

Transformational coaching and leadership: athletic administrators' novel application of social and emotional competencies in high school sports

Stephen P. Hebard

*Public Health Education, Prevention Strategies, Greensboro,
North Carolina, USA and*

*Public Health Education, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro,
Greensboro, North Carolina, USA*

Lindsey R. Oakes

Health and Human Performance, Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas, USA

Ann Kearns Davoren

NORC at The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Jeffrey J. Milroy

*Public Health Education, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro,
Greensboro, North Carolina, USA*

Jody Redman and Joe Ehrmann

The InSideOut Initiative, Baltimore, Maryland, USA, and

David L. Wyrick

*Public Health Education, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro,
Greensboro, North Carolina, USA*

Abstract

Purpose – The coach–athlete relationship mediates the relationship between sports participation and student-athlete character, health and well-being outcomes. High school athletic administrators (AAs) can provide critical leadership, mentorship and direction for coaches to optimize student-athlete performance and human development. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an evidence-based approach to developing adult and student competencies for holistic development across the lifespan that has been primarily performed and researched in the classroom. The purpose of this research is to capture the lived experiences of AAs applying a novel SEL-based curriculum (InSideOut Initiative, ISOI) with coaches and student-athletes in high school sports.

Design/methodology/approach – Interviews of 10 AAs captured their lived experiences of applying SEL-based leadership and coaching and their perception of its impact on coaches and student-athletes in high school athletics.

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Findings – AAs described leadership and coaching that are characterized by (1) safety, support and mentorship; (2) skill and support-based behavior modeling; (3) trusting, loving and supportive relationships; (4) self-reflection of values/beliefs and behaviors that impact self, student-athlete and culture; (5) the influence of emotions on the aforementioned; (6) the ability to have a long-term, sustainable impact on student-athletes and (7) alignment with their immediate environmental context.

Research limitations/implications – The data captured in this study suggest that ISOI-trained AAs practice SEL-competent leadership and coaching. Evaluation of the novel application of SEL-based interventions in athletics will be useful to understanding their effects on participant social and emotional competencies and outcomes traditionally associated with classroom-based SEL applications.

Practical implications – Athletic administrator interviews describe an approach to high school sports that requires a reconceptualization of the purpose of athletics. When the high school sport operates as a curriculum, integrated opportunity for its student-athletes and athletic administrator and coach leadership aligns with this overarching philosophy, there may be increased potential for positive youth development.

Originality/value – The results of this research are valuable in demonstrating preliminary evidence of how SEL-based leadership and coaching is applied and impacts adult and student-athletes in a unique sport context.

Keywords Social emotional and learning, School-based intervention, Adolescent development, High school athletics

Paper type Research paper

Nearly 9 million high school students or 50% of the total US high school student population participated in school-sponsored athletics during the 2018–2019 academic year. The high school sport is typically perceived as an extracurricular opportunity for positive personal student physical (e.g. strength and flexibility) and character (e.g. grit and discipline) development (Danish *et al.*, 1992). However, sports participation is also linked to adverse physiological effects and psychological risk factors associated with an athlete's unique experience and environmental context (Mahoney and Stattin, 2000). Athletes experience unique time and performance stress that, if inadequately managed, can manifest as unhealthy coping behaviors. Broadly, sports culture exposes athletes to a culture where harassment, discrimination and interpersonal violence have been widely normalized (Brown *et al.*, 2014). Positive and negative effects of a sport are mediated by several unique factors attributed to the sport context (Papacharisis *et al.*, 2005), including the coach–athlete relationship. The quality of this relationship can be directly responsible for the beneficial or potentially deleterious developmental effects of a student-athlete's participation in sports (Jowett, 2007). AAs' beliefs, attitudes and subsequent behaviors reflect their behavioral expectations for coaches and have a significant influence on perceptions of an athletics program's climate (Schein, 1995; Hebard *et al.*, 2021). As such, AA endorsement of positive coaching behaviors is necessary for coach adoption, implementation and sustainability of these approaches. One well-researched and effective approach to positive youth development is social and emotional learning (SEL), which is a framework for promoting personal development, social relationships, ethical behavior and productive work (Boncu *et al.*, 2017; Elias *et al.*, 2014; Greenberg *et al.*, 2003; Weissberg and O'Brien, 2004). In this paper, we describe the lived experiences of AAs' participating and applying the InSideOut Initiative (ISO), a systems-level, a SEL-based intervention that aligns AA and coach behavior and promotes a positive sport climate through "transformational coaching (Hebard *et al.*, 2021)." As such, AAs' perception that transformational coaching embodies the primary tenets of SEL is critical to arguing for its potential impact on student-athletes.

