

NORTHWEST UNIVERSITY

Kirkland, Washington

Rethinking Purpose within Youth Sports

An undergraduate thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for completing the Northwest University Honors Program

by

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May 2024

Abstract

Youth sports today are often misemployed and too frequently fall short of the vast potential athletics provide for positive youth development. The youth sports environment today is largely influenced by participation in club sports and early sports specialization, which are both surrounded by a myriad of research concerning their negative effects on youth. This study aims to gain perspective on the commonly held assumption that participation in youth athletics automatically leads to character development. To do so, this study utilized an online survey to gather both quantitative and qualitative data regarding perceptions and experiences of individuals with first-hand experience within the youth sports environment, including youth athletes, parents, and coaches. The goal of this study is to provide practical recommendations for youth sports organizations and coaches to implement into their programs in order to intentionally foster positive youth character development.

Keywords: Youth sports, character development, early sports specialization, coaching

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Rethinking Purpose Within Youth Sports

Youth athletics are full of potential to foster character development and lasting life skills in young athletes, yet the current system of club sports and early sports specialization often neglects and misuses this opportunity. Fueled by the misconception that participating in athletics automatically leads to positive development in young athletes, club sports and early sports specialization often promote winning and personal success as the ultimate goals in sport and beyond. Club sports and early sports specialization are often criticized for negatively impacting young athletes physically, mentally, and emotionally. Yet, participation often feels necessary in order for athletes to keep up competitively. Understanding that participation in club sports and early sports specialization cannot merely be avoided, this study aims to explore how youth athletics can be approached in a healthier and more balanced manner.

Preliminary Review of Literature

Participating in athletics is commonly assumed to correlate to positive social, emotional, and physical benefits; however, merely being part of a sport does not naturally lead to such benefits. Athletic participation has great potential to foster positive youth development, yet few athletic programs successfully implement and effectively carry out strategies that lead to positive development in young athletes (Danish et al., 2011). While an overall positive experience varies based on the individual athlete, very few programs “intentionally curate these experiences, and even fewer are evidence-based” (Hebard et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the youth sport environment has evolved to become significantly more competitive and intense in recent years. Due to this change, the youth sport environment is surrounded by concern and even considered “of great public health importance” due the copious

amount of attention it has drawn (Bean et al., 2014). Participation in sport alone does not simply lead to positive outcomes for youth. Rather, sport participation is a large and complex issue which is influenced by a wide range of factors (Coakley, 2011). Youth athletics must be cultivated by those leading the programs and organizations in order for youth to fully experience the positive results sports participation is naturally associated with.

The Role of Club Sports and Early Sports Specialization

The youth sport environment today is largely shaped by the increase in participation in club sports as well as early sports specialization. Studies on early sports specialization are primarily critical due to negative impacts on athletes' mental and physical health. Some specialization is helpful in order to be competitive within a sport, yet specialization often occurs too early and too intensely (Bean et al., 2014). Emphasis is also placed on closely monitoring athletes who are involved in early sports specialization to prevent injury, negative psychological effects, and ensure development of well-rounded motor skills (Myer et al., 2016). Moreover, specializing in one sport does not guarantee athletic success and often does more harm than good (Myer et al., 2016). The youth sport environment has been described as a "complex world regulated by adults" (Malina, 2010) in which children often are not specializing in one sport by their choosing. Rather, athletic participation becomes highly competitive and intense from young ages due to the pressure placed on parents and young athletes to specialize in one sport (Malina, 2010).

In addition to athletes themselves, club sports and early sports specialization can negatively impact parents as well as siblings. The bulk of research on club sports and early sports specialization focuses on the impact on athletes, yet research focused on the impact on parents reveals negative effects on stress levels, mental health, financial health, and difficulty balancing

lifestyle and sport (Bean et al., 2014). Parents often find themselves stretched thin as they attempt to give their children the best competitive edge possible (Smith, n.d.).

Athlete Motivations Based on Coach and Parent Influence

The environment created by youth athletic coaches impacts the motivations of athletes as well as their desire to continue participating in sport. Alvarez et al. (2012) conducted a study of 370 teenage soccer players investigating psychological factors, such as self-determination theory, in relation to coach behavior and athlete motivations. The study notes how coaches have a large impact on athletes' experiences and desire to continue participating due to the environment they create (Alvarez et al., 2012). Youth sports depend heavily on volunteer coaches, which can be difficult to train and retain (Bouchet & Lehe, 2010). Providing coaches with adequate training to develop necessary skills in order to identify factors that lead to meeting the psychological needs of athletes as well as avoiding strategies that harm these needs is essential (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thogersen-Ntoumani, 2011).

Parents also play a major role in influencing the perception of sport participation for young athletes. How a parent supports or pressures their child in their sport has a significant impact on the child's experience. Parents often have good intentions to help their children succeed yet place high pressure on their children for a competitive edge or the pursuit of scholarships (Malina, 2010).

Youth Sports Organizational Approaches and Recommendations

The manner in which youth sports organizations approach leadership greatly influences the experiences of those involved in youth organized sport. Implementing a transformational leadership approach for organization leaders as well as a training programs for coaches and managers can be highly impactful in the improvement of youth sports organizations (Martinez-

Moreno, Cavas-Garcia, & Diaz-Suarez, 2021). Sports organizations must also be able to constantly adapt and carry out a strong vision in order to be successful (Cucui, 2016). The difference between a sports experience that positively benefits an athlete and an experience that harms an athlete depends heavily on the environment the individual athlete is surrounded by, which includes the nature of the sports organization. Sports organizations can contribute to more positive experiences by cultivating environments where athletes can engage in self-discovery and are surrounded by adequate support for their sport and beyond (Petitpas et al., 2005). Emphasis should be placed on recruiting coaches who will follow the organization's goals and intentions as well as go through continuous training to ensure alignment with the purpose of the organization (Petitpas et al., 2005).

Recommendations for organizations, parents, and athletes surround around a few main considerations. The approach from parents and coaches, the amount of time dedicated to sport, and the level of intentionality within a team or organization are all major areas for improvement (Bean et al., 2014). Research suggests placing limitations on the hours dedicated towards organized sport weekly for children as well as incorporating variety to encourage physical health and safety (Myer et al, 2015). Moreover, it is also important to consider and research more in depth what contributes to negative psychological effects of sport so that strategies can be developed to encourage positive experiences (Hodge, Lonsdale, & Jackson, 2009).

