

EXPLORING THE VALUE AND IMPACT OF HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS
THROUGH THE LENS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

by

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Dedication

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity to reexamine many of the research findings associated with high school athletics. Utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, specifically an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, the research evaluated commonly held theories and beliefs associated with high school sports. Focusing on the lived experiences of nine high school administrators, through semi-structured interviews, the researcher identified possible opportunities to enhance the positive impact of high school athletics. The study analyzed the validity of the zero-sum (Coleman, 1961), developmental perspective (Holland & Andre, 1987) and commitment-to-school (Marsh, 1992) theories. The study investigated the impact of the pandemic on student-athletes regarding participation rates, academic performance, school attendance, student discipline, development of life skills, mental health, and collegiate athletic opportunities. At the institutional level, the research explored how the pandemic affected school policy as well as the perceived importance of high school sports among the community, school leaders, student-athletes, and parents. The study supports many of the existing positive outcomes identified in the literature associated with athletic participation. The research also found that the value of athletics was high prior to, during and after the pandemic. How this value was manifested in student and parent behavior changed significantly during the pandemic. The study demonstrates and reinforces the substantial role that athletics can have on the mental health of students. The impact of the pandemic on participation was mixed based on timing and age of students. Few lasting policy changes associated with athletics were implemented as a result of the pandemic.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| Problem Statement | 4 |
| Purpose Statement..... | 6 |
| Research Questions..... | 7 |
| Theoretical Framework..... | 8 |
| Definitions..... | 10 |
| Assumptions..... | 14 |
| Delimitations..... | 14 |
| Limitations | 17 |
| Significance..... | 17 |
| Conclusion | 20 |
| CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW | 22 |
| Introduction..... | 22 |
| Level of Participation in High School Athletics..... | 24 |
| Academic Impact | 25 |
| Academics, Negative Impact | 25 |
| Academics, Positive Impact..... | 26 |
| Impact on Student Behavior and Personal Experiences | 28 |
| Impact on the Development of Life Skills | 29 |
| Identifying as an Athlete, Collegiate and Professional Potential..... | 31 |
| Long-Term Impact of Athletic Participation | 34 |
| Impact on Academic Institution and Larger Community | 34 |
| High School Athletic Environment During the 2020-21 School Year | 35 |
| Mental and Physical Impact of the Restriction of Athletics During COVID-19..... | 40 |
| Student’s Self-Identification as an Athlete During a Pandemic | 43 |
| Resumption of Athletics During the COVID-19 Pandemic | 44 |
| Conclusion | 46 |
| CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY | 48 |
| Introduction..... | 48 |
| Design and Rationale | 48 |
| IPA as Method | 48 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Researcher Role | 50 |
| Participants..... | 52 |
| Instrumentation, Procedure and Data Collection | 53 |
| Data Analysis | 54 |
| Validity and Reliability | 55 |
| Ethics..... | 55 |
| Conclusion | 57 |
| CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS | 58 |
| Introduction..... | 58 |
| Setting and Data Collection | 58 |
| Participant Demographics..... | 60 |
| Findings..... | 62 |
| Themes..... | 63 |
| The Importance and Value of High School Athletics..... | 63 |
| <i>In the School</i> | 64 |
| <i>Professional and Personal Perspective</i> | 65 |
| <i>In the Community</i> | 68 |
| <i>Parents of Student-Athletes</i> | 70 |
| <i>Student-Athletes</i> | 72 |
| Impact on Students..... | 75 |
| <i>Life Skills</i> | 75 |
| <i>Identifying as an Athlete</i> | 78 |
| <i>Collegiate Athletic Impact</i> | 79 |
| <i>Mental Health</i> | 82 |
| Impact on School Operation | 83 |
| <i>Attendance</i> | 86 |
| Discipline, Participation, School Policies and Coaches..... | 88 |
| <i>Discipline</i> | 89 |
| <i>Participation</i> | 90 |
| <i>School Policies</i> | 92 |
| <i>Coaches</i> | 94 |
| Analysis..... | 95 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| The Importance of and Evolving Value of Athletics | 95 |
| <i>Administrators</i> | 96 |
| <i>The Community</i> | 98 |
| <i>Parents</i> | 100 |
| <i>Summary</i> | 101 |
| The Student-Athlete | 102 |
| <i>Value of Athletics</i> | 102 |
| <i>Life Skills</i> | 104 |
| <i>Collegiate Athletic Opportunity, Impact at the High School Level</i> | 106 |
| <i>Mental Health</i> | 108 |
| School Operations..... | 109 |
| <i>Academics</i> | 110 |
| <i>Attendance</i> | 116 |
| <i>Discipline</i> | 118 |
| <i>Participation</i> | 120 |
| <i>School Policies</i> | 122 |
| Connection to the Theoretical Framework | 123 |
| Validity and Reliability..... | 126 |
| Credibility | 126 |
| Transferability..... | 126 |
| Dependability | 128 |
| Confirmability..... | 128 |
| Conclusion | 129 |
| CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION..... | 130 |
| Introduction..... | 130 |
| Answering the Research Questions | 130 |
| RQ 1: What are the lived experiences of principals and/or athletic directors before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic considering the value and perception of high school athletics? | 130 |
| RQ 2: How did the lived experiences of high school principals and athletic directors before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic affirm or contradict the perceived value and impact of high school athletics as established in the literature? | 131 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| RQ 3: How did high school principals and athletic directors experience changes, if any, in the way their respective students, families, coaches, and/or community viewed and/or valued athletics before, during, or after the COVID-19 pandemic? | 135 |
| RQ 4: How did the lived experiences of high school principals and athletic directors before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, change or alter their respective view on high school athletics, if at all?..... | 137 |
| <i>RSQ 1: How did the lived experiences of high school principals and athletic directors during the COVID-19 pandemic change or alter school policy related to athletics, if at all?</i> | 138 |
| Implications..... | 139 |
| The Perceived Importance and Value of Participation in High School Athletics..... | 139 |
| Holistic Research Theories Associated with Participation in High School Athletics | 140 |
| Potential Benefits for Students Associated with Participation in High School Athletics ... | 141 |
| Sudden Loss of Access to Athletics..... | 142 |
| Participation Levels | 144 |
| Impact on the School and School Community | 145 |
| <i>Policy Changes</i> | 145 |
| <i>Community Impact</i> | 146 |
| Recommendations..... | 147 |
| In Practice | 147 |
| <i>Administrators</i> | 147 |
| <i>Parents</i> | 151 |
| <i>Students</i> | 151 |
| In Future Research | 152 |
| Conclusion | 154 |
| REFERENCES | 158 |
| APPENDICIES | 189 |
| Appendix A..... | 190 |
| Appendix B..... | 191 |
| Appendix C..... | 193 |
| Appendix D..... | 196 |