School environment and youth development

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory supports the view that environmental and contextual factors are necessary for understanding human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Neuroscience and education research aligns with this theory, as it points to the importance of

holistic education in which the interrelationships of all levels of the educational ecosystem (i.e. community, school, teacher, parent and student) prioritize human development alongside a traditional education (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018). When the school environment is contextualized by practices, policies and school–parent–student relationships that promote holistic development in school-age children, those students are more likely to demonstrate improved student learning and well-being (Garibaldi *et al.*, 2015; Osher and Berg, 2017). Positive school climates empower students to reach their adaptive potential (Haranin *et al.*, 2007). Students are more likely to feel efficacious (Ardal *et al.*, 2017) and experience individual well-being (Benson *et al.*, 2011) in an environment of high engagement, personal safety and environmental support for learning and well-being (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). However, American youths are rarely afforded high-quality classrooms and school experiences where relationships, fairness and autonomy are prioritized (Pianta *et al.*, 2007). Nationally, high school students have historically demonstrated risky behaviors and social problems indicative of struggling school climates. In 2019, nearly 20% of students reported being bullied on school property within the last year, and 9 percent did not attend school because they felt unsafe attending (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). LGBTQ+ students report significant school victimization and discrimination in their school communities (Kosciw *et al.*, 2020). In one national survey, high school students most often described feeling “tired”, “stressed” and “bored,” while only 20% and 33% described themselves as “happy” in two subsequent studies (Moeller *et al.*, 2020).

Community-level change toward a school climate that reflects engagement, safety and support requires leaders and mentors to positively influence their community through the promotion of healthy beliefs, attitudes and behaviors (Schein, 1995). From an SEL perspective, the modeling of prosocial, student-centered behaviors by supportive mentors and the establishment of prosocial school policies and practices are necessary to achieve positive, lasting student outcomes (Osher and Berg, 2017).

Social and emotional learning

SEL is “the process through which all young people... develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships and make responsible and caring decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020),” the origins of which are tied to youth prevention and resilience research (Zins *et al.*, 2004). Among school-based interventions, SEL programs are among the most utilized in promoting positive educational, health and wellbeing outcomes later in life (Hawkins *et al.*, 2008; Jones *et al.*, 2015) and for preventing student emotional and behavioral problems (Taylor *et al.*, 2017; Benson, 2006; Guerra and Bradshaw, 2008). SEL has become a staple of positive youth development approaches in schools (Elias *et al.*, 2014). School-based SEL prepares students to move successfully through school and college and is an equitable approach to supporting students of diverse backgrounds, including those of minority race or from economically disadvantaged families (Bridgeland *et al.*, 2013; Taylor *et al.*, 2017).

Student and adult competency development through SEL is dependent on meeting two specific contextual requirements. Social and emotional competency development in children and adolescents is dependent on adults’ ability to model nurturing, supportive, positive attitudes and behaviors that contribute to a community that is safe, healthy and equitable (CASEL, 2020). Additionally, SEL is dependent on a community’s ability to establish a safe, caring and supportive environment for school and community initiatives and practices (Cook *et al.*, 1999; Hawkins *et al.*, 2004). School-based SEL programs help leaders institute practices and policies that assist both students and adults in obtaining and applying the competencies required to enhance personal development, social relationships, ethical behavior and

productive work (Elias *et al.*, 2014; Greenberg *et al.*, 2003; Weissberg and O'Brien, 2004). Programs and initiatives that are grounded in SEL can establish communities and resources that encourage individuals to become knowledgeable, responsible and caring individuals who can achieve positive academic, health and citizenship outcomes (Graczyk *et al.*, 2000). Despite extensive research on the impact of school-based SEL on student outcomes, researchers and innovators alike have only begun to conceptualize school-based sports as an appropriate venue for the intentional development of AAs, coaches, and student-athletes' social and emotional competencies.

Youth sports participation and coaching

The positive impact of youth sports participation on adolescent physical, physiological and social development is well-documented. Youth sports fulfill a critical need for children and adolescents to be engaged in physical activity to combat diabetes, obesity, cancer (Staurowsky *et al.*, 2009) and other chronic illnesses (Hales *et al.*, 2017; Troiano *et al.*, 2008). Youth participation in sports has been linked to positive health behaviors that include healthier eating habits, lower smoking and illicit drug use and less interest in taking health risks when compared with non-athlete youth counterparts (Pate *et al.*, 2000). Researchers suggest that participation on a sports team is responsible for providing social support and acceptance, two critical indicators of suicide prevention (Taliaferro *et al.*, 2008). Noticeably, there is limited knowledge on the features of youth sports programs that contribute to this positive youth development (Larson, 2006). Preliminary evidence suggests that the coach–athlete relationship is a critical moderator of the relationship between sports participation and critical student-athlete outcomes (Bissett *et al.*, 2020; Rhind and Jowett, 2010; Gould *et al.*, 2007; Kish and Woodward, 2005; Jowett and Cockerill, 2003). Student-athlete behaviors and psychosocial factors related to sportsmanship (Bolter and Weiss, 2013), self-esteem and performance anxiety (O'Rourke *et al.*, 2014), intrinsic motivation (Price and Weiss, 2013) and concussion disclosure (Milroy *et al.*, 2019) are associated with the quality of a coach–athlete relationship. Certainly, further understanding of this relationship can lend insight into a coach's potential impact on a student-athlete's health and well-being.

Prioritizing student development in sports coaching

Whereas SEL is commonly applied in the classroom and broader school community, innovators have only begun to apply social and emotional developmental competencies to the unique intrateam and athletics program contexts (Hebard *et al.*, 2021). Like teachers and their classroom students, coaches are vital to a student-athlete's psychosocial and life skill development (Cote and Fraser-Thomas, 2007). Coaches of adolescent athletes have been described as the greatest influence on one's experience of sports (Trottier and Robitaille, 2014), a key agent for socialization (Cote and Hay, 2002) and prominent in shaping athlete values and life skills (Danish *et al.*, 2002). The role of the coach in a student-athlete's life has been described as parental (Becker, 2009) and critical to an athlete's optimal functioning (Jowett, 2007). In fact, the coach is described as an important context-specific attachment figure for athletes, who can fulfill critical functions associated with one's ability to regulate their emotions (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2008) and develop self-esteem and general well-being (Côté and Fraser-Thomas, 2007). In these views, nurturing and supportive coaching behaviors directed at youth athletes foster positive youth development and associated behaviors.

