

Can a high school coach make an impact mentoring high school students?

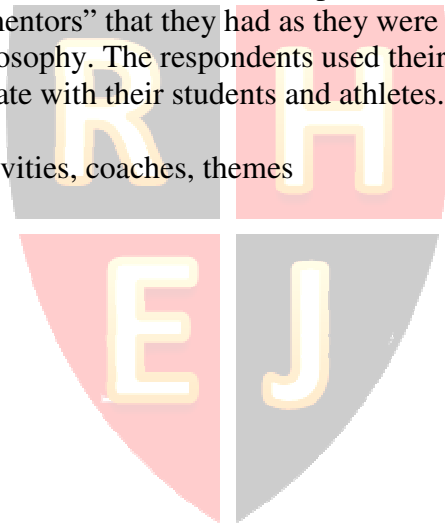
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ABSTRACT

Students attending suburban and rural schools face obstacles that make dropping out of school a viable option for them. The need for schools to find strategies that will keep students in school is critical. One strategy that is successful in keeping student interested in school is participation in sports. As the leaders of sports' teams, coaches provide the necessary mentoring that can positively guide a student's decision to stay in school. In this qualitative naturalistic inquiry, three coaches were interviewed. Each of the respondents were significantly influenced by their families and certain "mentors" that they had as they were in school; crediting them for molding their professional philosophy. The respondents used their life experiences as a guide in their professional careers to relate with their students and athletes.

Keywords: extra-curricular activities, coaches, themes



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INTRODUCTION

Today's high school students are expected to navigate through a myriad of challenges that are unique in our society. State assessment exams, curriculum changes, and the daily grind that teenagers face as they are maturing into young adults are a few examples of what they encounter. The impediments can become overwhelming for the students; leading to poor academic performance in school. Poor academic performance is related to higher rates of delinquency, involvement with drugs, and violence (Roosa, et al, 2012). Compounding the fact that students already face several hurdles in the school setting many of them do not have the support system at home to assist them to persevere. It is generally held that parents are typically the main socializing influence on their children and have an indelible influence on their overall psychosocial development (Schwebel, 2016). But, some students attending high schools have a lack of family support (Marchetti et al., 2016; Roosa, et al, 2012). Some parents expect their children to simply do as well as they did in school but do not provide a mechanism to adequately assist the student (Hart, 2014). Without the proper support system, these individual students face the difficult tasks alone. Rather than confronting these hurdles the students choose to drop out of school.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students attending high need public schools need support. Homelessness and high residential mobility among low-income families pose serious threats to learning and achievement (Cutuli, 2012). According to Carleton (2016) the challenge for students, however, is not limited to what is achieved in the present moment. The lack of student achievement in public schools has a far – reaching effect that can last for generations. Researchers and educational professionals have found that students from low SES families are often not provided with family motivation to succeed at school (Usher & Kober, 2012). The shadow that this lack of parental support casts over the student's future can be overbearing for a student. According to Curran (2015) youth sports are instrumental in adolescents' development by contributing to enhanced motor competence, physical self-concept and self-esteem; as well as providing opportunities to learn better emotion regulation and develop peer relationships.

High schools offer opportunities for students attending low SES public schools that may minimize the related risks that lead to poor academic performance (Seow & Pan, 2014). One such program is extra – curricular activities. In the sporting environment, the coach plays a significant role in athletes' cognitive, affective, and behavioral experiences (Pope, 2015). Coaches who lead extra – curricular programs can have a positive impact on whether a student stays enrolled or drops out of school. There is widespread agreement that one of the primary functions of leaders is shaping the attitudes and behaviors of their followers (Carleton, 2016). Research shows that younger athletes were more dependent their coaches (Rylander, 2015). The need for a mentoring provided by coaches is critical for student success. The challenge is monitoring the long-term and enduring effects of leadership and mentoring that is provided by the coach – athlete relationship (Carleton, 2016).

According to Hodge et al. (2014) in sport, the coach is typically regarded as the most influential significant other in the athlete's sport experience. Coaches provide the leadership that can change the lives of students who attend low SES schools. Northouse (2016) has described transformational leadership as a process that changes people. Transformational leaders also

influence their “followers” to accomplish more than what is usually expected of them (Northouse, 2016). A coach, through mentoring, can influence his students in a manner that can transform the students. Transformational leadership promote followers’ goals and enhance their confidence to increase one’s own expectations (Hampson & Jowett, 2014). According to Hampson and Jowett (2014) the followers of transformational leaders feel trust, admiration, loyalty, and respect for the leader.