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Athletic programs are a significant component of the high school experience for many students. Over 7.6 million high school students participated in sports in the 2021-22 school year (Sparks, 2022). Research by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, spanning from 1991 to 2019, found that over 57% of high school students participated in at least one school or community sport within the past year (Riser-Kositsky & Peele, 2022). Earlier research indicates that as many as 66% of high school students participate in some type of athletic activity (Duffett et al., 2004). Nearly half of high school students participate in an athletic program directly affiliated with their school (Lieblein, 2016; Pierce et al., 2020; Pruter, 2013). As a result of the time and resources invested in athletics, as well as the attention they receive in popular culture, much research has been dedicated to determining the impact of sport on the student, school and community at large. Over time, the research has evolved from an overall view of sports as a type of zero-sum, positive or negative only outcome (Coleman, 1961; Davis, 2009; Eitzen, 1975; Solberg, 1970), towards evaluating athletics based on specific outcomes, such as academic performance (Camiré et al., 2013; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fejgin, 1994; Knifsend & Graham, 2011; Lipscomb, 2007; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1990), behavior (Denham, 2014; Spruit et al., 2016) and the development of life skills (Pierce et al., 2020; Sturges et al., 2020; Yeung, 2015). Some researchers have also investigated the impact of sports based on specific demographic data such as race and sex (Adeyemo, 2019; Beamon & Bell, 2002; Denham, 2014; Eide & Ronan, 2001; Harper, 2016; Shifrer et al., 2015; Snyder and Spreitzer, 1990). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the experience of student-athletes and provides current researchers with a unique opportunity to examine some of the theories associated with athletic participation in a new light.

One of the earliest formal examinations of the impact of high school athletics was conducted by Coleman, in 1961. He argued that sports run counter to the goals and objectives of a school. This view is often referred to as the *zero-sum* model. Others identified a more positive impact of sport, known as the *developmental perspective* (Holland & Andre, 1987), which highlights the impact of sports beyond purely academic measures and outcomes. A third view, the *identification/commitment model* or *commitment-to-school* (Marsh, 1992), argues that athletics can promote and accomplish academic and non-academic objectives.