One organization, Inside Out Initiative (ISO), works directly with high schools to help intentionally create healthy athletic programs. The organization is founded around the belief that positive athletic experiences are centered around "safety, support, and engagement" (Hebard et al., 2021). ISO is rooted in core values that bring a larger purpose to athletics and encourages growth in all areas of athletes' lives (Hebard et al., 2021). Overall, the organization provides a

helpful framework for other athletic organizations to follow. Like ISO, many programs work within schools, while little structure or emphasis is placed within the club athletic realm. Hence, a need for recommendations focused specifically on club organizations comes to light.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore differences between the perceptions regarding youth athletics and observed experiences of youth sports participants. The current study utilizes a survey distributed to current and former youth athletes, coaches, and parents of youth athletes in order to understand perceptions and take in unique experiences of participants. The primary objective of the study was to examine the prevalent assumption that participation in youth sports inherently contributes to character development.

Study Design

The study design is cross sectional and based on a convenience sample. The survey utilized a combination of question types, including demographic questions, Likert scale questions, and open-ended questions in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. The study also utilizes the field of phenomenological research or lived experiences. Incorporating the lived experiences of study participants will help to gain deeper insight as well as curate recommendations based on first-hand experiences.

Participants

A convenience sample of 40 participants, aged 18 or older, was selected for this study. The inclusion criteria for the study specified that participants must have had prior experience with youth sports either as a player before the age of 18, a parent of a youth athlete under age 18,

or a coach of youth athletes under age 18. Survey participation was entirely voluntary, and participants proceeded to the survey after agreeing to the consent form.

Procedure

The study was conducted after being approved by the Northwest University Institutional Review Board. Survey participants received a recruitment email with a link to the consent form and survey. The data was collected via Qualtrics and is strictly anonymous to the principal investigator. Survey data from Qualtrics was then analyzed via Qualtrics and NVivo.

The survey consisted of 15 questions to gather insights from participants' experiences. First, participants were asked to select the role that best currently describes them: athlete, parent, coach, or other. Next, which generation they associate with, ranging from Baby Boomer to Gen Z. The third question asked how many hours on average per week are spent participating in athletic activities.

After these demographic questions, participants were asked a series of nine Likert scale questions. The Likert ranged from "completely agree" to "completely disagree" and included statements such as, "I perceive that youth sports develop character", "the youth sports environment promotes a healthy outlook and balance on life", and others related to family relationships, availability of opportunities, and the roles of coaches, parents, and athletes in character development within youth sports. Questions 11 and 12 focused on participants' observations of intentional implementation of character development in youth sports and to rate their youth sports experience overall from "mostly positive" to "mostly negative".

Finally, questions 13, 14, and 15 then transitioned to open-ended questions asking participants to share ways youth sports could be improved upon, any other experiences or

insights they have about youth sports, and any situations where themselves or someone they knew suffered more than benefited from involvement in youth sports.

Analysis Procedure

To analyze the qualitative data, the principal investigator conducted thematic analysis. After becoming familiar with the data by reading through the open-ended responses one by one, the investigator developed initial codes for data. Codes were then collated with supporting data and finally developed into themes.

Likert scale question responses were assigned a value of 1 through 5, with 1 corresponding to “completely disagree”, “never”, and “mostly negative” and 5 corresponding to “completely agree”, “frequently”, and “mostly positive” depending on the question asked. A higher score indicates a more positive perception or experience with youth athletics, while a lower score indicates a more negative perception or experience with youth athletics. For each question, the sum and average were calculated for comparison.

Results

The purpose of this study was to compare perceptions about youth athletics with observed experiences from participating in youth athletics. As previously discussed, youth sports are often perceived to lead to positive character development inherently. However, the literature suggests that the positive character development as a result of youth athletic participation depends heavily on intentional implementation rather than an automatic result of participation. The sections below will describe the survey data, including demographics, perceptions, and observed experiences.

Demographics

Of the 40 survey participants, 20% best currently identified as coaches, 32.5% as athletes, 27.5% as parents, and 20% as other (signifying past involvement in youth athletics, but not current involvement). Over half of the survey participants associate with Generation Z (52.5 %), while 20% associate with Generation X, 20% with Millennials, and 7.5% with the Baby Boomer generation. See Table 1 for counts and totals of the demographic data.

Table 1

Demographic Survey Data Counts and Totals

Role	Generation				Total
	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer	
Athlete	12	1	0	0	13
Coach	6	2	0	0	8
Parent	2	3	1	2	8
Other	1	2	7	1	11
Total	21	8	8	3	40

Likert Scale Questions

Table 1 shows the calculated sums and averages for each Likert scale question. A higher sum represents a more positive perception or experience of youth athletics, while a lower sum indicates a more negative perception or experience. The final three questions about the responsibility of a coach, parent, or athlete for character development simply reflects agreement or disagreement with the statement instead of a positive or negative perception or experience with youth athletics.

Table 2

Likert Scale Questions Sums and Averages

Survey Question	Sum	Average
State whether you agree or disagree with this statement: "I perceive that youth sports develop character".	182	4.79

State whether you agree or disagree with this statement: “The youth sports environment promotes a healthy outlook and balance on life”.	152	4.00
With your experience in youth sports, how often do you see character development intentionally implemented into youth sports programs?	156	4.11
My experience with youth sports overall has been:	176	4.63
Participating or being involved in youth sports has benefited my family relationships.	164	4.32
Overall, I think the youth sports environment provides fair opportunities to those who participate.	148	3.89
Relative to character development in youth sports, development depends mostly on the coach.	149	3.92
Relative to character development in youth sports, development depends mostly on the athlete's parents.	143	3.76
Relative to character development in youth sports, development depends mostly on the athlete.	139	3.66

Perceptions of Youth Athletics

75% of survey respondents “completely agree” with the statement “I perceive that youth sports develop character”, while the remaining 25% “somewhat agree”. Responses to the statement “the youth sports environment promotes a healthy outlook and balance on life” varied more, with 28.9% “completely agree”, 57.9% “somewhat agree”, 2.6% “neutral” and 5.3% each for “somewhat disagree” and “completely disagree”.

