

SEEING THE COURT: INVESTIGATING OUTCOMES,
PROCESSES AND PERSPECTIVES IN BASKETBALL AS A
POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

A Dissertation

by

CHRISTOPHER JAMES HARRIST

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2009

Major Subject: Recreation, Park, and Tourism Sciences

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ABSTRACT

Seeing the Court: Investigating Outcomes, Processes, and Perspectives in
Basketball as a Positive Youth Development Context. (December 2009)

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Researchers have found that 40 to 50 percent of youth's time can be classified as free or residual, which yields great opportunities for their participation in leisure and recreation activities. When all structured voluntary activities available to youth are considered, the greatest amount of time is spent participating in youth sports. Organized sports participation has been associated with positive developmental outcomes (e.g., healthier lifestyle; increases in self-efficacy; enhanced academic achievement); however, not all experiences are positive. Research has found that the context of the activity contributes significantly to participation being associated with positive or negative outcomes. Understanding important contextual elements related to sports participation, particularly as viewed by key stakeholders (e.g., coaches and players), is important in developing quality experiences that promote beneficial growth.

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential of youth basketball as a positive developmental context. More specifically, it examined: (1) the outcomes associated with participation as identified by coaches of youth sport *select* teams; (2) the

methods used by coaches to promote positive development; (3) the perceptions of the players related to coaching intentions and behaviors; and (4) the fidelity with which coaches carry out their identified coaching methods in practices and games.

Findings indicated that coaches and players were able to accurately identify desired goals and methodologies along three domains: (1) player improvement; (2) development of life skills; and (3) enjoying the playing experience. One outcome theme showing inconsistency across the respondent groups was the identification of enjoying the playing experience, which was not identified by the player group. This inconsistency, however, did not show up when the respondents were identifying methodological approaches. Further analysis of sub-themes indicated considerable variation between coach and player responses. In addition, data obtained through observation corroborated the major thematic findings; however, when discrepancies existed the data revealed closer association to player responses. Player's also offered insight regarding personal goals and positive developmental outcomes they attributed to participation. Observational data also confirmed a portion of coach and player identified methodologies, but new approaches were also discovered.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my little sister, Rachel; though you have left us in body, your spirit will be ever present. You were truly a R.O.C.K. Your boundless enthusiasm, relentless work ethic, and desire to positively affect the lives of so many individuals is a source of true inspiration. Rest assured your work is still on going.

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NOMENCLATURE

CBAS	Coaching Behavior Assessment System
CES	Coach Efficacy Scale
GOAL	Going for the Goal
OST	Out-of-School Time
P-E	Person-Environment
SOPS	Supports, Opportunities, Programs, Services
SUPER	Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Youth development programs seek to engage youth in targeted activities and equip them with skills that will help them successfully move through adolescence and into adulthood. Researchers have used a number of different terms to describe the ultimate goal of youth development programs, including creating effective human beings and promoting fully-functioning adults. Abundant research exists that attempts to define what constitutes a fully-functioning and effective young adult, often with considerable overlap (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 2000; Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2000; William T. Grant Foundation, 1988). Despite differing attempts, the goals of each model are consistent with the need to supply youth with the appropriate supports, opportunities, programs, and services (SOPS) (Witt & Caldwell, 2005) necessary to promote a pathway for youth to develop into capable young adults.

Numerous types of programs exist which seek to supply youth with SOPS (e.g. resistance skill training, community engagement, academic performance enhancement, psychosocial functioning, life skill acquisition). Out-of-school (OST) programs seeking to benefit youth vary widely and are sponsored by entities such as federally funded agencies, local managing organizations, parks and recreation

This dissertation follows the style of *Journal of Leisure Research*.

departments, museums, libraries, youth sports organizations, and amateur sports leagues. Across this diverse range of initiatives, positive developmental outcomes (e.g. self-efficacy, conflict resolution, self-regulation, communication) have been promoted through activities such as music (Broh, 2002; Cooley, Henriksen, Van Nelson, & Thompson, 1995; Zill, Nord, & Loomis, 1995), church groups (Eccles & Barber, 1999), cheerleading (Broh, 2002), performing arts (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Miller, Sabo, Farrell, Barnes, & Melnick, 1998), academic clubs (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003), and organized sports (Crosnoe, 2001; Hanson & Kraus, 1998; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003).

Organized Sports as Contexts for Youth Development

For many American young people, organized sports participation has become a rite of passage. Prior research on youth sports participation rates have provided estimates ranging from 20 million (Michigan Joint Legislative Study on Youth Sports, 1978) to 35 million (Martens, 1986). While there is no precise figure of youth sports participation prior to their entrance into the interscholastic setting, researchers have found significant increases in the number of youth sports participants through examining rates reported by major governing bodies (e.g., Little League, Pop Warner; Ewing & Seefeldt, 2002). Additional studies have shown that when all structured voluntary activities available to youth are considered, the greatest amount of time is reported to be in youth sports activities (Czikszenmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Larson & Verma, 1999). These statistics suggest the significant potential of youth sports as a positive developmental context.

Organized sports participation provides unique opportunities for development. Many have dubbed sports a microcosm of life because it provides a means to both teach skills, whether those skills are associated with sport specific outcomes or broader developmental competencies, and opportunities to master those skills in a relatively controlled environment. While engaged in a sports-related activity, youth report higher levels of concentration and enjoyment as compared to other daily activities (Cziksentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Kirshnit, Ham, & Richards, 1989). Additionally, research has shown that youth exhibit increased levels of intrinsic motivation and engagement when participating in OST activities (Larson, 2000; Larson & Verma, 1999). Sports settings provide an opportunity to engage participants through direct instruction during practices and team meetings (i.e. didactic learning) as well as enabling them to rehearse and master those skills in game or game-like situations (i.e. affective learning).

Evidence exists supporting positive physical and psychological outcomes associated with sports participation (e.g., healthier lifestyle, increases in self-efficacy; Smoll & Smith, 2002a; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Eccles & Barber, 1999). However, simply being on the field, in the gym, or in the rink does not necessarily lead to positive development. Demographic characteristics of the participant have been shown to affect the sports experience. This can be evident in the inclusion or exclusion in sport as it relates to gender and ethnicity (Elling & Knoppers, 2005), the influence of self-esteem and perceived ability level on sports participation (Chambers, 1991), and the effects of physical location on activity levels (Felton, Dowda, Ward, Dishman, Trost,

Saundes, & Pate, 2002). In addition to demographic variables, Mahoney and Stattin (2000) found that the context of the activity contributes significantly to participation being associated with positive or negative outcomes. Unfortunately, limited research exists on what constitutes a positive developmental context, especially within youth sports, and the manner in which contextual factors influence targeted outcomes.

Within the youth development field, considerable attention has been given to creating positive developmental settings within the broader context of out-of-school time (OST) activities. Eccles and Gootman (2002) suggested a list of eight factors that contribute to the developmental potential of any activity: (1) physical and psychological safety; (2) appropriate structure and adult supervision; (3) supportive relationships; (4) opportunities to belong; (5) positive social norms; (6) support for efficacy and mattering; (7) opportunities for skill building; and (8) integration of family, school, and community.

In response to the wide variation in youth sports programming and the subsequent effect it may have on programmatic outcomes, a national summit was held in 2006 (Active Youth, 2006) to create a national research agenda for youth sports. In their summary of the meeting, Perkins & Noam (2007) reported that the researchers in attendance coined the term *sports-based youth development program*. The term was defined as sports-related activities whose purpose is to facilitate learning and life skill development in youth. Researchers at the summit also sought to create a list of essential features in a sports-based youth development context, incorporating those suggested by Eccles and Gootman (2002), and extending the list to include opportunities to foster cultural competence; active learning; opportunities for recognition; strength-based focus;

along with an ecological and holistic approach to programming (Perkins & Noam, 2007).

Youth sports can encompass a broad range of activities that differ greatly in organizational structure and competitive level (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997). In an adaptation of Seefeldt and Ewing's (1997) classification of program types, youth sports not conducted within a scholastic setting can be classified into four categories: instructional leagues; recreational leagues; select teams; and club teams. Brief descriptions of these categories are provided in Table 1. Variations in team structure have the potential to contribute to differences in outcomes associated with participation. Typically, programs that are *instructional* or *recreational* are associated with a social agency (e.g., recreation and parks department, YMCA, Boys and Girls Club) where administrators attempt to minimize program variation through the use of written curricula and staff training. While some coaches have been exposed to training media, no accreditation or sanctioning bodies exist for those wishing to coach *select* youth athletics, calling into question the broader competence of coaches as developmental guides.

The term *select* refers to a particular competition level as well as general team structure. Teams falling into this category are typically composed of players from the same or a nearby geographical location (in contrast to club teams whose participants are often located throughout a state or, in some cases, from multiple states). *Select* teams are not usually associated with sanctioning or governing bodies, such as the Boys and

TABLE 1
General Levels of Youth Sports Participation

Type
Instructional Leagues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intended for children with entry level skills • Teams are loosely structured • Activity focus is participation targeting skill mastery • Children participate in practices and scrimmages
Recreational Leagues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants are assigned to teams or drafted from a pool • Players participate in regular practices and games • Program rules typically involve mandated playing time for participants • Team coaches are typically parent volunteers or high school/college students
Select Teams <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants are purposively selected or recruited • Players generally reside within a certain geographical area • Players participate in extended practices • Team coaches are sometimes paid • Travel is generally required to attend games and tournaments
Club Teams <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants tryout or are recruited • Players participate in extended practices and often have training regiments • Team coaches and staff are typically paid • Multiple teams are housed under a single organization • Teams may have corporate sponsors • Extensive travel is generally required

Girls Club or YMCA, but are organized at the grass-roots level by interested parents or coaches. Additionally, *select* teams typically compete on a higher competition level and travel more extensively than do recreational teams (i.e., those associated with local parks and recreation departments or other organizations). Much like Fine (1987) found when studying Little League baseball, these types of teams contain both play-like (e.g., fun, pleasurable, periods of disorganization, exciting) and work-like (e.g., structured, serious, goal-directive, emotionally intensive) elements. Because of their nature, *select* teams are autonomous in their operation with regard to player, parent, and coach behavior (e.g., a

coach can choose to practice once a week or five times a week; a parent can purchase new uniforms for the players). In addition, there are no constraints requiring a new coach to attend developmental clinics to acquire basic knowledge about how to coach.

It is also important that coaches actively engage their players during the sport experience. Within youth sports, and more broadly in any organized youth activity, it is important to balance the autonomy provided to youth and the amount of adult control (Eccles, Buchanan, Flanagan, Fuligm, Midgley, & Lee, 1991). Those settings providing appropriate balance are more likely to engage participants in a manner that promotes positive development. Research has found that coaches who provide players with opportunities to voice their opinion and genuinely take interest in player perceptions provide a setting this is more likely to foster beneficial growth (Heath, 1994; 1996).

Research Focus

Research related to youth participating on *select* sports teams is lacking; however, *select* teams constitute a significant portion of the youth basketball population and provide a rich setting for exploring how processes and transactions affect the potential of this context for the positive development of participants. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the views of coaches and players as they relate to participatory goals and coaching methodologies to determine if discrepancies between these two groups exist. Coaches were asked to identify outcomes they hope to achieve as a result of children participating in the program and the processes they use for achieving these goals. Further, through direct observation, the fidelity with which these means were implemented was investigated. Additionally, and in an effort to triangulate

data, players' perceptions of coach intentions, the methods used by coaches for achieving outcomes, and the coach's actual behavior as perceived by the player were gathered through the use of focus group interviews. Information gathered from coach interviews served as a comparison guide for identified outcomes and the methods employed to achieve those outcomes.

This study was guided by ecological systems theory (i.e., how the environment created by the coach affects player development; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1992) and person-environment (P-E) fit (i.e., the effect of environmental and personal characteristics that affect player development; Eccles, Buchanan, Flanagan, Fuligm, Midgley, & Lee, 1991). The work of Gould, McCallister, and their colleagues (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000) regarding the use of qualitative inquiry and theme development served as a guide for examining coach perceptions of targeted outcomes. The cognitive-behavioral model for coaching behaviors (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006; Smoll & Smith, 1984) aided in coach observations. The P-E fit provided a framework through which to examine the potential match between contextual elements and the characteristics of youth players. Studies exploring the effects of youth voice (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002; Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005), particularly those within a sports setting (Heath, 1994; 1996), advised this study's role in exploring youth perceptions.

Importance of the Study

There has been little research done regarding best practices within youth sports settings targeted at creating positive developmental opportunities. As Danish, et al.

(2004) suggest, many youth sport programs are lacking appropriate structure and proper implementation practices that can provide a venue for teaching transferable knowledge to adolescents. Both positive and negative effects have been found regarding participation in sport and leisure activities with the main causes in the variation being the structure and context of the activity (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). Sport-related activities and the contexts in which they are delivered must be purpose-driven towards teaching youth knowledge that transcends the playing arena and follows them into adulthood. Much of what is currently known about sports-related program processes can be described as a “black box” whereby research concentrates on selected outcomes with little attention given to what actually produces them (e.g., contextual variables, leader traits, participant attitudes). There is a need to move beyond this approach and gain a fuller understanding of common components within successful developmental settings and how these factors may promote or inhibit positive growth.

Researchers are beginning to take notice of the gap between what happens within a given program and targeted developmental outcomes; however, in-depth information regarding program practices are still lacking. For example, Fredericks and Eccles (2006) examined the relationship between extracurricular activity participation and developmental outcomes in early adulthood. While the data revealed that participation in multiple extracurricular activities may prove beneficial to participants, the authors recognized their study lacked information regarding the quality of participation and what was occurring within the program, both factors in moderating program effectiveness.

In another review of school-based extracurricular involvement, Feldman and Matjasko (2005) address participation and its affect on multiple issues, including academic achievement, substance abuse, psychological adjustment, and delinquency. The study found that participation in structured school-based activities, as opposed to unstructured activities, were associated with positive developmental outcomes. The authors also suggest that future studies that are qualitative in nature could provide in-depth understanding of vital program mechanisms that influence positive development in participants.

While achieving targeted distal outcomes is the ultimate goal of any single program, an understanding of the methods utilized to attain these results is equally important. Generating knowledge on program components, such as context, methodology, and processes, can not only lead to overall program improvement but the creation of best practice information resulting in the dissemination and replication of both efficacious and effective initiatives (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). Additionally, the identification of program elements related to effective positive development may provide generalizable information that extends beyond the scope of youth sports (e.g. art programs, alternative education initiatives, youth service organizations).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Youth sport programs have a long and storied history in the United States, beginning in the late 1800s where sports were sponsored as wholesome activities to keep boys off the streets and out of trouble, through the beginning of the 21st century where youth sports are often viewed as a rite of passage. Unfortunately, today's perceptions of youth sports are too often focused on negative and inappropriate parent, player, and coach behaviors as seen regularly in online video clips, on local news stations, or as depicted in cinema through movies such as *The Bad News Bears* (Jaffe, 1976) and *Kicking & Screaming* (Miller & Apatow, 2005). Despite research supporting benefits from sports participation (Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish, & Theodorakis, 2004; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006), the negative aspects of youth sports seem to garner far more attention than those contributing to positive growth.

One salient feature of existing youth sports research is that the positive developmental benefits associated with participation have been context dependent (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). For example, giving a child a mitt and a ball then telling him or her to go play in a field will not necessarily yield positive development. Thus, as many researchers have noted, youth sports programs must be purposive and intentional in nature (Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish, & Theodorakis, 2004; Danish, Forneris, Hodge, & Heke, 2004; Danish, Taylor, & Fazio, 2004; Duda & Ntoumanis, 2005). The person

most responsible for the contextual elements of a youth sports setting is the coach, especially in the case of *select* youth sports teams. Sports programs housed within social agencies, as well as many club team organizations, provide handbooks to coaches and require staff to complete a training program before being coming in contact with players or during their first year. However, well articulated and documented protocols for running effective practices are rarely utilized within *select* youth sports. While some coaches within *select* youth basketball possess previous coaching or playing experience, those lacking in this area may not be aware of their potential to positively influence players or, in extreme cases, create negative youth sports experiences.

Due to its potential for youth development, youth sports has attracted research interest; however, a considerable amount of research has been hampered by the omission of contextual aspects within a sports experience (e.g., competence of the coach), the use of ambiguous measurement criteria (e.g., “development of character”), and methodological limitations such as unreliable measurement tools (Menestrel & Perkins, 2007). Thus, researchers have begun exploring intentionality issues through qualitative inquiry to discover the processes that occur within a given sports setting. Research results, however, have revealed considerable variation in coaching intentions, behaviors, and setting characteristics (e.g., Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000). Moreover, few researchers have addressed issues of activity setting and quality of involvement, both factors shown to moderate the relationship between activity participation and development (Eccles, 2005; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005).

The characteristics of the individual can also have an impact on the sports experience. For example, research has suggested that the intent of sports participation is different among boys and girls, with boys being more outcome-oriented and girls more focused on the process of the game (Griffin, 1998). In another study, Elling and Knoppers (2005) explored the use of sport as both an agent of integration and discrimination depending upon the dominant normative images present. The authors found that stereotypical perceptions of youth are both confirmed and challenged through sports participation.

Race, ethnicity, and social class have also been shown to influence the effects of youth sports participation. Issues related to the use of sports participation as an agent of social mobility (Eitzen & Sage, 1993; McPherson, Curtis, & Loy, 1989) may have an effect on adolescent views of playing sports. Studies focusing on race and gender as variables in youth participating in physical activity have revealed noteworthy differences. Felton et al. (2002) found that Black girls were less active than White girls and, possibly correlated to this finding, access to resources promoting physical activity was greater among White girls than Black girls.

Researchers within the field of youth sports need to consider a holistic approach to exploring activities as potential developmental contexts. In gaining an understanding of the positive growth potential within athletic settings, studies must examine *in situ* activity processes, relationships, and learning environments. While quantitative studies have provided highly valuable insights into potential participation benefits, more

research is necessary to understand youth sport settings through a deeper examination of context processes (e.g., Fredricks & Eccles, 2006).

About the Coach

Within the field of youth sports, perceptions of coaches vary widely. Some are described as overbearing dictators while others fill the role of glorified babysitter; however, research has shown coaching duties often range far beyond simply teaching the technical aspects of an organized activity (e.g., proper shooting form; how to run a zone defense) and can entail equipping players with life skills that will positively influence their development (e.g., increases in self-efficacy; positive perceptions of the future; conflict resolution; Griffith, 1926; Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000; Kowalski, 2008).

Coaches can be generally classified into three categories as it relates to their coaching style: command (dictatorial - the coach makes all the decisions; players listen, absorb, and comply with the coach's instructions); submissive (baby-sitter - the coach provides minimal instruction and guidance; the coach often lack competence, are lazy, or are misinformed about proper coaching protocols); and cooperative (teacher - the coach shares the decision making responsibilities with the players; Martens, 2004). While this classification system is not rigid (i.e., coaches may exhibit characteristics of each style at differing times), the manner in which coaches interact and respond to their players has the significant potential to affect the players' experiences.

Coleman Griffith (1926), viewed by many as the *father of sports psychology*, contended that “the man who enters into the play life of young people has, then, a unique

opportunity to make himself effective in controlling that life and adding to it [sic] traits that might not otherwise be acquired” (p. 2). He viewed a coach as having many functional capacities within the sports setting, among them a true teacher (having the opportunity to instill in the players values that are viewed as beneficial); a character-builder (citing an immediate and personal opportunity to mold personalities); an athlete (rationalizing that the best mathematics teachers are, themselves, mathematicians); a physiologist (since the coach handles human bodies at work there should be some basic knowledge of muscular work, metabolism, and fatigue); and a psychologist (in dealing with human behaviors such as mental strength and self-efficacy).

Other researchers have noted that youth coaches typically have more contact with their players than do other influential adults (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006). In many instances, coaches take on a role far beyond the field or court, extending into something more familial or parental in nature (e.g., coaches giving players rides to and from practice; coaches being confidants of players; and coaches taking players into their homes to live). As Hutchinson and Baldwin (2005) suggest, positive parenting does not entail a particular type of relationship, but rather an inclusive set of interactions between youth and adult caregivers create conditions, regardless of physical location, that promote optimal growth. Coaches, as well as youth workers in other settings, are increasingly filling these vital roles in the development of youth.

In taking on these additional responsibilities, coaches are often seen as role models and mentors to their players. Researchers have long contended that “a child’s values, attitudes, and ways of behaving are most often learned from those people who

are most important to him/her...[b]y his words [the coach's] and deeds the kids will learn what is important - whether it is sportsmanship, cooperation, or winning at all costs" (Orlick & Botterill, 1975; pp. 2-3). Whether you speak to researchers or practitioners, one salient characteristic of positive developmental environments is beneficial relationships between adults and youth.

Mentoring Youth

A full review of the youth mentoring and supportive relationship literature is beyond the scope of the current study, however, the roles of mentors and influential adults within the broader context of youth development merits some mention. One of the staples in youth developing into fully-functioning and capable adults is the presence of positive adult relationships. The term *mentor* is derived from Greek mythology where Mentor, the son of Alcumus, was placed in charge of Odysseus' son, Telemachus. When Athena visited Telemachus, she took the form of Mentor and offered him wisdom and advice (Homer, 1999). The role of supportive adults in youth development and the importance of these relationships have changed little.

One of the most widely recognized and most researched mentoring organizations is Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Through their review, Grossman and his colleagues (Tierney & Grossman, 2000; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002) found that positive relationships between adults and youth, when given proper duration, were important to the positive development of young people (e.g., higher levels of self-worth, social acceptance, and scholastic competence). Mentoring relationships, such as those within Big Brothers/Big Sisters, are suggested to affect youth in three main ways: promoting

social and emotional development, enhancing cognitive development, and providing potential role models (Rhodes & Spencer, 2005). Building these types of relationships within differing contexts, described as relationship-based programming (Bocarro & Witt, 2005), provides youth with significant opportunities for positive development.

The nature of a player-coach dyad within youth sports provides considerable opportunities to foster meaningful relationships. Settings within youth sports have a strong social component and recognizing this as an integral part of the overall context, it is important to consider what the youth coach can do to maximize developmental opportunities. Orlick and McCaffrey (1991) suggest a list of conditions to help maximize the potential of a sport, or any other, developmental context. These suggestions include: use simple strategies; keep it fun; incorporate concrete, physical components; employ an individualized approach; utilize multiple approaches; be positive and hopeful; use proper role models; and involve parents. While not a comprehensive list, these suggestions provide some direction for how youth sports coaches can create positive developmental settings.

Additionally, a large number of youth sports coaches are, themselves, adolescents. Therefore it is vitally important for these individuals to have exposure to teaching methodologies that extend beyond skill instruction. There are several sports-based initiatives currently utilizing adolescent and young adult leaders as teachers and mentors with the goal of benefiting both the participant through peer-led instruction and the instructor through pedagogical training. For example, the Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation (SUPER) initiative is based upon the Going for the Goal

(GOAL) model. The GOAL program is grounded in a psychoeducational model (Ivey, 1980; referenced in Danish, 1996), which takes the approach of teaching directed skills, in this case life skills, through demonstration, instruction, and supervised practice (Danish & Hale, 1993). Further, the initiative is delivered using an educational pyramid (Seidman & Rappaport, 1974; referenced in Danish, 1997). The pyramid is predicated on instruction throughout all levels of participation resulting in benefits for all parties involved, including the instructors. The youth leaders are selected based on their academic and personal achievement, and then given extensive training in the GOAL or SUPER framework. It is suggested that use of these instructors provides concrete models of desirable behavior outside the context of the activity (Danish, Petitas, & Hale, 1993).

Recreation Among Adolescent Girls

Gender-based differences have been found regarding attitudes towards many different recreational activities (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfeld, 2002). For example, before entering into a recreational setting, girls may consider the potential for ridicule or evaluate their athletic competence and compare these factors with the potential for enjoyment before engaging in an activity (James & Embrey, 2002). In addition, as girls transition into adolescence many are pressured to conform to stereotypical perceptions of how women are supposed to behave (Henderson, 2005). As such, research involving the leisure pursuits of adolescent girls, particularly as it relates to increased social acceptance and accessibility is germane to promoting positive youth development for all children.

Participation in sports has traditionally been associated with male athletes; however, statistics regarding female participation in youth sports are encouraging (Seefeldt & Ewing, 2002). Research has shown that girls who participate in youth sports have not only benefited through physical activity (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996), and engage in less deviant behavior, such as smoking, alcohol consumption, and early sexual behavior (Girls Inc., 2003; Miller, Sabo, Melnick, Farrell, & Barnes, 2000). Helping recreation supervisors, program coordinators, and youth sports coaches to understand the potential benefits available to young female participants as well as the possible deterrents to involvement through focused research can provide increased opportunities for this population.

Methods of Learning and Coaching Effectiveness Training

A potential problem remains with regard to individuals who are just beginning their youth coaching careers and/or who have not taken part in any formalized training (teacher-led instruction or self-directed study). As Smith and Smoll (1991) have noted, “[t]he manner in which coaches structure the athletic situation, the goal priorities they establish, the attitudes and values they transmit, and the behaviors they engage in can markedly influence the effects of sports participation on children” (p. 330). Thus, if youth coaches exhibit undesirable behavior and promote negative attitudes, either through direct or indirect reinforcement, it has the potential to adversely affect the participants’ sports experience. Moreover, the potential negative outcomes have a high likelihood of spilling over into other aspects of the child’s life, particularly in the case of children from single-parent homes where coaches may be filling familial relationship

roles (Smith & Smoll, 1991). Despite the importance of player-coach interactions and the significant influence of the coach, research in this area did not receive sufficient focus until the 1990s (Smith & Smoll, 1991) when focus began being placed on coaches' knowledge and intentions, and how these subsequently affected their behaviors.

One important aspect of the coaching persona is how the individual learns to employ methods to achieve targeted outcomes, whether the outcomes are sports-related or broader in context. Research has explored how elite and expert coaches develop and expand their coaching knowledge; however, few studies have examined this facet of youth sports coaches. In a recent study designed to address this gap, researchers found multiple channels through which youth sports coaches seek to enhance their knowledge, including prior experiences as players; assistant coaching roles; athletic instructors; and formalized education initiatives (Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007). Peer-to-peer learning through cooperative dialogue provides another important stage for the development of coaches; however, because of the competitive nature of many sports settings, coaches often feel that they would lose a competitive advantage by sharing specific knowledge, producing a youth coaching culture that does not promote collegiality (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2004). Instead, it has become common practice to guilefully take ideas from other coaches without consent, with one youth coach stating: "Coaching is being able to steal from other coaches" (Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007; p. 201). This is a significant point of concern as this modeled behavior and, more importantly, the manner in which this tactic is presented to youth

participants (e.g., bending the rules for an advantage; stealing from the other team), has the potential to influence the players' actions in sports-related and other contexts.

One method utilized to increase coaches' awareness regarding their modeled behavior is a cognitive-behavioral approach to coaching improvement. It is the goal of a cognitive-behavioral intervention that, through a heightened state of behavioral awareness and broadened knowledge base regarding desired behaviors and outcomes, the individual would have a greater desire and enhanced ability to carry out desired actions (Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979). This view is based on a social learning framework where behavioral change is targeted through the observation and modeling of desired attitudes and actions (Bandura, 1977a). Through the use of the Coaching Behavior Assessment System (CBAS; Appendix A), Smith and his colleagues (Smith & Smoll, 1991; Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1978; 1979) found that coaches typically had an impaired sense of their behaviors. The CBAS is an empirically researched tool designed to code coaching behaviors through observational means. The researchers found that trained coaches were viewed by their players as more reinforcing, exhibiting higher levels of supportive behavior, utilizing less punitive means when reacting to mistakes. Additionally, higher levels of self-esteem were reported by players whose coach had completed the CBAS evaluation. This relationship was significantly magnified by children exhibiting low self-esteem prior to the coaching intervention, suggesting that this population might be most sensitive to this type of initiative. This is particularly important as many youth sports coaches work with children at-risk of exhibiting

negative behaviors due to factors such as socio-economic status, physical location, and family structure.

In continuing this line of research, Conroy and Coatsworth (2006) sought to expand the cognitive-behavioral model suggested by Smoll and Smith (1984; Figure 1) to include elements of interpersonal theory (Pincus & Ansell, 2003; referenced in Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

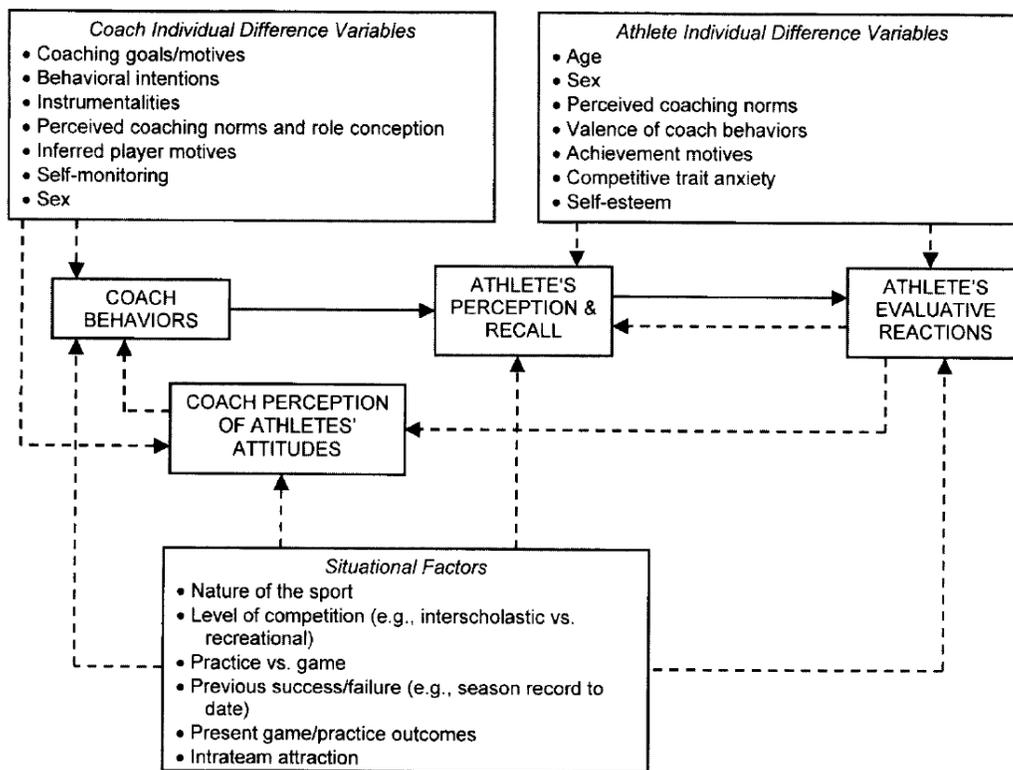


Figure 1. Cognitive-Behavioral Model of Coach Behaviors (Smoll & Smith, 1984).

Their proposed model (Figure 2) aims to explore the coach training effects on youth development through a process termed *internalization*, the adopting of modeled behaviors, values, and beliefs as one's own (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006).