Other researchers have explored the impact of sport on specific factors such as student behavior (Denham, 2014; Spruit et al., 2016), attendance (McMahan, 2020), substance use (Denham, 2014), perceived future achievement in sports in the collegiate and/or professional ranks (Beamon and Bell, 2002; Harrison, 2000), college-bound behavior and enrollment (Dawkins et al., 2008; Shifrer et al., 2015), and overall health (Johnson, 2018; Meeteer et al., 2016). Others have taken the research a step further by exploring the impact of athletics within specific demographic groups by controlling for factors including but not limited to sex, race, and specific sport, as well as the level of participation (Adeyemo, 2019; Haprer, 2016; Snyder and Spretixer, 1990). Collectively, this work suggests that the impact of sport, both positive and negative, is not consistent across all sports or subgroups.

The COVID-19 pandemic that gripped much of the world from early 2020 through 2021 created an opportunity for researchers to explore some of the commonly held perceptions associated with athletics in the high school environment. In March of 2020, all schools in the state of Michigan were ordered to pause in-person learning for three weeks as a result of COVID-19 (Exec. Order 2020-05). Ultimately, the remainder of the 2019-20 school year would be completed with students learning from home, virtually or via paper packets sent home, with

all extracurricular events, including athletics, being cancelled (Executive Order No. 2020-35; Michigan High School Athletic Association, 2020a; Kimmerly, 2020)

The 2020-21 school year in Michigan began as scheduled, with some schools opting to utilize in-person learning, a hybrid approach, or virtual learning (Higgins, 2020). Some districts, including mainly in the cities of Detroit and Flint, remained virtual and did not offer any significant in-person learning for substantial portions of the school year (Barrett & Gibbons, 2022, Johnson, 2021, Wisely, 2021). Athletic activities resumed in the fall, but in a highly modified environment. The Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) issued 37 updates from June of 2020 through June of 2021, in an effort to ensure member schools were aware of and following the appropriate protocols and policy (Michigan High School Athletic Association, n.d.).

During the entire 2020-21 academic year, various state mandates and orders placed limits on practice and competitions, required masks for every sport in some form, and limited spectator capacity (Uyl, 2020b, 2020d, 2020e, 2020f, 2020g) (Uyl, 2021a, 2021d, 2021e, 2021g). At various points throughout the 2020-21 academic year, student-athletes and coaches were required to participate in weekly COVID-19 testing. (Executive Order 2020-180; MDHHS, 2021c; Thompson, 2021). In addition to specific orders related to athletics, high schools across the state were required to move to virtual learning for a portion of the 2020-21 academic year. The pause in in-person learning for grades 9 through 12 resulted in the cancelation of high school athletics for over a month (Emergency Order, November 18, 2020; Uyl, 2020i). In addition to disruptions associated with state mandates and orders, teams and student-athletes experienced individual game cancellations and forfeits due to positive cases of and/or close contact to an individual that tested positive for COVID-19 (DeCamp, 2020).

The 2021-22 academic year witnessed sports proceeding free from large-scale interruptions, restrictions, or athletic specific testing mandates by the state. Students were still subject to potential quarantine due to exposure to a presumed positive case and/or isolation based on contraction of COVID-19. As a result, forfeits and cancelations of athletic contests were not uncommon (Nothhaft, 2021).

The three academic year span of 2019-20 to 2021-22 provides a unique opportunity to reassess the perception, value and impact of athletics at the high school level. The study found that sports continue to have a high value among many stakeholder groups during and after the pandemic. How stakeholders displayed the value that athletics held shifted during and again after the pandemic. Athletics can have a significant impact on the mental health of high school student-athletes. Overall, the pandemic had a minimal impact on participation at the high school level. Few new athletic policies emerged from or were instituted because of the lived experience of high school principals and/or athletic directors during the pandemic. Many of the positive effects of participating in high school sports were supported in the findings of this study. It is the author's hope that this research will assist in improving the experience of the student-athlete, the school, community, and other stakeholders in relation to high school athletics.