According to Asci (2016) the relationship between athletes and coaches is at the heart of sport training and successful coaching. The coach is in a position where they can provide the student with psychological, social, or tangible rewards or benefits like praise, recognition, and playing time (Cranmer, 2015). The coach can use these benefits to form relationships with their players that will be beneficial in the overall development of the student. The quality of the coach-athlete relationship is positively associated with several athlete variables, including self-concept. The coach can instill a self – worth by identifying and then meeting the athlete’s physical and emotional needs (Horsley, 2015). The transferability of the positive self – image that students receive from their coach – athlete relationship can play a role in keeping the student in school.

Coaches, then, would be well-advised to consider their role as instructors (Cranmer, 2015). The student then can use this, not only in the competitive arena, but also to enjoy academic success. Those strong personal relationships developed by positive communication and individualized interaction increased athletes’ well-being while improving player and team performance (Stewart, 2016).

Coaching is a difficult, demanding profession (Stewart, 2016). Even though research shows that the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement is stronger for children in suburban schools than for children in rural or urban schools the impact seen by coaching led mentoring programs will benefit all students (Sirin, 2005). The relationship between coach and athlete is generally causal and mutual (Asci, 2015). But the relationship can be reciprocal in nature. The feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of the coach are influenced by the effect of athletes and vice versa (Asci, 2015). Coaches rely on students to comply with their rules and expectations and students expect to be rewarded with playing time (Asci, 2015).

According to Rylander (2015) the day-to-day interactions between coaches and their athletes are typically complex and vary from one situation to another. But the one constant, however, is the need for coaches to get athletes to act in appropriate ways that will result in sporting success (Rylander, 2015). Thus, when athletes perceive that coaches possess the ability to reward them, the knowledge to help them succeed, or athletes desire to satisfy or identify with coaches, their perceptions of their ability to establish reciprocal lines of communication increase (Cranmer, 2015). Identifying relational characteristics leading to better sport performance could improve coaching effectiveness but it will also provide the underlying mentoring that is desperately needed by the student (Asci, 2015). To succeed, coaches should know their players as well as they know their sport and understand that while they are providing a mentoring service (Stewart, 2016).

In sport contexts, athletes encounter a great deal of pressure and stress in competition (Chen, 2013). But it appears as if the students benefit from athletic participation they will be inclined to continue participating. Neither age nor gender prove to be factors in seeing the results of mentoring the teen-age athlete. According to Curran (2015) the notion that a focus on coach behavior can help understand the motivational correlates of athlete engagement.

The failure to understand, accept and accommodate for individual differences in players does not make it easier on the coach (Stewart, 2016). For example, coaching female athletes is as rewarding as it is challenging because they are usually more coachable, intelligent, and mature than males at similar ages (Stewart, 2016). But both genders benefit from having a positive coach – athlete relationship. Results also show that coaches who work with younger athletes impact their sporting experience; making it critical for student success that they develop a relationship with their coaches (Rylander, 2015). Coach-initiated motivational climate has exhibited strong and consistent relationships with the athlete that lead beyond winning and losing (Schwebel, 2016). Participants perceived more tangible support inside and outside of sports from coaches than from teammates (Chen, 2013). Athletes in positive relationships see their coaches as caring about them as people and seek support and advice away from the sport (Stewart, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Lincoln and Guba (1985) have described qualitative naturalistic inquiry as a valid method of research when looking for a sense of representative of a population to which it is desired to generalize (p 200). Reducing the dropout rate among high school students is a concern for all schools. When a student fails to complete the minimum state requirement for graduation and drops out of school the burden of leading a productive life will become more challenging for them. Two current and one former educator participated in a structured interview. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) a structured interview is the mode of choice when the questions can be framed appropriately (p. 269). Throughout the study the participants appeared comfortable answering the questions as they provided insight as their personal influences and how they applied them in the current career.

Participation Selection

Purposive sampling was the method of choice in selecting the participants. All sampling is done with some purpose in mind (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 199). According to Shenton (2004) it is important to have familiarity with participants (p. 63). Each participant has demonstrated success and longevity as teacher – coaches. Two male participants had over 30 years of experience, while one, the lone female participant, had 13 years of experience. Each participant has been in leadership roles as head coaches in high school sports. In their roles as head coaches in football, track and field, and basketball respectively, each participant embedded their philosophy in programs that they coached. It was interesting, as Patton recommends (2002), when the field notes were studied to find common themes throughout the responses of each participant (p. 239).