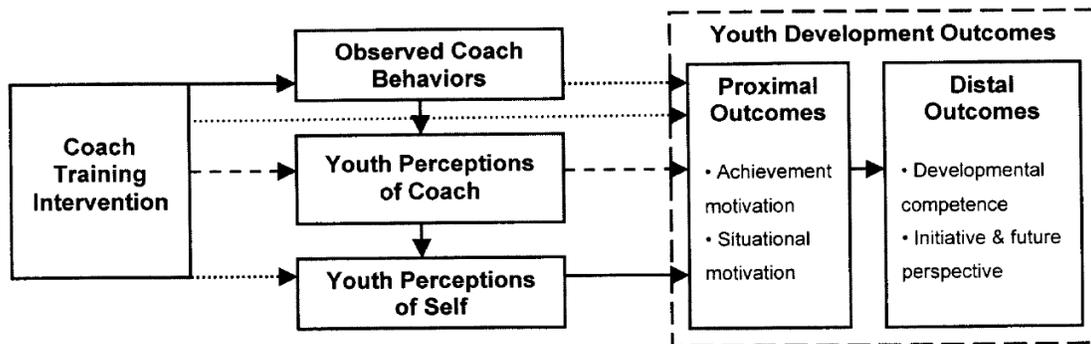


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Coach Training Effects on Youth Development (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006).

Initial empirical research has shown positive results in the target areas of the adapted conceptual model, including changing coaching behaviors, coach and self-perceptions, and motivational outcomes (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2004; 2006).

Coaching Efficacy and Self-Reported Study

A strong predictor of coaching behavior, player satisfaction, and athletic success is the extent to which coaches believe they can influence the learning and performance of their athletes, which Feltz and his colleagues termed *coaching efficacy* (Feltz, Chase, Moritz, & Sullivan, 1999). In a broader context, self-efficacy is an individual's belief in his or her ability to carry out a particular course of action and is influenced by four factors: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal (Bandura, 1977b). Coaching effectiveness initiatives are based, in large part, on Bandura's (1986) suggestion that an individual's self-perception of efficacy can strongly influence a subsequent outcome. Feltz et al. (1999) developed the Coaching Efficacy Scale (CES) because the field lacked a valid and reliable instrument to measure this concept. Initial research by Feltz et al. (1999) found that coaching

efficacy was predicted by past coaching success, coaching experience, perceived player talent, and social support. Further, coaching efficacy was shown to be a predictor of coaching behavior, player satisfaction, and current success (Feltz, Chase, Moritz, & Sullivan, 1999). Additional confirmatory research (Myers, Feltz, & Wolfe, 2008; Myers, Wolfe, & Feltz, 2005) regarding the CES have strengthened its validity and reliability; however its use has been primarily associated with varsity high school and college coaches. Despite this instrument's lack of use within youth sports research, the CES provides a basis from which to explore the potential role of efficacy as it relates to youth coaches being able to contribute to the positive development of their players.

Furthering this research, Vargas-Tonsing and her colleagues (Vargas-Tonsing, Warners, & Feltz, 2003) sought to examine the effects of coaching efficacy on team and personal efficacy. The researchers found that coaching efficacy served as a strong predictor of team efficacy but not personal efficacy. One explanation offered was the context in which the study occurred, within a team context. These results suggest the importance of considering the activity context when exploring setting components. Additionally, the authors suggested the measurement tool used (CES) was developed with a targeted team focus rather than for improving the coaching of individual athletes (Vargas-Tonsing, Warners, & Feltz, 2003).

One deficiency in the coaching efficacy literature is the lack of focus on those coaching younger athletes. Feltz, Vargas-Tonsing, and their colleagues (Feltz, Chase, Moritz, & Sullivan, 1999; Vargas-Tonsing, Warners, & Feltz, 2003) focused on coaches of high school athletes; however few studies have taken the application of coaching

efficacy research and adapted it to youth in middle and grade school. As researchers have suggested, the use of this construct within the field of youth sports could provide a means for individuals to understand the potential influence of their coaching behaviors (Kowalski, 2008) and could potentially result in coaches remaining positively involved in the field (Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998).

One of the most effective ways to research coaching efficacy is to employ qualitative interviewing techniques to elicit responses from coaches regarding their opinions and perceptions. Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung (2007) interviewed ten successful high school football coaches and inquired as to their methods for instilling life skills in their players. Participants in this study were able to clearly identify the methods used to achieve targeted outcomes and did not view teaching life skills and coaching football as separate tasks. Despite utilizing a wide range of methods, each one was carried out purposively with a strong focus on personal player development. Other research has employed this same technique in sports programs for younger participants; however, the findings revealed that although coaches recognized the benefit of teaching life skills in a sports context, few could identify the methods used to achieve these outcomes. Additionally, discrepancy was found between the stated coaching philosophies and their implementation (McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000). The differing results found in the previous two studies indicate the importance of having properly trained and highly effective youth sports coaches.

One of the most valuable methods for discovering and interpreting what happens within a given context is to employ those participating, in this case players, as active

informants in research. Insuring that those who stand to benefit are presented with situations, expectations, and challenges that are realistic and reasonable is vital to the success of any initiative (Orlick & Botterill, 1975). Allowing participants to have a voice in their participation and administering programs from a child's-eye view provides youth programmers with an important tool for cultivating meaningful relationships between program stakeholders. Before discussing youth voice and its role in promoting engagement within a youth sports setting, it is important to understand the meaning and relationship of these terms within the youth development literature.

What Is Youth Voice?

Researchers have suggested that the partition between youth participants and adult providers within a program hinges on negative views of youth and assumptions made by adults regarding youth competencies and capabilities (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). The rationale underlying adult leadership is that adults often “know best” through their more extensive knowledge and experience, thus placing them in a better position to guide program activities (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005). While appropriate adult supervision is fundamental within positive developmental settings (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), engaging youth as active participants in their own development through their input and effort plays an equally vital role.

Youth voice has become a term encompassing a range of ideas, from articulating perspectives on social issues (Anderson, Evans, & Mangin, 1997) to associations with courage and expression (Rogers, 1993); however, several salient features of youth voice manifest themselves in most definitions (e.g., the ability to conceive ideas and

effectively express one's views through meaningful dialogue). Ellis and Caldwell (2005) have proposed the following as a good working definition of youth voice: the degree to which youth feel their views are heard and respected by others, particularly adults.

Benefits of Youth Voice

The voices of youth are seldom heard within academic research despite their importance and direct affect on process-driven development (Brooker & Macdonald, 1999; Dyson, 1995). Similar arguments can be made within the field of youth sports regarding the inclusion of youth voice in programming and policy (David, Edwards, & Alldred, 2001). Despite the potential benefit of incorporating voice within youth development programs (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002), researchers and practitioners appear to rarely engage youth and elicit their views and opinions on programming.

Youth voice has strong theoretical ties to the concepts of initiative (Larson, 2000) and self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Initiative and self-determination are two key precursors to youth developing informed opinions and the ability to engage in meaningful discussions. Competencies in effective communication have the potential to foster autonomy and identity within youth (Ellis & Caldwell, 2005) leading to future increases in community and civic engagement. In contrast, youth who do not feel their opinions are valued may become disengaged from the program and adults in positions of authority may undermine youth's creative and expressive development (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005). Youth voice is a vital component in promoting positive developmental

opportunities for youth; however, it does not serve as the sole driver of beneficial growth. Voice plays a complimentary role with youth empowerment and participation to create meaningful engagement in youth development programs (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005). An analysis of effective methods for increasing participation is beyond the scope of this study; however, it is essential to understand how adult programmers, and more specifically youth coaches, can yield authority within a program to strengthen youth voice and create dynamic program contexts.

Youth Voice Studies

When advocating the use of practices that promote youth voice, it is important to understand that proponents are not suggesting that complete autonomy be given to youth regarding program development and planning. Contrary to most constructivist views which suggest youth learn best from peers or on their own (e.g., Piaget, 1967), positive youth development posits that appropriate structure and youth-centered adult supervision are essential elements of a developmental setting (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Thus, researchers have sought to examine the differing experiences of youth who participate in youth-driven (i.e., those programs planned, organized, and implemented mostly by youth) and adult-driven (i.e., programs in which adults design activities that fostered youth-centered learning) programs. When exploring these approaches to youth-adult interactions, Larson, Walker, and Pearce (2005) found each style was associated with distinct developmental experiences rather than one showing more benefit than the other. In the youth-driven programs, participants reported high levels of ownership and engagement along with the development of leadership and planning competencies.

Modeling behaviors related to context-specific talents were listed as benefits of the adult-driven programs. Participants of both programs exhibited gains in self-confidence and improvement in their levels of mentorship.

Studies addressing young people's perceptions of youth sports are not as prominent as those within general organized activities, particularly studies involving U.S. populations. Efforts in Britain have provided some groundwork for the exploration of youth voice within a sports context (e.g., Mason, 1995; Rowe & Champion, 2000) and have identified particular structural and financial barriers associated with youth participation. In addition, a study by McPhail, Kir, and Eley (2003) explored the perceptions of youth in facilitating participation in sport. Most notably, the researchers found, through qualitative inquiry, that two categories of constraints were most prevalent: conditions and climate. More specifically, the youth reported a need to improve current structures and processes that make participation possible and a desire to change the climate of the activity to a more inclusive and task oriented approach.

In addition to programmatic considerations, youth voice within a youth sports setting has also been associated with positive developmental outcomes for the participant. In a study examining grass roots basketball programs, Heath (1994) found that the presence of youth voice was strongly associated with increases in protective factors, self-control, self-respect, and reduced delinquency behaviors. In a subsequent study, Heath (1996) sought to understand the associations of youth voice and the presence of developmental benefits more deeply through the examination of a basketball team composed solely of African-American males. The study addressed two important

issues within youth development. The first is the previously noted association of youth voice with positive developmental outcomes. The second is an examination of these participation-based benefits in a marginalized population, as researchers have shown that these individuals are least likely to participate in out-of-school time activities (Posner & Vandell, 1999). Heath's study found that youth participants who were allowed to organize tournaments, run practices, and schedule travel became more confident in their ability to express ideas and experienced developmental gains in the areas of responsibility and self-respect, leading to their ability to more efficiently avoid negative behaviors.

Empowerment and Youth-Adult Partnerships

After practices have been established for fostering youth voice within a given context, adult programmers must place youth in positions to put action to their voice. Researchers have termed this process of acknowledging and relinquishing power to youth program participants as empowerment (Jordan, 2001). Following positive youth development approaches, youth become empowered through first being viewed as resources rather than problems, then through the acquisition of authority and knowledge (Holden, Messeri, Evans, Crankshaw, & Ben-Davies, 2004). Programs seeking to empower youth have been shown to positively influence youth identity development (Chinman & Linney, 1998), self-confidence (Larson & Wood, 2006), and, more distally, community participation (Zeldin, 2004). As the definition of empowerment suggests, empowering youth is not something that occurs via a single decision; rather, it is an

intentional process involving interactions between youth and adult leaders characterized by mutual respect and genuine concern.

Youth-adult partnerships have become key strategies within the fields of community building and youth development; however, research exploring this construct's core components and potential factors is lacking (Camino, 2000). Youth-adult partnerships, when carried out with an intention to foster developmental outcomes, have strong potential to positively influence youth participants and adult leaders as well as foster program improvement.

The notion of youth-adult partnerships has evolved from Lofquist's (1989) original classification of adult attitudes utilized within the fields of prevention science and youth development, to more recent additions by both researchers and practitioners. Initially, Lofquist posited that adults view youth as simply objects within a program, recipients of adult-driven initiatives, or resources that can be utilized to achieve adult determined objectives. More recently, youth professionals have added that in most cases youth should be viewed as partners, suggesting that youth have the right to develop and exercise decision-making power within programs and activities (Camino, 2000). Further synthesis of the youth-adult partnership construct describes these relationships as best practices yielding optimal opportunities for youth to engage in decision-making processes (Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). Collaborative efforts between adults and youth do not solely entail views and attitudes between these two actors, but incorporate contextual elements as well, including program atmosphere and community characteristics.

Person-Environment Fit

A viable framework for examining adult-youth program participant interactions is the person-environment (P-E) fit theory, which suggests the importance of balancing youth's need for autonomy and the amount of adult control within a given context (Eccles, Buchanan, Flanagan, Fuligm, Midgley, & Lee, 1991). Studies of P-E fit have taken place in a variety of disciplines including organizational behavior (French & Bell, 1978), psychological and physical well-being (French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982), management (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006), and more recently in the field of youth development (Kristof-Brown, Jansen, & Colbert, 2002; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003).

John French first suggested a program of interdisciplinary research called the Mental Health and Industry Program (known as the Social Environment and Health Program) over four decades ago (1963), which resulted in some of the first tests of the P-E fit theory (e.g. French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982). French suggested the importance of person-environment interplay, both within an objective and psychological context, and its effect on a myriad of outcomes. A representation of French's original model is shown in Figure 3. Within the model, the associations between differing developmental contexts (e.g., objective, psychological, personal, interpersonal) are shown as drivers of participant changes. These changes can be related to proximal outcomes, such as the participant's responses, or they can be more distal in nature, such as the mental and physical health of the individual.

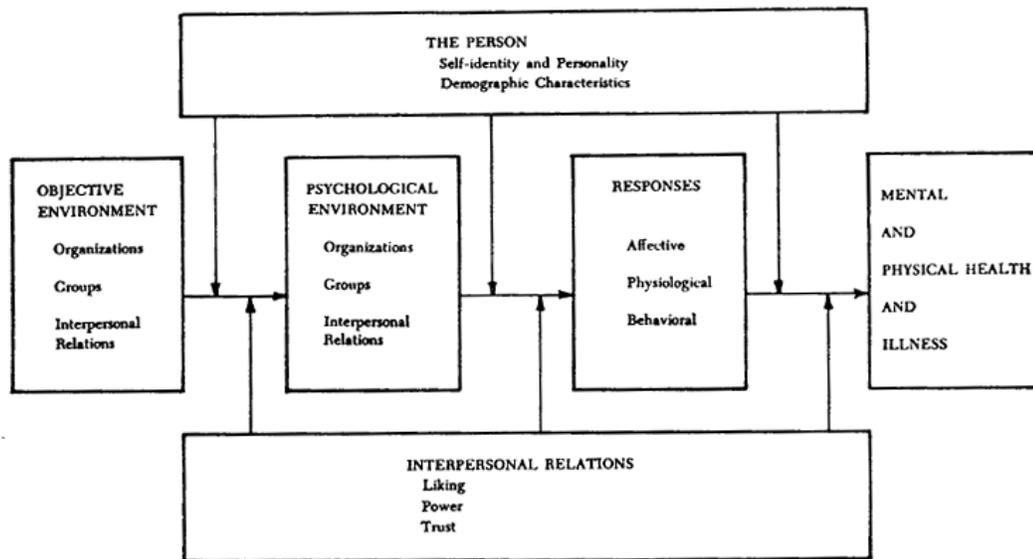


Figure 3. Person-Environment Fit (French, 1963).

Although numerous studies have explored the role of P-E fit, ambiguity remains regarding the makeup of linkages between the person and environment. In a summary work, Edwards and his colleagues (Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 2006) explored the use of P-E fit in various studies and distinguished three approaches regarding its perceived use. First, the atomistic approach seeks to examine the person and environment as separate entities then, after this examination, recombine them to generate a P-E fit of the scenario. Second, some research employs a molecular approach to P-E fit in which the goal is to assess any perceived discrepancy between the person and environment (e.g. if the job skills required for effective performance exceed the individual's abilities). Finally, molar studies within the P-E fit literature seek to measure the perceived synergy (via self-report or indicator variables such as the alignment between the individual's and organization's goals) between the individual and the

environment. A pictorial summary of the atomistic, molecular, and molar applications of the P-E fit can be found in Figure 4.

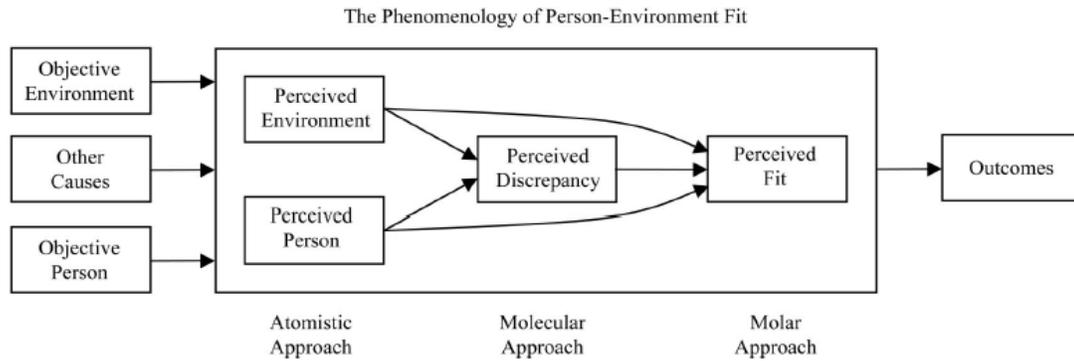


Figure 4. The Phenomenology of Person-Environment Fit (Edwards, et al., 2006).

In youth sports contexts, the P-E fit theory can provide a framework through which to consider the needs of players and the developmental opportunities afforded by the setting characteristics. More specifically, settings that match the player's subjective needs should provide positive motivational and behavioral consequences, whereas a mismatch in P-E fit would promote negative consequences (Lewin, 1935). Additionally, and central to equipping youth to be active agents in their own development (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000), youth's perceptions of environmental characteristics (e.g., coach, physical environment, atmosphere) is important in evaluating the potential fit between the player and their sports environment.

Youth Engagement and Enduring Involvement

Environments that are developmentally appropriate for participants have a higher likelihood to promote full engagement and result in desirable outcomes. Youth engagement is defined as "the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a

young person in an activity” (p. 49) and results when individuals are behaviorally, affectively, and cognitively impacted through their participation (Pancer, Rose-Krasnor, & Loiselle, 2002). From this definition, two terms merit further discussion: meaningful participation and sustained involvement.

There is nothing particularly inherent in youth programs or organized activities that explicitly produce positive development. A child will not necessarily manifest the traits of a fully-functioning and capable adult by simply participating on a youth sports team, creating a sculpture, or singing a solo in a choir. The notion of a fully-functioning adult, as suggested by Furstenberg (1999), entails an adolescent’s ability to find rewarding and remunerative employment, form lasting and gratifying relationships, and become contributors within their communities. Activities only provide a context that can positively influence the participant if they are properly structured and supervised. To this end, researchers have developed the theory of developmental intentionality which posits that attention must be given to “the dynamic relationship between developmental outcomes, youth engagement, and intentionality in the philosophy, design, and delivery of programs supports and opportunities for young people” (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005; p. 399).

The theory of developmental intentionality is based on three constructs: intentionality, engagement, and goodness of fit. Intentionality entails the use of deliberate and strategic decision-making to ensure consideration of long-term development is important in program planning and adult-youth interactions. Walker and her colleagues (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005) also suggest that, while

programmatic goals may originate from adult-driven means, truly dynamic change will be enhanced when youth are engaged as active participants in their own development and viewed as collaborators in program planning. Finally, the theory argues that utilizing an intentional approach maximizes the probability of a good fit between the participant and the program. Additionally, increases in the degree of fit have a high likelihood of increasing the level of youth engagement.

Higher levels of youth engagement, driven by factors such as youth voice and meaningful participation, have been empirically linked to increases in the degree of participation (i.e., participation intensity) as well as the duration of involvement (i.e., participation continuity; Hansen & Larson, 2007; Pittman, 1991). Particularly within a youth sports setting, researchers have discovered that the amount of time youth participate in sport each week (Simpkins, Ripke, Huston, & Eccles, 2005), their stability of participation across adolescence (Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003), and the time spent doing other activities outside of sports (Zarrett, 2006), all have influential roles in how participation is related to youth development. Other studies have found that transient participation in an organized activity cannot promote associated benefits, such as school achievement, prosocial behavior, and civic engagement, to the same degree as more sustained involvement (Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003).

Another study examined a group of young adolescents (5th-7th graders; $N=1122$) and the association of adolescent engagement in sports and activity-based positive youth development (Zarrett, Lerner, Carrano, Fay, Peltz, & Li, 2008). The researchers found

that, when compared with youth who did not participate, those involved in sports reported significantly higher levels of positive youth development. Moreover, positive associations with indicators of positive youth development and youth contribution as well as decreases in reported levels of depression were only found if participation was intense and continued for more than one year.

Summary

The field of sports-based positive youth development is emerging; however the currently body of research in this area is widely varied in its findings and applications, leading to many unanswered questions and avenues yet to be explored. One of the pressing needs within this field is furthering sports' use as a positive youth development context and exploring the factors that can influence its potential. More specifically, the expanding coach's role (e.g., social director, mother/father-figure, and identity developer) and its influence on the outcomes coaches feel their players should achieve through participation. Equally important is an understanding of the methods employed by coaches to achieve these desired outcomes and to examine the fidelity with which these methods are carried out.

Additionally, youth attitudes as they relate to coaching behaviors are becoming a viable means for improving participant outcomes. However, program evaluations and academic research involving youth opinions and perceptions within the field of youth sports are lacking. Despite the association of youth voice with positive participant outcomes (Chinman & Linney, 1998; Heath, 1994; 1996; Larson & Wood, 2006), community engagement (Calhoun, 1992; Forum for Youth Investment, 2004), and

programmatic benefits (Ellis & Caldwell, 2005), programs and initiatives seeking to nurture youth voice are lacking, particularly within youth sport contexts. If these settings are to be considered venues for developmental and behavioral enhancement, it is vital to equip youth with skills to confidently express their views and present an environment in which youth feel respected.

Previous studies (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; Heath, 1994; 1996; Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005; McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000) and paradigmatic views (French, 1963; Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 2006; Smoll & Smith, 1984) related to leader behavior and youth voice within a sports setting provide strong guidance in conducting research that seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of this setting as a positive developmental context.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential of youth basketball as a positive developmental context. More specifically, it examined: (1) the outcomes associated with participation as identified by coaches of youth sport *select* teams; (2) the methods used by coaches to promote positive development; (3) the perceptions of the players related to coaching intentions and behaviors; and (4) the fidelity with which coaches carry out their identified coaching methods in practices and games. Youth basketball coaches were asked to identify outcomes they hope to achieve and the processes used for achieving these outcomes when working with players on their teams. Next, observations were made of coaches' interactions with players to determine the extent to which the processes are actually implemented. Finally, players were asked their perceptions as it relates to the identified outcomes and the processes.

Qualitative Research

The use of qualitative inquiry has become a viable and increasingly complex means to expand the knowledge base and further the research agenda in many areas of study. For the purposes of this study, Creswell's (2007) definition of qualitative research will be used:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals ascribe to a social or human problem. To study

this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or signals a call for action (p. 37).

Creswell (2007) further suggests that it is appropriate to use qualitative inquiry when we desire an in-depth and detailed explanation of an issue that can be best gained through interacting directly with individuals in the natural environment. Additionally, qualitative research is beneficial when we strive to understand the contexts and settings within which participants develop (Henderson, 2006). It is the goal of qualitative data to present an accurate description of the participants' worldview as gleaned from their thoughts and perceptions. As such, this study will strive "to construct descriptions of total phenomena within their various contexts and to generate from the descriptions the complex interrelationships of causes and consequences that affect human behavior toward, and belief about, the phenomena" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p.3).

This study employed tenets of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in which the researcher generated a general explanation of processes utilized by youth basketball coaches to achieve developmental outcomes. The proposed explanation or theory was grounded in the data which was gathered from coaches and players directly involved in the developmental process.

Selection of Participants

Participants in this study were coaches of female youth basketball teams and their players (aged 13-15) who participate at a high competition level, known heretofore

as *select* teams. Teams participating in this study were located in north-central and southeastern Texas. Coaches were purposively sampled in a homogeneous manner (i.e., sampling that seeks to focus and facilitate group dynamics; Miles & Huberman, 1994) through existing relationships the investigator had within the *select* youth basketball community. More specifically, the teams were selected based upon the researcher's definition of an exemplary team which was defined along three domains: (1) the team must have shown a proclivity to compete and succeed at a high level (defined as the team winning first place at least twice the previous year); (2) the coach must have substantial experience (defined as a minimum of five years as a basketball coach); and (3) the team must have exhibited positive interactions (both player-to-player and coach-to-player interactions) during the pre-study observation period).

The youth sample was representative of the *select* basketball player population (i.e., predominantly Euro and African-American; higher concentration of teams in urban areas). Researchers have illustrated how sport experiences differ between males and females (Chambers, 1991; Gill, 1993; Oglesby & Hill, 1993). Through limiting potential confounding variables (i.e., gender, age, location) that have the potential to produce variation in study findings, the researcher was able to obtain a deep understanding and in-depth information about team dynamics within a particular subset. Study results can then be utilized as a means of comparison with similar research within other population subsets (e.g., male participants of the same age; older adolescents; participants within another geographic area).

This particular subset of participants was targeted purposively for two reasons. First, there is no sanctioning body for coaching certification at this particular competition level. While some coaches bring with them previous experience from other settings (e.g., recreation and parks departments) and roles (e.g., players), the minimum requirement to participate at a *select* level is simply to organize and properly register a team for tournaments or leagues. This stands in contrast to *recreational* and *instructional* league teams where coaches are often required to attend training seminars and successfully pass competency exams before working with youth players. Secondly, the specific age range of participants (early adolescents, aged 13-15 or approximately grades 7-9) is a population for whom teaching life skills through athletic activity may be most appropriate. In early childhood, participation in athletic activity concentrates on building sports-related skill competencies making the focus of play to learn the game at a rudimentary level rather than as a tool for life skill training. While teaching life skills is important at any developmental stage, it may be most important during early adolescence as it is during this time that youth embark on several concurrent changes greatly affecting their social and emotional growth. One of the most prominent changes is the cognitive development of the individual, which is associated with the youth's ability to think abstractly, process information in a more sophisticated manner, and engage in self-reflection (Keating, 1990). Adolescents also embark upon several socio-contextual changes that have the potential to play important roles in their development. These changes include the shift in relationships (from parent-centered to peer-centered)

and physical relocation within the school environment (from elementary schools to intermediate or middle schools (National Research Council, 2002).

Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were held with coaches at a location of their choosing (an interview guide can be found in Appendix B). The coaches were asked to identify what developmental outcomes (e.g., leadership, character, initiative) they seek to foster in their players. Coaches were also asked to identify the processes they use during contacts with the players to accomplish the stated outcomes. The coaches were asked to identify any individual(s) who influenced them as a child participant and/or youth coach as a means to establish potential drivers for their approach to working with players and particular coaching style. Demographic data was also acquired, including age, gender, ethnicity, years of coaching experience, and years of playing experience. Interview data was obtained through audio recordings and note taking by the researcher.

After interviews are completed, direct observation of coaching behaviors during practices and games was undertaken to determine the fidelity with which the coaches carry out the previously identified developmental processes (i.e., are they doing what they say they are doing; a guide for observation criteria can be found in Appendix C). Basic observation criteria (e.g., coaching temperament, activity atmosphere) were developed by the researcher, with influence from previous context-centered research (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Perkins & Noam, 2007), to identify potential contextual factors that serve to promote or dissuade positive development. These criteria of coach-

player interactions took direction from the Coaching Behavior Assessment System (CBAS; Smith, Smoll, & Hunt, 1977; Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979) which seeks to measure reactive behaviors (those given in response to player behaviors and actions) and spontaneous behaviors (those not given in response to a player performance attempts; for a full breakdown of the CBAS' emphasis areas please see Appendix B). Additionally, data collected during the interview with coaches served as a framework to guide in-depth observation criteria.

The observation of coaching behaviors included both verbal responses and those given nonverbally, such as kinesics (body movement), paralinguistics (volume, quality, accent, and tone of speech), and haptics (touching; Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Each coach was observed during three practices and five games. Game observations occurred within a tournament setting where teams typically play a minimum of four games (sometimes as many as eight).

Data was gathered through the use of field notes with the researcher playing an observer and a participant role (a participant role will be used during practices as a means to gain in-depth coaching information as well as establish trust and rapport with coaches and players; Creswell, 2007). During practices where the researcher is engaged as an active participant, note taking was performed immediately following practice. Engaging in an active role during practice promoted the researcher being viewed as a “regular” and encouraged participant actions that are more natural for coaches and players. Additionally, care was taken so as to not go “native” (i.e., becoming too close to participants) which could have threatened the validity of study findings through biases

(Henderson, 2006). This was accomplished through the researcher always being a “step away” from fostering relationships with coaches or players (i.e., a constant awareness by the researcher of the need to remain at a safe distance so as to not negatively impact or skew study findings). Another method for reducing team or individual bias entailed the researcher interacting to the same degree with each team (i.e., not spending more time with one team than another). The researcher also maintained a reflexive journal, where notes were maintained regarding methodological decisions and what the researcher perceived was happening within the setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using these observational techniques allowed the researcher insight regarding the interaction of coaches and players within the natural setting of practices and games.

Regarding the number of coach respondents, Lofland and Lofland (1984) warned against potential data management issues with large numbers of in-depth interviews; however Douglas (1985) has suggested conducting as many interviews as possible to fully explore the interest area. As a result, differing opinions exist regarding the minimum or maximum number of interviews needed to reach data saturation. Current research suggests that in-depth interview studies should contain 15-20 respondents as a general rule of thumb, although this figure ultimately depends on the characteristics of a given study (Henderson, 2006). The present study utilized multiple data gathering methods (i.e., interviews, observation, focus groups) and sources (i.e., coaches, players) and, as a result, employed three coach respondents.

Focus groups were then conducted with players as a means to triangulate the data obtained from coach interviews and direct observation (a focus group interview guide

can be found in Appendix D). When conducting qualitative research involving youth respondents, it is important to consider the context within which data will be gathered. Children have a propensity to become uncomfortable in settings with which they are unfamiliar (Hatch, 1995). To this end, focus groups were composed of members from the same team and were conducted within the practice facility, after or before practice times. While coaches (or other adults associated with the team) were present at the location during player focus groups, the players were situated such that privacy was maintained to promote honest discussion. Henderson (2006) suggests that a focus group typically consist of 7-10 participants; however, to promote engagement by all participants and utilize their interaction as the primary source of data, 4-5 youth participants per group was used in this study. The target focus group size results in two groups per team, resulting in a total of 6 focus groups used for this study. Employing focus groups as a research method requires the researcher to take on an active role in creating group discussion (Morgan, 2004). Further, Krueger (1988) suggests that focus groups be comprised of individuals possessing certain characteristics which serve to foster discussion. As such, the researcher observed participants in a practice setting to determine potential focus group members that will serve to promote interaction and minimize circumstances that could potentially dissuade discussion. Most notably, the researcher observed the interactions between those players serving as starters on their team (i.e., players who typically start and play the majority during games) and those associated with reserve roles (i.e., players who typically experience less playing time). This variable was of particular importance as these two groups had the potential for

distinctly different perceptions of their coach and focus groups composed of both types of players, starters and reserves, could have contributed to tension and reservations about opinion sharing.