Just as a school administration's policies and a teacher's modeling of social and emotional competencies influence student perceptions of school climate, an athletic administrator's practices and coach's demonstration of prosocial and emotional behaviors reflect student-athletes' experiences of the climate within their immediate environment. Sports

environments characterized by sportsmanship, the morally and socially relevant behaviors concerning respect and well-being (Kavussanu, 2008), correspond to positive, prosocial athlete behaviors (Bolter and Kipp, 2018). Reciprocity of a coach and an athlete's respect, trust and communication are characteristic of healthy and successful coach–athlete relationships (Gillet *et al.*, 2009), whereas mistrust, dominance and lack of respect are detrimental to the coach's and athlete's effectiveness and well-being (Blanchard *et al.*, 2009). Negative personal rapport behaviors like using fear, intimidation or angry yelling have been linked to a student-athlete's reports of somatic anxiety, poor concentration and worry (Baker *et al.*, 2000). Coaches who direct negativity at their team in relation to their perception of poor performance are linked to student-athlete dissatisfaction with their sport and their likelihood of quitting (Holt *et al.*, 2006). Given this great responsibility to their student-athletes, athletics programs and their coaches must become aligned in their approach to curating a positive school climate.

Positive student outcomes associated with sports participation are mediated by the behaviors normalized in the sport context (Fraser-Thomas *et al.*, 2005). Coaching leadership is important to supporting a team culture that prioritizes help-seeking (Coyle *et al.*, 2017), challenges hypermasculine norms and discourages playing through pain and injury (Kroshus *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, contemporary research describes implications of the coach–athlete relationship that include well-being and needs satisfaction (Felton *et al.*, 2021), team efficacy (Cho and Baek, 2020), sport satisfaction (Li *et al.*, 2021), athlete burnout (Choi *et al.*, 2020) and quality of life outside of sports (Burns, 2020). Findings from a recent narrative review and Delphi study of coaches, athletes, health educators and licensed mental health professionals describe consensus agreement on how coaches must foster team cultures to support athletes' mental health (Bissett *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, AAs and coaches can contribute to a sport and team culture by demonstrating leadership via behaviors that support destigmatization and normalization of mental health, competence and follow through with referral and support of mental health treatment. However, non-performance-related behaviors are rarely addressed by coaches (Kokko *et al.*, 2015) despite their view that the development of healthy athletes is important and worth their investment (Kokko and Kannas, 2004). Coaches also report that they are unsure of how to address these issues (Kokko and Kannas, 2004). However, few, if any, evidence-based pieces of trainings are required that support a coach's competence related to optimal positive student-athlete development (Sebbens *et al.*, 2016; Breslin *et al.*, 2017).

Though SEL has been established as a promising intervention for school-based social and emotional competency development, its application in sports had been missing until recently. Coaches play an important role in the lives of athletes and can focus on the social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs of the whole child during a significant developmental juncture (Kim *et al.*, 2016). In response to this need, the InSideOut Initiative (ISO), an SEL-informed, high school sport-based intervention, was created and implemented.

The InSideOut Initiative

ISO is a systems-level intervention that engages school leaders, AAs and sports coaches in the development of social and emotional competencies and cultivation of positive school and sport climates that foster student social, emotional and character development. Behavior change of adult ISO participants is explained by the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991, 2002). More specifically, the motivation of adult AAs and coaches to participate in behaviors that promote student SEL and positive youth development is explained by the alignment of beliefs, attitudes and intentions impacted by the ISO curriculum.

ISO views the coach–athlete relationship as a developmental asset and characterizes leadership-driven, positive school climates as the foundation for positive youth development.

The initiative applies a social-ecological framework (McLeroy *et al.*, 1988) to the implementation of an SEL-informed curriculum and creates a culture of support that aligns with the quality of the coach–athlete relationship. High school athletics programs that have committed to ISO accomplish three main tasks across levels of the school system: (1) engaging state policy makers, governing bodies in athletics and school community stakeholders in the shared purpose of promoting positive youth development; (2) positioning the AA as the champion of an ongoing effort to support the acquisition of social and emotional competence and skills among adults and student-athletes alike and (3) connecting student-athletes to caring coaches who validate their human potential beyond their contribution to winning. To make this future a reality, school communities and their athletics programs must be founded on a supportive and caring, positive school climate that sustains sports as an educational, social and emotional development experience. ISO suggests that a shared focus on positive youth development throughout the entire educational and sports ecosystem will result in sustained educational, social and emotional competence for student-athletes.

ISO acknowledges the importance of the coach–athlete relationship and the broader contextual, environmental variables that influence the success of that relationship. To that end, AAs, who are traditionally responsible for the administrative, logistical and financial decisions of the high school athletics program, are asked to consider the champion of the initiative in their school. AAs must become skilled at understanding the specific social, emotional and climate-related challenges that exist within their respective programs. As a leader and mentor, AAs facilitate experiences for coaches and student-athletes that promote positive youth development. Further, the athletic administrator acts as the athletics program's liaison to school leadership and aims to align this leadership and their policies (i.e. coach job descriptions and expectations, and definition of success in sports) with the new developmental objectives of their athletics program. As such, the AA's beliefs, attitudes and behaviors are critical to the success of transitioning an athletics program and its stakeholders away from a traditional win-at-all-costs culture to one that prioritizes socially and emotionally competent behaviors across the ecosystem.