Data Collection Process

The primary purpose of gathering data is to gain the ability to construct reality in ways that are consistent with the construction of a setting's inhabitants (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 81). It is for this reason that each of the participants answered a set of questions through the structured interview process that allowed them to reflect on their experiences and their perceived

impact on their students. Each freely answered the questions and were only re-directed if they appeared to be going off topic. The researcher took handwritten notes as the respondents answered the questions. The respondents were asked if they were comfortable being tape recorded; and they each agreed to allow the recording (Bernard, 2002, p. 220).

The audio recording and the hand – written notes were transcribed verbatim. The transcription was typed onto a Microsoft Word document. Once the interview was completely transcribed each individual line of the document was numbered. The numbering of the lines made it extremely easy to identify significant themes that were noticed during the coding process. Along with numbering lines, the “add comment” feature was used to highlight the identified common themes and phrases that were significant to the study. One or two words were used to describe the common theme and partial quotes were highlighted to support the coded theme.

After the common themes were marked on the Microsoft Word document the themes were transferred over to a Microsoft Excel document. The themes, the page numbers where the theme was located, the line numbers where the quote was located, and the partial quote were all transferred to the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This first tab served as the original master copy. A second tab was opened and the entire first tab was copied onto the second sheet of the workbook. Once the coded information was on the spreadsheet the entire document was alphabetically sorted to group the themes together. On the third tab, the themes were sorted according to the number of times that they appeared and assigned an arbitrary color code. The sorted coded themes were then transferred to a fourth tab. The colors were randomly selected with the adjacent themes contrasting in color. If there was a discrepancy in the coded information corrections were made to both documents.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness is established in a naturalistic inquiry by using techniques that provide truth value through credibility (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 132). Because the human instrument is the primary source of data collection the researcher needs to account for any biases that may exist (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40). One way that credibility can be tested is by member checking. In this study, member checking was utilized as the primary technique to establish trustworthiness. According to Erlandson et al. (1993) member checking provides credibility by allowing members of the stake holding groups to test categories, interpretations, and conclusions (p. 142). The respondents were each given an opportunity to summarize their responses immediately upon finishing the interview sessions. In addition to reviewing their responses, the researcher informally asked for clarification on points that may have need clarification. Along with reviewing their responses, each participant listened to the audio recording of the interview. The interview was “played back” for each respondent giving them an opportunity to recall additional information that was not mentioned the first time, correct any errors, or confirm individual data points (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). The importance in establishing internal validity or credibility and trustworthiness is critical for the study (Shenton, p. 64).

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Coach MW is a retired teacher / coach who worked for over forty years. He credits much of his professional success to the foundation he received while growing up in rural South Texas.

While in high school MW participated in various sports and used that as a way to receive a college education. He finished his playing career in college and graduated with a bachelor and master's degree before becoming a certified public school educator. MW is one of a few men who can say that he played and won a collegiate national championship and to have been the head coach on a state championship football team in Texas. He credits his successes at both the collegiate and high school level to the mentoring that he received from his parents and high school and college coaches.

Coach OC is a recently retired teacher /coach who was the second respondent that was interviewed. OC had a unique distinction from the others interviewed in that he spent his entire career working, 31 years, in one school. OC credited much of his success to the direction provided by his parents. "Four of five boys all received a college degree...they must have done something right," he would say. Teaching and coaching in an area close to where he grew up, OC reflected on the many times he related to his students as they too, faced similar adversities. "What I see in them...you know what...I've been there, I've done that," he would say of his students and athletes throughout his teaching and coaching career.

Coach JC has been a professional educator for 13 years and was the third individual interviewed for this study. JC was the lone female interviewed for this study. She, like the two other respondents, credits the support her family gave her as she was going to high school as a major factor in her success. JC and her older sister grew up in a "tough neighborhood" and used sports to "stay off the streets." Using her blue collar working parents as inspiration JC was awarded a college basketball scholarship and decided to become a teacher / coach. Knowing that "she grew up in their shoes," JC's goals were to "motivate" her players and "push them to stay in sports."

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results of the qualitative naturalistic inquiry in this study revealed that coaches can impact the students that they work with. The three coaches interviewed were MW, OC, and JC. Regardless of whether the coaches worked with the students on their teams or in their classrooms each of the respondents was confident that they had made an impact on their students. The respondents relied on life experiences and personal influences to mold their leadership styles

Family Influence

One common theme that resonated from the three interviews was the benefit that each participant received from having supportive parents. "My mom and dad were probably the heroes of my life," MW would say as he spoke fondly of the impact that his parents had on him while he was growing up. "My parents pushed me and my sister," remembered JC as she recalled the times she grew frustrated in school but her parents never wavered in offering support. The importance of having the parental support was clearly explained by each participant.