Implementation of Character Development

About 61% of survey respondents “sometimes”, observed intentional implementation of character development in youth athletics, while about 26% observed “frequent” implementation, and the remaining 13% responded “infrequent” or “almost never” (10.5% and 2.6%, respectively).

Experience within Youth Athletic Environment

The majority of participants had a “mostly positive” experience with youth sports overall (73.7%), while 18.4% had a “somewhat positive” experience, 5.3% “neutral”, and 2.6% “somewhat negative”. Additionally, 52.6% of participants “completely agree” that involvement in youth sports benefited their family relationships, while 28.9% “somewhat agree”, 15.8% were “neutral” and 2.6% “somewhat disagree”. Survey respondents agreed least with the statement that youth athletics provides fair opportunities to all who participate, with an average score of 3.89 and a sum of 148.

Role of Coaches, Parents, and Athletes in Character Development

Survey respondents agreed most that the coach is primarily responsible for character development with an average question score of 3.92 and a sum of 149. Comparatively, parent responsibility for character development received an average score of 3.76 and a sum of 143, while athlete responsibility received an average score of 3.66 and a sum of 139.

Qualitative Data Themes

The final three survey questions were open-ended, short response questions designed to record participants’ individual experiences with youth athletics. Responding to the open-ended questions was optional and participants could submit the survey while leaving the open-ended responses blank. Of the 40 total survey participants, 30 participants responded to at least one of the open-ended questions.

Each open-ended question was analyzed through coding and developed into themes present to the principal investigator. NVivo software was utilized in order to conduct thematic analysis for the qualitative data. Six main themes emerged from analysis. See Figure 1 below for a concept map of all themes and subthemes, and Table 3 for cases and counts of themes.

Figure 1

Qualitative Data Theme Concept Map

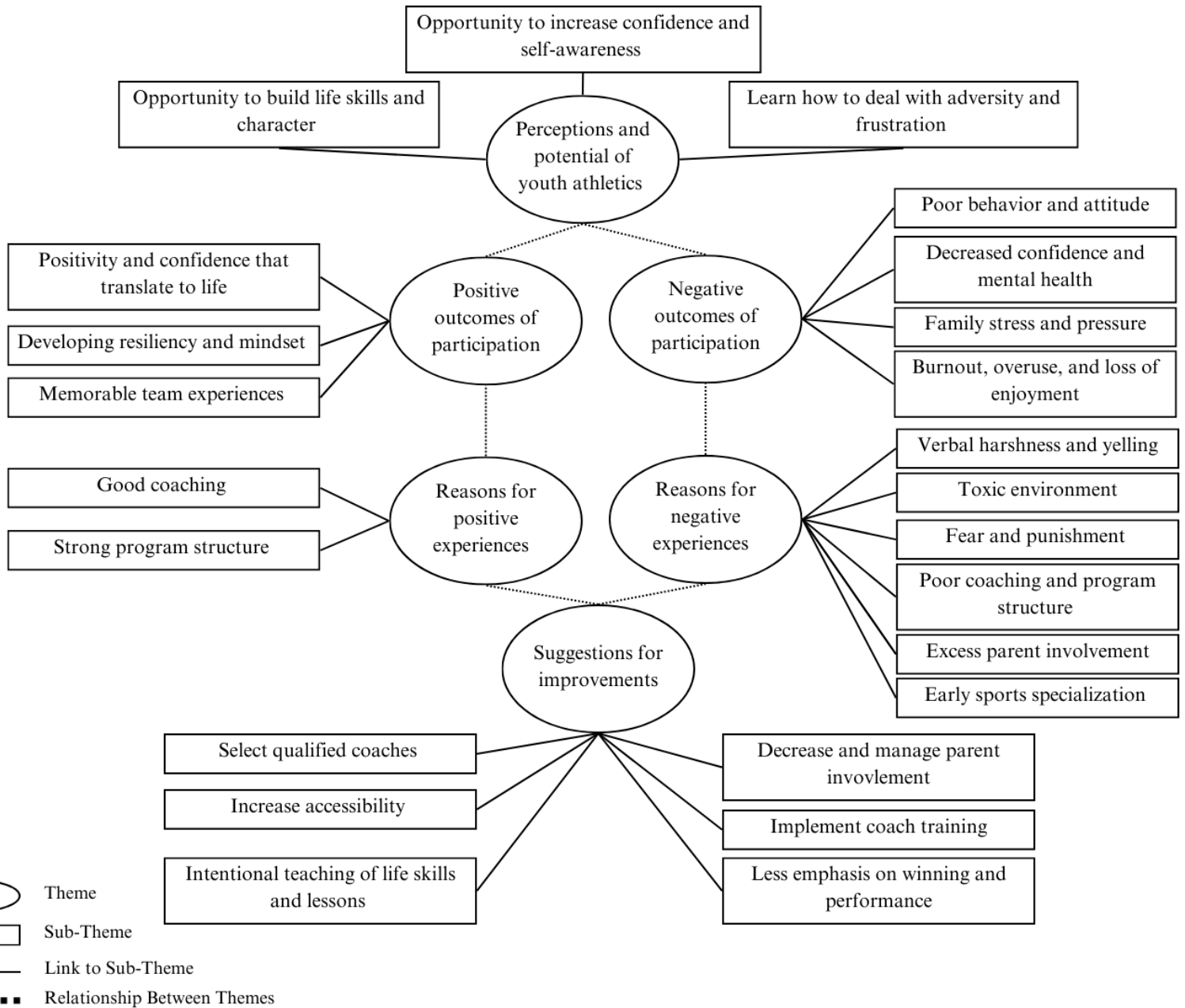


Table 3*Qualitative Data Themes Cases and Counts*

Theme		Cases (Number of Participants)	Counts (Number of Empirical Indicators)	Empirical Indicator (Evidence)
1.	Perceptions and Potential of Youth Athletics	5	5	“Youth sport can have a huge impact on kids and facilitate healthy and positive atmosphere that can carry into their day to day lives” (Participant 18).
2.	Positive Outcomes of Participation	9	9	“Sports have helped me in every aspect of life. It’s given me confidence in other aspects of life” (Participant 11).
3.	Negative Outcomes of Participation	13	19	“Growing up I was on a lot of successful teams but because of it I experienced a lot of burnout and I lost a lot of enjoyment for the sports that I played” (Participant 2).
4.	Reasons for Positive Experiences	3	4	“Of the few ‘good’ coaches they were fair, fostered teamwork and character development. These coaches made a life-long impact and had successful teams” (Participant 25).
5.	Reasons for Negative Experiences	17	28	“It is mind boggling how many stories I’ve heard and or/experienced of young athletes struggling with confidence and continued frustration with their performance resulting directly from a coach (even at the collegiate level)” (Participant 22).
6.	Suggestions for improvement	28	43	“More intentional coaching (of values), better communication with better coaches and parents, more intentional about the psychology behind sports” (Participant 4).