The purpose of the study

Understanding the experiences of AAs as high school leaders of coaches at schools that have participated in ISO training is essential to demonstrating the influence of SEL on coaching behaviors and culture settings that impact positive youth development. As of September 2020, ISO training has impacted AAs, coaches and student-athletes at 3,745 schools in 15 different states. ISO's wide reach and potential for future adoption highlights the importance of understanding how lived experiences of transformational AAs and coaches align with the tenets of SEL. Therefore, consistent with the CASEL framework of SEL competencies, we interviewed AAs about their knowledge, skills and attitudes that reflect positive youth social, emotional and character development in youth sports. Our primary objectives were to (1) understand how transformational coaching is consistent with the primary tenets of SEL and (2) describe the experiences of AAs who witness and enact SEL-related coaching behaviors in high school sports.

Methods

A constructivist qualitative phenomenological design was used within this study (Groenewald, 2004). This design was specifically selected for this study because it allowed for the development of an accurate and reliable description of the lived experiences of transformational AAs. Additionally, this design facilitated understanding of social and

psychological phenomena from the perspective of AAs who have been involved in the ISO. The philosophical worldview for this study was constructivist due to the foundational belief that each AA seeks an understanding of the world in which they live and work, as well as the fact that each AA develops subjective meanings of their experiences that are varied and multiple (Creswell, 2014).

Sample

A stratified purposeful sample was drawn, first, selecting 6 NFL markets. Diversity in market type (e.g. size, location, etc.) was considered in market selection. Next, seven AAs from each market were purposefully sampled. To be eligible for inclusion in the AA sample, the AAs' school must have fully implemented the ISO five-step pathway. The 10 AAs who ultimately participated in this study were former coaches and ISO participants working in high schools within Indiana (Colts), Minnesota (Vikings), Fort Worth (Cowboys), Ohio (Bengals/Browns), Southern California (Chargers) and Tennessee (Titans) NFL markets. A gatekeeper from the ISO not involved in the research performed in this study assisted with the email recruitment of the AAs.

Data collection and instrumentation

Semi-structured, individual interviews captured AAs' perceptions and lived experiences. Each interview occurred online via GoToMeeting technology, and each interview lasted approximately 45–60 min (see Table 1 for interview questions). Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using an inductive, iterative, and comparative process (see Figure 1). The following activities were completed: data preparation and transcription, data immersion, memoing, mining memos, and categorizing. An overall process of vertical and horizontal analysis was utilized (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010). Vertical analysis included a separate analysis process for each transcript. After each transcript was vertically analyzed, horizontal analysis was completed across the transcripts. A visual diagram was created to organize the most prominent thematic ideas and make visual connections between thematic ideas. Lastly, a memo was created that described the flow of these thematic findings. Two co-researchers worked together to interpret data, capture varying interpretations, and reduce bias within thematic findings.

Throughout the process of data analysis, analytic questions were utilized to assist with the development and description of categories and themes. These specific questions were asked of the data; each question was based on the theoretical framework of social emotional learning (see Table 2).

Findings

The thematic findings from AA interviews are presented below in visual (see Figure 2) and in narrative format. The intersectionality and relationships between each AA interview were used to develop each thematic finding.

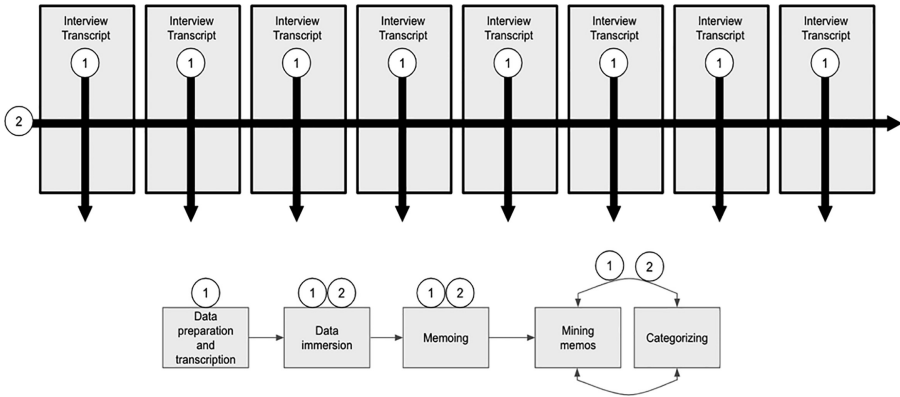
Coaches need self-reflection and self-management

The AAs revealed self-reflection is critical to a coach becoming the “best” version of their self as a coach and caring adult. According to AAs, supporting student-athlete development requires self-reflection of personal values and beliefs, their behaviors, the team climate they are structuring, how they are influencing the broader culture of the team