In considering issues raised by Patton (2001) associated with selecting an appropriate sample for qualitative inquiry, the age of respondents was between 13 and 15 years of age (or approximately 7th-9th grade). A major premise of qualitative inquiry is to gain detailed, in-depth information regarding social phenomena and, as such, a richer understanding of context dynamics can be provided through identifying a narrower age range. Additionally, an intimate understanding in this context could promote further research with more diverse age ranges and in other settings.

Rapport and Responsibility

It is important for the researcher to cultivate rapport and trust with the respondents before exploring personal experiences and perceptions. This notion is particularly salient when conducting research involving youth populations. As Graue and Walsh (1995) suggest, the relationship between a researcher and a youth respondent is much different than with an adult respondent because:

Regardless of the rapport between researcher and child, the researcher is NOT a child. The adult remains an adult, an outsider, and 'other.' The relationship between adult and child is asymmetrical and can never be bridged by taking what some have called a 'least adult role'" (p. 145).

Failure to address these issues of developing rapport and trust could provide shallow perspectives on the interactions within this context (Graue & Walsh, 1995). As a result, I engaged the youth during their practice time by becoming an active member (as agreed to by the coach) of the activity and worked to overcome a position of authority and

potential threat. In so doing, my demeanor as an interviewer and observer during subsequent activities did not serve to control the children's behaviors; rather, it promoted a comfortable interaction allowing respondents to speak freely on topics they feel are important (Browning & Hatch, 1995).

With the successful establishment of rapport comes a level of responsibility to the participants in the research. The researcher has an obligation to always be honest with the participants throughout the research process (Henderson, 2006). Consent forms were provided for coaches (Appendix E) and parents of players (Appendix F), and assent forms were supplied to the players (Appendix G) via mail and distributed prior to first contact with the team. The forms were collected prior to the first coach interview. These documents, approved by Texas A&M University's Institutional Review Board, provided participants with a description of the study, the identification of their role, and their rights as a potential study respondent. Related to this study, progress updates were supplied to the coaches and the intentions of the research were presented to the youth respondents prior to data gathering. Additionally, the researcher has an obligation to address issues of results sharing with the participants. The findings of the study are based on the behaviors and perceptions of the respondents and results obtained through these data were made available to those who were interested. This study provided deliverables to both coaches and players in the forms of coaching methodologies and youth perceptions of coaches' intentions. To protect the anonymity of the participants, coaches and players did not receive information pertaining directly to their team; rather, they were given generalized information from all respondents.

Data Analysis

When analyzing qualitative data, great concern must be taken to ensure that the interpretation of that data is rooted in the words and perceptions of the respondent. “Just as children are situated within contexts, the research act exists in context as well...[t]his context provides culturally and historically situated lenses that are as salient to the findings as the ‘data’ themselves” (Graue & Walsh, 1995). Data analysis procedures situated in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were used in this study and included the following coding techniques: microscopic, open, axial, and selective.

Following each interview, observation, and focus group, the researcher examined the raw data (i.e., notes taken during the interview and focus groups as well as field notes taken during observation) through microscopic coding. This method promoted familiarity with the data, the examination of *in vivo* concepts related to respondent behaviors and responses, and provided a means to evaluate potential interpretations of the data (Henderson, 2006).

During all phases of data collection (interview, observation, and focus group), open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to generate categories and sub-categories. Transcripts were made of interviews and focus groups from the recorded audio tape and paired with the researcher’s notes and reflexive journal entries. This process allowed the use of the constant comparative method (Creswell, 2007) whereby newly obtained data was compared to emerging categories during the initial open

coding. The use of this method promoted data saturation, meaning subsequent interviews and observations were producing no new categories of information. The Atlas.ti software package (Scientific-Software, 2007) was used to aid in coding and in the identification of emerging categories. Selective coding will then be used to connect the developed categories and propose, as well as refine, the substantive-level theory.

Trustworthiness and Validity

Great care must be taken to maximize the potential benefit of any qualitative endeavor, particularly with those involving youth populations. This study employed several validation strategies to increase the trustworthiness and reliability of the research, including participant engagement, data triangulation, peer review and debriefing, member checking, and identifying researcher biases (Creswell, 2007).

Qualitative researchers suggest using prolonged engagement and persistent observation as a means of developing trust with participants and cultivating a rapport that promotes a valid representation of contextual actions and perceptions (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Merriam, 1988). Through my sustained involvement in *select* youth basketball, I bring in-depth knowledge of this culture and existing relationships with individuals (e.g., coaches, players, organizers, parents) in this community. While this may present potential drawbacks through biases and preconceptions, it is important for the researcher, as the instrument of data collection (Henderson, 2006), to have intimate knowledge of the context being examined and effectively be able to make decisions regarding saliency within the study (Creswell, 2007).

Through the use of multiple data sources (e.g., coaches, players) and methods (e.g., interviews, observations), I was able to triangulate the data collected to gain a full perspective of youth basketball as a developmental setting. The use of multiple resources served to corroborate the information gathered and provided a comparative means to explore differing perspectives (Merriam, 1988; Patton, 2001).

Similar to interrater reliability within quantitative research, the use of peer review and debriefing was used as a means to externally check and verify the reliability of the study (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was done through questions regarding the research process and comparative note taking by the researcher and the peer reviewer during debriefing sessions.

The purpose of qualitative research is to solicit and present the views and perceptions of a participant group. As such, the use of member checking to verify the credibility of research findings and interpretations is “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). The data collected, interpretations of the researcher, and conclusions drawn were presented to participants as a means to judge the accuracy and validity of the research. Member checking occurred throughout the research process. First, coaches were supplied the categories and interpretations generated during the microscopic and open coding steps for both interviews and observations. Likewise, a return visit to a team practice allowed the researcher to present interpretations of the data collected to each focus group. Second, players and coaches were provided a briefing of the conclusions drawn from the axial and selective coding steps. This document contained generalized findings related to

coaching practices, coach behaviors, and player perceptions. Participants were asked to provide, if necessary, alternative language, key observations, or other interpretations that would serve to benefit the analysis of the data.

Researcher Role

I have been associated with organized sports, whether through playing at the collegiate level or being a youth coach, for over two decades. Through my experiences as a player, coach, referee, and supervisor I have developed first-hand, in-depth perspectives regarding the use of organized sports to accomplish desired distal outcomes, ranging from the development of a player who will succeed at various levels of athletic competition to utilizing the activity as a hook to involve youth and teach targeted life lessons.

Over the last 14 years, I have been involved in basketball mainly as a coach, taking a team of beginning players (normally boys and girls aged 7 to 8) and continuing to work with them until they graduated high school. As a team we would travel extensively, particularly during the summer months so as to not negatively impact academic performance, to play in various tournaments and leagues. Through our travels and games played, I was exposed to a wide array of team types, ranging from rural teams to faith-based organizations to corporately sponsored teams (i.e. a team whose entry fees, traveling costs, and equipment needs are supplied through corporate means such as Nike or And1). During these experiences, it became evident that differing types of teams carried with them certain personas and atmospheres that contributed to the players' (as well as the coaches' and parents') demeanors and actions. Most notably,

teams whose motives were driven by winning exhibited less sportsmanship behaviors and tended to be associated with corporate sponsorship or club organizations.

Conversely, other teams exuded respect for others both on and off the court as well as exhibiting many prosocial behaviors.

My experiences with these teams led to a completely new view of the possibility of youth basketball as a means to intentionally teach participants lessons that could benefit them both as players and as individuals. I began observing more closely the attitudes and actions of other coaches, parents, fans, and players while at tournaments and tried to formulate some type of associations between them. In addition, I began focusing more on equipping my players with skills that would help them become more complete players through knowing the game; better students through a directed focus on school; respectful sons and daughters through parent involvement; and aware individuals through community involvement.

I have had many experiences through youth basketball, both positive and negative, that resulted in this newfound perspective of utilizing youth sports as a means to engage youth and a tool to teach players skills that could benefit them beyond the game. I have been witness to actions ranging from physical altercations during an under-5 instructional league to members of a team exhibiting altruism through their financial assistance to a team not having the means to pay travel expenses. Initially, I felt as if I was alone in my efforts to utilize basketball as a means to benefit players physically, socially, and emotionally, but I soon found that others were making similar efforts within their programs. I also began to wonder what components of our programs

were similar and were these targeted actions resulting in the overall improvement of life and basketball skills for our players.

The characteristics of the researcher are important to any study, particularly qualitative endeavors. As such, I attempted to recognize my position as it relates to this study and remain reflexive (Henderson, 2006) regarding my role. Determining positionality was done through acknowledging the personal attributes and identities (e.g., gender, race, role; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004) that I brought into the research setting. I acknowledge my role as a male conducting research involving female youth participants. While it was possible that youth respondents were influenced by the difference in gender, I felt that two factors provide a strong rationale for my use as the data gathering instrument. First, of my 14 years involved in coaching youth sports, 10 years have been spent working with female athletes within the study age range. Through this experience I have developed an understanding of this population and have continuously refined my ability to effectively cultivate a trusting rapport with these youth. It must be noted, however, that the information shared by the study participants may have yielded differing results if the researcher had been female. In addition, interpretations of the data gathered, as seen through a female perspective, may have led to alternative findings. Second, my extensive experience in coaching youth athletics, in addition to my involvement as a player and referee, provide a rich understanding for the context in which I was immersed, resulting in observations and insights that I feel may have not otherwise been obtained.

Additionally, I believe that youth sports can play a vital role in the positive development of participants. However, I have witnessed scenarios where this is certainly not the case and, as a result, attempted to remain objective with regard to the developmental potential of youth sports. I also believe that the majority of youth sports coaches seek to promote the positive development of their players; however, I feel many succumb to the hyper-competitive nature of many athletic venues (e.g., leagues, tournaments) and compromise their role by employing a “win at all cost” mentality. I am cognizant of other youth coaches who engage in this activity for inappropriate reasons (e.g., to promote their child at the expense of other; reliving unfulfilled desires during the coach’s time as a player). While complete objectivity is never attainable, I am cognizant of my positivist views and attempted to minimize those within the research. Additionally, I attempted to remain reflexive about my role in the research process, particularly as it relates to the effects of participant responses and derived meanings on the researcher and the participants. To address these issues, I maintained a research journal throughout the study as a means of enhancing ethical and methodological rigor (Smith, 1999).

Study Limitations

As with most qualitative research, there are two major limitations to this study: the ability to generalize the findings and the biases of the researcher. Because this type of research generates rich and in-depth understanding, it is often housed within strict contextual elements. That is not to say that results cannot be generalized to similar settings; however, the degree to which the findings can be extended to other contexts

could be limited. As a former player, referee, and youth basketball coach, I bring with me a certain viewpoint through which to view this activity. While extensive efforts have been made to reduce personal bias in this area, it is inevitable that my past experiences will play a role in the interpretation of data. In addition to my past experiences, I must also acknowledge my role as a male researcher conducting this study. This may have influence in two specific areas: (1) my interactions with and observations of the female participants; and (2) my discussions with the coaches. While I have extensive experience in coaching girls' youth basketball, the relative short duration of the study, with regard to developing rapport with the participants and eliciting full responses from the players, in addition to gender differences, may have affected both the collection and interpretation of the data. Further, my role as a coach and, more specifically, a male youth basketball coach, may have affected my transactions with the coaches and the framework through which I viewed their coaching behaviors.

The purposive sampling method used in this study could also be a limiting factor. While this sampling method is widely used within qualitative research (Creswell, 2007), it has the potential to reduce the ability to generalize findings to other contexts, both within and outside the sports venue. Additionally, sampling from only a certain geographic area could provide insight into regional phenomena that may prove inconsistent in other locations (e.g., states, countries), but further study will need to be conducted in other locations to corroborate the findings of this study. While this is a limitation, sampling in this manner will provide in-depth information regarding a specified sample and can serve to promote research in other physical locations.

By relying on the perceptions of players and coaches regarding behaviors, issues related to self-reporting may arise. Coaches may wish to “appear” a certain way within the research and, as a result, report information that is inaccurate or false. Likewise, youth within the focus groups may engage in group normative behavior or be reluctant to say anything negative in the presence of their peers. While this limitation cannot be completely overcome, observations of coach and player behaviors will be used as a crosschecking mechanism to verify interview data.

The order in which data is gathered could also serve as a limiting factor in this study. Coaches were first asked to identify their desired goals and the methods they employed to achieve these outcomes. Next, the data obtained through observation was aligned along the major thematic findings to serve as a crosschecking mechanism to determine the fidelity of the coaches’ methodological approaches. It could be postulated that if observational data was obtained first then differing findings may have resulted. In addition, if player data was obtained prior to coach data the results also had the potential to be altered.

Finally, the influence of the researcher may have an influence on the observation and interview data gathered. Coaches and players may act and speak differently than they would in a “normal” setting, potentially skewing the information obtained. More specifically, because the coaches in this study were selected purposively through existing relationships, my presence as a fellow youth basketball coach and peer may have affected the coaches’ and players’ willingness to express their true feelings and emotions. While players and coaches were informed that my presence at practices and

games was strictly an academic endeavor, it is impossible to remove completely past perceptions of my being a coach. However, the threat of researcher influence and the desire for normative behavior are present in most self-report studies; and, it was hoped in the current case that through developing rapport and cultivating a trusting relationship, coaches and players will feel comfortable “being themselves” during data gathering.

Despite these limitations, this study has the potential to explore a historically underutilized context for promoting positive youth development. Findings generated from the research can provide insight as to potential discrepancies between coaches and players. In addition, it may provide a framework for conducting similar research aimed at exploring stakeholder opinions in other youth sports contexts.

CHAPTER IV

STUDY FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the views of coaches and players as they relate to participatory goals and coaching methodologies to determine if discrepancies between these two groups exist. The study was divided into four components that examined: (1) the outcomes associated with participation as identified by coaches of *select* youth basketball teams; (2) the methods identified by coaches to promote positive development; (3) the fidelity with which coaches carry out their identified coaching methods in practices and games; and (4) the perceptions of the players related to coaching intentions and behaviors. Data were collected through interviews with coaches of three select girls basketball teams; focus group interviews with players; observations of team practices, tournament games; observation of informal interactions between players and coaches; and casual dialog with participant's parents.

The results of the study will be organized by major thematic findings across three of the data sources (coaches, players, and observations); however, to fully appreciate the perspectives and observations, it is necessary to gain an understanding of the context from which the data were drawn. The following section will discuss the dynamics of each team to provide a lens through which to gain a richer understanding of the data collected.

Team Descriptions

The participants in this study were the coach and members of three *select* girls youth basketball teams from the greater Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex. Each team was comprised of female players residing in various cities. Players participated under the guidance of an organizer or organization and participated in tournaments and leagues at a high level of competition. The total sample included three coaches (two male, one female) and a total of 31 players from the three teams. Though it was difficult to determine a representative ethnic proportion of the *select* basketball community, the players' ethnic distribution was representative of those typically seen at a *select* girls' tournament in Texas (45.2% White, 38.7% African-American, 9.7% Hispanic, and 6.4% Asian-American). More detailed information regarding sample demographics can be found in Table 2.

Team 1

Team 1 is a highly successful team whose core players have been together six years. This group plays approximately 80 games per year (with the majority of those games being played during the summer season which extends from late May to late August), has won back-to-back national championships, finished as national runners-up one year, and has qualified to play for another national title in 2009. Most of their games are played within tournaments held by private sports organizations and are played within close proximity (less than 100 miles) of the team's central location. The team does, however, participate in tournaments that require significant travel (recent examples, Minnesota, Nevada, Ohio) and time spent away from home. While a significant

percentage of the players come from more affluent communities, the team does engage in some fundraising (e.g., tournament hosting) to offset the costs of travel and tournament entry fees. Typically, parents of the players travel with the team to tournament sites; however, few stay during practices. Practices are held twice a week (6:00pm to 8:00pm) at a local middle school or at an athletic complex that the team must pay to use. Each practice lasts approximately two hours. When held in the middle school, the team uses the entire gym; however, when the athletic complex is used the team has a full court but must compete with noise from roughly fifteen other courts in use at the same time.

TABLE 2
Team Demographics

Demographic	Team 1	Team 2	Team 3	Mean (SD)
Coach Information				
• Gender	Male	Male	Female	
• Ethnicity	White	African-American	White	
• Age	40	41	35	
• Coaching Experience	24	10	15	
• Coaching Select	10	6	2	
• With Current Team	6	6	2	
Player Experience (Mean,				
• Age	13.72	12.78 (.44)	15.27 (.47)	13.92
• Playing Organized	7.27	6.11 (1.36)	9.27 (1.68)	7.55 (1.60)
• With Current Team	4.00	2.89 (1.11)	1.72 (.47)	2.87 (1.14)
Player Ethnicity				
• White	63.6%	0.0%	63.6%	45.2%
• African-American	18.2%	88.9%	18.2%	38.7%
• Hispanic	9.1%	11.1%	9.1%	9.7%
• Asian-American	9.1%	0.0%	9.1%	6.4%

Coach *Jones* began coaching at 16 years of age, under the direction of his father. Coach *Jones* did not make the varsity baseball team as a junior in high school and elected not to play on the junior varsity team. Subsequently he was asked to be the team manager of the girls' junior varsity softball team. With his father as the varsity coach, Coach *Jones* was listed as team manager but had all the duties of a coach. Since that time, Coach *Jones* has been working with youth in various sports contexts including softball, baseball, and basketball. When asked why he chose to coach select basketball, Coach *Jones* responded: "I've had several offers to coach high school athletics but wanted to stay at the select level. You can't interact with them in the same way or be as much a part of their lives in a school setting."

Coach *Jones* has been involved with a select team for six years. His involvement has enabled him to provide a unique atmosphere for his players; one he feels allows them to become more effective on multiple fronts. He attributes a great deal of the team's success to the players' upbringing, indicating that "... we're fortunate where a lot of my girls come from good background, if not all."

One of the main reasons teams play in a select division is a desire to participate at a higher competition level than is offered at most park and recreation departments or non-profit agencies (e.g., Boys and Girls Club). There is a heightened emphasis on winning, which some may argue has some adverse consequences; however, Coach *Jones* is cognizant of this possibility, sharing that:

[Y]ou got to keep it fun, but I tell everybody, when you're winning, it's always fun. I mean, it really is. We went 4-0 [four wins and zero losses] this weekend against ninth and tenth grade teams and we'll probably have a great practice tonight. Two weeks ago, we went 1-3 [one win and three losses], practice was a

struggle. A 1-3 weekend is tough; the 4-0 weekend is great. I can do no wrong last weekend. It didn't matter. As long as we won, I can do no wrong. I tell everybody winning solves everything. I think last year like I said, when we weren't winning, it's a little harder. We didn't have a regular trip to Chili's, we didn't have the whole group going, so different things like that. But at the end of the day, we're a select team, we're a handpicked team and our expectations are high.

Coach *Jones* felt that the relationships he developed with his coaches played a significant role in his life, sharing that: "To me, I had coaches my whole life they were always there for me and it was those coaches that I felt gave me just the lessons to work harder and to succeed." He also felt that it is an important aspect of his coaching education is to continue evaluating and refining his approach through self-reflection and peer learning:

I'm not afraid to bring in another coach...like some of these girls have been with me for five, six, seven years. They know what I'm going to say before I say it. I know the mistake they're going to make before they make it. But then also, they have somebody else telling them the same thing or maybe in a different way, I think they learn it. Three or four years ago, I could probably say I was too intense, no doubt about it and learned you know. I'm never too old to learn and had to learn how to turn my intensity towards positive energy.

Team 2

The veteran players of Team 2 have been together for four years and have also experienced considerable on-court success. Typically, this team has played in an age division that is one to two years older than the current players; this approach has yielded great success when they've played against teams of their own age group. Team 2 has qualified for and played in several national tournaments, advancing to a high level but never finishing within the top four. During the summer months, the team competes in approximately 50 games, most of which take place within a 100 mile radius of the

team's home location. Like Team 1, the coaches, parents, and players make a concerted effort to play in at least one tournament that requires considerable travel (e.g., Tennessee). Unlike Team 1, the majority of Team 2 players reside in less affluent areas of the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex and, as such, participate in significant fundraising efforts (e.g., working concession stands, local service drives, goods sales) to provide funding for team travel and entry fees. Most of the parents do not remain at the gym during practice hours, but they typically accompany the players to tournaments, providing an encouraging fan base during games;

There are several fathers of players who serve as assistant coaches during practice (though only one serves during games), but few other parents are present unless the coach is holding a parent's meeting. Practices are held twice a week (7:30pm to 9:00pm) at a local middle school that also serves as a city recreation facility. During practice, the team has access to the entire court; however, there are instances when a younger team practices with Team 2.

Coach *Wilson* is an experienced basketball player, having participated at the high school and pro-am (a hybrid level between a professional and an amateur league) levels. His first introduction into youth sports was not in a coaching capacity:

I was refereeing at first. When you start out refereeing, your first year you ref middle school. The coaches that I saw were just horrible. I have a strong passion for this game. I sincerely do have a strong passion for this game and I just got irritated at seeing the lack of direction that these young kids were getting in terms of playing ball. I mean that's really what prompted me to coaching. I wanted to be a part of the development process in terms of young people learning how to play this game and I wanted to teach them the right way.

When asked to elaborate on what he observed in the non-exemplary coach, he responded:

The thing that sticks out to me most is two things actually. One, I would see coaches encouraging the wrong things. I mean for example, a player could, I don't know, be dribbling in traffic on a break and he or she could be dribbling with his or her head down and trying to dribble through three or four people as opposed to looking up and making an outlet pass or passing the ball to someone open, and throw the ball away subsequently or lose the ball out of bounds. The coach is like, "That's okay. That's okay. We'll get them next time." It's things like that I'm thinking, no, that's not okay, you know? If you teach them how to do it right in the next time, or at least give them instruction as to what he did wrong or she did wrong, they can learn from it. But just to say, "That's okay. That's okay," things like that would frustrate me. Then coaches just didn't seem to be passionate about it. I know a lot of middle school coaches are science teachers or football coaches or whatever and they're just doing it for a paycheck or whatever.

Contrary to many coaches, Coach *Wilson* strives to develop a positive relationship with both the players and the parents on his team. He views this as an essential element of what he tries to accomplish with his team:

A lot of my players come from single-parent households so I get a lot of phone calls from the moms if someone's acting up in school, not doing what she's supposed to do at home or just certain situations like that, that there is a rapport with each parent in that regard especially the parents that have the single-parent households.

The coach values the insights and opinions of the parents, and feels that including the parents in team activities is an important element in creating a family atmosphere and something that makes his team somewhat unique:

I've been truly blessed. I have an excellent group of parents. On my oldest team, 70% of these girls I've had since they were nine years old, ten years old, since fourth grade and I have a strong rapport with the parents. They're very active. They're very active in their daughter's playing on this team and we have a real family type atmosphere. There's a lot of outside activities that we do exclusive from basketball and from the tournaments. So there's some teambuilding

activities that we have that builds that camaraderie and the bonds that the girls and the parents have.

In addition to considering basic team and coaching information, it is important to consider the coach's style, approaches and their driver for working with the players. During the interview, Coach *Wilson* offered some insight as to his personality and how that has shaped his approach to coaching;

I've learned a lot since day one when I started coaching to where I am today in terms of my coaching style. My natural personality is kind of laidback but I've very passionate about certain things. Things of my interest, I'm very passionate, basketball being one of them. I've been on all three sides: player, coach, [and] referee.

He goes on to explain how his laidback personality guides his interactions with players:

I don't think that you have to just really get all in someone's face and just bark out down their throat to make a point. You don't have to just be a "ya, ya, ya" type coach to make your point. You can talk to people and you'd be surprised at the response you'll get just by talking to them. You'd be surprised. You'd be surprised. Now there are times when I get frustrated and I'll stomp my foot or whatever but it's in context and I'm not over there throwing chairs or grabbing somebody by the collar or any kind of stuff. I'm more laidback and conversational.

Coach *Wilson* also explained his desire to continue learning the game from a coaching perspective and how he accomplishes that through, among other things, self-reflection:

When I started refereeing, I would look at games differently because at first when I watch a basketball game, I just watch it as a player. Then when I started refereeing, I would look at a game from a referee's perspective. From a coaching perspective, I'll watch how other coaches interact with their players and stuff. Even though it's on TV, I watch how they give instruction, how they give direction or how they make their point. Even going to watching other games where there'd be a tournament or something like that, I'll watch how coaches act and I have to kind of be reflective in like, "Hey, do I do that?" You know? "Do I act that silly?" I kind of step back a little bit to kind of just reflect to see how I carry myself and I want to make sure that the way I carry myself, my players on

the sideline would not be ashamed or wouldn't feel like, my God, my coach is crazy because whether we realize it or not, our behavior is going to reflect on those kids, boys and girls. I don't want my behavior to be negative or to let them think that something is okay when it's not.

Another method utilized by the coach for continued learning is through peer interactions with other coaches. Coach *Wilson* shared that:

I've never been afraid to learn something from someone else whether a peer, someone older or whatever. You can always take something from other people. You can always learn something from other people. I mean even to this day I'm continually learning. I'm a student of the game myself but just through the course of time.

An important aspect of any coach's pedagogical approach is the underlying rationale for wanting to work with youth in a sports setting. Some coaches have children on the team, others feel it is an alternative to the scholastic certification requirements, but Coach *Wilson* explained that:

I just love seeing their development. I'm not going to sit here and say I don't like winning. I love winning...But at the same time, I've watched a group of girls grow from fourth grade to seventh grade. I went to at least one game of each one of their seventh-grade games and I told them that before the season started when you guys go play for your respective middle-school teams; one, you will have more experience nine times out of ten than anybody else on that team; two, there's going to be almost no situation that you haven't been in already based on your select play; and three, you guys are going to be the leaders for your respective teams because no one else is going to have the experience that you've had through playing select ball. And I was right. When we came back together as our select team and I asked them about it, they were all like, "Man, you were right, coach." But just seeing that development and knowing that I had a small piece, had a small part in their development, that's what I look for the most. And when they make it to college, I want tickets.

Team 3

Team 3 is new to select *team competition* having only been together two years (despite their being the oldest of the three teams included in this study). During their short tenure, the team has experienced success each year, winning numerous tournaments and placing in the top three in many others. While the individual players are very competitive, based on observations of skill level the team is not at the level of the other two study teams. The team plays in approximately 35 games during the summer months, all of which are played near the team's central location. Little long distance travel is required.

The players are diverse in their ethnicity and socio-economic backgrounds. Due to the minimal travel requirements and little need for overnight stays, a high percentage of parents are present during tournaments; however, no parents were seen during practices (unless they arrived before the end of practice to pick up their daughters). Practices were held on Tuesdays and Saturdays at a private school (7:00pm to 8:30pm) where the team had exclusive use of the entire court. On tournament weekends, the team would forego the Saturday practice as games were played that day, resulting in only one practice that week.

Coach *Smith* has extensive experience playing basketball, participating in high school as well as playing at the Division I college level. She has also been an assistant coach at the Division I level, and has been in the profession for 15 years. However, she is a relative newcomer to coaching select basketball. When asked what prompted her involvement, the coach explained that:

You know I played basketball [in college]. I guess it became my love in high school. I went into college playing ball and studying pre-med, and then at the end of my junior year it hit me like a ton of bricks that I only get to do this for one more year the rest of my life. That's it, it's over. So I came back as a coach. I mean, I wasn't ready. I wasn't ready to be away from it.

After a coaching position brought her to the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex, Coach *Smith* became interested in working with players at the select level during the summer months.

She offered a brief account of what the first summer was like:

So when I came into it [coaching select] I really didn't know what to expect and I didn't know what the ability level of my team was going to be. I was just handed this team, here this is your group that you're going to coach, so I didn't really have a lot of this is where we're going, this is what we're doing. But this year, at the end of the year it was about halfway through our season last summer and the parents started saying we want to stay together if we win. Yeah, let's do it. So at the end of our season I asked everybody, "What do you all want to do? What do you want to do with this team?" They weren't really interested in travelling out of town a whole lot but they were interested in maybe playing for the opportunity to go to a national tournament somewhere.

Reflecting on her pedagogical approach to coaching, Coach *Smith* draws a great deal from her past experiences as a player and shared a particularly interesting account of a former coach:

But my first college coach, man, he was a screamer and a holler'er and it was really a lot about him...He pulled some stunts like we were playing a game where he was wearing a blue sweater. He's screaming and hollering and yelling just like he always did and some ref made a bad call. He didn't like it. He whipped off his sweater and he had an official's shirt underneath. I mean he was out there, a showman you know. Another time we were playing a game and we were getting our tail kicked on the road and I looked over on the bench and he wasn't on the bench. He was sitting in the stands eating popcorn and he just left us you know. He got T'd up [received a technical foul] like three games in a row so our AD [athletic director] suspended him and he couldn't believe it...I always thought there was a way to be critical of what people were doing without beating them down as a person too. I mean the way you say things matters especially with girls and I think it matters with boys too but I think boys are starting to get that kind of treatment so young they don't know any different.

When asked her perspective on the coaching role, Coach *Smith* responded, “my job first and foremost is the team and just what’s best for the team as a whole.” She then reflected on her transition from working with collegiate athletes to those players still in high school:

As a college coach, I’m working with them every day of their life, their everyday activities you know. Are you eating right? Are you sleeping? Are you getting your school work done? They’ve got car trouble, got to help them try to figure out how to get that taken care of and still stay in line with the rules of the NCAA. I mean it’s their whole life, they’re away from their mom and dad and you’re the frontline for them when something happens to help them with it. And I miss that, that aspect of it. When I came to high school, I came to high school and it started sinking into me that I don’t have as much influence on them. I don’t feel like I can influence them as much because they go home to mom and dad.

The last portion of the coach’s response is particularly interesting as it runs contrary to what many select basketball coaches believe and has the potential to affect the coach’s interaction with players. When I inquired, as a follow up, about the coach’s perceived self-efficacy in helping her players to positively develop, she explained:

I don’t know that it [the player’s growth as an individual] has anything to do with anything that I’ve done. I think it’s just their natural growing up and maturing you know. But yeah, that’s hard for me to say. Yeah have I seen them change some? Yeah but know that it has anything to do with us in select basketball. Yet I think I know them better. I know how to deal with them. At least I know how to deal with the core group which has helped me to learn how to deal with the new folks I have this year and understand them better.

Coach *Smith* has a grounded perspective on her coaching role, and stated that she could be called a repeater or a manipulator:

...you could say I’m the head repeater, you could also say, well, I’m the head manipulator because that’s really what we’re doing. We’re trying to push the right buttons to get people to do what we want them to do

The coach, however, does have a firm grasp on her coaching style and the desired effect she hopes it has on her team:

I don't think you've got to be a yeller and a screamer you know, at people. I don't want to be a yeller and a screamer officially. That's not saying I don't. I get mad and I'll say stuff to them and I feel like they may slip, though my team never depends on that.