Perceptions and Potential of Youth Athletics

The first theme present from the qualitative data is participants expressing the positive potential of youth athletics. Data that was coded into this theme expressed opinions on what outcomes sports participation could have as opposed to actual observed outcomes. There were 5 cases and 5 empirical indicators for this theme.

Opportunity to build life skills and increase character. A few participants expressed the positive potential of youth athletics as an opportunity to build life skills and character. For example, Participant 7 talked about how reacting to sport situations translates to life, “way too often people get too caught up in the wrong aspects of youth sports. This is a real opportunity to teach kids life lessons and how we don’t control all things around us. How we react and handle these situations builds character for life” (Participant 7, Baby Boomer, Coach).

Furthermore, some participants discussed the impact youth sport participation can have on daily life. Participant 18 revealed, “youth sport can have a huge impact on kids and facilitate healthy and positive atmosphere that can carry into their day to day lives” (Participant 18, Gen Z, Coach). Both participants discuss the potential of participation to build lasting skills and a positive frame of mind beyond sports participation and into everyday life. In these statements, neither participant gives real life examples of this occurring, yet instead talk about how these can be potential outcomes.

Similar to participant 7, participant 14 comments on the positive potential of youth athletics through adversity, “great ways in learning how to lose and handle frustration” (Participant 14, Gen Z, Other). Both participant 7 and participant 14 comment specifically on how losing or challenging situations within athletics provide opportunities for youth to grow.

Opportunity to increase confidence and self-awareness. Other participants expressed the potential for youth sports to help increase confidence and self-awareness. Participant 6

explained, “I’ve had the opportunity to watch kids, grow and blossom because of athletics, when other things did not provide that. It is also provided opportunities for travel, dealing with diversity, and dealing with self-awareness and confidence in a way that is not necessarily provided in other arenas” (Participant 6, Baby Boomer, Coach). Participant 6 emphasizes the unique opportunities youth athletics can provide. It can provide opportunities for growth and flourishing where kids may not otherwise be exposed to.

Likewise, participant 16 reveals, “sports can help you better realize who you are as a person or cause you to ignore other passions you have” (Participant 16, Gen Z, Athlete). Here the participant provides both a positive and negative potential outcome of youth sport participation. First, on the positive side, athletic participation can help increase self-awareness. On the other hand, participation may take away from other life interests. Still, both participants comment that there is positive potential within youth athletics to become more self-aware and increase confidence through experiences.

Positive Outcomes of Participation

Moving on from potential and perceptions of youth athletics, actual outcomes and experiences will next be discussed. To begin, many participants shared positive outcomes they had within their youth athletic experiences. There were nine cases and nine empirical indicators for this theme.

Positivity and confidence that translate to life. A few participants discuss how youth sports participation directly helped them develop confidence and a positivity to carry with them in their everyday life. Participant 11 reveals, “sports have helped me in every aspect of life. It’s given me confidence in other aspects of life” (Participant 11, Gen Z, Athlete). Furthermore, Participant 12 says, “growth mindset teaches you gratitude and contentment while encouraging

one's best effort" (Participant 12, Gen Z, Athlete). Here both participants disclose how their participation in youth athletics carried with them into the rest of their lives.

Developing resiliency and mindset. Several participants talk about how they developed or have seen others develop resiliency and a strong mindset through youth sports participation. Participant 4 explains, "I learned how to overcome pain to achieve more than I thought was possible. Basketball also taught me better control my thoughts and how to work through conflict with others" (Participant 4, Gen Z, Athlete). Similarly, participant 3 explains, "the only thing I see is injuries which I believe is a key component in developing character in resiliency" (Participant 3, Gen Z, Athlete). Participant 12 also specifically mentions developing a "growth mindset" (Participant 12, Gen Z, Athlete). Besides injuries, the participants do not detail specific examples or experiences that led to developing a strong mindset and resiliency. Rather it appears these qualities were developed through a range of experiences over time.

Memorable team experiences. A final subtheme within positive outcomes of youth sports participation that participants shared is memorable team experiences. Participant 10 shares, "I remember the emphasis on team and coming together by prayer, food, or fun" (Participant 10, Gen Z, Athlete). Participant 6 talks about how sports have "provided opportunities for travel" (Participant 6, Baby Boomer, Coach).

Reasons for Positive Experiences

Building from positive outcomes of participation is the theme of reasons for positive experiences. There were three cases and four empirical indicators for this theme.

Good coaching. Three participants discussed how good coaching can lead to positive experiences. Participant 25 explains, "very few coaches were "good" coaches. Of the few 'good' coaches they were fair, fostered teamwork and character development. These coaches made a

life-long impact and had successful teams. Winning was a perk to the program” (Participant 25, Gen X, Parent). Participant 28 explains a reason for positive experiences is “the right coach that has balance between teaching the sport and understanding each child has different abilities” (Participant 28, Baby Boomer, Parent).

Strong program structure. Participant 15 details in one response, “the organization and structure can really help shape the child’s experience” and in another response explains that “quality of programs vary and level of qualification of coaches vary which can make or break an experience for a young player” (Participant 15, Millennial, Coach).

Negative Outcomes of Participation

The next theme present from the qualitative data is negative outcomes of participation. There were 13 cases and 19 empirical indicators for negative outcomes of participation. Negative outcomes have been divided into the sub-themes below.