Table 1.
Interview questions

Interview questions for AAs	
How would you describe the purpose of a coach in sports? How would you define the role of a coach?	
(1)	What is their responsibility to a young person's development?
(2)	What do you do to foster that development?
How do coaches, today, make an impact on their athletes across the life span?	
(1)	What qualities do they have?
(2)	What is it like to be around these coaches?
(3)	How do these coaches influence who their athletes become?
(4)	What impactful/memorable lessons do these coaches teach?
At the end of the day, how do you know that you did the best coaching job you could do?	
What has an athlete said to you that made you know you did a good job?	
How do you hope that an athlete will remember you 20 years from now?	
Can you tell me about a time when a coach had an impact on you?	
(1)	How would you describe this coach?
(2)	What was it like to be around this coach?
(3)	What did you do when you were around this coach?
(4)	How has this coach influenced who you are today?
(5)	What were the most impactful/memorable lessons that you learned from your experience with this coach?
(6)	What other memorable interactions did you have with this coach?
How do you, as an AA, model impactful coaching behaviors for coaches?	
(1)	How do you coach your coaches on how to be a good coach?
What advice would you give to a new coach to help them become the best version of themselves?	
How does your school environment support your coaching of coaches and/or athletes?	
How does your school environment inhibit your coaching of coaches and/or athletes?	
How does your admin support your coaching of coaches and/or athletes?	
How does your admin inhibit your coaching of coaches and/or athletes?	

Figure 1.
Data analysis process



and/or athletics program, their strengths and weaknesses, their emotions, their motivations and intentions, and how they are perceived by student-athletes. One AA explained, “You can just kind of tell what’s guiding them [as a coach], and those are the ones that know when they need to do a better job of handling situations in the heat of the moment.” Another AA explained, “The coaches know that they want to structure a positive, competitive and fun

Table 2.
Analytic questions

Analytic questions	SEL competencies
Is there evidence of recognizing one's emotions?	Self-awareness
Is there evidence of recognizing one's thoughts?	
Is there evidence of recognizing one's values?	
Is there evidence of recognizing one's behaviors?	
Is there evidence of recognizing one's strengths?	
Is there evidence of recognizing one's limitations?	Self-Management
Is there evidence of a growth-mindset?	
Is there evidence of grounded confidence and/or self-efficacy?	
Is there evidence of successfully regulating emotions?	
Is there evidence of successfully regulating thoughts?	
Is there evidence of successfully regulating behaviors?	Social Awareness
Is there evidence of taking perspectives of others?	
Is there evidence of taking perspectives of those from diverse backgrounds and cultures?	Relationship Skills
Is there evidence of establishing and maintaining healthy relationships?	
Is there evidence of establishing and maintaining rewarding relationships?	Responsible Decision-Making
How does the AA identify problems and analyze situations?	
Are choices made based on social norms, ethical standards and safety?	Character Development
How does the AA consider the health and well-being of self and others?	
Is there evidence of instilling and strengthening core ethical values and moral character skills?	
Are these values and skills positively impacting relationships with others?	
Is there evidence of teamwork?	
Is there evidence of sportsmanship?	

environment with a culture where the kids want to be involved.” The AAs also report that a coach needs to be able to accomplish high levels of self-management in order to become the “best” version of their self as a coach and caring adult, which is something that the AAs were modeling for the coaches. According to AAs, the “best” coaches are able to self-manage their behaviors in ways that they are influencing climate and culture, their emotions, their acknowledgment of mistakes, their growth mindset, their motivations and intentions, their ego, and how they are carrying themselves and communicating. One AA explained, “After losing a game, the superintendent came to me and said, ‘I know your coach is going to be upset, but the coach had already expressed to me that he was not going to be a transactional coach like the coach on the other team tonight, and I was like, ‘Holy cow, he got it!’” Another AA explained, “Rather than just thinking that a kid screws up and pulling them off the field and never seeing that kid in the game again, a good coach knows to coach the kid up.”

Teaching

The AAs explained that coaches play the important role of a teacher, and this teaching extends well beyond sport performance skills. The AAs revealed the importance of ensuring that coaches were guided in their abilities to fulfill this important role of teaching. According to AAs, the “best” coaches use modeling strategies to teach their student-athletes how to support and help one another prepare to be the best person they can be, set expectations for themselves with a growth mindset, communicate effectively with other people, important lessons about character and monitor and understand themselves and others. For example, one AA explained, “Our coaches teach their student-athletes how to set the expectation for themselves as human beings, and as peers, brothers, sons and all of the other things.” Another