Somewhat new to the select basketball ranks, Coach *Smith* is still developing her rapport with parents and learning how to effectively communicate with them while maintaining what she refers to as a "safe distance." According to the coach:

I just try to stay in line with what it is the parents want. I talk with the parents. ...which I never did with parents collegiately. Didn't care to. But here we talk, we interact. That's kind of touchy for me though because I'm like it's a fine line, you know. If you're too friendly then they're going to start thinking they can tell you stuff that she can't be telling me and I'm not telling them how to raise their daughter so I don't want them telling me how to coach.

The coach does, however, have a firm stance on parental involvement as it relates to her team:

And so I told them if you [the parents] want to yell instructions and tell them [the players] what to do, you probably ought to get your own team. I haven't had a bad response yet. I guess because it's like day one, it's what I say. Maybe it helps because I tell them, "I'm not saying you're wrong. I'm just saying there's a lot of ways to play this game but we want to play it this way."

Outcome Themes

One of the goals of this study was to identify the desired goals that were to be achieved through participation. First, coaches were asked to identify the participatory outcomes they desired for their players. Next, to establish potential discrepancies, the players were asked to identify the goals they felt the coach had for them. One of the major thematic findings was consistent across the two groups (*development of life skills*).

The *player improvement* theme identified by the coaches was replaced by the player identified theme *team success through winning*. Finally, the *enjoying the player experience* theme identified by the coaches was not identified by the players.

Coach Responses

When the three coaches were asked to identify their goals three major themes emerged: (1) player improvement; (2) development of life skills; and (3) enjoying the playing experience. Each of these goals was not identified as a separate construct (i.e., the coach did not focus solely on a specific goal, such as the development of life skills, during coach-player interactions); rather, the goal themes were viewed as interrelated in that a player could potentially be improving their skill set while developing life skills within an enjoyable environment.

Consistent with the findings from previous studies (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000), coaches were able to readily identify desired goals for their players and recognized the importance of teaching a variety of skills to participants. This finding is noteworthy because much of what players learn through their participation in youth sports depends upon the coach (Petlichkoff, 1993; Steelman, 1995) and the coaches' ability to accurately convey their thoughts to their players (Smoll & Smith, 1984). Additionally, Smoll and Smith (1984) proposed that variables associated with coaching differences, which includes the coach's goals and motives, serve as the primary drivers, along with differences among athletes and situational factors, for social learning.

Player Improvement

The three sub-themes showing the highest degree of consistency across the three teams were: (1) teaching the game-three coaches; (2) preparation for the next level-two coaches; and (3) skill improvement-two coaches. The ultimate goal of most athletes participating at a high competition level, such as select basketball, is to improve their skill set and mastery of the game. If the desired outcome was simply participation, then this could certainly be accomplished in a parks and recreation program or through participating in unorganized (i.e. “pick-up”) sporting activities, often requiring minimal resources, such as money and time.

Similar to other studies that have found the most prevalent coaching focus to be technical instruction (Bloom, Crumpton, & Anderson, 1999; Miller, 1992), coaches in this study were able to effectively and quickly identify the foci they felt would lead to improvements in the player.

Teaching the Game. *Teaching the game* was identified as a sub-theme for all three teams. Each coach felt that one of their primary goals was to not simply instruct players on correct movements while engaged in play, but to increase players’ ability to recognize certain details within the game (e.g., defenses, offenses, opponent tendencies) and make the proper decisions based upon that information. It was the belief of all coaches that effectively teaching athletes how to improve their performance through a greater understanding of the game would develop skills that would be of benefit in other life settings, a finding similar to Gould and his colleagues (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007).

In preparing players to compete at a high school level, Coach *Jones* noted a desire to create “cerebral players,” that is, players who have the cognitive ability to think about the transactions that occur during play and select from them the appropriate action. He noted that:

We still work on the fundamentals, we still have some kids that haven’t grown, we still have kids that aren’t fully grown so you kind of go back and forth with fundamentals but now it’s almost at a point where we’re trying to teach them the game, getting on to them big time to let them know the game mentally.

Example outcomes of a player effectively knowing the game are the ability to recognize an opposing team’s defense, grasp the team’s focus particularly as it relates to specific offensive and defensive tasks, and make proper decision during play.

In many instances, players are described as being “robots on the floor” (i.e., machine-like players who carry out their coach’s orders with great precision but have little ability to rationalize). Coach *Wilson*, however, desires his players to be very “cognitive” in their approach to playing, saying he gets “genuinely excited when players are able to think for themselves.” He goes on to explain that:

Many coach, but few teach and I definitely want anybody that’s ever played for me that when he or she gets to the next level whether it be varsity, college or whatever, I want that player to be a student of the game and have a high basketball IQ.

Consistent with the other two coaches, Coach *Smith* desires her players to have a high basketball IQ. She explained that her efforts are:

[T]o make them smarter players, to not have them be mechanical players or robots that run a pattern. We run this offense, this is what I don’t want to do all the time, every time, but to be thinkers and to see the game developing, understand that you’ve got to make a series of decisions and you’ve always got to work together...But I just don’t know how you help somebody become a smart player without talking about it a lot and explaining it.

Preparation for the Next Level. Two of the coaches mentioned a desire to prepare their players for participation at the high school level. More specifically, they referenced a goal of having the athletes play on the junior varsity level, as a minimum, during their freshman year and then move up to varsity by their sophomore year. This finding is rather unique among youth sports research as most coach-centered studies do not focus on select-level athletics and among those that do, most have not explored this aspect of coaching pedagogy (many focus on coaching behaviors; for an example see Cushion & Jones, 2001). Additionally, from my personal observation, many youth sports coaches do not consider the player's participation on scholastic teams when developing their team and player goals. Often the goal is to be as successful as possible within the select environment without a focus on helping the players improve their skills for future participation.

Coach *Jones* goes further, putting his goals for the players in context:

Our goal this year is to get back and win our district AAU which is in two weeks. We'd like to win a super regional here in Frisco and then get into the top 10. I'd say my personal goal would be to get in the top eight or top four at AAU, which is in Cincinnati, Ohio. But at the end of that if I have four girls next year on varsity as freshman, to me that's more of accomplishment than winning a trophy at AAU. If I have all 10 on JV or a varsity then I know we really succeeded. My ultimate goal is, in three or four years, to spend every Tuesday and Friday night watching basketball during basketball season in high school and watching girl after girl after girl that I know and hopefully when they walk by, they'll come up and say "Hi."

Similarly Coach *Wilson* wants his players to be prepared to compete at a high level during their first year of high school:

My short-term goal is for them to be prepared when they make it to high school or their freshman year. I would like to see them go directly to at least the JV team as opposed to playing freshman ball. That would be my short-term goal for all of them. Two of them I know for sure, they're probably going to go straight to varsity. Yes, the goal would be just having them prepared mentally and skillfully for the high school level.

Skill Improvement. This sub-theme was separated from preparing players for the next level of competition because it became a distinct part of overall player improvement and was identified as such by two of the coaches. This finding coincides with one the features of positive developmental settings proposed by Eccles and Gootman (2002) - opportunities for skill building. While approaches to developing sports-related skills vary as do the level of skills addressed (Strean, 1995), the development of skills has been found to be one of the most salient features associated with youth sports participation (Fine, 1987).

While a primary focus of Coach *Jones* was adequately preparing a player for high school competition, the coach realizes that this may not be every player's goal nor may it be feasible given a certain player's skill set. In recognizing this, the coach expressed a strong desire to see his players improve their basketball skills: "I think my main goal is just as long as they're better today than they were yesterday, then we're heading in the right direction."

Coach *Smith* stated that: "I tell them at the very beginning that my goals are to improve our skills so whatever skills they have, make them better at forming them, maybe introduce some new things to them, then also to expand their repertoire."

Development of Life Skills

Life skill development through physical activity, particularly sports, has become a recent focus of many researchers (Gilbert, Gilbert, & Trudel, 2001; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000; Theokas, Danish, Hodge, Heke, & Forneris, 2008; Wiess, Bolter, Bhalla, & Price, 2007). In the current study, those sub-themes showing the greatest amount consistency across the three teams were: (1) teaching positive qualities-three coaches; (2) mental strength and a focus on academics-two coaches; and (3) instilling a positive work ethic-two coaches.

Within the field of youth sports, an important factor mediating the development of life skills is the coach and the coach's perceived efficacy in helping players to develop positively (McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000). Past research has suggested that because of the short term nature of youth sports programs, there is little chance they could produce significant and lasting effects (Fine, 1987). Other research has suggested that if coach's felt the time allotted was sufficient to do more than simply prepare athletes for competition, they may be more willing to pursue objectives that serve benefit outside the athletic setting (Strean, 1995). The findings in this study speak to one of the unique features of select sports in that the coach is often working with the same group of athletes for an extended period of time and, given this opportunity, can focus on helping the players to develop beneficial life skills.

Teaching Positive Qualities. The labeling of this sub-theme speaks to the wide ranging responses given by the coaches and may be evidence that goal development, as it relates to life skills, may not have been a specific area of focus when determining

desired outcomes. Regarding the level of specificity given within this theme, Gould and his colleagues found similar results when they interviewed exemplary high school football coaches. One of the higher order themes found in their study was *teaching positive skills and values*, which was composed of several raw data categories rather than specific sub-themes (Gould, et al., 2007).

Coach *Jones* views that: “Society is a tough place especially nowadays. So try to be disciplined, try to work hard and kind of see where it gets you.” The coach feels that achieving a high level of self-discipline is “key to becoming a better player and person.” He also feels that it is a noteworthy trait to teach, one that positive draws the attention of observers:

I'm a huge disciplinarian. When you're in my [team's] uniform, you're not going to be messing up the hallways. My main thing is I want people when they leave a tournament win or lose that, “Hey, that team wins with class, they play hard and they're intense.” I'd say that's probably my biggest thing.

Coach *Wilson* feels strongly that playing basketball, or any sport when properly organized, can help children develop positively. One of the most important aspects of the sports environment, according to Coach *Wilson*, is the orientation of the coach towards the players. He shares that:

My primary goal for the team I coach is, I always say primary, just development, and instilling strong qualities and integrity for the sport. I think if they have the genuine desire to play and they have the foundation of strong qualities, positive qualities and integrity, the rest of it takes care of itself in terms of playing high school or playing college.

The coach goes on to explain what some of those basic, foundational qualities are:

Competitiveness, “stick-to-it-iveness,” not giving up, understanding that there's two parts of the game that there's a winning part and there's a

losing part, and being able to handle both parts of it. If it's losing, learn from it. Not dwell on the loss but learn from the loss. If it's winning and being successful, being humble in that success and don't let the success define you as a person. But be humble in that success and recognize it is not what you did but it's what you guys did collectively and just integrity. I don't like the "me, me, me" type players in their attitude. I don't tolerate it on my team. If I see it, I nip it in the bud.

Mental Strength and a Focus on Academics. This sub-theme was one of the first goals related to life skills mentioned by the coaches. Again, Gould found similar results in his study where the coaches mentioned a focus on *academic enhancement* (Gould, et al., 2007). While few studies have explored the specific goals of youth sports coaches, existing research suggests that it is not an uncommon focus as youth who participate in sports to have higher grade point averages than their non-participating peers (Coakley, 1993). Further, integration of scholastic elements into youth sports contexts is another suggested aspect of positive developmental settings (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

In describing how basketball has changed, the coach mentioned a need to equip his players with a "mental toughness" that will serve them both on and off the court:

Now you got to be physically strong and you got to be mentally strong. And so from that aspect, I think our role has expanded because not only are we worried about their play, but also what they're doing outside the practice...and then grades.

Much like Coach *Jones*, Coach *Wilson* takes an active role in promoting scholastic achievement on his team. The coach wants each of his players "to have success on the court and in the classroom, because having those grades straight is the most important thing."

Instilling a Positive Work Ethic. Within the few youth sports studies that focus on coaches' goals, none specifically mention the coach's desire to instill a positive work ethic. While similar findings, such as the focus on increasing athlete's motivation and the ability to set and achieve goals, could be associated with this domain, these goals were always mentioned in concert with sports-related achievement. In this study, however, coaches mentioned the focus on a positive work ethic as a means to achieving success in other life domains.

Another life skill that Coach *Jones* views as vital to a player's success is a desire to give maximum effort no matter the circumstances: "If I had one thing, I'd want all these girls to take from it [playing], it's just to work hard." The coach mentioned his genuine desire to "see the girls work hard rather than win."

To a large degree, player improvement is dependent upon the individual's work ethic and desire to get better. As such, one of a coach's most important goals is (or should be) to teach players how to work hard towards a desired goal. As Coach *Smith* shared, this is something she feels will benefit her team members in their lives beyond being on the team: "I just want to see them get better and hopefully instill the passion for the game and instill the drive and work ethic that's going to carry them on through the rest of their life."

Enjoying the Playing Experience

The theme *enjoying the playing experience* included various sub-themes across the three teams. Only two sub-themes were identified by at least two of the teams: (1) allowing the players to have fun; and (2) recognizing the temporal nature of basketball.

This theme is noteworthy because very few youth sports studies have identified having fun as a primary goal. Many studies explore the coach's desire to develop life skills (Gould, et al., 2007; McCallister, et al., 2000; Papacharisis, et al., 2005) and, while previous findings provide useful results, most fail to ascertain the coach's goals.

Previous research has focused on behavior observation as a means to determine the coach's focus (Bloom, Crumpton, & Anderson, 1999; Cushion & Jones, 2001; Miller, 1992).

One study that sought to explore coaching expectations found the most common answer given when asking coaches what they believed athletes should be getting out of their participation was "having fun" (Lesyk & Kornspan, 2000; p. 401). A study by Scanlon and Simons (1992) found enjoyment to be a cornerstone of motivation to be a central factor in most theories of continued participation (Weiss & Ferrer-Caja, 2002). While the notion of enjoying sports participation may be assumed by some, the negative effects of athletic involvement reported by some researchers would be evidence that enjoyment within some youth sports contexts is not the central focus.

Allowing the Players to Have Fun. While the work of Lesyk and Kornspan (2000) identified having fun as the most desirable coach identified outcome, they did not attempt to break the construct down further to determine what coaches' felt comprised this construct. As determined in the current study, one component of enjoyment is allowing the players to have fun. Despite the means they used to achieve this goal, the two coaches who identified this sub-theme felt it was their responsibility to create an environment in which having fun was possible.

“Fun” is the most common answer given when you ask young person why they engage in a certain activity. Coach *Jones* seemed very cognizant of this, stating: “As for individual girls, for the girls, they got to have fun. If it becomes a job or a chore it’s not worth it.” Through his experiences as a coach, Coach *Jones* has seen many players “burnout” (a point in time where a player decides that the task of participating in sports outweighs the enjoyment) and thus elect to cease playing, even though many of the players had the skill set to potentially play collegiately or professionally.

Coach *Smith* reported a “need to have a good experience as a group” and felt “the parents want their daughters taught a lot and I think they want to have a good experience as well.” Coach *Smith* recounted something a coaching peer had told her and how she has used this to shape her approach:

One coach, in particular, always said that you have to work four hours a day, every day, if you wanted to play Division I basketball. We’re not about that here. These girls are here because they have chosen to be here and they enjoy playing. We only practice twice a week. And on weekends where we have tournaments we only practice once.

Recognizing the Temporal Nature of Basketball. Another new sub-theme to the coach-centered literature was the recognition of basketball as a temporal activity. Both of the coaches who mentioned this idea felt it was necessary for their players to understand that whatever happens during play should not define them as individuals; rather, participation should serve as a means to enhance their life through taking joy in participation. While this may be the stated goal of many coaches, the degree to which this objective is actually pursued may not be as prevalent.

While playing youth sports can become a very time intensive and all-encompassing endeavor, Coach Jones strongly believes the players should recognize that “there is far more to life than basketball.” As an example of what shapes his viewpoint, he shared the following story:

Prime example last night, we’re at the boys’ spring league and find out a 16-year-old collapsed right on the floor in the other gym with a heart attack. To me, to watch them pumping his chest and all that and looking at my son and thinking, “You know, no matter how bad you played just give it your all.” The one thing I try to tell the kids, I would love to put the uniform back on, I love to compete and you don’t get to do that every day.

Many young players aspire to play professional sports; however, the likelihood of doing so is very slim. In women’s basketball it is estimated that only 3.3% of high school players will play at a NCAA member institution and, of those, only 1.0% of will be drafted by the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA; AAHPERD, 2007). While this should not dissuade participation in sports activities, it should provide some direction for the coach working with youth players. As noted by Coach *Wilson*:

I know not all my girls will play college, so I always try to keep in the front of their mind that basketball is going to be there when you’re done. Basketball is going to be here, you know? But what we’re doing or what you’re participating in, basketball is not the end-all to be-all of everything. As much as I love this sport, it’s going to be here when I’m gone just like it’s going to be here when you’re gone.

Player Responses

Another element of this study was to explore players’ perceptions of coaching intentions. Players were asked to identify what goals they felt the coach had for them. While the results showed some consistency between players’ and coaches’ responses, sub-themes indicated some differences in coach and player identified goals. Two

primary themes showed consistency across the players of all three teams: (1) achieving team and individual success; and (2) development of life skills.

Achieving Team and Individual Success

This theme focuses on the players' perceptions of the goals they feel the coach has for them. The responses indicated that the players felt both team and individual success were important to the coach. Two sub-themes were identified by at least two of the teams: (1) team success through winning-three coaches; and (2) player improvement-three coaches.

Team Success through Winning. A primary reason most select teams are formed is to compete at a high competition level and to do so successfully. Most adolescents desire to win the games in which they play and, in many cases, both players and coaches are chastised if it is viewed they are not working toward this goal (Fine, 1987). This became evident in player responses from Team 1 who, when asked what they felt the coach's goal was for the team, responded with: "To win nationals." When this response was given, all other players in the focus group immediately confirmed their teammate's answer.

Similar to the first team, when the question, "What do you think your coaches goals are for you?" was posed in each focus group one player gave a similar response to *Leila* who stated she felt the coach wanted them "to be good and for our team to win." This response was affirmed by all other group members.

Consistent with player responses from the previous two teams, respondents on Team 3 felt the coach wanted them to "play and do well at nationals [the national

tournament for which they must qualify].” Again, all of the focus group participants agreed with this perspective.

Player Improvement. As noted by Coach *Jones*, the players on Team 1 were aware of the goal of preparing them to compete at the high school level. One player felt the coach’s desire was to “push us to get to the next level of our ability in basketball; one of his rules is to get us to play high school and get us to play in college and everything.” Another player agreed that “he wants us to do good in high school like our varsity and JV teams and everything.”

The players of Team 2 also recognized the coach’s focus on their individual development, and his desire for them to “improve our skills every day and always get better.” *Leah* shared that her coach always wanted her, and the rest of the team, to “try our hardest and reach our fullest potential and push ourselves and you can learn from your mistakes.”

As was identified by Coach *Smith*, the players perceived a focus on their individual skill improvement. Players on her team also identified skill improvement as one of the coach’s foci regarding individual improvement. Many responses were similar to *Jaden*, who said:

I think she like works with us like she wants to make us better not just the team but like she wants us to be team players but then she like tries to improve our individual skills too. And I think she like...like in practice, she like wants us to work on every single like aspect of the game not just like one thing which is kind of what like my other coach did. It’s kind of like frustrating and annoying. I think she’s a good coach.

Madison shared a similar story, but gave more specific detail about how she felt the coach focuses on her skill improvement:

She wants me to like be more strong and be more aggressive since I do like have a lot of size. I think she feels like I don't use it to my advantage sometimes and I think she just wants to help me be able to like dominate. I think that they want me to work on my weaknesses.

Development of Life Skills

Similar to what was expressed in the players' goals for participating in basketball, perceptions of desired life skill lessons emerged in the players' responses about their coaches' goals. This category focuses on what the players feel the coach is trying to accomplish through participation that will serve benefit on and off the court. The two sub-themes showing the most consistency were: (1) achieving life success-two coaches; and (2) focus on academics-two coaches.

Achieving Life Success. One of the most common goals mentioned by the players is the emphasis that is placed on achieving success off the court. In their responses, many of the players referenced their coach's desire for them to "succeed in life" and "have a better future." Comparing Coach *Wilson* to one of her past select coaches, *Claire* said, "He's different because other coaches want you to...be more than just a player."

In addition to increasing basketball skill mastery, the players felt that Coach *Jones* also wanted them to grow and mature as individuals. *Mandy*, a six-year veteran on the team and someone who views the coach as a "second father," felt that Coach *Jones* wants to:

See us get better, I think. See us not just winning but he's like... he wants to see us when we are in our senior year, actually go to college or something. Actually, achieve something like in basketball or be a better person than we were when we got on the court.

A teammate shared a similar view in that she sees the coach trying “to make us better, not only in basketball but like a better person.”

A potential result of players reaching their potential is the achievement of life success. Again, a broad construct, the players felt Coach *Smith* “just wants to make us like better all around people.” *Emily* commented on the coach’s ability to connect the skills obtained through participation with those needed outside the gym: “She wants us to be smarter in and out of basketball. She wants us to be more athletic and more in shape and better players and all that.”

The players felt that Coach *Smith* desired to help them reach their fullest potential, both on and off the court. *Jaden* felt the coach wanted those on the team to “reach the highest potential that we all have an individuals. She always tells us that she wants each of us to like reach the highest potential.” Similarly, *Brooke*, a member of a different focus group, said: “They [the coaches] want us to do the best we can as people.”

Focus on Academics. Consistent with the coach’s views, the players identified a focus on grades as a goal of the coach. *Lisa* shared that her coach “is big on school, so he will be like, “You have to get good grades to be able to play high school and college and then be able to get to the WNBA.” Similarly, another respondent said, “we’re student athletes and grades come before... school becomes before basketball, that’s what he says.”

One of the specific items associated with life success, according the players, is a focus on achieving academic success. Similar to the Like the previous reference to

basketball being fun, all players in the Team 2 focus groups mentioned the coach wanting them to “stay in school.” As *Aleisha* shared, “He wants us to like have...our school work always comes first and stuff and like if it isn’t...I can’t say big words. He wants us to like pick it up and stuff, he wants us to go to college.”

Methodological Themes

Three themes were identified regarding approaches coaches utilized to accomplish participatory outcomes: (1) achieving player improvement through practices and games, (2) developing life skills through a coach-player relationship, and (3) enjoying the playing experience through a conscious coaching effort. Again, the three themes were not identified in a specific order, nor were they completely separate approaches. The methods worked in a complimentary manner and were identified as being used in varying degrees depending on the situation and the goal the coach is working towards. While the three major themes were consistent across all three data sources (i.e., coaches, players, and observations), sub-themes revealed some variation. To illuminate these discrepancies..

Achieving Player Improvement through the Participatory Context

Coach Responses

Findings from similar studies have varied, particularly as they relate to coaches identifying desired goals for players and then describing their methodologies for achieving the stated goals. For example, Gould et al. (2007) found that experienced and highly successful high school football coaches were able to effectively identify their strategies for achieving goals for player improvement and for the development of life

skills. Likewise, Cotê and his colleagues found that expert gymnastics coaches were able to accurately identify their approach to coaching (Cotê, Salmela, & Russell, 1995).

However, a similar study with youth softball and baseball coaches indicated that coaches were unable to articulate their methodological approaches despite having, on average, over a decade of coaching experience (McCallister, et al., 2000). The current study revealed that coaches were able to identify methodological approaches to achieving desired player outcomes; however, inconsistencies were found when the methods were compared to previously stated goals (i.e., each coach stated goal did not match up with a corresponding method).

The methods described in this section pertain to the coach's manipulation of the participatory environment to promote player improvement. Consistent with the coach's identification of desired goals, one of the most reported methods was a focus on teaching the game through questioning and explanation. The second and third most salient sub-themes, while not directly related to goal reports, can be associated with listed goals as they create the context through which to achieve outcomes. Several methods were described for player improvement, including teaching the game through example (three coaches), instructing players on teamwork (two coaches) and enforcing disciplinary measures.

Teaching the Game through Example. Despite not being mentioned specifically as part of their coaching methodology, all three coaches noted a desire to help their players achieve a greater understanding of basketball. Specific methods cited by at least two coaches for achieving this outcome were the use of player questioning,

encouragement to continuously be involved during activities, opportunities for players to make their own decisions, and an increased focus on explanation (as opposed to instruction). This finding related to the coach's ability to appropriately structure the athletic context to promote player development has been echoed by other researchers (Abraham & Collins, 1998; Smith, Smoll, & Christensen, 1996) as an important skill in the coach's repertoire. Abraham and Collins (1998) referenced the expert coach as someone who "orchestrates learning activities and mediates social climate while diagnosing and remediating student performance" (p. 59). Additionally, research has suggested that expert coaches tend to employ reciprocal questioning and explanation more than novice coaches (Coté, Salmela, & Russell, 1995).

A method employed by Coach *Jones* is the modeling of desired behaviors. Many coaches instruct from the sidelines during practices; however, Coach Jones states that: "I'm not afraid to show them. I'm not afraid to run with them. It's easy for me to sit there and say, 'I used to do this and I used to do that.'" Until they see it, they don't believe it."

In trying to make his players more cognitively involved in the game, Coach *Wilson* makes an effort to elicit their thoughts during play. He described his coaching "style as a teacher" and wanting the players to be engaged in the game. Thus he noted:

For example during halftime or even timeouts, before I start talking or addressing about an issue, I ask them, "What do you guys see going on out there? I'm standing on the sideline looking but you guys are in the game. I mean you guys are in the war out there, you know?" So I'll engage them to get them to verbalize how they see the game going so that even when they get to the next level or their school teams, they'll have that attribute and hopefully they can take that to that other team.

He feels that the entire team should constantly be involved in the game, not only those currently on the court:

Again, I want the girls to be engaged, I want to see what they see from their perspective and I want to get them to think like that. Even when you're not in the game but you're watching the game, when you do get in the game, I want you to know what's going on and be a part of it.

As was mentioned in the goal identification section, Coach *Smith* desired that her players understand the game of basketball to a point where independent decision could be effectively made. One specific way the coach accomplished this was by providing the players options for their play: "So we have, we've got a couple offenses, a couple things we do but they're really skeleton, bare bone structures that they can create a lot out of." The coach implements a basic offense that allows the players to "think on their own and try new things out."

The coach also mentioned a focus on cognitive skill development, meaning not simply the improvement of skills but an understanding of why skills improve. Coach "Smith" felt the players "had to understand why and how those [skills] develop and what happens when they do."

Instructing Players on Teamwork. The consistency of this sub-theme confirms the findings of Lesyk and Kornspan (2000) who found that one of the most reported expectations of youth sports participation by the coach was effectively interacting in a team atmosphere. Fine (1987) also suggests that most "coaches believe their players often think primarily of personal glory rather than team success, they see teamwork as a part of the moral order in which they must instruct their players" (p. 71). A central tenet within any team sport is the coach's ability to effectively guide a team towards working

together to achieve goals. Within the setting of a team, many contextual elements must be effectively manipulated by the coach. As Fine (1987) found in his observation of Little League baseball players, each team has its own culture and the coach's ability to recognize and competently manage this environment can greatly impact the performance of the team.

Success in basketball is hard to achieve unless there is a concerted team effort.

As Coach *Wilson* saw every player on the team having a role:

One of my quotes is "Individuals play the game but teams win championships," so if we're in a situation where we're winning the game or it seems pretty evident that we're going to win, it's blowout, or whatever the situation is, I just always stay mindful and try to help them [the players] do the same.

While only having basic offensive and defensive schemes provides the players opportunities to make their own decision, Coach *Smith* wanted these choices to be made within a consistent team philosophy. She explained that:

Being on a basketball team, if you can get everybody doing the same stuff we'll be successful. If we've got everybody doing the same thing, it's going to work. But if we've got one doing what her daddy over here tells her and one up there what her mom is saying and we've got three on the floor doing what I'm saying then we're not...we're going to have a hard time.

The coach described implementing this strategy through making each player "aware of what the other is doing and understanding that the decision you make, whatever it is, affects the other four girls on the floor."

Enforcing Disciplinary Measures. According to Eccles and Gootman (2002), one of the central factors in creating a positive developmental context is the presence of appropriate structure and proper adult supervision. This aspect includes the institution of appropriate rules and associated consequences for not following those rules. Despite the

varying approaches to discipline between the teams, there was consistency in the coach's desire to maintain a balance between their role as a mediator of the playing experience and as an authority figure.

Within a basketball setting, punishments for undesired behaviors (e.g., speaking while the coach is speaking, not paying attention, giving less than full effort) generally take the form of an intense physical activity (e.g., running sprints up and down the court, doing push-ups). While Coach *Smith* is no different than other coaches in her use of these methods, she implements them in a way that is different than most other coaches. For example, when reprimanding her players, Coach *Smith* typically makes them do one push up then immediately return to practice, as opposed to halting practice and requiring the entire team to run sprints. As she explained: "I mean if you're going to use it as a punishment it's got to be quick and I think the more you use it, you just become desensitized to it."

While a sense of enjoyment is a focal point of Coach *Jones*' pedagogical approach, he also mentions a need to impart clear disciplinary measures that are consistent across the team:

[T]he big thing is they know if they're talking they're done. We're not talking in practice, we have two hours and if you're talking and if they're talking, I don't even discipline. I send them off to the side. Tell them when they're done, come join us. I'm not going to discipline a whole team based on two or three that may not want to be there, but once I send them off to the side, the whole group pretty much gets the picture and they don't want to be sent off to the side.

Player Responses

The sub-themes in this category reflect the players' perceptions of the methods used by the coach to achieve the previously stated goals. More specifically, the players' views reveal that furthering their skill set as a basketball player is primarily done through the context (either practices or games) created by the coach. In addition, players are able to more effectively identify the coach's methods than they were the coach's goals.

Analysis of the responses indicated four sub-themes that showed consistency among the respondents: (1) coach consistency-three coaches; (2) focus on teaching the game and showing players through example-three coaches; (3) giving appropriate corrections and praise-two coaches; and (4) treating each player equally-two coaches.

Coach Consistency. Youth sports coaches are often unaware of their actions (Smith, Smoll, & Hunt, 1977), particularly as they relate to influencing their players' actions. During games, players often look to their coach for guidance in to how to react in certain situations. The players on Team 3 were cognizant of this, and identified how the demeanor of the coach affects their play during practices and games. *Autumn* felt that Coach *Smith* is "more calm [than most coaches] and keeps her head, which helps us on the court." Another player, *Emily*, appreciated how the coach "is more like calm and collected, no matter the situation. We can always count on her for direction."

The players on Team 2 were very aware of the coach's reactionary behaviors and cited those as a main reason their play has improved. *Paige* explained how her coach's behavior affects the way she performs:

He barely changes [between practices and games]. He is such an outgoing person. He's kind of laid back, he won't over exaggerate or anything, or panic, so like when we're down, he'll just encourage us and tell us to calm down. He's very calm and chill.