Poor behavior and attitude. One participant discussed poor behavior and attitude in two different responses. First, participant 12 reveals, “one of my friends says that he always became the worst version of himself when he was on the court because of his intense attitude to win”. In a separate response, participant 12 again commented how they have observed in others how sports have “sometimes made them act in ways they were not proud of” (Participant 12, Gen Z, Athlete).

Decreased confidence and mental health. Five participants discuss the issue of mental health and instances of decreased confidence. Participant 22 notes, “it is mind boggling how many stories I've heard and/or experienced of young athletes struggling with confidence and continued frustration with their performance resulting directly from a coach (even at the collegiate level)” (Participant 22, Millennial, Other). Similarly, participant 9 reveals, “favorites

can be a big issue with a young athlete's confidence" (Participant 9, Gen Z, Athlete). Participant 11 simply states, "we need to talk more about mental health in sports and how it can be negative at times" (Participant 11, Gen Z, Athlete), while participant 25 details how in one experience, "the players often emotionally fell apart or checked out mentally during a game" (Participant 25, Gen X, Parent).

Family stress and pressure. Five participants reveal how youth sports experiences induced family stress and pressure. Participant 26 explains, "I see lots of kids/preteens who want to try out sports, but unless you have been in a sport since childhood, you won't make the 'good' team. This puts pressure on families to have their kids in year-round sports or 'select' teams which is not possible for many families because of scheduling, finances and flexibility" (Participant 26, Gen X, Parent). Likewise, participant 20 details, "youth sports ask too much time of families and athletes. It pushes athletes too far and if they are not willing to be pushed, they cannot participate" (Participant 20, Gen Z, Other).

Burnout, overuse, and loss of enjoyment. Seven participants revealed instances of burnout, overuse, or loss of enjoyment from their experiences within youth sports. For example, participant 25 notes, "many players that were pushed too hard by parents or were part of a dysfunctional program wanted to quit or did quit (both at the high school and collegiate level)" (Participant 25, Gen X, Parent). Participant 5 explains, "I have teammates lose their love for their sports or only continuing to play for there parents sake which should not be the case" (Participant 5, Gen Z, Athlete). Participant 2 personally recalls, "growing up I was on lot of successful teams but because of it I experienced a lot of burnout and I lost a lot of enjoyment I had for the sports that I played" (Participant 2, Gen Z, Athlete).

Reasons for Negative Experiences

Following negative outcomes of participation is the theme of reasons for negative experiences. There were 17 cases and 28 empirical indicators for reason for negative experiences in total. The theme has been divided into subthemes below.

Verbal harshness and yelling. Four participants noted verbal harshness or yelling as reasoning for negative experiences. Participant 1 notes, “my cousin quit sports partly because his coach was too harsh and always yelling. It was more toxic than productive for him” (Participant 1, Gen Z, Other). Participant 28 simply recalls “harsh verbal words to the kids” and how “the way some coaches talk to the kids. It can be disrespectful at times” (Participant 28, Baby Boomer, Parent).

Toxic environment. Five participants described a toxic environment as reasoning for their negative experiences. Participant 25 reveals, “Many players that were pushed too hard by parents or were part of a dysfunctional program wanted to quit or did quit (both at the high school and collegiate level” (Participant 25, Gen X, Parent). Likewise, another participant explains, “in some specific experiences, I have seen harm come to athletes in the form of psychological abuse. Most of this has come back to the coach, either directly or by their lack of controls around how athletes and parents should behave” (Participant 17, Gen X, Parent). Participant 4 shares, “I had a terrible experience with high school volleyball. The environment was so toxic I literally became ill” (Participant 4, Gen Z, Athlete).

Fear and punishment. Two participants list fear or punishment as contributing factors to negative experiences. Participant 22 explains, “I think a lot of coaches, when there is a lack of knowledge about the game, or frustration about something, end up overcompensating by yelling and public shaming (Participant 22, Millennial, Other). Moreover, another participant details multiple examples of fear and punishment saying “one of the most degrading aspects of my

youth sports experience was the manipulation of playing time” and additionally, “ using playing time as a way to punish athlete’s for their performance can create negative dynamics within the team as well as a fear based mentality, which hinders athletes from trying new things and advancing in their skill” (Participant 12, Gen Z, Athlete).

Poor coaching and program structure. Six participants credit poor coaching or a poor program structure for negative experiences. For instance, Participant 9 explains how “favorites can be a big issue with a young athlete’s confidence” (Participant 9, Gen Z, Athlete). Participant 22 explains more specifically in response to if they have had experiences that were more harmful than beneficial, “yes, due to poor coaching...it is mind boggling how many stories I’ve heard and/or experienced of young athletes struggling with confidence and continued frustration with there performance resulting directly from a coach (even at the collegiate level). Some players quit sports because of it, and others lost their love and passion for the game” (Participant 22, Millennial, Other). Moreover, Participant 17 gives insight on the proportion of poor coaches, “I would estimate that of the dozen or so coaches my children had, 25% were outstanding, 40% were acceptable, and 35% should not have been allowed to ever work with children of any age in any capacity whatsoever” (Participant 17, Gen X, Parent).

Excess parent involvement. Seven participants explain how excess parent involvement contributed to negative experiences. One participant notes, “parents are too worried about their child’s playing time and running coaches in small schools out” (Participant 13, Millennial, Other). Similarly, Participant 8 says, “relationships with parents become conflicted if the parents are too involved in a poor way” (Participant 8, Millennial, Coach), and Participant 11 relays, “these kind of circumstances involve kids who were forced into participating by parents or

coaches. They didn't really choose to participate and felt they had no choice" (Participant 11, Gen Z, Athlete).

Early sports specialization. Three participants describe how early sports specialization has led to negative experiences. Participant 21 explains, "sadly too many kids are specializing in one sport and missing out on the physical and social benefits of playing more than 1 sport" (Participant 21, Gen X, Parent). Participant 23 details how the youth sports experience has change since they participated, "there wasn't such an emphasis on private sports or getting good at just one sport specializing. Sports are still positive but the privatization early of sports is causing poorer families with single parents or those who can't afford it to make it to practices to not be part of sports at an early age. This privatization process is in early elementary" (Participant 23, Millennial, Parent).