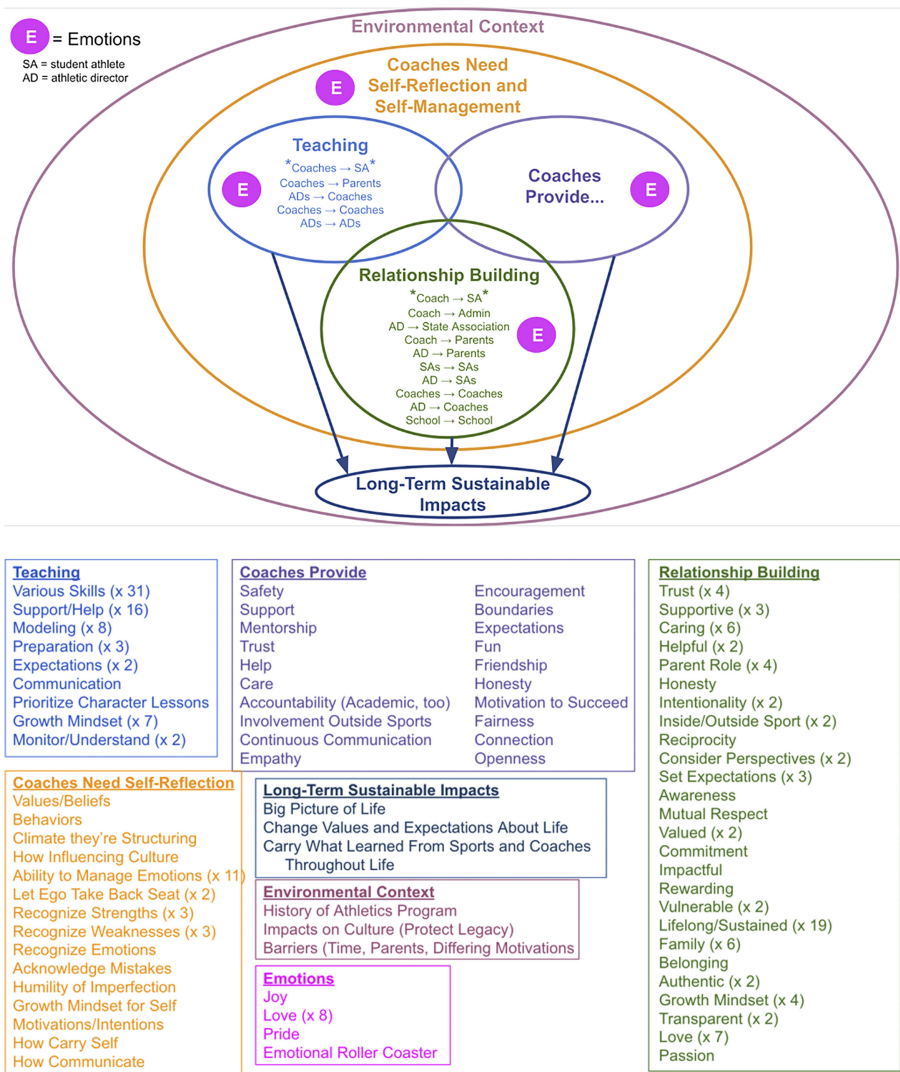


Figure 2.
Thematic findings
from AAs

AA explained, “Our coaches teach their players that the job and the purpose of the players are to love each other.”

The AAs also explained that this valuable teaching extends beyond just coaches teaching student-athletes. During interviews, AAs discussed scenarios where coaches teach parents, AAs teach coaches, coaches teach coaches, and AAs teach AAs. For example, one AA explained, “Not only are the coaches teaching the student-athletes how to win a game with class, but these coaches are also teaching the student-athletes’ parents,” and another AA explained, “I have taught my coaches that the next time they are challenged, just pause and remember who they are and who they aspire to be as a coach.”

Coaches provide

The fact that great coaches were described by AAs as providing so much to their student-athletes is a phenomenon that all the AAs described in their interviews. According to AAs, the “best” coaches were described by AAs as providing safety, support, mentorship, trust, help, care, accountability, continuous communication, empathy, encouragement, boundaries, expectations, fun, friendship, honesty, motivation to succeed, fairness, connection, and openness to their student-athletes. The AAs revealed they were modeling these behavioral attributes for coaches, so support their approach to coaching. One AA explained:

If coaches try to set expectations and measure the success of each student-athlete the same, one of them would look like a total loser and others would always be winners, and that is not how it is. So, coaches have to put a bar up that is true and that they can each aspire to and know whether they are successful. It is not just based on whether the student has beat somebody else or not. It is about what each student accomplishes.

AAs also explained that coaches prioritizing student-athlete development are involved in the lives of student-athletes outside of the context of sports. For example, one AA explained, “You can tell the kids that know their coaches and that learn from their coaches; their coaches care for them and teach them outside of the sport.”

Relationship-building

The AAs explained that the relationship-building that occurs between coaches and student-athletes is critical to the success of a coach. According to AAs, the strongest and most valuable relationship between a coach and a student-athlete has specific and foundation characteristics, which the AAs model and instill in their relationships with the coaches. These relationships are trusting, supportive, caring, helpful, honest, intentional, reciprocal, respectful, valued, committed, impactful, rewarding, vulnerable, lifelong and sustained, welcoming, authentic, transparent, passionate and filled with love. One AA explained, “Coaches provide their student-athletes with opportunities to build a deeper trust in their relationship as a coach and student-athlete, and there is a caring and understanding relationship that is built.” The best and most successful relationships between a coach and student-athlete include a coach that plays the role of another parent to the student-athlete. These relationships exist within and outside of the context of sport; perspectives are consistently considered, expectations are set with a growth mindset and a feeling of being a family is established. One AA explained, “Our coaches are really fulfilling a parental role with our student-athletes, without having that official parent title. They are motivating growth and setting expectations for growth with each student-athlete.”

The AAs also revealed that this valuable and critical relationship-building extends beyond just coaches and student-athletes. During interviews, AAs discussed multiple scenarios where their relationships with all parties involved in high school athletics, from state high school athletics associations and school administrative staff, to coaches, trainers, parents, and the student-athletes themselves, have an impact on each athletics program.

I think how I interact with the coach builds that relationship, and that level of trust supports them, trying to get to know them outside of the sport, and their job as a coach is important. Again, it is building trust that builds the relationship, but how does a great coach behave on the sideline? Or how does a great coach behave when they are upset or whatever? I just think modeling that is important for the coach. So, those are things that I try to do with my coaches.