Claire also commented on the coach's behavior during games and how she felt it was different from other coaches she has observed:

And like he sits in his seat. Well, sometimes he sits down; like if we're down or something, he sits there and doesn't yell like a lot of coaches do. Well, he does yell sometimes, but it's when he's calling out plays and stuff

One method not mentioned by the coach of Team 1, but recognized by the players was the coach's consistency as it relates to practice and game activities. *Kristi* commented, "he gets a little more intense when it's [the game] close but I think he tries to keep things the same as the practice and the games because you practice how you play." Her teammate, *Kelly*, offer a game-related insight to the coach's approach: "He keeps things like calm on the bench. When you're on the bench, you're not really nervous. He makes you feel like ... I don't know. I can't really explain it."

Focus on Teaching the Game and Showing Players through Example. Player responses indicated a great deal of appreciation for the coach's focus on in-depth instruction about the game of basketball. Many players compared characterized some of their past coaches as "dictators," but *Riley* felt that Coach *Smith* had a unique approach in that "she won't tell us what we're doing wrong, she makes us figure it out by what she's saying, like surrounding it with context clues."

Susan commented specifically about her interactions with the coach *Smith*:

I mean like Coach *Smith* is cool. It's just like every time I say something, she's like, "Everyone stop so we can break it down." And then I'm like,

“Okay.” That’s nice, I like that. She like explains it so everybody else gets it too.

Many players on Team 1 have been exposed to a variety of coaches, and a consistent response among the participants was the effort Coach *Jones* puts into trying to be a teacher of the game. As an example, *Sheryl*, a recent transfer from another select team, shared that: “When I came to [this team], I learned a whole lot more than like my other select team because I learned how to do more post stuff. He teaches us a lot.” Speaking specifically about the coach teaching offensive schemes, *Sheryl* went on to explain that:

Like this five-out and four-out and three-out offenses, I think we’ve spent three weeks on it now and we know it pretty good. He still gets mad at us if we don’t do it right but he’ll also talk us through it and he’ll take time to teach us. But we wouldn’t get that with any other coach.

On the same topic of teaching offensive skills, *Mandy* compares the coach’s teachings to a good recipe:

We know it [the offense] but he’s trying to critique it now. We know the movements; he’s just like showing us what we can do to make it better than it is. When we did the five-out, we weren’t thinking about the picks but now we’re thinking about it. He just throws stuff in the pile. We have the salad. He’ll just throw in the tomatoes and the carrots.

In his efforts to teach the players about the game, Coach *Jones* employs a hands-on approach, often stepping onto the court and showing the players the desired behaviors, as was shared by *Karen*: “He like gets on and demonstrates... he teaches you to like read the defense and know what to do if they do something.”

Consistent with what Coach *Wilson* mentioned as one of his goals, the players commented on the coach’s ability to teach them the game of basketball. One player

stated that the coach “teaches us new stuff, like he teaches you stuff that you would never think to do on your own.” *Grace* appreciated how her coach “breaks it down for us, like if you mess up on something in the game, he’ll have us work on it in practice and improve that skill.” Following her comment, *Leila* said, “Yeah, and he doesn’t just tell us what to do, he’ll actually get on the floor and show us.”

Giving Appropriate Corrections and Praise. A significant part of coaching is reacting to the players’ performance, either in practices or games. The manner in which the coach reacts can have a significant impact on the player. The respondents were able to identify ways in which the coach utilizes appropriate corrective behaviors to help them become better players. *Kylie* shared that “if you mess up he encourages you to fix it next time. He doesn’t yell at you or say not nice things.” *Leah* appreciated the way Coach *Wilson* corrected her play during games: “He will take you out and tell you what you did wrong and then expects you to do better next time. He’ll take you out and tell you what happened, then encourage you to do better.” *Leila*, a player who can be particularly hard on herself, shared the following account:

If we say we like get frustrated and give up on something, he takes us out of the game and makes us like just sit there and talk until we cool down. He’ll come and talk about it, and let us think about it. And, if we still have a negative attitude, he won’t let us back into the game.

One of the most recognized coaching methods related to player improvement was the coach’s effective use of corrective actions and his desire to praise players for their effort. As *Sheryl* explains, Coach *Jones* uses a great deal of patience when dealing with his players:

He doesn't like scream at you when you mess up. He's like, "go here," maybe if I don't go there again, he's like, "go there" and if I don't go there again, he's like, "go there" and then like maybe after the hundredth time I don't go there, he's really getting a little more intense to go there but he's not like, "Go there before I"...and all that.

The coach was also cited as utilizing corrective methods that are appropriate and effective in eliciting the desired response. *Danielle* shared that:

[W]hen he takes you out and you think you got taken out because you messed up and he'll come tell you, "Come here." He'll tell you what you did wrong and then you go back on the court more confident because you know what to do.

A teammate shared a similar view on this topic, saying, "He doesn't take us out if we miss a shot, but when he does [substitute], he'll explain what we did wrong and what we can do better to change it." Another player said that:

He encourages you, even if you make a mistake, he encourages you do it over and over again so you get it right. He helps us get back up and not get down on ourselves if we miss it or something.

In comparing Coach *Jones* to her previous coach, *Celeste* offered: "[S]he [another coach] will find something that we did wrong, but Coach *Jones* is like, we make it, he's going to be happy and we know we're going to go to the sideline and he's going to praise us."

In addition to his corrective actions during games and practices, Coach *Jones* also approached his players with tact and respect off the court. *Wendy*, who commented that she can be quite hard on herself after games, appreciated the coach because "he says, "good game," or he tells you something good about yourself and what you've been doing right, instead of focusing on the bad things that you've done." *Jamie*, a new addition to the team and one that does not receive significant playing time, stated that "if

you don't get in for a long period of time, after the game he'll come up and say like he's sorry that he didn't put you in."

As was noted in the coach interview, Coach *Smith* takes a unique approach to correcting behaviors through punishment. Instead of the typical "line up and run" (the coach makes the players line up at the end of the court and run sprints), the coach employs a "one push-up rule" where the players simply do one push-up and continue with normal practice activities. *Sydney* shared how a former coach of hers carried out punishment: "Another coach I had made you do like 20 times down-and-back and it sucks. But here, it's just do a pushup, much better."

Many players also commented on the coach's approach to correction through communication. As *Emily* shared, "when like Coach *Smith* gets upset with us, she's like tells us what to change. She doesn't just ignore us." *Abby* added on to her teammate's thoughts with:

She's not really negative to us, I like it. She kind of...even if we're down like 50 [points], she's still kind of positive. Because she's like "It's not over. We have a whole another half." Some coaches would be like, "You all suck."

Susan appreciated "how she's more like calm and collected and like when you do something wrong, she will like sit there and walk you through it."

Other players identified the coach's method of coupling corrective behaviors with positive comments. *Jaden*, a player who has been under Coach *Smith* for four years, said:

She'll like point out bad things but she'll point out good things too. If she says something that's like criticism we have to like say rebound, like rebound from it. And then if you get two points, she points at you like

she's saying, "Two points" like it's always like influencing us to be better players.

Treating Each Player Equally. An important aspect of Coach *Smith's* approach, according to the players, is the focus placed on treating each player on the team, no matter how much playing time she gets, equally and appreciating what makes each player different. *Jamie*, a relative newcomer to the team, explained, "she doesn't play favorites...he loves everybody." Other players gave similar accounts of the coach's efforts: "I think coaches like Coach *Jones*, they take the time to get to know each player." *Celeste* offered another perspective: "Coach, he cares about every single one of his players. He makes sure that you know that and he wants you to see that."

The players were very astute in recognizing the coaches' desire to treat each player as a vital part of the team. During the focus group with the reserves, *Brooke*, one of the less skilled players, remarked that "it doesn't matter 'cuz with this team you know you're going to play. We're all contributors and I think coach focuses on having it that way."

Emma shared a story about another coach as a contrast to Coach *Smith's* approach:

I had another coach that liked to like play games with you, like with your head. She'll like tell you one thing but tell someone else like another. Like two of my friends last year like she put them up against each other for a spot on varsity. And like she told them that you're going head to head for this one spot and actually that pretty much ruined friendship because they couldn't like talk about it because they knew they're going against each other. So, I didn't like how she like played games with you but like when you come here, you're all kind of even.

Observational Findings

The fourth element of this study was to examine the fidelity with which coaches carry out their identified coaching methods in practices and games through the use of participant observation. Designed as a means for comparison, the observational data was aligned along the themes developed from coach and player responses: (1) achieving player improvement through the participatory context; (2) developing life skills through a coach-player relationship; and (3) enjoying the playing experience through a conscious coaching effort.

Data obtained through observation confirmed the coach's manipulation of the participatory context to achieve player improvement. Analysis revealed six sub-themes those showed significant consistency across all three teams: (1) appropriately correcting players; (2) all players are involved; (3) showing and instructing players through example; (4) use of questions and explanations as a teaching tool; (5) valuing player effort and focus; and (6) effectively praising, supporting, and caring for players.

Appropriately Correcting Players. One of the most important approaches to coaching pedagogy is the manner in which the coach responds to and corrects undesired behaviors and mistakes. While not expressly mentioned by the coach, the players perceived this as an important facet of the coach's methodology. Observation of coaching behaviors confirmed this insight. When Coach *Jones* corrects or instructs players it is always done in a calm and controlled manner; the coach always seems to fully explain to situation so the players is not simply trained to do the correct action the next time, but knows why the correct action is required.

A common complaint of some coaches by players is their inconsistent approach to corrective action, particularly during practices in games; however, Coach *Jones* appeared very consistent in his actions. The coach was very encouraging throughout practice, despite players making mistakes or missing shots; he seemed to really appreciate their effort and intense play and this seemed to give the players freedom to take risks and potentially fail without getting frustrated at themselves or having their coach yell at them.

Likewise, during games, Coach *Jones* employed the same tactic. At one point in the second half a player took an ill-advised shot and, during a timeout and immediately admitted to the coach that it was a bad decision. Instead of talking about the decision or harping on the player's shot selection, the coach used the incident as an opportunity to encourage the player to continue shooting as the player was not among those with the highest scoring averages.

One of the most observable aspects of Coach *Wilson's* methodology is the manner in which he corrects the player's actions. During one practice session, the players were not giving maximum effort and appeared to not be concentrating to the activities. While the drill was continued, the coach gently reminded the players of their need for focus and the players' effort and attentiveness increased momentarily. However, soon thereafter, the players were again "goofing off" resulting in sloppy play. The coach stopped practice and pulled all the players together. He addressed the group in an even tone, emphasizing the need for the players to "think about what you're doing and work hard to get better." The players responded positively for a short time then

returned to their inattentive play. Again, the coach stopped practice, but this time he makes the players run sprints. After the sprints are completed, the coach gathered all the players together and, after seeing that several are a little distraught at their teammates for making them run, stressed the importance of the players helping one another and making certain each is “taking care of business.” Soon after the players’ attitudes improved and the coach got very excited when they engaged in effortful play.

Coach *Wilson* displayed consistent behavior in correcting player actions during tournament situations. During his pregame talk, the coach mentioned to the players that there are going to be mistakes made and to not be afraid of making them. He encouraged the players through saying “everyone makes mistakes, it’s how you respond to those mistakes that’s important.”

The coach consistently approached player mistakes with an encouraging word. On several occasions the coach recognized the effort then offered a suggestion of corrective behavior or proper decision-making but always in a supportive manner. Additionally, the coach allowed the players to recognize their own mistakes during play. When this happens the players were not reluctant to approach the coach after a mistake and generally initiated the conversation about how to make the correct decision next time. Contrary to many situations, this seems to allow the players to smile about the mistake (evidence the player is not becoming discouraged or frustrated).

On Team 3, when players made a mistake the coach often remained quiet and allowed the player to recognize it on their own. When this occurred, the coach simply asked, “How could you correct it next time?” This approach to correction seemed to

make the players think, something the coach referred to as “cerebral players” (i.e., players who think through the game). The coach made it a point to never take a player out of the game for making a mistake. Other than strategic substitutions, the coach only took a player out of the game if the player was tired or if there is a lack of effort.

The coach of Team 3 also displayed evidence of appropriate corrective action during practices and games. For example, during one of the shooting drills the players were assigned partners and were asked to make as many shots as possible, maintaining individual counts. After the drill the players were asked how many each made, with those making the most not having to run (the coach referred to these as “down-and-backs” which was simply the player lining up at one end of the court and sprinting to the other, turning around, and sprinting back). One pair of players misunderstood the directions given by the coach and were given a punishment of one push-up. The coach approached each situation with tact, especially in a game setting. During one of her halftime talks, the coach told the players “we have lead in our feet” (meaning the players are moving very slowly on the floor and are not reacting quickly). Seeing that the players were a bit down on themselves, she asks them, “Are you going to hang your head or are you going to play?” The coach’s tone is low key and calm; however, the players responded to the coach’s question by encouraging one another and becoming more involved in the halftime discussion.

All Players Are Involved. Unfortunately for many youth sports participants, coaches often focus most of their attention on the more highly skilled players resulting in the less skilled players showing little improvement. Cognizant of this risk, Coach *Wilson*

sought to engage the entire team during both practices and games. A significant portion of practice was devoted to live play (game-like play). When a player is not participating the coach made it a point to stand beside them, often putting his arm around them, and explaining aspects of the game. Again, the coach exhibited consistent behavior in both practice and game situations. While a game is going on, the coach constantly engaged the players sitting on the bench to make certain they were watching and learning from the game. He used both direct instruction and questions to achieve this result.

One method utilized by Coach *Jones* to engage all members of the team was to design drills in a way that limits player downtime and encourages constant interaction. Thus, players participated in many drills and activities that required constant motion and full team engagement; there were very few times when players were re simply standing around watching other players; even during the scrimmage sessions the coach routinely substituted players in and out so that all get significant playing time.

Player downtime is not completely avoidable, as some drills and activities require a limited number of participants; however, the coach took measures to remedy this through his interactions with players. For example, during a team scrimmage (game-like play between teammates) the coach always made it a point to speak to all players, not just those currently involved in the activity; the coach also instructed the players not currently playing to be involved in the activity by encouraging their teammates and offering any helpful pointers.

One of the most difficult times to ensure player engagement is during games, as the coach is most often focused on what is occurring on the court. Aware of this, Coach

Jones took measures that would be construed by the normal observer as a minor detail but, as player responses indicated, is quite noteworthy. Unlike most coaches who stand the entire game or sit at the head (first seat) of the bench, this coach made it a point to sit in the middle of the bench during games. When asked about this approach the coach responded that doing this allows him to better engage all of the players, especially those sitting on the bench.

Coach *Smith* made it a point to involve all players in practices and games, and even sought to involve those players who were unable to participate. While I was talking informally with the coach before practice, she received a text message on her phone from an injured player. The player wanted to let the coach know she was doing better and hopefully would get to see her soon. On another occasion, one of the team's injured players showed up to practice. All of the players and coaches greeted the player affectionately. After asking the coach about this, she remarked that she never wants any player to feel left out. She mentioned another injured player (the player had to have open heart surgery) and says "I still consider her an integral part of our team."

Showing and Instructing Players through Example. As was mentioned by Coach *Jones*, there were many times during practice when the coach would not simply stand on the sidelines and instruct the players. When explaining constructs, the coach routinely stepped onto the court and physically showed the players the desired actions; many times during instruction the coach used physical contact such as a hand on the shoulder or a pat on the head. When instructing, the coach often participated in the drill to model the correct behavior or action.

In addition to furthering the players' knowledge through asking questions, Coach *Wilson* also teaches through example. Often, the coach is seen on the court, showing the players the desired behaviors or the available options. The players seem to respond very positively to the coach participating with them.

Similarly, during corrective action, Coach *Smith* often stepped onto the court and showed the correct action or proper options through physical example. Additionally, the coach used physical contact to guide her players to the correct placement on the court or put her arm around them when explaining a facet of the game.

Use of Questions and Explanations as a Teaching Tool. In their focus group interviews, the players mentioned Coach *Jones* teaching them the game and helping them to understand why certain actions are performed. In both practice and game situations, the coach utilized this method of instruction. One of the main methods employed by the coach to teach the players was through questioning. This method entailed the coach gathering the players in a circle and asking them what their job is on certain offensive and defensive sets. The coach also asked the players what their fellow teammates jobs were during the same sets. Additionally, the coach always strove to give the players options during play and allowed them to choose the option they feel would work best at the time.

Coach *Jones* also strove to teach every player about the game, not simply those who played the highest number of minutes. The reserve players were put into the game early and allowed to play substantial time during the first half. Despite the team being considerably ahead on the scoreboard, the coach continued to work with all of the

players, explaining what their options were while playing and asking questions of the players to determine their attentiveness.

The use of reciprocal questioning is a significant portion of the Coach *Wilson's* approach. The coach was open to players asking questions about facets of the game and got very excited when a player thinks of a new facet (especially if the coach had not thought of it). He makes it a point to recognize these efforts in front of the team. The coach also asks questions of his players to determine their level of understanding and attentiveness. Often, the coach began practice with a conditioning drill (an activity involving significant running) then held a brief team meeting at center court. The team talked about the previous week's tournament. The coach made certain to allow the players to express their views. The coach concluded the meeting with his views of the tournament, complimenting the players on what he thought they did well.

Coach *Smith* preferred to teach her players through the use of questioning and explanation. She made it a point to help the players not simply understand what to do, but why it needed to be done. The coach consistently taught the players through reciprocal questioning (e.g., during a scrimmage session the coach stopped play and asked a player what her options were if the defense reacts a certain way) as well as through physically showing the players the correct actions. Additionally, the coach was very open to the players asking questions about aspects of the game. Several times the coach stopped practice to allow a player to ask a question, making certain everyone could hear and potentially benefit from the discussion.

Valuing Player Effort and Focus. An important value portrayed in Coach *Jones*' approach to corrective action was his desire for the players to, above all else, give maximum effort and focus on the task at hand. Fine (1987) revealed similar findings when exploring Little League baseball. Similar to the baseball coaches in his study, Coach *Jones*, *Wilson*, and *Smith* seemed to distinguish effort from the notions of success and failure. When a player failed to do these things seemed to be the only time the coach gets upset. During one drill Coach *Jones* got very unhappy with the tone and speed of practice; many players appeared to not be trying hard, were talking about non-basketball related subjects, and were not paying attention to the activity. The coach corrected the players sternly saying "you guys are just going through the motions out here...there's no effort...get it together, or we can just run all practice." While no punishment was given other than the coach speaking loudly, the players immediately responded with more effort and ceased talking about non-basketball activities. When the coach saw the players trying harder and being more attentive, he coach was quick to praise the players and further encourage them.

This behavior was consistent in games as well. In one game when the score became 34 to 11 in the opposing team's favor, the coach called a timeout and was unhappy with the effort. In a louder tone than normal, the coach told his players to "try harder and dig deeper" no matter the circumstances. The coach said, "It doesn't matter what happens on the scoreboard, as long as you give it your all on the court." Soon after the timeout the players seemed to respond to the coach's instructions by increasing their effort and scoring four quick points before halftime.

Similarly, Coach *Wilson* only seemed to get upset at a lack of effort shown by the players. The coach accepted mental mistakes and missed shots as part of the game.

While the players were on offense, the coach did not encourage the players only when baskets were made, but recognized when the players' skills were improving.

Periodically, the team practiced with a group of younger players (approximately 10 years of age). During one of these joint sessions all players participated in drills and scrimmages together. At one particular point, the coach became unhappy with the older players' effort. After making them run sprints, he pulled all the players into a circle to explain the reason for the punishment and how to correct their behavior. The coach stressed to his older players that they needed to "take responsibility of the younger players and set a good example" of how to work hard during practice.

During one game, late in the first half and with the team significantly ahead (24-4), the coach became upset when a player did not hustle back on defense. Despite the score, the coach immediately called a timeout to correct the player's action. While addressing the player the coach was quite stern but ended the conversation with an encouraging remark. The player making the error was not hesitant to approach the coach and recognized her mistake immediately. In a subsequent game, the team began the game by outscoring the opponent by a large margin; however, the coach was not happy with the players' effort. The players were making shots but did not seem to be making good decisions on the court or giving maximum effort. During a timeout, the coach addressed this problem by letting them know that there were players sitting on the bench who were ready to come into the game should the effort not improve.

Coach *Smith* made it evident to her players that effort and focus was valued far above winning. An example was given during one of her postgame talks, where the coach stressed the need for the team to consistently work hard and play together. Despite the team winning the game, the coach sought to utilize teachable moments from the team's poor performance and explained to them that winning is not the most important goal. Another example occurred during play when, on the offensive end, a player made a great play and did everything but make the basket. The coach immediately recognized the effort and not the missed shot, telling her "great job, just finish it next time."

Effectively Praising, Supporting, and Caring for Players. This category focuses on how the coach showed appreciation for player effort through praise, support, and care. One opportunity to exhibit these behaviors occurred quite frequently in games when minor injuries occurred. For example in one game, with the game still undecided, a player on Team 1 suffered a mild injury during a foul but elected to remain in the game. This player led her team on to score several baskets in succession and encouraged her teammates on defense resulting in the other team not scoring for a significant period of time. This events allowed the team to create an insurmountable lead. When the coach made a substitution for the player he made it a point to congratulate the player, as did her teammates and spectators.

These types of transactions occurred regularly during games; however, they might appear unimportant to some viewers because of their small frequency. However, each instance may involve a different player and if a coach failed to recognize this it might serve as a negative experience for the player. During observations, this was not

the case for Coach *Jones* as he took advantage of each opportunity to show caring for his players. During an exchange in the first half, an opposing player's elbow hit one of the players and no foul was called. Rather than complain or question the referee's judgment, the coach focused on his player by first making certain she was okay then encouraging her to "play through it."

Even during losses, the coach appreciated the situation and helped bring perspective to the players. Despite losing the game, Coach *Jones* was pleased with his players' efforts and said: "I can't tell you how proud I am of you for not quitting." He briefly addressed the main errors during the game but did not dwell on them and told the players that considerable improvement was needed before the next tournament. He congratulated the players on qualifying for nationals and, with the parents standing around, thanked the parents for investing the time to help their daughters to achieve this result.

When addressing his players, Coach *Wilson* always used an even tone except when the players made a good play or give good effort. It is at this point the coach became very excited for the player and encouraged the rest of the team to recognize her effort. The coach got genuinely excited when a player "got it." During one of the group practice sessions (both older and younger players practicing together), a younger team member played well against an older team member (the younger player had blocked the older player's shot then scored a basket over the older player). After this the entire team and coaching staff made it a point to congratulate the younger player. This attitude

seemed to affect both the players on the bench and the parents in the stands in a positive manner as both groups recognized the players' efforts.

In addition to appropriately correcting her players, Coach *Smith* consistently praised them for their efforts. During one scrimmage session, the coach made it a point to stop play and recognize a player's good effort. The players took the opportunity to do likewise. This is done for any player showing good effort, not simply the most skilled on the team (the coach actually seemed to get more excited if it is a less skilled player showing the effort). Similarly, during one tournament game, the team started off playing much better than in the previous game. The coach recognized this and praised the players for their effort. During timeouts, the coach was consistent in being even toned and calm when addressing the players.

Developing Life Skills through a Coach-Player Relationship

Coach Responses

The *developing life skills through a coach-player relationship* construct was comprised of three sub-themes that showed consistency. Those sub-themes showing the greatest degree of consistency for coaches across the three teams were: (1) being aware of player maturation (three coaches); (2) making an effort to know each player (three coaches); and (3) ability to get on the player's level (two coaches).

Considerable research exists on the potential positive and negative outcomes associated with participation in youth sports. Some have argued that playing youth sports contributes to identifiable positive outcomes in participants (Smoll & Smith, 2002a; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Feldman & Matjasko,

2005), while others have reported that children who are athletes do not show higher positive development than their peers and, in some cases, exhibit more deviant behaviors (Bredemeier & Shields, 2002; Hansen & Larson, 2007). However, the shortcomings of many research efforts is the failure to determine coaching processes and how they lead to desired or undesired outcomes. The findings in this study are important in that coaches were able to identify specific approaches for achieving positive development in their players.

Being Aware of Player Maturation. The emergence of this sub-theme as consistent across all three teams is unique in the youth sports literature. Previous studies have touched upon this area as a suggested focal point for coaches to protect against potential harmful effects of participation, such as early sports injuries (Brown, 1988) and the onset of competitive anxiety (Smoll & Smith, 2002b). In this study, the coaches' focus on awareness of the maturation of their players was not a means to avoid potential negative outcomes, but a means to promote positive development. This finding may speak to the coach's ability to work with the same group of players for an extended period of time, a unique facet of select youth sports, and tie in closely with the following sub-theme.

Coaching a select team provides a coach with an opportunity to work with players over many years yielding great opportunities to be a positive part of the players' maturation process. When asked of the changes he has seen in his players, Coach *Wilson* mentioned "their maturity on and off the court." He goes on to say, "I've seen them

mature in many ways, and I think that is a result of the relationship we have built together.”

Coach *Jones* was aware of the changes associated with his players navigating adolescence (e.g., cognitive changes, physical changes, relational changes) and how those may affect the coach-player relationship:

It’s going to be interesting because we’re getting older to see how much they continue to tell me. I know about boyfriends but as they get a little bit more mature, I have a feeling it will probably taper off. These girls have known me for five to six years, by the time they’re seniors, some of them for 10 to 12 years. It will be interesting to see if the relationship continues. I still keep in touch with some of the girls I coached in the late ‘80s.

In addition to general issues that apply to all adolescents, the coach was also aware of changes that may be unique to the young women he coaches:

Basketball is becoming secondary around boys and their social life, but you just try to give them a good mix with that. It’s difficult especially with the girls; girls’ feelings can get hurt very easy and they can hate each other for a week or two and “I’m not talking to her” or you know and so, but that’s where I think we do a good job of talking to them, pulling them aside, making them be friends.

Although Coach *Smith* has minimal select team level experience, her extensive time spent at the collegiate level taught her that “it’s important to know that the players are growing up and changing. Being a physical education instructor at a high school has also allowed her to observe changes associated with physical play as they mature:

I get to watch this here [at school] because I do first grade through twelfth grade [physical education] so as the boys get older they become more physically aggressive, physically competitive. It’s all physical and girls just become more manipulative so I think female coaches could manipulate their female players better.

Making an Effort to Know Each Player. Past studies have suggested the notion of a Pygmalion effect or a self-fulfilling prophecy when speaking of coach’s interactions

with their players. While this notion is most well known within literature associated with classroom environments (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), when applied to a youth sports setting, this notion contends that the evaluative perceptions of athletes will affect the coaches' behaviors such that those perceived as more skilled will continue to improve while those seen as less skilled will not improve as such or, in some cases, may regress (Smith, Smoll, & Christensen, 1996). A potential explanation of this is provided by Horn and Lox (1993), whose research found that less skilled athletes often receive fewer coaching resources (i.e., attention, feedback) than those perceived as more skilled. While the current study's finding that all three coaches identified a focus on knowing each player and treating each equally does not undo previous suggestions, it does provide evidence that utilizing appropriate counter-measures to combat these notions may yield higher team and player success.

While Coach *Jones* recognizes a need to be consistent in his approach, he also mentions a need to appreciate the differences between individual players and a desire to "find out what makes each one tick." He goes further to say that:

[E]ach kid is going to be different. Some are going to develop very quickly, some aren't going to develop at all and the work ethic, that's something that I can yell all I want, but if they don't do it on their own, they're not going to.

A benefit of coaching players for an extended period of time is the opportunity to build a relationship with each player, and the ability to appreciate what makes each individual different. As Coach *Wilson* shared, this can be a valuable tool in becoming an effective coach:

I've learned that what you can say to one player can motivate them and they'll respond. You can say the same thing to this other player, and they could be broke down and done for the rest of the game. I've learned how to distinguish who and how I can say what type of comments to motivate them. Some players you have to be a lot more positive even though you're addressing something negative that they did to get them to respond, recognize whether they're extra-sensitive or very emotional type players. I mean I've learned how to distinguish those two.

A point of emphasis with Coach *Smith* was making certain each player knew she was valued and, in so doing, taking the needed time to understand each individual's background and how to appreciate their differences. The coach spoke about what she has learned in moving from an assistant coach's role (in collegiate athletics) to the head coach:

It's a lot really about motivation, the mental approach, finding out what makes each one of them tick to me. That's my emphasis, so but really I think the biggest thing is I figured out being a head coach is that I have to be more concerned and in-tune individuals

Coach *Smith* then shared a specific example of how she implements knowing each player to the benefit of both the team and the individual:

I love coaching them because, for example, we played our third game on Saturday, it was an inter-pool game and it didn't count or anything. We already knew that on Sunday we just had to win one game and we would qualify for the national tournament and when they showed up they were just flat out on the floor. My point guard, she's got a little...you know she can be a little "attitude-y" and...she wasn't playing hard and really was holding her team back. So I pulled her out. I told her, "If that's as hard as you're going to go, you can just sit here. If you don't want to play, why don't you just go home and I'll see you in the morning." Then I walked away and we start playing hard, we started chipping away at the lead, started playing competitive and well that gets her wanting back in the game, but I left her there [on the bench] the whole half. That fired her up, then we kicked their butt up one side of the floor and down the other in the second half and we won. So I think that's the change is that I know more how to know what makes each one tick and how to get to them.

Ability to Get on the Player's Level. This sub-theme may have been one of the most important aspects of this study. Much of what was accomplished (player improvement, development of life skills, and enjoying the experience) seemed to be predicated on their coach's ability to effectively relate and communicate with players. While this was accomplished through different means across each team, the coaches' all referenced a need to reach their players in a way that was well received. The presence of supportive relationships is a core aspect of Eccles and Gootman's (2002) requirements for positive developmental settings; however, the youth sports literature is just beginning to explore the intricacies of how a coach-player relationship is cultivated (Petitpas, Cornelius, & Van Raalte, 2008).

According to Coach *Jones*, one of the most vital aspects of his approach to coaching is an ability to "reach" the players. This approach involves, developing a rapport with his players through his actions and word choice that allows him to present the desired information in a manner that is most effectively understood by the players. One of the main ways Coach *Jones* accomplishes this is through his interactions with players:

I'm probably a 16, 17-year-old in a 39-year-old body, I have players who text me all day long. "I got in trouble at school" or I did this at school or I did this or I did this. I feel they look at me more, I won't say, more as a friend, as a coach because they all know I'm a coach first, but it's pretty close. I got some girls who have been giving me hugs since third grade after every practice and we'll continue to do it I'm sure. I think they all know that I care for them individually. It's not about the 200 trophies in my room and sitting out in the garage, it's not about winning the national title as long as they're doing good in school and they're happy in life, I'm happy.

Coach *Jones* also recognized the importance of building a trusting relationship with his players through a sense of mutual belief. He noted: "...I think the neat part is that the girls I think like me, I think they believe in me and I think they know that I'll do anything for them."

Another method for building a positive relationship is the coach's participation in what could be termed "youth" activities:

...one of the parents, when we're in Kansas for a tournament, opens the door because kids were running down the hallway and I was leading the group. So they know that we're going to have fun and they know that they can be who they are. The other thing too is half of these kids will...you saw my Jeep. Coach has the top down and we're going to go eat and they all want to pile on the Jeep or pile in my wife's car and we get to know them that way and it's any of them. All of them know. It's different things, different ways; up until last year when we traveled, I never drove. I'd always ride with somebody else and you get to know them that way when you spend eight hours from here to Kansas with the family. You get to know a little bit about them.