Suggestions for Improvement

The largest percentage of responses fell under the theme of suggestions for improvement. There were 28 cases and 48 empirical indicators in total for this theme. Suggestions for improvements have been divided into the subthemes below.

Select qualified coaches. Four participants suggest selecting qualified coaches to improve youth sports. Participant 19 simply states, "have only qualified coaches be involved" (Participant 19, Millennial, Coach), while Participant 16 lists, "better coaches for girls sports" and "more accountability for bad and unhealthy coaching in youth sports" (Participant 16, Gen Z, Athlete).

Increase accessibility. Five participants give suggestions relating to increasing the accessibility of youth sports. Participant 14 asks, "lower prices to allow youth to participate who are in a low-income household" (Participant 14, Gen Z, Other). Participant 23 suggests an

alternative approach, “more scholarships for children who want to do private select sports which have become more prevalent. More scholarships to clinics or supplemental training for these activities. Donations of extra uniforms” (Participant 23, Millennial, Parent).

Intentional teaching of life skills and lessons. Two participants suggest more intentionally coaching efforts. Participant 4 suggests, “more intentional coaching (of values), better communication with better coaches and parents, more intentional about the psychology behind sports (Participant 4, Gen Z, Athlete). Likewise, Participant 29 adds, “coaches and parents should spend more time and effort intentionally involving character development in the sport. Youth athletes should be rewarded and punished based on displays, or lack of displays, of character, attitude, respect, effort, etc.” (Participant 29, Gen Z, Athlete)

Decrease and manage parent involvement. Six participants suggest reducing and managing parent involvement. Participant 8 suggests “guidelines for the level of involvement in regards to coaching, coaching from the stands, opinions, etc.” (Participant 8, Millennial, Coach). Another participant adds, “parents re-examining their role and responsibility in youth sports” (Participant 6, Baby Boomer, Coach), and another, “parent should let coaches coach and coaches should not allow interference” (Participant 25, Gen X, Parent). Similarly, Participant 17 suggests, “there should be a much clearer definition of the roles of the coach, parents, and athletes from the beginning of the experience” (Participant 17, Gen X, Parent).

Implement coach training. Seven participants acknowledge a lack of qualified coaches and suggest training programs. Participant 22 suggests, “finding good coaches, or maybe (a more attainable option) implementing training curriculum for coaches to coach/communicate better with their athletes” (Participant 22, Millennial, Other). Likewise, Participant 2 recommends, “have more trainings for new coaches—where I’m from most coaches are just random parents

and they don't always understand the impact they can have on their players" (Participant 2, Gen Z, Athlete). Moreover, Participant 15 elaborates, "volunteer coaches are great but I definitely think there could be more structure added to what they are teaching and perhaps ideas to help the player develop mentally" (Participant 15, Millennial, Coach).

Less emphasis on winning and performance. Eleven participants give suggestions relating to shifting the emphasis of youth sports away from a focus on winning and performance. Participant 6 recommends "more emphasis on participation and success through improvement, rather than on winning" (Participant 6, Baby Boomer, Coach). Participant 5 adds, "the concept of doing your best and trying your hardest is the most important, not necessarily winning at all costs" (Participant 5, Gen Z, Athlete). Participant 25 suggests that "skill development, teamwork, and character development should be the main priorities in youth sports" (Participant 25, Gen X, Parent). Moreover, Participant 22 talks in terms of performance expectations, "you can set the bar high for athletes, but only if you've taught them a foundation upon which they can practiced and can pull from" (Participant 22, Millennial, Other). Participant 26 simply suggests "more fun and less pressure" (Participant 26, Gen X, Parent).

Discussion

Perceptions Versus Observed Results

One theme present in the survey data is the difference between participants' perceptions and observed results. 100% of survey participants either completely agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement "I perceive that youth sports develop character". However, when asked about how often participants observe intentional character implementation, only 26% observed frequent implementation. This disconnect between expressing potential of youth sports

developing character and actually observing implementation aligns with Danish et al., who explain why so many youth athletic programs fall short of delivering on the potential of youth sports in terms of character and life skills development (Danish et al., 2011). It is a common believe that sports participation builds character, yet few programs frequently implement character development strategies intentionally.

Furthermore, another inconsistency between perception and observed results emerges through the qualitative data. Particularly, the quantity and depth of negative experiences and reasons for negative experiences as compared to positive experiences and reasons for positive experiences. Quantitatively, this difference can be seen by comparing the number of cases and empirical indicators for each theme. Positive experiences yielded nine cases and nine empirical indicators and reasons for positive experiences totaled three cases and four empirical indicators. Comparatively, negative experiences summed thirteen cases and nineteen empirical indicators and reasons for experiences totaled seventeen cases and twenty-eight empirical indicators. The depth of negative experiences compared to positive experiences is also illustrated in Figure 1: Qualitative Data Theme Map, referenced prior and available in the appendix.

Impact of a Coach

Qualitative data indicated that the impact of a coach can be significant in one's overall experience, positively or negatively. Positively, participants shared that a good coach could shape an entire experience and even have a life-long impact. Brinton et al. (2017) discuss how authoritative coaching styles, where athletes are given structure and support, leads to greater levels of autonomy, competency, and performance for athletes. Comparatively, authoritarian coaching styles, where coaches implement high structure and rules yet lack support, negatively affected athlete autonomy. This coaching style may result in high levels of competence, but not

increase performance because of the negative effect on autonomy. As such, one reason participants may have shared the positive benefits of a good coach could be due to coaches who exhibited an authoritative coaching style. For instance, Participant 25 shares that one coach who created a lasting impact was “fair, fostered teamwork, and character development” and that “winning was a perk to the program”. This explanation is in line with an authoritative coaching style with structure and support and also indicates competence and performance with the benefit of winning being second to the support athletes received.

On the other hand, participants shared how a negative experience with a coach could have long-term implications. A common theme revealed is how a bad coach could impact an athlete’s overall enjoyment for their sport. Participants shared instances of burnout, emotional drainage, quitting, or loss of passion due to the impact of a coach. Many negative experiences with coaches or sports participation in general also included yelling or verbal harshness. The impact of yelling or verbal criticism extends beyond sports performance for youth athletes as well. As noted by José et al. (2023), the emotional competency of a coach is critical in promoting psychological well-being and developing the emotional competency of the youth athletes themselves. Abrams (2002) additionally reveals “most coaches and parents enter youth sports with no training in coaching children or in the psychology of child athletes” (p. 273). To this point, several participants desired more implementation of sports psychology or noted how many coaches lack understanding of the extent to which they can impact young athletes.

