Predicting Youth Sport Experience: Student-Athletes’ Perceptions of Hostile, Performance, and Communication Climates

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Over 45 million children and adolescents participate in organized youth sport in the United States (Adirim & Cheng, 2003; Merkel, 2013). Accompanying this vast number of youth sport participants are over 6.5 million youth sport coaches. The scale at which youth sports operates has generated an increase in parental involvement, additional travel competitions, and higher costs (Aspen Institutes’ Project Play, 2014; Coakley, 2009), thereby intensifying the stakes of these activities. As one of the most popular extracurricular activities for youth (Guèvremont, Findlay, & Kohen, 2008), organized sport may be an ideal setting to promote positive youth development (Fraser Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). Therefore, the Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA), a national non-profit organization was developed in 1998 to provide positive character building experiences, which to date has impacted over 8.6 million youth stakeholders through collaborative efforts with schools and sport organizations (PCA, 2016). Given the rising popularity of youth sport participation, the high stakes faced by all stakeholders involved in youth sports, and the widespread educational initiatives of PCA, the purpose of our research was to evaluate the perceived organizational climate (performance, hostile, and communication) and how it relates to student-athletes’ youth sport experience.

Sport participation is widely believed to positively impact sportsmanship, health, academic goals, psychosocial behaviors, and moral character (Merkel, 2013; Staurowsky, et al., 2009; Taliaferro, Rienzo, Miller, Pigg, & Dodd, 2008). However, these gains cannot be assumed without the facilitation by a positive role model. Accordingly, negative sport environments facilitated, directly or indirectly, by adults results in high levels of stress, anxiety, and negative social behaviors. Additionally, sport participation has perceived challenges with inherent risk of injury, medical costs, family burden, and antisocial behaviors stemming from specialization in sport (Callender, 2012; Merkel, 2013; SHAPE, 2016). One way to study the changes and impacts occurring in organized youth sport is by examining the organizational climate and how it relates to processes and outcomes. While management and higher education literature have revealed the influence of organizational climates on organizational effectiveness, and employee satisfaction, commitment, and retention (Guzley, 1992; Schulz, 2013; Thompson, 2005), limited research investigating the influence of climates on the youth sport experience has been conducted.

For the purpose of this research, three organizational climates (performance, hostile, and communication) were selected. A performance oriented climate reflects a “pressuring, ego investing environment” (Ommundsen, Lemyre, Abrahamsen, & Roberts, 2013, p. 8) where individuals feel compelled to succeed and avoid failure (Roberts, 2012; Wang & Biddle, 2007). In a performance climate, the coach typically uses social comparisons and external criteria to determine success (Ommundsen et al., 2013), which hampers communication, helpfulness and encourages power differences (Deutsch, 2006). As such, the increased stakes of organized youth sports may create a performance climate with a win-at-all-cost mentality creating tension amongst team members. Therefore, we posited the following hypotheses:

H1a: A performance climate will have a significant negative relationship on a student-athlete’s sport experience.
H1b: A performance climate will have a significant negative relationship on a student-athlete’s team satisfaction.

When aversive social situations with aggressive behavior (see Dietz, Robinson, Folger, Baron, & Schulz, 2003; Glomb & Liao, 2003) or acts of deviance (Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998) occur, stressful environments are created (Restubog, Scott, & Zagnencyk, 2011). Therefore, if the aversive situation becomes commonplace, a hostile climate, characterized by antagonistic, acrimonious feelings among group members may emerge (Mawritz et al., 2012). In youth sport, a hostile climate may create a stressful environment and experience. Thus, the following
hypotheses were posited:

H2a: A hostile climate will have a significant negative relationship on a student-athlete’s sport experience.
H2b: A hostile climate will have a significant negative relationship on a student-athlete’s team satisfaction.

Compared to a performance or hostile climate where stressful environments are created by poor supportive interactions (Deutsch, 2006; Eys et al., 2003), a communication climate promoting a cooperative environment with information and support flowing may yield more positive sport experiences and team satisfaction. In particular, a communication climate includes an environment where a coach ensures role communication and teammates encourage cooperation through communication (Eys et al., 2003). As such, we posited the following hypotheses:

H3a: A communication climate will have a significant positive relationship on a student-athlete’s sport experience.
H3b: A communication climate will have a significant positive relationship on a student-athlete’s team satisfaction.

This research study examined five high schools in the Southeastern region of the US. High school student-athletes (N = 459) participated in a paper survey. The survey instrument was adopted and adapted from existing scales on team satisfaction (Walling, Duda, & Chi, 1993), youth sport experience (Hansen & Larson, 2005) and climates (Buss & Perry, 2014; Seifriz, Duda, & Chi, 1992; Vartia, 1996). Data analysis for the hypotheses utilized regression. Significant results revealed support for H1b, H2b, H3a, and H3b revealing both performance ($\beta = -.10, p = .00$) and hostile climates ($\beta = -.22, p = .00$) have negative significant relationships on a student-athlete’s team satisfaction, while a communication climate has a positive significant relationship on a student-athlete’s team satisfaction ($\beta = .32, p = .00$) and youth sport experience ($\beta = .13, p = .00$).

Similar to management and higher education environments (Guzley, 1992; Schulz, 2013; Thompson, 2005), student-athletes are influenced by the climates created by coaches, administrators, parents, and peers. As such, the character building training is important for all stakeholders. Future research should include comparisons of organizational climates based on level of sport and other evaluation of possible mediators such as trust or moral conduct. Additionally, longitudinal research measuring effectiveness of workshops, such as PCA, should be conducted in an effort to examine the changes in climates.