Building a relationship with players also involves the ability to relate effectively with youth. This allows the coach to maintain an appropriate balance of technical instruction to achieve player success and friendly interaction to create a mutual level of comfort. Coach *Wilson* strives to reach his players in a way they understand and not in a manner that seems "too adult." While admittedly a "kid at heart," the coach shared that:

I like my players to know that coach is human. I like to laugh. I like to joke. I like to play, whatever. But then, I know how to balance that versus when we need to get something done. But I let them see that. I mean I'm human. We can joke around and play but okay now it's time to learn this play right here, you know?

Player Responses

In addition to the participants identifying methods for player improvement, they were also very aware of the coach's pedagogy for helping them learn life skills through their participation. The responses indicate this was achieved primarily through the relationship that is built between the player and coach.

The sub-themes showing the greatest degree of agreement were: (1) coach as a caring, engaging, and pushing individual-three coaches; (2) ability to get on the player's level-three coaches; (3) focus on academics-two coaches; and (4) positive team atmosphere-two coaches.

Coach as a Caring, Engaging, and Pushing Individual. When working with young athletes, coaches often wear many hats; meaning, they play different roles in the individual's life (e.g., advisor, counselor, teacher). *Mandy* (Team 1) expressed her feelings toward the coach and how he plays a vital role in her life:

I love him to death. I literally call him my second father, sometimes. But I love how he puts you in the game. He never...I don't know how to explain it. But he never makes you feel left out. If you're on the bench, he's always sitting next to you and telling you what's going on. Then you go in and then the next person comes out, he's always talking to somebody on the bench. He's always telling you what to do and what to do to get better and he's always pushing you to get to that next level. He also encourages us outside of basketball to do the right thing. He puts his whole heart in the game.

Having had multiple coaches during her playing career, "Celeste" offered insight regarding how Coach *Jones* is unique in his approach:

He's more affectionate. Coach is like, if you think you're doing really bad, he'll come over and he'll just talk to you. He'll take a seat beside you while the game is going on and he'll tell you, "You know, it's all right." Then he'll make you happy again. He'll give you a hug and most coaches I see don't do that.

Lisa felt that “all coaches care, but not the way Coach *Jones* does: He gets into your life like he wants to know what you’re doing during the week.” Upon hearing this comment, *Sheryl* shares a story that describes how Coach *Jones* is always concerned with his players:

He will even call you if you don’t show up to practice. One time there was a track meet, the track meet got cancelled. After the track meet got cancelled, I had plans. It was 2:30 and the track meet got cancelled. I was like, “Girl, we’re going to do this and this and this.” I was like, “Basketball practice?” So I didn’t go. I don’t know what happened but I was watching a movie and got a phone call. At first I got a text message, he was like, “Where you at?” I’m like, “Who is this?” I’m like, “What are you talking about?” Then he calls me, I don’t have him on my phone but he’s like, “Why aren’t you in practice?” I’m like, “Oh!” He talked to my daddy and everything!

In many instances, youth coaches serve in a more limited capacity in that their only interaction with the players occurs in practice and game settings. As *Natalie* described, this is not the case with the coach of Team 2: “He’ll talk to us after the game, like he’ll just sit with us and talk about kid stuff.”

The coach also exhibits his caring for the players through his willingness to help them in a variety of circumstances. *Aleisha* shared that:

Coach doesn’t mind giving rides to practice and stuff. Like if you say, “Can you give me a ride?” He’ll say, “Sure man, I’ll be right there.” Then, when practice is over, he will wait until your mom comes so you don’t have to be there alone.

A select coach has the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with players and become an active influence on their individual development. *Madison* shared how Coach *Smith’s* influence has been felt both on the court and at home:

Coach *Smith* like I go to her and tell her stuff because I feel more comfortable with her since I’ve known her since ninth grade and I’ll be a

junior this year. So, it's been like my fifth year so like I feel comfortable talking to her about stuff because she can kind of relate and like I came to her and told her about things that were going on at our home and she kind of helped me get through it, and tell me to keep my head up and stuff like that and she just always been there to push me and make me better.

Other players commented on the coach's unique approach, saying "she's very goofy. She's like old school too. She would like crack those little old school jokes and we don't get them but we're all be cracking up. It would just be like 'What?'" Despite being viewed as "old school," the players seemed to respond to the coach's methodological approaches and appreciate her willingness to push them:

I think that she's very misunderstood because like she is calm and like she doesn't really get out of hand but like she will get in your behind and tell you, "Hey, you're doing wrong or whatever," and she'll help you along the way.

Ability to Get on the Player's Level. The player responses indicated that a primary reason for the Coach Jones' success, both on and off the court, was his ability to be viewed not only as a coach, but as a friend and someone the players do not feel strangely about socializing with. One player from Team 1 remarked, "he's fun and he hangs out with us. He's like a little kid. He becomes one of our friends and not like a coach. It's not like an adult; we treat him as a friend." Other players made similar comments, with one sharing, "he jokes around with us and stuff, off. Before I ride with him to practice and to tournaments sometimes, and he's like funny in the car and stuff, and he doesn't act like an adult."

Also recognized by the players was the coach's ability to explain things that pertain to both sports-related and life-related issues in a manner that is meaningful.

Kristi felt that “he tells us he says it so that it doesn’t go in one ear and out the other. It sticks with you.”

According to his players, an important aspect of Coach *Wilson’s*, approach was his ability to effectively communicate with them. As told by *Leah*, the coach enjoyed hanging out with the players: “We go out to eat. We go shopping. He’s funny and very nice. He has like a laidback personality. Well, a very cool personality.” The players also appreciated the coach’s interactions with parents and his use of humor to maintain a comfortable playing environment: “He messes with the parents a lot. He even gives the parents nicknames. Oh, he’ll be trying to make the craziest shots [during practice] in the world too.”

As Coach *Smith* mentioned in her interview, she does not wish to be classified as a “yeller and screamer.” Rather, she desires to engage players through basketball and teach them beneficial skills. The players’ attributed Coach *Smith’s* success in this area to her effective communication and ability to relate. *Susan* said “she gets through to us like by not yelling, but just like talking to us.” *Emma* continued her teammate’s thought by adding: “Yeah, she can talk to us like how we understand it not how like somebody that’s like her age would understand. She doesn’t really ever talk down to us either.”

Another astute observation made by the players was the coach’s ability to relate to their situation (i.e., being a female teenager):

I think she realizes that we’re actually teenagers and like she knows what she went through I guess when she was a teenager. She relates to you. I think she just understands like teenagers and like the way that they feel about certain things.

Focus on Academics. Many coaches give lip service to their focus on academics; however, few follow through with actions. In working with the parents, Coach *Wilson* utilizes the players' schoolwork as a motivating factor for playing basketball. As one player from Team 1 stated, "School is a really big thing that he's important on. He used to make us bring report cards from school." *Celeste* goes further by saying:

If we have to turn in our report card and we have like a 60, then he's going to make us run, and he's going to tell you that this is what matters, it's like priority wise, school first, and then your family or your religion or whatever, and then basketball, so you have to get that down.

Working closely with the parents, Coach *Wilson* creates an effective avenue through which to monitor his players' grades. While scholastic endeavors are most often not a preferred activity of the players, they recognize the coach's desire to have them perform well in school. *Grace* stated that: "He thinks that that since you love basketball so much you will make sure you focus on your work and stuff so that you can come back and play basketball." *Natalie* continued her teammate's thought: "Because if we don't have good grades, he doesn't let us to play. We always have to give him our report card. And if we get an award we show him." Although no names were mentioned, the players admitted, "some people on the team, they're out because of their grades."

Positive Team Atmosphere. A functional element of any successful team is a cohesive effort where all players are supportive of one another. The players were very observant of Coach *Jones*' desire for them to help one another and "pick each other up." *Mandy*, one of the team leaders, shared that the coach "encourages us to encourage our teammates. Like, if another player isn't doing good in shooting, then he encourages me to go out and tell her, good job, and keep shooting."

The players also reported a level of trust in one another, in knowing that each team member is doing what is best for the team and is always giving maximum effort.

Danielle stated that Coach *Jones* pushes them:

To play serious but don't like get way down on yourself if you don't play good and that we need to like encourage each other and not...we're not going to talk anything bad about our own teammates and that we're going to leave everything on the court.

In any team sport, the coach has a difficult task creating a cohesive team environment in which all players are supportive of one another and willing to do their part, no matter how large or small, to achieve team success. The players felt that Coach *Wilson* helped them in this respect, building an atmosphere that promotes teamwork and a positive work ethic. Speaking about this, *Paige* shared:

Like winning's not everything is how he would explain it. Like if we talk about teamwork and stuff, and like if you believe in your teammates and you know that you do good, even if you lost the game, you know you gave 100%, then that's all that really matters.

Kylie expressed her opinion of the coach's desires: "If you give your best and you're all in the game, then he would rather have us work hard and lose than be playing silly and sloppy and winning."

Observational Findings

The goal of this section is to examine the fidelity with which coach and player identified methodologies were carried out during practices and games. Data analysis revealed three consistent sub-themes associated with the development of life skills: (1) coach conduct and consistency-three coaches; (2) equal treatment and use of player voice-two coaches; and (3) ability to get on the player's level-two coaches.

Coach Conduct and Consistency. The ultimate leader of any team is the coach and, as such, the players most often look to this individual for both verbal and non-verbal cues on appropriate behavior. This is especially salient when working within youth sports and, more specifically, within a select basketball setting. For example, during the game Coach *Jones* remained very calm, regardless if things appeared to be going well for his team or if they were experiencing hardships. The players seemed to model his behavior by playing in a calm and collected manner.

A specific example of the coach's approach during adversity was evident in the championship game of the tournament. The team started off the game down 8 to 3; however, the coach remained consistent in his behavior by being calm and tactfully correcting his players while always encouraging them. This behavior seemed to extend into the game, as the players, despite losing, remained calm despite the adverse circumstances. Later in the first half the team fell considerably behind (28-11) and, again, the coach remained calm during play and timeouts and consistently encouraged his players. The players appeared to give maximum effort, but their shots were simply not going in the basket; however, like the coach, the players did not get discouraged and continued their effortful play.

The coach's behavior during close games and in losing situations is often a marker of their general approach to dealing with similar life situations; however, what is not generally focused on is the coach's reaction when their team is winning by a large margin. In one game, as anticipated, the team jumped out to a big lead (12-0) early in the game and, upon seeing this, the coach removed the full court press. This approach is

interesting to note as the game was part of a regional qualifier for a national tournament where seeding is based upon your record at this tournament. In the event two teams tie, or would otherwise have the same seeding, the point differential (how many total points you win by minus how many total points you lost by) would be the determinant of seeding. Despite these rules, without expressly mentioning his intentions to the players, the coach exhibited respect for the opposing team by not attempting to win by as many points as possible and risking embarrassment to the other team.

Coach *Wilson* was consistently calm and collected in his interactions with the players. In turn, they seemed to reflect this attitude while playing. When a hardship was encountered (e.g., referee does or does not call a foul, missed shot, player gets knocked down) the player consistently remained calm and did not overreact to the situation.

During the game, Coach *Wilson* was very relaxed on the bench even if a player made a bad decision or mental mistake. He continuously encouraged them when this happened to “make up for it on the other end.” In one specific example, the team started the game behind, having trouble guarding the other team’s taller players. During a timeout, the coach spoke to the players in a calm and even tone, encouraging the players to “be calm and work hard.” A little later in the game, the team fell further behind and the coach subsequently called a timeout. In the same even tone, the coach challenged his players to “do something good,” not specifying what exactly that was the coach further said “give it your all and do something good.”

Coach *Smith*’s conduct and the consistency with which the coaching task was performed became a major determinant in player demeanor, especially during games.

The coach was extremely consistent in remaining calm, despite the situation. For example, the team began one game playing very well, and got a quick lead. The coach, however, appeared the same as when the team started slowly in the previous games (calm and reserved). Again, during another game, the team pulled ahead and, during a timeout, the coach displayed the same demeanor as when the team was losing (calm and even toned).

The coach's demeanor towards the referee proved to have mixed results when observing her player's subsequent behavior. However, despite any negative reactions towards the officials, the coach was able to immediately bring her team together and say "let me worry about the refs, you guys just play." During this exchange, the coach seemed in control of her emotions, being able to quickly turn from very upset towards to the officials to very calm when addressing her players.

Equal Treatment and Use of Player Voice. The notion of player voice is similar to the previously discussed youth voice construct (i.e., the degree to which youth feel their views are heard and respected by others, particularly adults). Coach *Wilson* always made it a point to ask his players' opinions and perceptions of the game. The players always took advantage of this opportunity, are were very insightful about what they felt may work during the game and ways to improve their play. The line of communication also functioned in the reverse in that players felt comfortable enough to suggest strategies to the coach. For example, in one game the players asked the coach if they can work on their offensive sets during the second half to prepare for the next game. The coach agreed to the players' suggestion and reminded them to pay attention to detail.

As noted previously, Coach *Smith* made a concerted effort to treat each player equally. For example, she always took the time to talk with any player who has been substituted out of the game, regardless if it is the player with the highest or lowest scoring average. Additionally, the coach took the time (while play is going on) to work with and explain a particular facet of the game (e.g., rebounding position) to the last player on the bench (i.e., one of the less skilled players).

Coach *Smith* also employed significant use of player voice during practices and games. Any time a team discussion took place during practice, the coach pulled all the players into the jump circle at mid-court. The coach always asked the players if they had any questions or comments about practice or the game in general. More often than not, the players took advantage of this opportunity to ask a specific question about team strategy or offered suggestions on things they felt might benefit the team. In a specific example, during halftime of one game, the coach asked the players for their preference on what defense to run at the beginning of the second half. The coach listened to the players' input then followed through and allowed the players to choose the defense they think would work best.

Ability to Get on the Player's Level. This category was consistent in both the coach and player interviews. Early in the fidelity checking, it became apparent that Coach *Jones* strove to effectively communicate with his players and did so in a manner that mixed coaching instruction and friendly chatter. One example of the coach's focus on communication was the use of electronic media. During an informal conversation, the

coach mentioned speaking with one of his players the previous night about team strategy and eliciting her opinions on potential areas of improvement.

During practices, the coach made a conscious effort to balance his corrective actions with friendly dialogue. The coach really attempted to get on the players' level to interact with them more effectively; several times throughout the practice he gave players fist bumps, high fives, or engaged in trash talking. As an example, when one player blocked another player's shot the coach screamed, "get that weak stuff outta here." Players did not take offense to this and everyone laughed; this type of interaction appeared to create an easy-going environment in which the players could "just play" (i.e., focus only on playing basketball and not on other extraneous factors such as the coaches' corrections or parents yelling).

While some may dismiss these actions as the coach "being a kid at heart," it did seem to serve an important purpose in creating a closeness and sense of trust with the players, as is evidenced during a game observation. Throughout this game, and all others, the players seemed to want to sit next to the coach. As the players were put into and taken out of the game, there was never an empty seat to either side of the coach.

During a tournament there is potential for significant down time between basketball games and what occurs during these instances are often just as significant as those occurring on the court: For example, at one point the team had five hours until their next game and elected to go to a local mall for a quick meal and a movie. During the meal all players and parents sat together, and the same was true during the movie. This was not an isolated occurrence as the team routinely ate together at the end of the

day. The players always sat together, as did the parents, with Coach *Jones* maintaining balanced conversations between the groups. Several times the coach was observed throwing small pieces of bread or chips in a playful manner with his players and with parents.

Many times during practice, Coach *Wilson* used team competition activities to build skills. During these activities groups of players competed against one another, with the loser of the competition having a very minor punishment of one full-court sprint. Most of the time the coaches (head and assistant) were involved in these competitive activities and participated in both drills and punishments. This created a very relaxed atmosphere and the players seemed to appreciate the coaches' involvement. The parents also responded by cheering on the players during competition drills (i.e., drills in which there is a losing team and a winning team).

Enjoying the Player Experience through a Conscious Coaching Effort

Coach Responses

The *enjoying the playing experience through a conscious coaching effort* theme was comprised of various sub-themes. Only one sub-theme, *thanking the parents for their role*, was specifically identified more than once by the three coaches; however, based upon responses in the coaches' interviews, tangential references to *promoting self-reflection and recognition of achievements* and *allowing the players to just play* were also consistent sub-themes.

While studies have identified the importance of creating an enjoyable playing environment (Lesyk & Kornspan, 2000), few have offered insight as to how this can be

accomplished within a highly competitive sports setting. Those who have offered suggestions often reference a need to minimize or even abolish the competitive nature of youth sports (Fielding, 1976; Kohn, 1986). The findings associated with the conscious coaching effort theme provide insight into potential methods for helping athletes maintain their high level of competition while doing so within an enjoyable environment.

Thanking the Parents for Their Role. Parents are often seen as an essential, yet unfortunate part of the youth sports experience. A substantial body of research examines the role of parents in youth sports (e.g., Kanters, Bocarro, & Casper, 2008), but little has focused on the relationship between the coach and parent in creating a positive context for the players. The inclusion of this sub-theme in the current study is substantial in that coaches and parents are often at odds, regarding things like playing time for their son or daughter; however, the coaches' suggestions offered by coaches in this study for involving the parents in the playing experience may provide valuable insights for other coaches and researchers to explore how this positive dynamic affects the team's culture.

Quite often, parents are seen as the antithesis to positive youth sports participation. However, Coach *Jones* takes a different approach in making certain his players recognize the role their parents play in participating in select basketball:

The other thing is when they make the varsity or their JV, thank their parents because each parent spends a lot of money and a lot of time invested in their kids. The other big thing is it's not uncommon for me after practice or after a game to say, "Hey, you guys go home and thank your mom and dad or thank your grandparents or thank your aunt or thank who got you here."

In addition to involving the parents in team decisions, Coach *Wilson* also makes it a point to thank them for their efforts and intentionally does this in the presence of his players:

I always, always, always sincerely tell the parents how much I appreciate them because they came. The people that live [further away], they could easily play for a team closer to home. I let the parents know that I know that they're sacrificing their time, gas, money, you know? I tell the girls this in front of the parents that this is what your parents are sacrificing for you guys to be here and I know that you don't have to be here. You could play for anybody that's closer to home but it means a lot to me that you guys have trusted me with the development of your daughters' basketball skills. I don't for one minute take it for granted. I mean, I let that be known on a regular basis.

The coach felt these efforts serve two main purposes. First, it helps the players recognize the sacrifices that are made by their parents (e.g., time, money) and teaches them to appreciate those actions. Second, it creates a trusting and respectful relationship between the coach and parent.

Promoting Self-Reflection and Recognition of Achievements. Coach *Jones* expressed a strong desire to have his players recognize when they reach milestones and achievements. This approach is a continuation of the coach's aspiration for the players to effectively set attainable goals then work hard towards accomplishing those goals. He accomplished this end through his interactions with players, taking the time to gather the team for a discussion or speak to each individual player privately. Coach *Jones* explains that:

When we went to Minnesota, it was draining because it was emotional because we lost one of our best players, our expectations were high. The talent level is far better than we thought and when we came back, everybody thought it was a disappointment. How many kids at 13 years old got to go to Rochester, Minnesota convention center, an arena, and play basketball? There were 32 teams there that had to get there. You have to qualify to get there. You couldn't

pay to get there; you had to qualify to get there. I told them, “You're one of the 320 girls who had this opportunity so enjoy it.”

Allowing the Players to Just Play. Being a former assistant coach allowed Coach *Smith* to observe the head coach’s behaviors and their effect on the players. As a result, the coach has developed a desire to allow the player to, first and foremost, have fun. As she recalled, “I see going from college to high school to select, as I travel that route from college to high school to select, I am more hands off with the player.”

Coach *Smith* undertakes measures to create an enjoyable practice environment through competitive activities and scrimmage play. She felt her attitude helped her achieve this type of environment:

I’m pretty laid back and I don’t really rip them unnecessarily. Hopefully they’ll say that practices aren’t boring. The group of girls that we have, I try to make to make it enjoyable so I would hope they’d say not boring because they have fun.

Player Responses

The players were also very astute in recognizing the coaches’ desire for them to simply have fun and enjoy their experiences while playing basketball. From the responses, this was achieved through the coach’s intentional approach as well as encouraging his players to develop friendships through the team. Responses associated with this theme were not numerous; however, analysis revealed two sub-themes that showed consistency: (1) coach allows the players to have fun-three coaches; and (2) coach promotes player contact within the team-two coaches

Coach Allows the Players to Have Fun. One of the most referenced negative aspects of youth sports is the potential for the activity to cause increases in levels of anxiety and stress in participants (Grossbard, 2009; Scanlan, 1978; Smoll & Smith,

1996). However, as indicated referenced by both players and coaches, there is an intentional effort on the part of the coach to minimize stress in the playing environment.

Kristi, a veteran of six years from Team 1, spoke about the methods of the coach in this regard:

It's like when you're on the court, he doesn't like yell at you. It's just calm and you're just out there like having fun, like there's not a lot or pressure. It's just playing basketball and that's what it feels like.

Similarly, *Jamie*, who is playing her first year with this team, shared that her coach “takes all the stress out of us and helps us feel better about ourselves. He gets rid of all the pressure.”

Playing sports is fun (or at least it should be); however, depending on a multitude of factors (e.g., coach attitude, peer relations, team success), this may not be the case. The players of Team 3 commented on this aspect, saying that some of their past teams were “poorly run” and “the coach had no business working with kids.” The players, however, identified Coach *Smith* as someone who “truly lets us have fun. She makes playing basketball fun, like even in practice and sometimes that's pretty hard to do.”

Sheryl, a member of Team 2, commented, “When we're playing it's kinda like Coach *Wilson* just wants us to enjoy ourselves and have fun. I mean, like, there are times in the games when we play for a long, long time without him saying one word.” *Karen* also felt that Coach *Wilson* desired the team to truly enjoy their playing experience: “It's like, even if practice is hard, he always makes it fun. He's always out there playing with us and goofing off. That just makes it fun.”

Coach Promotes Player Contact within the Team. One method for enjoying the playing experience not identified by Coach *Jones*, but recognized by the players, was the coach's focus on promoting communication between players. The players identified this aspect as an important facet in building team chemistry and camaraderie. As one player shared: "He started this thing where everybody has to text each other like every day and we get to know each other better through that." In addition to communication through electronic media, the coach also promoted communication in practice, game, and off-court settings: "He makes us talk a lot with each other. And exchange our phone numbers and stuff. He wants us to become friends, like be able to talk to each other."

Leah, a player on Team 2, felt that her coach "wants us to be like sisters." *Grace* follow her teammate's comment saying, "Yeah, he makes sure everyone has everyone else's cell phone numbers and always encourages us to call and text each other. You know, be a part of each other's lives."

Observational Findings

The final category to be observationally confirmed was the coach's focus on creating an enjoyable playing experience for the participants. Observations revealed two sub-themes across all three teams: (1) allowing the players to just play; and (2) use of humor.

Allowing the Players to Just Play. Seemingly a simple idea, allowing the players to just play is foreign to many youth sports coaches who feel they must always be in complete control of every facet during play. While some level of control is desired by the players, Coach *Jones* employed a different approach in wanting his players to "be

able to think for themselves” stating as much during a one game. The coach seemed to take the opportunity to allow his players to enjoy their time on the court as much as possible by saying very little. He also remarked to the assistant coach and I that this would be a good opportunity for the girls to “think on their own” during the game.

The coach also allowed the players time during a tournament to “unwind” and “just be kids.” Before one game, the coach did not give a pregame talk. He simply joked around with some of the players while they stretched and talked amongst themselves. The players’ conversations centered on normal teenage talk (e.g., relationships, school happenings, movies) and did not revolve solely around the upcoming game.

Additionally, efforts were made during practices to promote playing the game (as opposed to strictly regimented drills). In many cases, the coach organized practice so that players had significant scrimmaging with little coach intervention.

During both practices and games, Coach *Wilson* spent a significant amount of time simply watching his players. In practices, it was not uncommon for Coach *Wilson* to remain quiet for ten minutes before offering some corrective advice or ceasing a drill. Likewise, the coach made an effort to remain quiet during five to seven minute intervals during games as he feels “this lets the players know I trust them.”

Often, during his halftime talks, the coach made it a point to focus on the positive efforts of the players and, again, remind them to “just play” by saying “remember who coaches the games, it’s us [the coaches] and not the parents.” The coach also allowed the players to prepare themselves before games, making certain to not seem overbearing. Prior to most games the players sat on the floor stretching talking casually and enjoying

themselves. When the coach approached the players he joked around with them for a few minutes and then let them continue talking with one another.

Coach *Smith* also seemed to purposefully remain quiet during portions of practices and games. When asked about this observation, Coach *Smith* responded that “I want them to have fun and just play sometimes, and if there’s something that’s wrong I want them to be able to fix it.” It is not uncommon for there to be 5 to 10 minutes periods during practice where the coach allowed the players to work on a single skill (e.g., shooting, passing) with nothing being said. Additionally, the coach always allowed substantial time for scrimmaging (live play between teammates) where the coach only stopped play to administer a punishment (one push up; this is only done if the players fail to do basic fundamentals during play, such as blocking out or hustling) or explain different options to the players.

Use of Humor. Participation in highly competitive youth athletics can become a very strict and serious enterprise; however, in his efforts to allow the players to enjoy their experience, Coach *Jones* used a significant amount of humor during practices and games to maintain an easy-going playing atmosphere. For example, the coach gave a very brief pregame talk involving mainly technical instruction but did attempt to maintain a degree of levity by offering any player taking a charge (an offensive foul by the other team usually involving a collision; the opposing team had several very tall and strong players) an ice cream.

Even more important was the use of humor during games, which can provide for player enjoyment and remind them of the temporal nature of the game. The coach

appeared to keep a loose atmosphere on the bench, using funny quips and smiles when speaking to the players. The coach also used humor in a tactful manner to correct players. He used humor and jokes to correct players when they were not performing a task correctly; as an example, a player was dribbling down the court and passed the ball out of bounds; the coach asked the player if she was passing to her imaginary friend; everyone gets a good laugh, even the player who is being corrected; the coach then calmly spoke to the player, instructing her on the proper pass.

Both coach and player respondent groups mentioned Coach *Wilson's* use of humor during practices and games, commenting how this kept the playing environment loose and casual. The coach also employed the use of humor in corrective actions. As an example, a player had missed several free throws during the first half and, during halftime, the coach jokingly referred to the player as “Shaq” (a reference to Shaquille O’Neal, a professional basketball player known for his notoriously poor free throw shooting). During one exchange in the first half of a game, a player sustained a minor injury to her hand. The coach asked the player if she was okay. When the player confirmed she was indeed alright and wished to remain in the game the coach remarked “that’s good ‘cuz if you came over to the bench I was going to have to cut off that hand!”

Players on Team 3 sometimes “goofed off” with little said from Coach *Smith*; however, the players seemed to know where to draw the line and despite being silly, the players worked hard. The coach routinely used humor during practice. Sometimes this was a means to bring levity to a situation (e.g., if a bad pass is made the coach gives the

player a funny look) and other times it is used as a means of correction (e.g., to correct bad shot selection).

Player Goals

In speaking with the players I sought to understand why they choose to participate in basketball. As youth mature and enter early adolescence, they begin to express their opinions more effectively and exploring their reasoning as it pertains to playing basketball could provide insight into their personal goals of participation. Data analysis of participation motives revealed two themes within this construct: (1) enjoyment; and (2) serving a purpose.

Enjoyment

Given as one of the most common reasons for participation, enjoyment of the activity is a vital construct to understand. Discovering what makes something enjoyable can provide great insight for activity organizers and, in the case of this study, the youth coach. Across all three teams, the players described two components that attribute to their enjoyment: (1) basketball is fun; and (2) competitive nature.

Basketball Is Fun

While seemingly a simply idea, fun is a concept that seems very important, especially when speaking with youth, and one that can serve as a predicator of other positive outcomes. All players in the focus group interviews mentioned fun as a primary reason for their involvement. Wanting to make certain her feelings were accurately conveyed, *Natalie* commented on why she participated: “And it’s fun. Yeah, it’s very fun. Very fun. Very, very fun.” Agreeing, her teammate expressed how basketball had

become a part of her everyday life: “I just like the game of basketball and since I started I just really loved it and I pick up a basketball almost every day.”

When asked why they participate in select basketball, one player’s answer was typical of responses in any voluntary context: “It just makes you feel good and it’s fun.” This response is noteworthy as it stands in contrast to many views of highly competitive athletics as having mostly negative effects on participants. Another Team 1 player commented on her perspective as it relates to her everyday life:

Even though we’re basketball players, you know how people say they eat, sleep and think about basketball. They really don’t. I’m not thinking about basketball when I go home or if I’m just lying down. I’m like, “I shouldn’t eat this because I have basketball practice later” or “I shouldn’t do this because it can mess up my ankle.” Something like that is just, I’m not thinking about basketball 24/7 [24 hours per day; seven days per week; i.e., all the time] even though I’m a basketball player. It doesn’t consume my life because that will be bad to have something consume me like that much.

Most members of the team shared this perspective, with one player offering that:

As a teenager the last thing on my mind is basketball. Seriously, my mind goes into basketball, and I’m going to get probably in trouble for this but when basketball hits my mind it’s probably about five or ten minutes into basketball practice. I know that sounds bad but like just a lot of other things are on my mind.

When asked what they enjoyed about playing select basketball, all members of Team 3 answered in a similar manner to *Chloe*, who said: “Fun! I like it. I wouldn’t want to do anything else.” It was also explained by “Emily” that basketball served a social function by allowing players to participate with their friends:

Just getting to hang around with people and just getting on the court and knowing like you’re having fun doing what you do. It’s not like sitting in the classroom where you have to do something. It’s just like you can go out there and do whatever and have fun like while you’re doing it. You don’t have to worry about other stuff.

Competitive Nature

If fun is the primary driver for participation, many recreational leagues can fulfill this need. However, the players also commented that the high level of competition and the opportunity to be successful was a large part of why they chose to play. “Kylie” shared that she played “because I like the fast paced game and I like the competition.” Likewise, “Claire” referenced her liking of the competition but also expressed that “I like winning, because the last team I was on was horrible. I love to win.”

One player from Team 1 commented that:

Mine’s really, really cheesy but I play basketball because I like the thrill of going down the court and shooting a three-pointer, making it and winning the game, stuff like that. The competition, knowing that you can win.

Others in the group approved of this view, with many referencing the desire to “play against the best out there...and win.”

The players from Team 3 have all completed at least one year of high school and many have been participating in organized basketball for over eight years. As such, most players have continued their participation because they enjoy the competitive environment that playing provides. *Sydney* provided a little insight as to her competitive nature: “I’m super competitive like I can’t let my three-year-old cousin beat me in a foot race...Well, she’s really mean. I don’t know, I’m usually competitive and I like beating people.” *Abby* offered a similar view of her personality: “I’m a competitive person so I guess...whenever I’m out there like I love the game and then just like that I have the competitive drive. I guess, I feel I can actually compete.”