Another AA explained, “Our coaches also know the importance of being able to build a relationship with the parents and being able to build relationships with the administrators, too. It is not only about building relationships with the kids.”

Long-term sustainable impacts

Through talking with all of the AAs, it was evident that there are long-term sustainable impacts of teaching, providing and relationship-building. The AAs explained that when great coaches teach, provide and build relationships with their student-athletes, the student-athletes gain the perspective of the broader meaning and purpose of life. One AA explained, "Our coaches want to really challenge them [student-athletes] to think bigger than themselves, to see the bigger picture of life and to put that into action." The AAs also explained that teaching, providing and relationship-building from great coaches can change student-athletes' values and expectations about life, and the student-athlete carries what they learned from and experienced with their coaches throughout their life. One AA explained, "Our coaches are focused on impacting their [student-athletes'] lives over the course of their lives and not just their athletic life here in school."

Emotions

The AAs revealed that various emotions are influential and an important part of the ways in which great coaches self-reflect and self-manage, teach, provide and build relationships. The AAs explained that self-reflection and self-management, teaching, providing and relationship-building can be a roller coaster that is charged with emotions. The coaches revealed the importance of their own ability to model to coaches and facilitate the skills among coaches of being able to recognize and manage all of these important emotions. One AA explained, "It can be like an emotional roller coaster for coaches. There can be one moment of great joy and then another moment of deepest despair." AAs also explained that some of the most prominent emotions that surface for great coaches are joy and pride, with the most prominent and most meaningful emotion being love. One AA explained, "Our coaches hope that their student-athletes remember them as someone who loved them," and another AA explained, "Our coaches want our student-athletes to have a memory of a positive experience. They [student-athletes] go through ups and downs, but at the end of the day, the coaches want them [student-athletes] to know that they are loved and cared for by the coaches."

Environmental context

When talking with all the AAs, it was evident that environmental context lays the foundation for the ways in which coaches self-reflect and self-manage, the ways in which coaches teach, provide and build relationships, as well as the ways in which teaching, providing. Relationship-building generates long-term sustainable impacts for student-athletes. The AAs explained that the history and culture of the athletics program, the desire to protect the legacy of the athletics program and various environmental barriers (i.e. time, parents and differing motivations) each play an integral role in defining the environmental context. One AA explained:

There was really no purpose at our school before. I can just honestly say that it was kind of chaotic at best. The culture of the school has dramatically changed. Fast forward 10 years later, and the culture of the school has dramatically changed. We have worked to develop our culture so that our administration and everyone understands that it is not just a uniform that student-athletes wear. It is what student-athletes do with the information and what these kids learn in the long run that is the benefit that we are looking for.

Another AA explained, "Our coaches talk about what they desire the legacy of their teams and that athletics program to be, and they talk to the student-athletes about what needs to be done to continue this legacy," and another AA explained:

Like it or not, there is always going to be a challenge. You are always going to have parents. You know, you are going to have a few parents. I would say a school board member, which is normally a

parent to somebody that is going to try to break the chain and not try to follow what we are trying to accomplish. And when push comes to shove, are there enough people that are going to override this parent and be able to support what we are trying to accomplish?

Discussion

Thematic findings from this study revealed that the interviewed ISO-trained AAs were describing coaching practices aligned with social and emotional competence. Researchers have identified the following five social and emotional competencies: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management and emotion regulation, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship-building and (5) responsible decision-making (Yoder, 2014; CASEL, 2020). Notably, AAs revealed the importance of *coaching with self-reflection*. AAs described how coaching behaviors are a direct reflection of the thoughts and values of each coach. A coach's self-awareness of those behaviors and a growth mindset are critical to successful teaching, modeling, mentorship and relationship-building in the sport contexts. Most notably, recognition and management of *emotions* in the pursuit of both performance and personal/developmental aspirations were reported broadly across AAs. AAs describing coaching with a positive influence on student-athletes shared the presence and challenges that come with personal and student-athlete emotional reactions to sports participation. The identification and management of emotions were described across the various ways that coaches interact with student-athletes, especially within the context of their specific roles and responsibilities (i.e. *providing*). These thematic findings from AAs directly align with the social and emotional competencies of self-awareness, self-management and emotion regulation (Yoder, 2014; CASEL, 2020).

AAs described the adoption of leadership and coaching styles that accounted for their responsibility to promote the development of student-athletes and coaches beyond maximizing athletic performance. AAs described their awareness of having *long-term sustainable impacts* on the student-athletes they coached. AAs who had participated in ISO training described themselves as *teachers* who educate peers and coaches on ways to support their student-athletes and their parents. For these AAs, their teaching for long-term impact was performed by intentionally modeling behaviors that they expected their coaches to perform with their student-athletes and parents, with a specific focus on self-reflection and self-management of emotions. AAs noted the role of coaches in providing performance (i.e. strategy and motivation) and social-emotional (e.g. safety, empathy, encouragement and connection) assets that, in part, drive long-term, sustainable impacts on their student-athletes. AAs viewed themselves and their coaches as mentors with the opportunity to promote coach and student-athlete adoption of positive values, and high, realistic life expectations that would meaningfully contribute to their lifespan development. These thematic findings from AAs directly align with the social and emotional competencies of self-awareness, self-management, emotion regulation and relationship-building (Yoder, 2014; CASEL, 2020).