Pressure and Intensity of Youth Athletic Environment

A final theme present from the survey data is the excess pressure and intensity within the youth sports environment. Many participants discuss feelings of burnout and loss of enjoyment, even with experiences on winning teams. Some of this stress could be contributed to the

emphasis on early-sports specialization and overall time spent dedicated to youth athletics. Additionally, many participants cite excess pressure from parent or coaches as contributing factors to negative experiences and conflicting relationships down the road. Witt and Dangi (2018) discuss reasons why youth athletes decide to quit their sports including pressure from coaches and parents which can result in feelings of lack of ownership over experiences, lack of time for other youth activities, and anxiety. Many youth participants quit because of pressures induced by adults, “millions of child athletes quit early through no fault of their own, but because adults taking away the fun have made them miserable” (Abrams, 2002, p. 255). Furthermore, Abrams (2002) explains how quitting youth athletics as a result of adult induced pressures robs youth of meaningful personal development experiences. Survey participant results and related literature suggest undue seriousness and pressure exerted on youth athletes within the youth sports environment.

Recommendations

Survey participants provided plentiful suggestions for improvements, with a total of 28 cases and 43 empirical indicators. Based on suggestions from survey participants and existing literature the following recommendations have been developed for coaches, parents, and facilitators of youth athletics:

- Implement a coach training program or curriculum. Many programs could benefit from more educated coaches in terms of sports knowledge and understanding of psychological impact alike.

- Increase coach accountability and oversight. The negative implications of coach impact described by participants reveals a need for more oversight of coaching behaviors and accountability for actions that could adversely affect well-being of youth athletes.
- Increase program structure. A lack of boundaries for parents or lack of structure within coaching methods can create stress for youth athletes. Program structure implemented and overseen by administration of youth sports programs could help foster a fairer and more enjoyable environment.
- Hold information sessions or distribute educational resources for parents. Many parents of youth athletes may have good intentions, but their actions can negatively impact their child's experience, positive development, and enjoyment. Increasing awareness and understanding of parent impact could prevent stress on athletes and relational conflict down the road.
- Increase accessibility. Many youth sports programs present financial or time-commitment issues that prevent some families and youth from participating. Keeping accessibility at the forefront of importance for youth sports programs and communities could allow more youth to experience the positive benefits sports participation provides while keeping up with competition for long-term development.

Conclusion

Youth athletic participation provides vast potential for character development and enriching life experiences. Yet, existing literature and survey participant responses from this study highlight how many participants often have negative experiences with short-term and long-term implications. In most cases, negative experiences are not a result of the youth athletes

themselves, but of the adult figures who are responsible for fostering and regulating the youth athletic environment. Lack of controls and oversight for coaches and parents within youth athletics appears to heighten risk for negative experiences physically, mentally, and emotionally.

The purpose of this study was to compare perceptions of youth athletics with participants' lived experiences. While study results and existing literatures contributed to forming recommendations including coach training and oversight, parent education, program structure, and accessibility, a need for further research emerges. Youth athletic programs could benefit greatly from researched backed guides with detailed actions on developing program structure, training and educational curriculum, and a system of oversight for coaches and parents alike. Overall, a more intentional structure with a larger focus on long-term impacts could allow youth athletics to live up to its potential by helping youth develop character and lasting life skills in a safe environment.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Demographic Survey Data Counts and Totals

Role	Generation				Total
	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer	
Athlete	12	1	0	0	13
Coach	6	2	0	0	8
Parent	2	3	1	2	8
Other	1	2	7	1	11
Total	21	8	8	3	40

Table 2

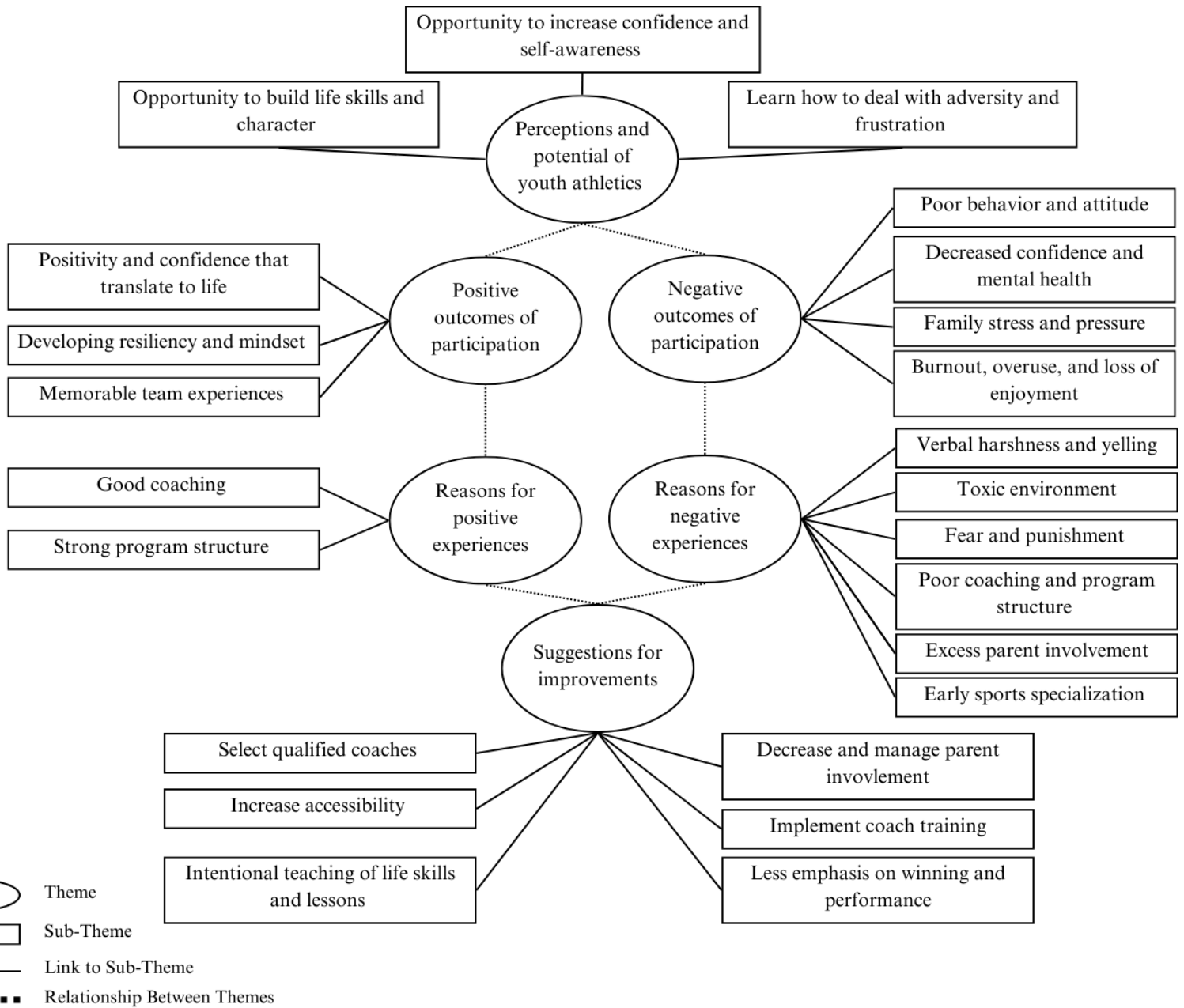
Likert Scale Questions Sums and Averages