Several other players, like *Madison*, referenced a euphoric feeling while playing: “The adrenalin you get from playing like when it’s like a hard game or something. It’s like the excitement or something.” Likewise, when *Autumn* was asked what she enjoyed most about playing she responded:

The adrenaline. I like the competitive nature of it. I like getting inside other people’s heads. Like whenever we are playing a team and they think they have us and then we like pick out their plays and they get really upset. I love the rush of it.

Serving a Purpose

In addition to enjoying their experience playing basketball, the players appear very cognizant of potential positive attributes that may develop through their participation. This category represents the players’ perceptions of why they choose to continue participating in the sport, beyond enjoyment. Analysis of the data revealed consistency across three sub-themes: (1) participation keeps the player busy; (2) being part of a team and family; and (3) basketball as an escape and a stress reliever.

Participation Keeps the Player Busy

For many youth, playing basketball, or participating in voluntary activities generally, is an enjoyable time filler. As a player from Team 1 shared, “I play basketball because I wouldn’t know what else I would do because it’s like my life now and it’s something to keep you in shape and it’s very entertaining to me and I love it.” Other players reflect on what they would be doing if playing basketball was not a part of their lives:

I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t play basketball, like I’d probably be really lame. Like I’d go home, stay at home and get fat or something, I don’t know. I’d probably like be getting into bad things.

Another player had similar feelings regarding participation as a means to avoid potentially harmful activities: “Well, you have practice, so that takes up time for you to do, like you can’t go do something else because you have practice, like going to do drugs or something.”

The players of Team 2 also discussed how participation in select basketball diverted them from engaging in less desirable activities. *Claire* shared that she “wouldn’t have things to do on the weekends,” which would most likely cause her to “sit around and watch TV; be a couch potato and probably be fat.” *Leila* also saw her participation as a pleasant diversion and something that would keep her “from getting into trouble.”

Many activities vie for the time of youth, with some offering potentially harmful effects (e.g., illicit drug use, sedentary lifestyle). In their responses, the players of Team 3 recognized the use of basketball as a means to positively occupy their time. Many, like *Autumn*, viewed basketball as a means to ensure physical activity: “I like working out [in practice] and staying in shape and I just feel good.”

Players also felt their participation kept them away from undesirable situations:

Well, I’d probably be in trouble [if I did not play basketball]. I don’t know, I mean, I just wouldn’t have anything to do like so I just have more time to think of stuff that I should be doing and like it’s getting into trouble that I don’t need to be in. I stay focused and I’m gone so I don’t have time to think of anything to do.

Being Part of a Team and Family

Participating in team sports provides significant opportunities for social interactions, particularly if the team membership is consistent over an extended period of time. Similar to any social group, the members of a team seek to create a sense of unity

and reflect a common persona (Fine, 1987). The players on Team 2 reported a sense of family when speaking of their teammates, having gone through a variety of intense emotions that accompany sports competition and carrying those over into their non-basketball interactions. *Paige* commented: “I like how everybody just has a positive attitude and if you have a bad attitude they lift you up. We on the same team and we all have special talents.” Agreeing with her teammate’s view, *Claire* provided a point of comparison with a past select team: “Everyone in the team is kind of...without bad attitudes. Because the last team I played on...well, the team before the last team I played on, everybody on the team had some problems.”

The players also referenced their interactions off the court and how they felt these relationships were important to them:

We all get to encourage each other and it’s good because outside of basketball we get to know each other better like at sleep over’s and stuff and our chemistry is good. I think we’re very close. All of us like have cell phones. We mostly have everybody’s number

Kylie has a similar view and stated that:

Everybody [on the team] talks. It’s not like anybody has any anything to hide or anything against each other. We’ve known each other for a while so like after our game, you’ll see like the whole team walking around. There won’t be like two people over here then two people over there and two people giving dirty looks after our games, we go all to McDonalds or something.

As has been mentioned, participation in select basketball came be a very time intensive endeavor and, as such, many players see the individuals they play with not only as teammates, but friends and, in some cases, family members. *Mandy*, a player who has been a part of Team 1 for six years shared:

I think about this is like we're not just a team, we're a family out here and we all connect. After a tournament, most of the team always goes out to eat and we always have a [team] party. On trips, you don't go home after a game or at break, you don't go to your room and you just sit there with your family. You're with your. You'll be with everybody so then you all are like sisters to me and then we just connect better on the court. I like it better when we're all connecting and having fun and winning. Three-pointers are really cool too.

Celeste, a player who was recently added to the team shared a different perspective:

Yeah, when I came to [this team], like I didn't really know anybody then once I'd met everybody, we became friends and at first I was nervous to play but then I started hanging out with them, it became a lot better.

The playing experience and camaraderie felt by the participants provides some players with a sense of belonging and self-worth:

If we get fouled, everybody on the court goes and picks the girl up. It's not like everybody just walks away and we're sitting there and she has to get up by herself. They're there to tell her, "Good job! Way to get the foul." With the sense you're wanted and loved.

Given the significant time spent together, select basketball players have the opportunity to develop meaningful and lasting relationships with their peers. One player from Team 3 felt that "we're like a family out on the court." Continuing that thought, another player remarked, "It's exciting when the games are really close and your teammate makes a really good play and you get up [excited] for them."

Sydney spoke about her enjoyment when she makes a good play and feels she contributed to the team's success:

I think the best thing about basketball for me is like when you're one on one with someone and you make a play and you make the shot and it's just like, "Yes, I beat her." You feel like you have accomplished something and you helped your team because you've helped them maybe like take the lead or something or maybe get closer to the lead. So you want to make sure that you do help your

team especially when it's close like a couple of games that we had this year. And we would like come around and beat the team because of what some person did, so I feel like it's the best thing.

Basketball as an Escape and a Stress Reliever

One of the positive outcomes from participation, as identified by the players of Team 3, is the escape from every day stresses and a reduction in stress levels. As *Emma* shared:

When you get on the court, you kind of just like...you stop thinking about everything going on like around you. You focus on the game so it's like...you want to like stop caring about like if you have a fight with your mom or something. You can just like use that as a way to play better.

Playing basketball also serves the same purpose for *Riley*, who commented that basketball is “like an escape route for me. So, whenever things are hard or tough at home or whatever, I can like come and play basketball and shoot around and relieve stress or whatever so that's part of it too”

Autumn mentioned how “basketball puts everything in perspective for me.” She went on to explain: “I can go into a game really, really, angry about something that's doesn't have to do with basketball be like “I'm an idiot. Why was I like angry about that?” It just helps you like get over whatever.”

Likewise, according to a significant number of Team 1 player responses, participation in select basketball provides as escape from the stresses of daily life and a positive outlet by which to relieve feelings associated with anxiety and anger. One player felt that basketball is “kind of a stress reliever because, when I get on the court, all my focus is on basketball and all the problems at school and stuff are gone.” Another player shared similar feelings, speaking specifically about how her position, the low post

(i.e., a frontcourt player whose actions are performed closest to the basket), provides a direct outlet for her emotions:

I like my position a lot, like the post because I like to go to practice or something like really PO-ed. Then I'll come out like feeling better. Like a block. It takes away what me and my mom were talking about in the car, like an argument. This roadblock, it takes that away. So when I'm here it takes that away.

Participation was also linked to a loss of self:

I'll come out [after playing], just feeling better. It's like an outlet. When I'm on the court I forget about everything else just by playing basketball. It is like a way to get away from life, like all the stuff that goes wrong. You just have to worry about basketball. It's an escape, that's the word I was looking for.

Player Growth and Changes Attributed to Participation

This theme focuses on the players' reflections of how basketball has benefited or changed them and the lessons they felt were learned during their participation. It is important to consider these perspectives as they provide a means to verify if the coach's intentions are achieving their desired effect. The following quote provides perspective on the following sub-themes:

It's given me really like an extra "oomph" and it's really taught me to try your hardest because basketball is all about trying your hardest and working hard until the final buzzer. It's kind of like that in my play. Like you also try as hard as you can no matter what anybody thinks. It's really taught me life lessons even though it's just a game but it's taught me like never give up, never stop trying, keep working hard, and listen to coach or you'll run. But yes, just life lessons like that.

Player responses indicated consistency across six sub-themes: (1) more social; (2) increases in self-confidence; (3) valuing self-discipline and respecting others; (4) conflict resolution and anger management; (5) better decision making; and (6) positive work ethic.

More Social

Participation in team athletics provides the player significant opportunities to meet new people. Youth sports serve as venues for socialization and, as such, present players with opportunities to foster relationships with teammates (Fine, 1987). As *Susan* explained, playing on a select team “kind of like helps you meet new people, like because we like probably would have never met them [teammates].”

For many, this opportunity helps the individual strengthen their social skills.

Brooke reflected that:

It’s hard for me to come in and meet new people. It was hard for me because like I’m shy whenever I first meet new people and I’ve kind of opened up to that. So, basketball has helped me a lot in that.

A product of Coach *Jones*’ focus on promoting player communication, as referenced by the players, was an increase in their social abilities. As *Karen* from Team 1 explained: “I used to be really shy and quiet. I wouldn’t talk to anybody unless you came up and talked to me. But now I’m talkative and I’m a bit more out of my shell, if you will.” Agreeing with her teammate, another player remarked that playing on this team “does help you interact with other people better.”

A common response given by players from Team 2 when asked how participation in organized basketball has affected them is an increase in their social skills. *Paige* mentioned that playing basketball “helps your confidence because you’re shy whenever you start, and then whenever you play you become friends, it makes your confidence build up. It helps you make friends too and to be outgoing.” Having a similar experience, *Natalie* remarked that:

[P]laying changed my attitude. And I used to be really, really shy, but now I am not shy. Like it helped me a lot, like it kept my grades up since I really like playing and it like just changed my personality a lot, and then it also helped me stay in my shape and stuff.

Increases in Self-Confidence

An outcome that seemed closely related to, but distinct from, increases in social functioning is the player's development of self-confidence. *Leila* reported that playing basketball "definitely boosts your self-esteem and also confidence." *Claire*, a newcomer to Team 2, shared that "since coming to this team, my confidence level has gone way up."

The players of Team 1 also reported seeing changes in the levels of self-confidence, particularly as it relates to their ability to successfully negotiate new challenges. *Sheryl* shared that:

I've never really been shy. I've been really outgoing like forever and ever and ever but basketball had just given me that little like push. Like when you want to do something...you can do it in basketball like the coach says, "Do 20 suicides [a running drill usually used in conditioning players or as a punishment," but you don't think you can do it. So like determination to finish them. So when I don't think I can do something, I'm like if I can do 20 suicides, I can do this. It just gives me that extra push to do something that I don't think that I can do. This little, "Come on, are you serious?" Like, "Really? You think you can't do this?" You know, this little extra confidence. To give you that confidence like, "I got this."

Celeste, a new member of the team, related a similar story: "I wasn't confident at first, but then like if he said to shoot and even if you miss it, I realized I can get better."

Many players from Team 3 reported an increase in their self-confidence and a discovery of new personal skills that served benefits away from basketball. *Sydney*, a player who has admittedly been pre-occupied with the perceptions of others, said that

playing basketball: “[T]eaches you not to like care about what other people think and it kind of teaches you like everyone has a flaw. Like not everyone can be like six feet tall and fast as lightning but like you work with what you have.”

Susan, who has seen marked improvements in her play on her scholastic team, shared that participation at the select level “teaches you to be a better leader like on your school team and like you’re more like a leader not a follower and you trust yourself better.”

Madison shared a unique story about her experiences playing basketball, but one that speaks to the improvement of her self-confidence;

I think that basketball has made me a stronger person on the inside, and the out and like I think that it causes you to have like a higher...it makes you think. It made me more goofy because like at school I’m not that goofy, I’m just being myself so. But now, I have that part of me and people laugh at me so I feel good about myself at the end of the day.

Valuing Self-Discipline and Respecting Others

Under the proper supervision, participation in youth sports can lead to a strengthening of self-discipline and an increase in respect for others. Players commented that playing on Team 3 has taught them “how to respect myself, my coach, and my teammates.” *Susan*, one of the most skilled players on Team 3, shared that her “attitude in the past hasn’t always been the best,” but that during her tenure with the team, she has learned to “watch what you say and how you treat others on the court. If you’re just going to like talk down at people, like on your team, you’re not going to get anywhere.”

During Team 1 focus group interviews, many players referenced a change in how they treat others and their desire to remain in control of their thoughts. *Karen* admitted:

I used to be like a horrible child, honestly. But basketball has like discipline me to show respect on and off the court. So I show it to people on the court and I show it to my family and friends, my teachers, everybody.

Similarly, *Mandy* felt Coach *Jones* had directly contributed to her becoming more respectful through his responses in game situations: “And see, when I used to play, I used to foul out every game, and I’d get really mad at the refs but then he taught me to just shrug it off and just respect them.” *Wendy* expressed that playing basketball on this team “disciplines you and it teaches you to be respectful.”

In addition to changing how the Team 2 players viewed themselves, participation in organized basketball was also seen as a means to improve how players viewed others, both peers and adults. *Leah* shared:

It changed my attitude toward people, like the way I talk to them. I can tell that it has changed because like when I was younger, I used to have a quick attitude with people, but now I know how to communicate better.

Conflict Resolution and Anger Management

Participation in any highly competitive activity has the potential to yield a wide variety of emotions, from euphoria to devastation. An important developmental process is growth in the ability to effectively manage these emotions. Similar to Fine’s (1987) findings that sports served as a means to teach self control, many players commented on how their interactions with Coach *Jones* had taught them to “keep their cool” in difficult situations. *Mandy* explained that she:

[U]sed to have a big temper problem. If some girl would go down the court and foul me and I wouldn’t get the call, I’d go up and just push her out of bounds. Basketball, for the years I’ve been playing it, it’s taught me that in the end it doesn’t really matter. I ask myself, “Does that one call make a game?” And it’s just like that in life; you can’t get mad at everything that doesn’t go your way. You have to push through it and like live everyday to the fullest.

A vital skill for anyone to acquire, as identified by members of Team 2, is the ability to maintain focus and effectively manage conflicts that arise. *Leah* recounted how her participation has helped in this area:

It was like when the people started talking to me, sometimes they like get on your nerves. They get you real frustrated real quick. You get frustrated real quick and you're like whatever, but now, like during basketball, we have to talk it out.

Natalie shared that playing has helped her become more aware of her emotions:

“Well, before, I had frustration and like after every game I used to cry and stuff, but now like I'm able to get through it better.”

One of the most consistent responses given by the players of Team 3 were the lessons learned about efficiently resolving conflict and effectively managing feelings of anger. *Susan*, the same player who previously stated her attitude has been questionable in the past, explained:

I have a really short temper and in basketball, if I wanted to get ejected in every game, I probably could but I have to like work through that. It teaches you like to say calm and not to get upset about everything.

Chloe also shared how playing, particularly under the guidance of Coach *Smith*, has taught her:

[T]o like keep your composure on the court and it teaches you how to like be able to keep your composure outside of the court with things like just like random fights that you have with like friends or something, it will help you keep your composure and not like go off.

Sharing a similar experience, *Emma* spoke about how playing has made her more cognizant of her behavior:

It just helped me to be more open and kind of helps me to keep my temperament because when I get mad, I kind of like lose it. But playing, like, you can't just

like lose your temper on the court like you actually have to like just stay focused and keep your head.

Better Decision Making

For many players, basketball becomes a focal point on which to base other decisions that may occur outside the playing environment. *Lisa* felt that:

Basketball helps me make better decisions, smarter decisions. I try to hang around with good people and if I know something is stupid, I think about the consequences and how that affects basketball, that's why I don't do it. Like drugs, like I know that's going to mess me up and that's going to mess up basketball.

Agreeing with her teammate's comment, another player reported that "basketball runs through my mind...drinking and like eating bad food, hanging out with the wrong crows, stuff like that." *Kelly* saw her participation as a means to "think more about what I want in life and what's bad and what's good." She goes on to explain:

It's like, if you do this, you're going to do this because, if you work hard, then you're going to play better; or if you don't put work into it then you're not going to play as well. Or if you do like drugs and stuff like that, then you're not going to play as well. So you have to think about that stuff.

Additionally, as *Grace* from Team 2 commented, there is opportunity for decision-making ability to spill over into the player's everyday life: "It teaches you how to be smart and make good decisions." Likewise, *Kylie* felt that her participation has "helped me make the right decisions, here [during play] and at home."

Positive Work Ethic

Success in a team sport requires that all participants work together towards a common goal. Players from Team 3 reported learning this lesson through their participation, particularly since they have joined the team. *Riley* felt that playing

“teaches you about, like, real hard work and, like how it will pay off and stuff.” *Abby* shared that playing on a select team, with many different personality types, has taught her “how to work better with people.”

A central focus of Coach *Jones*’ coaching is to instill a positive work ethic in his players and value this above winning. During focus group interviews, the players confirmed the coach’s efforts with many stating similar feelings to *Danielle*’s, who felt that playing basketball has taught her “to always try your best, whether you think you can win or not.” Another player commented that participating under the guidance of Coach *Jones* has “taught me to work harder for what I want and that I have to choose what I want to do more, and work hard at that.”

While working hard for oneself is important, a team sport requires each team member to consider the success of their teammates and, ultimately, the team above their desires. *Jamie* sees this as a benefit of her playing experience, stating that playing “helps you think about everybody instead of yourself, because you do make choices for the whole team and not just for yourself.”

Negative Experiences

As with any activity, both the positive and negative aspects have to be considered and I would be remiss if I did not mention the non-beneficial experiences of the players and coach. Considering these points of view is just as vital, if not more so, to the improvement of coach-player interactions than the positive experience of sports participation. Three sub-themes showed consistency across the three teams: (1) parental involvement; (2) intra-team cliques; and (3) previous coach experiences.

Parental Involvement

The negative aspects of parental involvement in youth sports have been documented in major media publications (Cary, 2004) as well as academic journals (Arthur-Banning, 2009). Similar patterns were observed in this study when the coach and players were asked to comment on negative aspects of parental participation. Coach *Jones* commented, “nine times out of ten, the parent’s and the kid’s goals aren’t the same.” Further, he stated, “I say it’s about the kids, but you have to please the parents.” Many times parents attempt to live vicariously through their children’s participation in youth sports. As Coach *Jones* has found:

Sometimes the parent commitment is almost higher than the kid’s commitment. It’s good but also can sometimes be scary because I do have one or two girls where their parents are more committed than the kid. Kid loves the game but also loves volleyball or soccer, but the parents really love basketball. So that makes it a little bit more difficult.

While the actions of parents are often considered from the eyes of coaches or others spectators, rarely is opinion elicited from the youth participants, particularly as it related to their parents. One player summed her views by simply saying, “my least favorite thing [about basketball] is going home and talking to the parents.” Other players reported similar feelings, with one stating, “I don’t like inviting my parents to come. My mom doesn’t say a word, but my dad is the most annoying person. We [the players] get frustrated when they [the parents] yell at us.” Speaking more specifically of after-game interactions, *Sheryl* explained that:

Like say something happens on the court or something, you got to go home with him and I’m just like, “Dude, I really don’t want to listen to you right now.” That’s like my least favorite. Like when I’m on the court my coach doesn’t make you feel bad. But like after, my parents, I guess everyone’s parents are like, “Oh

my goodness, what was that?" So you get in the car and I'm like, "So how did I do?" My parents are like, "Well, you did this wrong. You did this wrong."

Lisa shared a similar experience, referencing her mother's reaction to a specific play in the previous game:

My mom talks to me and she's trying to talk to me about basketball and she doesn't know what she's talking about and I hate that and I hate that they think that they know what happened when they have absolutely no idea what was going on. They're like, "So why did that happen?" I'm like, "Do you even understand why I gave her that foul? You wouldn't even understand how that happened, so don't even talk about it."

Another player from Team 2 noted:

One of our players, their dad, sometimes he just goes overboard, he needs to let the coaches coach the game and not coach from the sidelines. It gets her [the player and daughter] frustrated then she plays all down, and then she starts messing up and stuff.

Kylie shared a similar account of how she feels parental involvement can negatively impact the team:

It frustrates us sometimes when they say it because they don't say it in a nice way sometimes. It hurts your self-esteem. I guess their intent on saying things are to encourage you but sometimes they don't say it in the right way that's encouraging.

Paige, a player who has been with the team for five years, presented her view of both the positive and negative potential of parent involvement:

They can't help it whenever they are yelling at you, but it kind of makes you go down like your self-esteem goes down a bit and you don't play as good. But whenever they are like "Woo hoo!" all of the sudden and stuff your self-esteem goes higher.

Most responses on Team 3 were similar to *Susan*, who answered with:

Annoying. Over controlling. They try and tell you what to do and they don't know what they're talking about. And then they get angry at you. "Why aren't you listening to me," or "When I talk to you, why don't you even respond?" Or

“You always clam up.” That’s what I got on the way over here. I’m like “Really?” After a really bad game, they come on you like extra hard and you’re just like, “Can I have a break, please?”

Riley had a similar reaction and stated that: “Normally, whenever I hear them in the stands, it’s negative parts. It’s like [when my parents say], ‘*Riley*, you shouldn’t have done that!’ That’s when I just want to say, ‘Shut up mom!’ It’s like, I’m trying!”

Intra-team Cliques

One of the unfortunate aspects of many select basketball teams is the distance that separates players’ homes. This makes it difficult for many players to socialize outside the context of team activities and has the potential to create cliques within the team. In most cases, this manifested itself by the presence of an intra-team authority structure whereby certain players would be seen as the social leaders of the team (Fine, 1987). While this appeared to be minimal in the case of Team 2, the players commented that, if they could change any aspect of the team, it would be to live in closer proximity: “We’re like spread out. I would change it to where we all went to the same school.”

Just as participation on a select team can provide positive opportunities to meet new people who may live in different areas or towns, it can also result in creating team cliques with the team. As *Abby* explained:

The people that kind of go to the schools around here...because they know people, they like can talk about stuff that goes over at school. And then there’s like the rest of us, who have absolutely no idea who they’re talking about. I mean it would be nice to eliminate the basketball cliques.

Emily shared a similar view about the intra-team cliques:

I wish we were a lot closer because I feel that we are branched off. These five right here, we mainly stick together. And like the other four you probably just

talked to earlier, they're like mainly stick together and I feel like we are all not included on things outside of basketball with each other.

While not a major response category within Team 1, the presence of intra-team cliques is noteworthy, particularly as it relates to the players' desires. As one player states:

Nothing against the girls on the team but we have sort of cliques on our team. They're all kind of closer because they live closer together. Sometimes, I don't know if you notice it, sometimes at practice, we all kind of go with those people.

Of particular importance in the player's response is the desire for the players to live closer as this seems to be the root cause of isolated player groups. Similar to what Fine (1987) found regarding the presence of elite cliques, the geographic dispersion of players affects the teams and their cultures. When asked what they would change about the team, *Sheryl* suggested that:

If all of us lived closer and like if we would be able to hang out every day. You can't be just like, "Hey, can I come over to your house?" "Yes, it's going to take me like 20 minutes." Not like that. My mom is going to be like, "No." I wish we could be like near each other.

Previous Coach Experiences

This category focused on how the players felt their select coach was different from other coaches they have had in the past. These perceptions provide valuable insight into what a youth coach should not do, as identified by players. Researchers often focus only on discovering behaviors that coaches should adopt and, while this provides great benefit, rarely address views, especially of the player, regarding undesirable coaching approaches. *Karen*, a member of Team 1, explained that her school coach:

[W]as really like out of it because she expected so highly of us. We [the respondent and several players on the select team] were like the only girls who

actually had a basketball set of mind. The other girls it was just school ball to them. She made them hate the game. She made them not care. She ran us so much for stuff that we couldn't control. Like, these girls, this is school ball to them. She was so serious about it. She thought we were like about to go to nationals. It was like an NCAA thing for her. It was horrible. It was the worst experience of my life.

Relating a similar story, *Sheryl* shared that:

Like at school ball, I really didn't understand the plays that well. You can ask them, I was very slow. My school coach would have to like break it down but she wouldn't. She thought it was annoying. The reason I couldn't understand it is because she'd have like no patience. I knew she was doing something wrong because when I came to play with [this team]; I was getting plays faster here than I was at school ball, which is supposed to be easier. I'm like something's wrong with that. They treat us like we're pro ballers.

The players' responses are particularly intriguing because it is generally felt that select basketball is a step up the competitive ladder from playing on a junior high or high school team. It could be assumed that the increase in competition level should be accompanied by higher levels of stress and anxiety; however, the respondents reported the opposite.

Throughout their youth athletic careers, players from Team 2 have come in contact with a variety of coaches. Player perceptions of past coaches provide valuable insight into what is desired of a coach. *Aleisha* offered opinions on her school coaches:

The coaching is different because the coaches that are there [at school] are like different than the coaches here, because the coaches here know more, a little bit more. The coaches at school don't know that much about basketball, but they try to help out as much as they can.

Grace shared a similar account, comparing Coach *Wilson's* approach to that of her school coach: "Like with coach, he knows the concept of the basketball, but like the

coach at our school, like she don't really know like what's going on. And the girls don't understand the concept or the basics.”

Claire, a recent addition to the team, has played for a variety of select basketball coaches and recalled an example of how the coach's motive negatively impacted her playing experience:

Well, some coaches I've played for, they have a child on the team and they play for the benefit of that child and not for benefit of the team. So, it kind of just messes up everybody else. Other people on the team they just don't have a chance. It's all about his child.

Being the oldest players of the three teams studied, members of Team 3 had the most experience with previous coaches and were asked, if they wished, to share some of their thoughts. *Autumn* shared that:

I've had a bunch that like don't really know how to...I got ones that are like crazy and don't know how to coach at all. Ones that just sit and scream or like they'll get mad and they just stop talking.

Jaden shared a similar account, being quite frank about her scholastic basketball coach:

My school coach is bipolar and he will blame one person for the loss of an entire game and he punishes you for every single thing you do wrong. He makes you do like 20 times down on backs and it sucks and here, it's just do a pushup, much better.

Observational Player Outcomes

In addition to exploring the methods employed by the coach, player outcomes associated with participating in practice sessions and games became apparent during participant observation. While the time frame associated with the study was not sufficient to develop a comprehensive list of player outcomes, it is important to note these behaviors as they provide a means to verify some of the coach's desired goals for

the players. Analysis of the data obtained through observation revealed three sub-themes that showed consistency across at least two of the teams: (1) supportive of teammates; (2) conflict resolution and anger management; and (3) sportsmanship.

Supportive of Teammates

Emotions often run high for select basketball players, particularly during tournament games. This provides many opportunities for players to become frustrated or upset with one another for a variety of reasons (e.g., poor play, something said between games); however, Team 3 never showed signs of this behavior. For example, throughout the first half of one game, the players were not making their shots and the game was very close (with the team consistently behind by a few points). The players were frustrated, but only when their shots were not going down. They never got frustrated with one another; rather they continuously encouraged each other to “keep working hard.”

Despite the ebb and flow with a game, players from Team 1 were never observed getting frustrated at or speaking harshly to one another. Many instances were seen where players sought to help one another. For example, during the second half of a game, many of the players who had started the game (more skilled players) elected not to shoot the ball and, instead, got the ball to one of the reserve players (less skilled players) to help them get involved in the game. The coaches and parents recognized this unselfish play by clapping and yelling positively as the starting players were being substituted out of the game.

Similar scenarios were seen during practice. I observed that players routinely helped one another during practice; as an example, one of the weaker and newer players

was having difficulties running an offensive set and another player, one of the team veterans and a starter, took the time to explain in a gentle and encouraging way what needed to be done.

The players also seem to be involved in one another's lives outside the walls of the gym. For example, during breaks in practice, players often asked one another how the day or week has been at school.

Team 2 players on the court and on the bench were constantly encouraging one another. If a player made a good or "hustle" play (a play that may not result in a score or the team getting the ball but one that requires maximum effort) all players recognized their teammate. The same is true when a player made a mistake. All the players rallied around their teammate for encouragement.

Additionally, any time a player substituted out of the game, all players on the bench stand up, give the player five, and tell her "good job." If the coach sees players not doing this he quickly corrects the behavior telling the players to "encourage each other."

Conflict Resolution and Anger Management

Players from Team 1 mentioned during focus groups interviews that participation in basketball has helped them become more effective in resolving conflicts and managing their anger. This was confirmed throughout the observation data gathering with one case being particularly salient. In the focus group interviews one player commented that basketball had helped her with effectively managing her anger. I noted that during a game the same player was pushed hard and subsequently struck her head on

the court. After a brief stay on the floor her teammates helped her up, but while visibly upset, the player took no action and continued to play under control.

The players witnessed the consequences of losing control of emotions. During one game, a player from the opposing team questioned a call by the referee and, after using some profane language, was called for a technical foul. The opposing team's spectators were upset by the referee's decision and became much more vocal; however, the players of Team 1 remained calm as did their coach.

During tournament games, players are provided many opportunities to effectively manage their emotions or allow their emotions to manage them. Players on Team 3 were consistent in their effective management of intense emotions. During the tournament semi-finals (the game prior to the championship), the opposing team was extremely disrespectful towards Team 3 players, fans, and officials. Despite the opposing team acting in this manner, both the coach and players remain calm and disciplined, sticking to their game plan.

Sportsmanship

While a working definition of sportsmanship is quite elusive, evidence of the construct is certainly observable during many sporting events. As Fine (1987) suggests, the notion of sportsmanship is one that is easier to observe than to define. I was able to observe numerous instances. During one game, despite the game's scenario (i.e., close game or large point differential), sportsmanship was displayed. A play in the second half resulted in a player from Team 1 knocking an opposing player down. Immediately the player from Team 1 offered to help the opposing player up and make certain she is okay.

Many interpretations of sportsmanship have been offered with few that have been widely accepted. However, it seems inherent in every athlete that evidence of sportsmanship is easily recognized. For instance, during one game Team 2 was comfortably ahead (41-22); however, the coach continuously encouraged his players to “keep working hard, even if the game is one-sided ‘cuz you never know what will happen.” The players did continue working hard but not in an effort to win by as many points as possible. Routinely during play, the players did not take easy shots or elect not to score on a fast break (a play in which the team rebounds the ball and quickly runs to their offensive end to score) per the coach’s instructions and, instead, worked on their plays and other facets of the game.

Summary

Some consistency was found between coach and player responses of identified outcomes and methodological approaches; however, analysis and comparison of sub-themes revealed discrepancies between the two respondent groups. More specifically, findings were consistent across the major thematic groups (i.e., player improvement, developing life skills, and enjoying the experience) but identification of the sub-themes that comprised each major theme varied across respondent groups (i.e., coaches and players) and teams. Additionally, observational data confirmed some of the identified sub-themes, but differences were found in this area as well.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the views of select team basketball coaches and players as they relate to participatory goals and coaching methodologies to determine if discrepancies between these two groups exist. The study was divided into four components that examined: (1) the outcomes associated with participation as identified by coaches; (2) the methods identified by coaches to promote positive development; (3) the fidelity with which the coaches carried out their identified coaching methods in practices and games; and (4) the perceptions of the players regarding coaching intentions and behaviors. A significant amount of research within the field of youth sports focuses on quantifiable outcomes in participants (e.g., leadership qualities, stress levels, skill mastery) with little mention of the processes that serve to generate desired outcomes; however, this study revealed the importance of considering contextual factors and formative processes as variables in the developmental equation.