Encouragingly, AAs described the importance of *building relationships* that reflected social and emotional competence. Representative themes reflecting the parent-coach role were widely discussed across AA interviews (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2008; Jowett, 2007). AAs clearly described coaches who performed the roles of an attachment figure, in which trust, nurturance and love are critical to the developmental process. In addition, AAs acknowledged how the relationships that were built within the sport context had the potential for a lifelong and sustained impact. AAs supported coaches and student-athletes to consider how their emotions, thoughts and values would carry on with them beyond the sport and had an impact on the world around them. AAs identified various ways that social and emotional competencies are important for positive development in relationships within the sport. These thematic findings from AAs directly align with the social and emotional competencies of social awareness and relationship-building (Yoder, 2014; CASEL, 2020). AAs noted how

nurturing, supportive and positive coaching interactions with student-athletes were necessary for encouraging social and emotional competency development (CASEL, 2020). Notably, the success of SEL is dependent on the ability of the mentor and system to contribute to a community that is experienced as safe, supportive and engaging (Cook *et al.*, 1999; Hawkins *et al.*, 2004). The interactions described by AAs in this study contribute to building a community that is safe, healthy and equitable (CASEL, 2020).

Thematic findings from this study support the notion that SEL and a school's *environmental context* are interactive and co-influential regarding successful change among youths and adults alike. The beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of leaders directly impact community members' perceptions of the quality of their immediate environment (Schein, 1995). Thematic findings from the study's interviews demonstrate AAs' awareness of how their personal attitudes and behaviors influence the team and athletics climate and directly impact their student-athletes. This study also provides preliminary data in support of the idea that AAs with social and emotional competencies are fostering positive environments for student-athlete development (Hebard *et al.*, 2021). These data suggest that ISO-trained leaders are applying and modeling social and emotional competencies to create an environment in which coaches and their student-athletes feel empowered. As these sport environments are intentionally curated to reflect a prosocial and character-driven climate, the behaviors of its members are likely to align (Bolter and Kipp, 2018). Similarly, AAs that foster environments where coaches provide support, trust and encouragement are likely to experience these behaviors reciprocated by their student-athletes (Gillet *et al.*, 2009). AAs are also tailoring a coaching environment where coaches are accountable for their communication, emotions and mistakes, which may combat the presence of negative rapport behaviors and corresponding student-athlete experiences of anxiety (Baker *et al.*, 2000) and dissatisfaction (Holt *et al.*, 2006). AAs also acknowledged how coaching attitudes and behaviors were essential to preserving and extending the positive legacy of their athletics programs beyond performance. AAs beliefs and commitment to lifelong learning and lifespan development are representative of efforts that align with core tenets of positive youth development and social and emotional competencies (Taylor *et al.*, 2017). The data suggest that coaches aspire to the roles of teacher, mentor and coach beyond the athletic space to help their student-athletes grow and gain perspective that will help them throughout their lives.

Implications for research and practice

This study of ISO-trained AAs described the potential impact of socially and emotionally aligned coaching behaviors. A next positive step for this line of research is to understand the specific experiences of coaches with SEL training. This future research will further demonstrate how coaches are influenced by SEL, how aligned behaviors directly impact student-athletes and how those coaches contribute to the perception of a culture of safety, support and engagement. Additionally, it would be ideal for future studies to demonstrate generalizability and transferability to make definitive statements about the positive impact of SEL on AAs, coaches, student-athletes and their environment. Thus, it would be effective to employ a mixed- methods design that collects and analyzes both qualitative and quantitative data. Longitudinal research that utilizes quantitative data to make conclusions about how SEL training impacts AAs, coaches, and student-athletes is imperative. Further exploration of the ISO logic model described in Hebard *et al.* (2021) work could result in more definitive conclusions regarding the application of an SEL framework in high school sports. Finally, researchers should consider the implications of a broader school environment's alignment with the culture of athletics and behaviors of leadership in sports.

Despite the study's methodological limitations to the generalizability of its data, the findings can be used to tentatively guide decision-making among high school administrators,

athletics administrators, coaches and related stakeholders. ISO-trained AAs interviewed for this study described a novel, SEL-based approach to coaching and leadership largely associated with social and emotional learning competencies and positive youth development. ISO and this study provide preliminary context for the conceptualization of high school athletics as a co-curricular or integrated aspect of a student-athlete's education. Though an application of SEL in high school sports has yet to have been thoroughly researched, other applications in similar, school-based contexts have demonstrated a positive impact on academic performance, school engagement, social and emotional competencies, and development. We suggest that school administrators and athletics leadership thoughtfully consider the integration of an SEL framework to their athletics programs that align with their greater school philosophies to learning and child development. An additional step toward this reconceptualization of high school sports requires alignment of *purpose* across high school sports and the overall curricular experience. Though participation in high school sports is generally acknowledged as a positive experience for high school student-athletes, it is typical for sports and its leadership to prioritize the demonstration of ability (i.e. winning) over a commitment to positive development. Shared beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviors that communicate a commitment to positive youth development over winning may have positive developmental outcomes uncommonly associated with the sport. Finally, leadership decisions at the administrator level, including policy development and hiring, should align with this reconceptualization to ensure an aligned approach to prioritizing student-athlete development.

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Corresponding author

Stephen P. Hebard can be contacted at: stephen@preventionstrategies.com