Survey Question	Sum	Average
State whether you agree or disagree with this statement: "I perceive that youth sports develop character".	182	4.79
State whether you agree or disagree with this statement: "The youth sports environment promotes a healthy outlook and balance on life".	152	4.00
With your experience in youth sports, how often do you see character development intentionally implemented into youth sports programs?	156	4.11
My experience with youth sports overall has been:	176	4.63
Participating or being involved in youth sports has benefited my family relationships.	164	4.32
Overall, I think the youth sports environment provides fair opportunities to those who participate.	148	3.89
Relative to character development in youth sports, development depends mostly on the coach.	149	3.92
Relative to character development in youth sports, development depends mostly on the athlete's parents.	143	3.76
Relative to character development in youth sports, development depends mostly on the athlete.	139	3.66

Appendix B

Figure 1

Qualitative Data Theme Concept Map



Appendix C

Table 3

Qualitative Data Themes Cases and Counts

Theme		Cases (Number of Participants)	Counts (Number of Empirical Indicators)	Empirical Indicator (Evidence)
1.	Perceptions and Potential of Youth Athletics	5	5	“Youth sport can have a huge impact on kids and facilitate healthy and positive atmosphere that can carry into their day to day lives” (Participant 18).
2.	Positive Outcomes of Participation	9	9	“Sports have helped me in every aspect of life. It’s given me confidence in other aspects of life” (Participant 11).
3.	Negative Outcomes of Participation	13	19	“Growing up I was on a lot of successful teams but because of it I experienced a lot of burnout and I lost a lot of enjoyment for the sports that I played” (Participant 2).
4.	Reasons for Positive Experiences	3	4	“Of the few ‘good’ coaches they were fair, fostered teamwork and character development. These coaches made a life-long impact and had successful teams” (Participant 25).
5.	Reasons for Negative Experiences	17	28	“It is mind boggling how many stories I’ve heard and or/experienced of young athletes struggling with confidence and continued frustration with their performance resulting directly from a coach (even at the collegiate level)” (Participant 22).
6.	Suggestions for improvement	28	43	“More intentional coaching (of values), better communication with better coaches and parents, more intentional about the psychology behind sports” (Participant 4).

Appendix D

Survey Questions

1. Which title best describes you currently?
 - a. Coach
 - b. Athlete
 - c. Parent/Guardian of an Athlete
 - d. Other
2. To which generation do you associate with?
 - a. Gen Z (1997-2012)
 - b. Millennial (1981-1996)
 - c. Gen X (1965-1980)
 - d. Baby Boomer (1946 -1964)
 - e. None of the above
3. How many hours on average per week during sports participation do you spend in practice, training, games, or commuting to and from events?
 - a. 1-5 Hours
 - b. 5-10 Hours
 - c. 10-15 Hours
 - d. Over 15 hours per week
4. State whether you agree or disagree with this statement: "My perception is that youth sports develop character".
 - a. Completely Agree
 - b. Somewhat Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat Disagree
 - e. Completely Disagree
5. State whether you agree or disagree with this statement: "The youth sports environment promotes a healthy outlook and balance on life".
 - a. Completely Agree
 - b. Somewhat Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat Disagree
 - e. Completely Disagree
6. With your experience in youth sports, how often do you see character development intentionally implemented into youth sports programs?
 - a. Frequently
 - b. Sometimes
 - c. Infrequently

- d. Almost never
 - e. Never
7. My experience with youth sports overall has been:
- a. Mostly positive
 - b. Somewhat positive
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat negative
 - e. Mostly negative
8. Participating or being involved in youth sports has benefited my family relationships.
- a. Completely Agree
 - b. Somewhat Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat Disagree
 - e. Completely Disagree
9. Overall, I think the youth sports environment provides fair opportunities to those who participate.
- a. Completely Agree
 - b. Somewhat Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat Disagree
 - e. Completely Disagree
10. Relative to character development in youth sports, development depends mostly on the coach.
- a. Completely Agree
 - b. Somewhat Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat Disagree
 - e. Completely Disagree
11. Relative to character development in youth sports, development depends mostly on the parents.
- a. Completely Agree
 - b. Somewhat Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat Disagree
 - e. Completely Disagree
12. Relative to character development in youth sports, development depends mostly on the athlete.
- a. Completely Agree
 - b. Somewhat Agree

- c. Neutral
- d. Somewhat Disagree
- e. Completely Disagree

13. Please list any ways you think youth sports could be improved upon.

14. Please share any other insights or experiences you have had with youth sports.

15. Are you aware of any situations where you or someone else involved with youth sports has suffered more than benefited from involvement? If so, please explain.