Additionally, minimal research has been conducted focusing on best practices within youth sports settings as developmental contexts, particularly as it relates to the select level, causing many initiatives to lack proper structure and direction. The results of this study of three purposively selected girls youth select basketball teams, that common characteristics can be identified, potentially providing direction for the creation of best practices literature. Though the fields of youth sports and youth development

have identified similar goals (the positive development of children through out-of-school time activities), little research has tied youth development and youth sports goals and practices together; this study has begun addressing this divide by examining youth sports as a positive youth development setting.

In the discussion of findings, I will summarize the consistencies and discrepancies found between coach and player responses as it relates to desired participatory outcomes and methodological approaches. Next, I will discuss the goals, changes, and negative experiences expressed by the players during focus group interviews. The presentation of observational findings will then serve as a crosschecking mechanism to review identified outcomes and methods. Lastly, I will address the implications of this study as it relates to research, practice, and future research.

Comparison of Player and Coach Responses

One shortcoming of previous literature exploring coach identified goals and methodological approaches is the absence of including any discrepancies between coaches' reports and what player perceptions of the coaches' goals and methods. The players' perspectives are vital to include as, ultimately, the athletes are the one's impacted by the coach's pedagogical approach.

Substantial research exists on goal setting behavior, with regard to both benefits and development (Danish, 1996; Fry, 2003; Galotti, 2009; Roberts-Gray, 1999). Goal setting research within the youth sports domain is limited and studies that seek to compare coach and athlete perceptions are minimal. One study designed to explore this issue found that the goal setting strategies of coaches and athletes significantly differed

in the number of goals that were established and the specificity with which goals were set (Weinberg, Burke, & Jackson, 1997).

Goal Identification

During focus group interviews, players were asked to identify the goals they felt the coach desired for them to achieve. While players' responses were consistent with some of the goals identified by the coach, several differences were found. One difference between coach and player responses was the absence of the *enjoying the playing experience* primary theme. While the players identified methods the coaches used that enabled them to enjoy their experience, they still did not identify enjoyment of the playing experience as a goal. This finding was a bit confusing because when the players were asked why they choose to participate in select basketball, the most common response was associated with some element of enjoyment. One potential explanation for the discrepancy is that players at this age and competition level typically participate because they choose to. More specifically, there is some aspect of intrinsic motivation that drives their involvement and as a result, the players might not feel the coach must focus on their enjoyment (i.e., they are already participating because they enjoy it).

Another difference between the two groups became evident when identifying goals within the *player improvement* theme. While all the coaches referenced a desire to achieve success through winning, it was not specifically identified as a goal for the players. However, when the players were asked what they felt the coach's goals were for them, the response in all six focus groups referenced winning. It was unclear if this

discrepancy was due to the coach not wanting to appear focused on winning, or if by participating at a select level it was assumed that the ultimate goal was to win.

In addition, for the *player improvement* theme, there were some consistencies between coaches' and players' responses on a team-by-team basis. During the interviews, it was clear that these consistencies exist because of a concerted effort on the part of the coach. For example, Coach *Jones* from Team 1 utilized a process where players completed a goal sheet, which was taken by the coach and utilized as a means to develop both team and individual goals. Coach *Smith* from Team 3 had a short and simple list of desired player improvement goals (e.g., increase player's skills and knowledge) and made it a point to convey these goals to the team prior to the start of the season. These consistencies show the importance of intentional and effective coach-player communication.

Comparing coach and player responses within the *development of life skills* theme revealed considerably more discrepancies than the previous section. One possible explanation for this outcome was the vagueness with which life skill goals were identified by the coach. Each coach mentioned a devotion to teaching players positive skills that would benefit players on the court and in everyday life settings; however, little specificity was supplied as to the specific skills that were targeted (e.g., resiliency, self-confidence, leadership, conflict resolution). Two sub-themes that did reveal consistency between the two groups were: (1) mental strength and a focus on academics; and (2) instilling a positive work ethic. In the case of *mental strength and a focus on academics*, the coaches of Teams 1 and 2 made it clear to the players that achieving scholastic

success was a prerequisite for participating on the team. For *instilling a positive work ethic*, it can be hypothesized that since this particular skill is easily observable by the coach (e.g., monitoring player effort during practices and games) and manipulated (e.g., utilizing verbal or physical corrections), it received more focus during practice than what might be characterized as higher-order, life skills (Stean, 1995).

Method Identification

Players were also asked to provide their perceptions of the coaching methodologies used by their coach, particularly as these related to the previously identified goals. Comparisons of coach's and player's responses yielded considerable consistencies. It is plausible that coaches made an effort to communicate their methodological approaches to the players. Considering the coaches' reported focus on *teaching the game*, explanation of coaches' intentions would provide valuable insights to the players. Another possible explanation is that the players were able to perceive coaching actions during practices and games, thus establishing a basis for determining coaches' methodologies; whereas, the determination of overall goals would be more difficult. This hypothesis is supported by previous research that found players to be sensitive to their coaches' behavior patterns, specifically as these influenced the establishment of attitudes and the ability to predict future coaching behaviors (Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1978).

Analysis of the coach and player responses within the *achieving player improvement through the participatory context* theme also revealed consistency, particularly in the areas of *teaching the game* (identified as *focus on teaching the game*

and showing players through example in the player responses). This finding relates to how the coach's defined their role as a teacher (Abraham, 1997; Claxton, 1988).

Additionally, the players' noting that coaches show players through example may give some indication of why this particular sub-theme was salient. In studies of behavior modification, the use of modeling as a teaching technique has been shown to be an effective driver of change (Bandura, 1986; Perry & Furukawa, 1986). If players observe coaches stepping onto the court and modeling the correct behavior, this may provide a stronger impression of coaching methodology than strictly didactic instruction.

The *developing life skills through a coach-player relationship* also revealed consistency across the coaches' and players' responses. While there was some mention of a *focus on academics* and a coach's *ability to get on the player's level*, it appeared that the methodological approaches within this primary theme stemmed from the coaches and players cultivating a meaningful relationship. Further, effective coach-player relationships seemed to be at the root of the remaining primary themes as well (i.e., *achieving player improvement from the participatory context* and *enjoying the playing experience through a conscious coaching effort*). A substantial body of research exists that highlights the importance of meaningful adult-youth relationships as a driver for positive development (e.g., Resnik & Bearman, 1997; Rhodes, 2004; Tierney & Grossman, 2000), and recreation often provides an ideal setting for cultivating and sustaining these relationships.

Within the field of sports, the importance of coach-player relationships has been found to be important for improving player performance and teaching life skills (Gould,

et al., 2007; Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). Within this study, players referred to their coach as being similar to a family member (e.g., a “second father” or “like one of my aunts”) highlighting the potential of select youth sports coaches to develop and sustain meaningful relationships with players, which, as Eccles and Gootman (2002) have suggested, is an essential feature of a positive developmental context.

The primary theme *enjoying the playing experience through a conscious coaching effort* exhibited considerable inconsistencies across the three teams. A main reason for these differences may have been the players’ inability to identify *enjoying the playing experience* as a primary goal of their coach. As was discussed in the summary of identified methodologies, the coaches often mentioned including the parents as a means to encourage enjoyment. The players, however, felt that the most notable approach to enjoying their experience was the coaches’ simply allowing the athletes to play, both in practices and games. Previous research exploring players’ opinions has only tangentially touched upon the enjoyment of athletes, and even more infrequent is the exploration of processes that encourage enjoyment. The emergence of this theme reveals the ability to explore enjoyment as an end product of participation.

Player Goals

While this study was not designed to determine player stated goals regarding participation in select youth basketball, during the focus group interviews, players began offered some insights regarding why they choose to participate. Information obtained regarding player goals revealed two main thematic findings: (1) enjoyment; and (2)

servicing a purpose. One response when asking players why they chose to continue participating was that “basketball is fun.” This answer, while simple, may provide coaches with important direction in organizing team activities. In addition to the topic of enjoyment, the players also mentioned that basketball served a beneficial purpose. An interesting sub-theme was *basketball as an escape and a stress reliever*. Players on all teams mentioned that participation allowed them to escape the stresses and worries of everyday situations, and provided a safe place to have an enjoyable experience. Further, players referenced feeling better after practices and games than they had prior to these events. These findings are noteworthy as select sports competitions (and practices) can be very intense and potentially lead to increases in stress or frustration. Many coaches do not consider this player outcome and often, purposely or inadvertently, place a high degree of pressure on the player to perform well. This finding could serve to promote a more intentional playing environment, allowing the nature of the activity to have a more therapeutic impact for the player.

Player Changes

Another important bi-product of focus group interviews were the developmental changes that players felt were attributed to their participation in youth sports. While it cannot be ascertained that athletic involvement was the sole driver of this change, it is interesting to note that players felt basketball played a large part in this positive development.

One of the most salient features in this category was that players felt *more social* as a result of their participation. Many players attributed increases in social competency

(as well as self-confidence and self-perception) to their involvement in youth sports. When joining the team many players had to develop new relationships with peers who soon became close friends, despite living relatively long distances from one another. Another consistent finding was that players felt participation aided their development of effective *conflict resolution and anger management* skills. Reports were given of past player attitudes that involved high levels of anger and temperamental behavior which lead to undesirable behavior (e.g., aggressive displays while playing, disciplinary issues at school); however, the players felt that their participation had helped them develop effective coping strategies for these emotions.

Negative Experiences

Players also provided information regarding negative experiences in youth sports. This information may be valuable to stakeholders, particularly to the coaches, in addressing issues that are not positively benefiting the participants. The most common response in this category was *parent involvement*. While many positive parent interactions occur within youth sports, participation at a high competition level may illicit more negative experiences when compared to less competitive situations. Typical player's responses included parents that were overbearing, those that seemed to talk negatively to their daughter after a game, and parents who had the potential to negatively affect individual and team performance through their behavior at games.

Additionally, the presence of *intra-team cliques* was a consistent feature across all the teams studied. Players felt this could possibly be attributed to team members living in disparate parts of the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex, an unfortunate feature of

many select teams. While the players identified this sub-theme, none felt that the presence of isolated groups greatly affected the team's ability to be friends and to perform well during play.

Finally, the players offered numerous comments regarding past coaches, both those at the select level and within a scholastic setting. While this finding was not directly related to this study, it is important as it provides a list of "don'ts" for coaches. The themes of *player goals*, *player changes*, and *negative experiences* were not focused targets of this study; however, findings in these areas speak to the potential information that players can provide to researchers in furthering youth sport studies and to coaches in more effectively managing contextual elements to maximize development potential.

Observational Discoveries

The final goal of this study was to determine, through participant observation, the fidelity with which coaches implemented their stated methodological approaches. An important caveat in this study was the order in which the data collection techniques were carried out. Some have argued that observation of coaching behaviors functions best if the coach is unaware the data collection is taking place (Dubois, 1981); however, for this study, it was imperative that the coaches' goals and identified methodologies be determined before the observation of actual practices took place in order to help identify whether what was being done was consistent to the coaches' interview responses (Franks, Johnson, & Sinclair, 1988).

The data obtained through observation was to be used to cross-check whether coaches' stated objectives and approaches were being carried out in fact during practices

and games. Additionally, the players' perceptions of coach's methods were also used as a means to compare the consistency between what coaches said were their goals and methods and the perceptions of the players. In this section I will discuss the consistencies found between the observational themes and responses given by the coaches and players. Next, I will discuss noteworthy differences and offer a possible explanation as to why these may have occurred. Finally, the process of participant observation provided me with the opportunity to witness player outcomes exhibited during the activities and, as such, I will provide a brief summary of those findings.

Observational Consistencies

The thematic findings obtained through participant observation verified a significant amount of the methodological approaches mentioned by players and coaches, though the findings did vary across the three teams. The highest percentage of verification was evident in the *achieving player improvement through the participatory context* theme. Several factors, consistent with previous research, may have led to this finding.

First, player improvement is a much more tangible outcome than the *development of life skills* or *enjoying the playing experience*. As a result of coaches being able to measure this outcome (e.g., higher shooting percentages, fewer turnovers, higher winning percentages), the bulk of the coaching focus may have been placed on this goal. As Streat (1995) found in his examination of youth sports contexts, time limitations are an obvious constraint on coaches and should be taken into account when assessing youth sports as a developmental intervention. Streat reasoned that developing

complex motor skills and focusing on objectives that are not sport-specific takes a substantial amount of time and, as a result, coaches often become focused on goals that can be attained during a shorter period of time. In the current study, coaches had, on average approximately three hours per week to work with their players during practice. During tournament weekends, the majority of available time was either spent playing or recovering from playing. While the lack of time should not be interpreted as an excuse for failing to teach objectives that are not specifically sports-related; rather, the time factor may support the fact that coaches, much like after-school program coordinators and recreation supervisors, must be intentional in their efforts (Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish, & Theodorakis, 2004; Duda & Ntoumanis, 2005; Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005).

A second possible explanation for consistency in the *achieving player improvement through the participatory context* domain compared to the other two themes is the proficiency level of the coach in achieving sports-related skill improvement versus life skill development. Research has found that many coaches attempt to refine their skill set through various channels (e.g., coaching clinics, online resources, strategy and inspirational books) in hopes of achieving more efficient ways to improve their players (Gilbert & Trudel, 2005; Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007). However, a minimal amount of research has explored how coaches attempt to refine their effectiveness in helping players develop skills that are not sports-specific. As has been mentioned, a small amount of previous research has identified specific goals and methods related to this topic (Gould, et al. 2007; McCallister, et al. 2000), but to date

there have not been efforts to identify how coaches gain expertise in creating positive developmental settings for the athletes.

Observational Differences

Participant observation of the three teams revealed several inconsistencies, particularly in the areas of *developing life skills through a coach-player relationship* and *enjoying the playing experience through a conscious coaching effort*. In this section, I will discuss observational findings as they relate to confirming methodologies identified by players than by coaches; and how direct observation revealed thematic findings that were not mentioned by either respondent group and a suggested rationale for these findings.

Higher Consistency with Player Reports

When observationally derived themes were compared to those articulated by coaches and players, the athletes' responses tended to show greater consistency with the findings of the researcher than the coaches' reports. In a substantial portion of the youth sports literature, researchers have utilized self-report techniques to explore behavioral elements; however, when researchers began employing direct observation as a methodology they discovered that coaches often had a limited awareness of their own behaviors (Smith, Smoll, & Hunt, 1978). As a result, many behavior adjustment curricula or approaches were developed that targeted youth sports coaches (e.g., American Coach Effectiveness Program; Martens, 1987; Coach Effectiveness Training; Smoll & Smith, 1993; Program for Athletic Coaches' Education; Seefeldt & Brown, 1993). Unfortunately, most youth sports coaches, particularly those in select sports, are

volunteers and not under the guidance of any particular governing body. Thus, there is no requirement to obtain proper coach training or continuing education (DeKnop, Engström, & Skirstad, 1996; Ewing, Seefeldt, & Brown, 1996).

Research has also found that players typically tend to be more accurate in reporting coaching behaviors than their coach (Smith, Smoll, & Hunt, 1978). This finding was supported in the current study, suggesting that one potential method for increasing the coach's awareness of observed behavior is to elicit feedback from their players (a central tenet of youth voice; Ellis & Caldwell, 2005). In their study that explored how coaches learn, Gilbert and Trudel (2005) found that many coaches seem to be working alone and elect to refine their skills through a self-evaluative process. While this method may work for some youth sports coaches, the research suggests that coaches may be missing out on an important resource for feedback – the players. This study's finding that athletes seem more aware of coaching behaviors than the coach, strengthens previous studies and their claim that effective and accessible coach education materials are needed. In addition, it provides support for the idea that youth voice may be a valuable tool within youth sports contexts.

Inconsistencies with Both Respondent Groups

The final finding from the observational portion of this study was that thematic findings in almost all domains, but perhaps more so in the areas of *developing life skills through a coach-player relationship* and *enjoying the playing experience through a conscious coaching effort*, generated discrepancies between the coaches' and players' responses. While past research has found that coaches are often unaware of their actions

within given contexts (e.g., practices, games, casual interactions), little attention has focused on why this occurs, even when coaches are deemed exemplary. One possible explanation for this finding is that coaches are similar to youth wizards, because their actions are difficult to emulate since they are “highly personal” and do not lend themselves “to conventionally conceived ‘program replication,’ ‘dissemination of activities,’ or ‘treatments’” (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; p. 37). What this suggests is that coaches have difficulty identifying their methodological approaches because it is something that is inherent and personalized to each individual. This is not to say that the methods employed by youth wizards are veiled in secrecy; rather, careful and knowledgeable observation is required to identify and understand the approaches of these individuals. In their research, McLaughlin and her colleagues observed six youth wizards and attempted to summarize what they found consistent between the youth leaders (e.g., seeing potential in youth, focusing on youth in programming, having self-efficacy). The insights the current study provides regarding possible coach wizardry (e.g., *valuing player effort and focus; coach conduct and consistency; use of player voice*) may serve to inform future research in exploring, through in-depth observation, how exemplary youth sports coaches engage in meaningful transactions with their players.

Player Outcomes

During observation the opportunity arose to note specific players outcomes as they were exhibited during practice, game, and casual (e.g., going to the movies, between games, breaks during practices) interactions. While the following examples

only provide a partial list of behaviors that could be observed, they do provide a means to corroborate a portion of the coach's identified goals and methods.

One of the most consistent player outcomes was the presence of players being *supportive of teammates*. Coaches mentioned a desire for the team to work as a single unit and to become connected both on the court and outside the gym. Evidence of this outcome provides confirmation of the coach's goal and related methodological approaches. Also evident was the sub-theme *conflict resolution and anger management*. Many times during games players were exposed to situations and circumstances that could illicit a negative reaction (e.g., a referee making a poor call, an opponent knocking the player to the floor, the player performing poorly); however, a consistent behavior across the three teams was each player's ability to maintain an even temperament in light of these circumstances. It was not clear if this evidence can be attributed to a focused coaching effort, but it did become apparent that the coach's demeanor while engaged in game activities played a large role in the player's subsequent behavior (i.e., when the coach was calm, the player was calm).

Implications for Theory

One of the main contributions of this study is to bring together literatures related to positive youth development and youth sports. As Lauer (2002) suggested, elements of youth development have found their way into many research areas, such as family dynamics, public school systems, and community organizations; however, little is mentioned about positive youth development within the youth sports literature (the converse can also be said). While some research has begun to emerge that links these

two fields (e.g., Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2005; Zarrett, Lerner, Carrano, Fay, Peltz, & Li, 2008), the findings from this study in areas such youth voice, meaningful relationships, supports and opportunities), serves to further academic inquiry in this area.

The data presented in this study reveal the consistencies and discrepancies related to the opinions of stakeholder groups (i.e., coaches and players) in youth sports. To date, theory-based research exploring positive developmental outcomes, as perceived by coaches and players, has not been conducted. The findings of this study suggest that research in this area and, more specifically, study aimed at developing substantive level theories is needed.

The findings also revealed that within a sports context, youth can be active agents in their own development. During many instances, players were given the opportunity to share their opinions during practices and games. After listening to player suggestions, all three coaches then showed their willingness to act of the players' suggestions. Similar to the findings of Heath (1994; 1996), this promoted the players thinking more critically about their situations, both within a basketball setting and in their normal, everyday lives. As Lerner and his colleagues suggested, youth are not simply passive recipients of services; rather, there exists a reciprocal interaction between the participant and the contextual elements present (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). Through expressing their personal goals for playing and the developmental changes they attributed to participation, the players in this study showed that youth's perspectives can be a valuable voice in undertaking this type of research. Additionally, through their perceptions of coaching behaviors, the players provided support for the

incorporation of youth voice into coaching pedagogy, especially as a means to promote positive behavioral changes.

The study also highlighted the importance of relationships between the coaches and players. A substantial amount of research exists that supports the need for meaningful relationships within positive developmental settings (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Rhodes, 2004) and, more specifically, within youth sports settings (e.g., Jowett, 2003; Petitpas, Cornelius, & Van Raalte, 2008). In this study, both coaches and players commented frequently on the importance of the coach's *ability to get on the player's level*, which seemed to be an essential feature within the coach-player relationship. The coach's rapport with the players also seemed to significantly enhance the ability to achieve goals in the three identified domains: *player improvement*, *development of life skills*, and *enjoying the playing experience*.

An area of concern related to youth sports research has been the lack of recent in-depth observation and process-centered research (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Fredericks & Eccles, 2006; Smith, Smoll, & Christensen, 1996). While past studies, such as Fine's (1987) work, have provided a foundation on which to base more contemporary studies, research in this area is lacking. This study addressed those shortcomings by seeking to explore the relationship between coach's stated methods and the actual implementation of these methods in real-world coaching situations (i.e., practices, games, casual interactions). While the study was not intended to provide a complete overview of coaching mechanisms, findings revealed that identification of developmental processes related to both sports-related and life skill acquisition can be

identified. Further, the recognition of coaching processes within this study may provide a means for conducting research designed to generate a quantitative instrument aimed at evaluating the developmental potential of a given sports context.

The findings of this study also extend the use of the cognitive-behavioral model of coach behaviors (Smoll & Smith, 1984) into the area of highly competitive youth sports. Past research using this model has typically concentrated on instructional programs or recreation leagues leaving the select level largely untouched. The study's examination of coaching goals, behavioral intentions, athlete perceived coaching norms, and elements of the playing environment were shown to have an influence on coach and athlete perceptions.

Research involving the conceptual model of coach training effects on youth development (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006) was strengthened by this study. With the research serving as a coach training intervention (i.e., making the coach more aware of their intentions through verbalization in interviews), the study showed how observed coaching behaviors, player perceptions of coaching intentions, and players' self-perceptions can have an impact on youth development outcomes.

In addition, this study showed how the phenomenology of person-environment fit (Edwards, et al., 2006) can have application in a youth sports setting. While each team exuded its own persona, the end result was similar – the positive development of participants within an enjoyable environment. Each coach had differing approaches to working with players and establishing positive, meaningful relationships; and seemed to

take into consideration the individual differences each player brought to the team in creating an environment that would best fit each participant's needs.

Finally, this study showed that youth sports can be viewed as a setting for positive youth development. With a proper focus on intentionality (Walker, et al., 2005), the study findings showed that coaches are able to foster positive and meaningful relationships with their players to help move them along pathways towards becoming a fully-functioning adult.

Implications for Practitioners

Youth sports can be viewed as developmental interventions (Stean, 1995) and, as such, an understanding of how this context can be constructed to promote positive growth is essential. Most youth sports coaches are unaware that positive youth development exists as a structured field of study and are thus hesitant to engage academic research because of jargon and rhetoric that fails to provide meaningful suggestions in an efficient way. Most youth sports coaches are volunteers, meaning their involvement with youth often comes after a full workday, resulting in little time to explore the proper physiological and psychological development of children. However, through my interactions with the coaches in this study and in speaking with other coaches, parents, players, tournament organizers, their interest in the areas of youth sports and positive youth development research has been stimulated. Additionally, the findings of this study reveal that youth sports coaches can be engaged in the practice of positive youth development without realizing it. Having the ability to identify and focus on positive youth development tenets could provide coaches with the means to more

effectively generate desirable outcomes through participation. This study has shown that, through engagement and meaningful discussions, interest in this type of research exists and, at least in my specific circumstance, is desired.

Similar to its contribution to theory, this study revealed the importance of relationships between coaches and players. The nature of youth sports (e.g., competition, intensity, time commitment) provides a significant opportunity for the coach to develop a meaningful rapport with the athletes. More cognitive approaches to pedagogy can provide the coach with a means to utilize their players as valuable resources to team and personal improvement. By simply asking the players why they play basketball, instead of assuming the answers were known, I was able to reveal an important part of their motivation, i.e., basketball provided an escape and a means of stress relief for the player. If the coach employs a similar approach, the participatory context can be manipulated towards this, as well as other, ends.

The study revealed three areas that coaches can approach with intentionality when planning practice, game, and non sports-related activities: *player improvement*, *development of life skills*, and *enjoying the playing experience*. In speaking with youth sports coaches, both associated with this study and through casual conversation, many had not considered an intentional approach to the latter two areas, nor had they contemplated expressing specific goals and methodological approaches to their players. Additionally, after speaking with the coaches and sharing some of my own approaches to coaching youth basketball, the coaches were grateful to have this type of information,

often commenting that they wished their youth coach would have approached their playing experience with intentionality.

Future Research

A limitation in this study was that it took a cross-sectional view of three female youth basketball teams. Research designs incorporating a longitudinal design may provide additional insights as to how select youth basketball may be used as a positive developmental setting. Research conducted over multiple years could illuminate the differences among individual player backgrounds, their development through sustained participation, and their ultimate course of personal growth. Additionally, information gleaned from following teams for an extended period of time may reveal the trajectory of both coach and player growth (e.g., how the coach progresses from teaching simple skills that may be sports-related to more complex techniques for helping players transition into high school or adulthood).

Other situational factors could be manipulated to construct comparative studies. For example, issues related to the predominance of male coaches in select girls basketball can be explored. More specifically, studies can be conducted to examine the added potential benefits of having a female coach as compared to a male coach. In addition, the issue of race could be addressed in future research. In this study, the coach of the predominantly African-American team was also African-American. Studies could be conducted that analyze the role race and ethnicity have when matching youth basketball coaches and players.

While this study cannot be generalized to other sports settings, it may provide a template for conducting other process-focused research within youth sports. Future endeavors could examine the context of male teams in a similar way to evaluate if findings in this study are gender specific or if there is consistency across the settings. The use of non-exemplary coaches could provide a means to compare thematic findings and discover potential discrepancies between methodological approaches. Teams of younger ages may provide further insight concerning rapport building between the coach and players (the teams in this study had all been together at least two years).

This study revealed a glimpse of the developmental processes across three teams, which certainly does not constitute a full view across the field. While important findings were generated, continued exploration of how outcomes manifest themselves in sports environments could continue the process of inter-relating the youth sports and positive youth development fields. In addition, research aimed at opening the “black box” in other contexts and discovering how specific processes and setting elements contribute to positive growth could lead to the formation of best practices for those involved with youth.

During this study, both coaches and players made reference to negative parent interactions and how these unfavorably affected their coaching and players’ experiences. Likewise, during my observation of other teams, it became apparent that a misalignment of participatory goals existed between all three parties (i.e., coaches, players and parents). Examination of how to effectively mediate the relationships between these groups is needed and, more specifically, methods should be sought to overcome the

disconnects. Similar inquiry could also reveal how youth sports can provide a positive developmental context for all involved. Many youth sports coaches are older adolescents or young adults, still maturing in their own right. Many youth sports parents are young, still learning how to effectively navigate their child's participation. Future research could provide these individuals with resources to help contribute to positive experiences.

Conclusions

The goal of this study was to provide an exploratory look at coach identified goals and methods, player perceptions of coaching intentions, and observational cross-checking of methodological approaches. During my tenure as a youth sports coach, I have grown significantly in my approach to working with players. Early in my coaching career I was still maturing as an adult and had several difficult experiences with both players and parents. However, as I matured and my coaching methodology was refined and I began to see how participation in sports could provide far more than enjoyment (though that should be at the root of its purpose). I also reflected on my experiences as a player and how playing had provided a multitude of positive outcomes for me. I desired to bring a small portion of that process to this study in hopes of supplying something of value for coaches of select teams. Additionally, I wanted to discover if other individuals had gone through a similar process in their growth as a coach. The findings from this study helped answer many questions I had; however, it has also provided me with avenues for future exploration.

I approached this study with a focus on helping others gain benefit from something that was a large part of my life. While I feel the findings accomplished this

goal, particularly for those involved in this study, it has also helped my personal development. Through the insights I was given, the privileges that were extended to me, and the frank conversations with coaches, players, and parents, I have gained a deeper understanding of this community, an appreciation for conducting research in this environment, and insights on how to be a better coach for my children.

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APPENDIX A

Response Categories of the Coaching Behavior Assessment System	
Class I. Reactive Behaviors	
<i>Responses to Desirable Performance</i>	
• Reinforcement	a positive, rewarding reaction (verbal or non-verbal) to a good play or good effort
• Nonreinforcement	failure to respond to a good performance
<i>Responses to Mistakes</i>	
• Mistake-Contingent Encouragement	encouragement given to a player following a mistake
• Mistake-Contingent Technical Instruction	instructing or demonstrating to a player how to correct a mistake he/she has made
• Punishment	a negative reaction, verbal or nonverbal, following a mistake
• Punitive Technical Instruction	technical instruction following a mistake which is given in a punitive or hostile manner
• Ignoring Mistakes	failure to respond to a player mistake
<i>Response to Misbehavior</i>	
• Keeping Control	reactions intended to restore or maintain order among team members
Class II. Spontaneous Behaviors	
<i>Game-Related</i>	
• General Technical Instruction	spontaneous instruction in the techniques and strategies of the sport (not following a mistake)
• General Encouragement	spontaneous encouragement which does not follow a mistake
• Organization	administrative behavior which sets the stage for play by assigning duties, responsibilities, positions, etc.
<i>Game-Irrelevant</i>	
• General Communication	interactions with players unrelated to the game

APPENDIX B

Coach Interview Guide

- How long have you been coaching?
- How did you begin coaching?
- What are the goals of your team (or organization)?
- How do you try to achieve these results while in contact with your players?
- What do the youth say they enjoy most about playing?
- What do you think they enjoy least or would they change?
- What makes your team (or organization) unique from others?
- Do you have contact with players and/or parents off the court?
- How do you think participating has changed your players?
- Why do you think your players stay on the team?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX C

Observation Guide for Coaching Behaviors

- How does the coach respond to desirable player behaviors?
 - Reinforcement/nonreinforcement
- How does the coach react to undesirable behavior and mistakes?
 - Encouragement/instruction/punishment/ignore
- Are coaching behaviors consistent across practices and games?
- If different, how does the coach respond to desirable/undesirable behaviors and mistakes during games?
- How does the coach interact with players before/after practices and games? Is this behavior consistent with actions during practices and games?
- Does the coach's behavior seem consistent across different player groups (starters and reserves)? How or how not?
- Does the coach adhere to the identified processes for achieving player outcomes?
- Does the coach promote an atmosphere of psychological and emotional safety (mutual respect for/with players; supportive; inclusive)?
- Does the coach promote active involvement/engagement by all players during practices and games?
- Is instruction given in a generally positive manner with the coach maintaining eye-contact with the players?

APPENDIX D

Youth Focus Group Interview Guide

- How long have you been playing organized basketball?
- How did you get started playing?
- Why do you play? (If fun, what makes it fun?)
- What do you think about your coach?
- What do you think your coach's goals are for you?
- What do you like most about playing?
- What do you like least or what would you change?
- Do you think playing basketball has changed you?
- Do you think you have learned anything that will help you off the court?
- Do your parents come to practices and games?
- Do you talk about things you learn during practice at home?
- Do you hang out with your teammates?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

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