Students in today's schools, who are at risk of dropping out of school, may be products of single parent homes. Both OC and JC had parents who worked, but their jobs were considered "blue collar" and they did not want their children to endure the same physical hardships that they did. The immediate need to enter the workforce to earn money for food and housing sometimes outweighs the benefits to staying in school. Some parents see the current situation that they find themselves in and desire for better circumstances for their children pushing them to persevere.

For example, OC's parents "didn't have a college education but they pushed us to do it". Knowing that his parents "wanted both of their kids to go to college," MW took the necessary steps to take his college entrance exams and enroll in college.

Their parents also believed that participating in high school athletics would enable their children the opportunity to gain a college education. MW, OC, and JC were each awarded athletic scholarships. Had he not been awarded a football scholarship MW would have entered the military once he graduated from high school. JC "used athletics to stay in school" and was awarded a basketball scholarship to a junior college where she graduated with an associate's degree before enrolling at a larger university. OC's journey followed a similar path by completing his associate's degree while playing baseball at the junior college. He, too, enrolled at a major university following his stay.

Outside Influences

Educators have a distinct advantage of influencing all stakeholders. The daily contact provides opportunities to meet with teachers, staff members, administrators, parents and community members, and most importantly students. In this study, each respondent mentioned the educator who impacted their lives and subsequent professional philosophies. Two of the respondents mentioned their high school coaches as influential people in their lives. You can still hear the admiration that JC has for her high school basketball coach. "She pushed us," but still had a "relationship with us," JC recalled. "Even to this day, I can still talk to her on the phone and consider her my friend."

OC mentioned his high school Spanish teacher and football coach as having the greatest impact on him. "He made class fun," and "I modeled my style after him," OC stated as he reflected about his high school football Spanish teacher. OC was so influenced by his high school teacher that he even became a certified Spanish teacher; which he has taught for 31 years. Once in the classroom, OC used the strategies that he was shown by his former coach, "I tried to make class fun."

"We were treated like human beings." MW felt fortunate to have experienced this both in high school and in college. Having always been involved in organized in sports, MW did not realize that his coaches were impacting him at all. It was not until he was admitted into the hospital with a life – threatening illness did he realize the impact that his coach had had on him. One day, as he was lying paralyzed in the hospital bed MW's college football coach called him. "Get up from that bed," MW imitated in the coach's gruff voice as they spoke on the telephone. MW stated that he began to cry. He felt like he was "letting his coach down" because he could not get up from the bed as his coach was asking him to do. In listening to MW speak of that time, it is evident that he continues to hold a strong admiration for the person who coached him over 40 years ago.

Relatability

Upon graduating from high school, MW was offered an athletic scholarship to a university located in a large urban city. Born and raised in rural South Texas MW had never lived in a large city. After a few months at the large university, MW knew he needed to get back to "his roots." He found the more comfortable place for him among the "mesquite and cactus" of South Texas. He spent his entire career working in rural schools. MW never felt comfortable

living and working in large cities; he preferred working in rural communities – where he knew he was home.

OC and JC believed that their ability to relate to their students played a role in their success. OC's desire to remain in a single school for his entire career was largely due to him being able to "easily relate" to the students. The students knew that OC "grew up in the neighborhood," so "I would revert back to my childhood when I would talk to them." This played a role throughout OC's career. The struggles that the students faced was something that OC could relate to. He provided the same advice that his parents and teachers would give to him; fully understanding the manner to present it to the students.

Similarly, JC believed that her students knew that she "has been in their shoes." When student athletes come to her for advice she "doesn't have to adjust to them." Her ability to relate to them because she was familiar with the difficulties that these female students face has given her an advantage. Low income, single parent homes, with sometimes a lack of a strong role model present in their lives has these girls looking for support. JC knows that she's providing the support for them that she was given by her personal life experiences.

Impact Evidence

Due to the many years of experience among the three respondents the far-reaching impacts that they have had on the students are numerous. JC spoke of a student trainer, who she helped through a bullying situation; OC mentioned a former valedictorian who gave him credit for being one his best teachers; and MW that had a former athlete with a physical disability, who is now an agriculture teacher, stop by his home and reminisce of their time in high school.

The letter recently mailed to JC thanked her for the guidance she provided spoke volumes; proving to her that she had made a difference. Having his and another coaches lunch interrupted by a former player, who is now living in urban Northern city, stating that all that they taught them was still paying off reaffirmed OC's beliefs in the impact that he has had on students. And his players taking the time for daily visits as he lay motionless on his hospital bed demonstrated to MW that the role that coaches play and the impact they have is immeasurable.

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