Problem Statement

Across the United States and specifically in Michigan, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted K-12 education unlike any event perhaps since the Spanish flu of 1918-1920. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students across Michigan experienced periods of remote learning as the result of mandates by the state government and/or agencies, decisions at the local district level, or by parental choice. During the pandemic, even when in-person learning was available, students faced a nearly constant threat of interruptions to their typical school experience due to

required periods of quarantine and/or isolation. The impact of COVID-19 was not limited to the traditional 6 or 7 class periods associated with a typical high school day. High school athletics experienced greater disruption, modifications and monitoring than the academic component of school operations. Seasons were subject to extended postponements, cancellation, and/or delays (Calloway, 2020, 2021; Fominykh, 2021, Novak; 2020). At times, in-person learning was permitted when athletics were prohibited (Kolade, 2021). Student-athletes were subject to testing when non-student-athletes were not (Associated Press, 2021; McCabe, 2021a; Thompson, 2021; Uyl, 2020j). The potential and in many cases actual impact for student-athletes, was compounded by the loss not only to in-person learning, but also access to extracurricular activities and the benefits associated with each.

In the fall of 2020, the ability of schools to conduct athletic competitions was subject to COVID-19 metrics in specific regions of the state. Schools in some areas of the state could hold competitions in specific sports, while schools in other regions could not. Indoor school athletic facilities were open in some parts of the state and closed in others (Uyl, 2020d). For a period of time, non-contact sports were permitted, but contact sports were restricted. (MDHHS, 2020). During a portion of the pandemic, with the exception of swimming, student-athletes were required to wear a mask. In contact sports, participants were required to wear face masks during play (Executive Order 2020-180; Uyl, 2020f). In non-contact sports, masks were required when social distancing could not be maintained, such as on a bus, in a dugout or on the bench, but not during play (Uyl, 2021e).

In late winter/early spring of 2021 when all sports were allowed to resume after a multi-week pause, in order to participate, student-athletes 13 to 18-years-old and adults associated with an athletic team were required to undergo COVID testing at least once a week during the season

or be within 90 days of a COVID-19 diagnosis (MDHHS, 2021c). The testing program for student-athletes and coaches were often conducted on school grounds and by school staff. The testing and reporting process could require a significant time commitment by school staff (Chambers & Goricki, 2021; Emons, 2021).

While the primary population impacted by these specific aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic was student-athletes, many other segments of the population associated with high school athletics were adversely affected. Parents, coaches, principals, athletic directors, fans of sport, and school communities were also impacted. This study examined the lived experiences of high school principals and athletic directors as it related to athletics before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This specific portion of the affected population was selected based on the goal of the study; to explore how the pandemic may have changed, modified or reinforced commonly held theories and beliefs related to high school athletics. Focusing on administrators who were in place before, during, and after the pandemic allowed the researcher to examine this topic from a consistent perspective throughout the entire time period under review. To accomplish this goal, the researcher implemented a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, specifically incorporating an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. The research reviewed some of the commonly held theories and beliefs associated with high school athletics in an effort to provide the best possible outcome for all stakeholders.

Purpose Statement

The goal of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological methodology study, specifically incorporating an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, was to describe, illuminate, and better understand the lived experiences of high school principals and athletic directors, as it related to high school athletics, before, during and after the COVID-19

pandemic. The findings highlight the impact of high school athletics during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research also addressed if and how the findings from existing literature on athletics remained consistent before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This work adds new discoveries to the established research related to the impact of high school athletics. Ultimately, it is the hope of the researcher that this work will help high school administrators create an environment that can accentuate and expand the positive aspects of participation in high school athletics while limiting or mitigating the potential negative outcomes.

Research Questions

RQ 1: What are the lived experiences of principals and/or athletic directors before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic considering the value and perception of high school athletics?

RQ 2: How did the lived experiences of high school principals and athletic directors before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic affirm or contradict the perceived value and impact of high school athletics as established in the literature?

RQ 3: How did high school principals and athletic directors experience changes, if any, in the way their respective students, families, coaches, and/or community viewed and/or valued athletics before, during, or after the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ 4: How did the lived experiences of high school principals and athletic directors before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, change or alter their respective view on high school athletics, if at all?

RSQ 1: How did the lived experiences of high school principals and athletic directors during the COVID-19 pandemic change or alter school policy related to athletics, if at all?

Theoretical Framework

This study attempted to understand the experience of high school principals and athletic directors, as it relates to high school athletics, before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher implemented a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, specifically incorporating an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. The phenomenological approach originates from the work of Edmund Husserl. Husserl first proposed phenomenology as a philosophy, not a specific approach to research (Urcia, 2021). Husserl argued that nothing should be assumed or taken for granted when trying to understand a phenomenon (Peoples, 2021). A Husserlian approach focuses on description of the phenomenon from those who experienced it, without offering interpretations. It also requires that the researcher bracket (or epoche) his or her own preconceived notions and/or experiences out of the study (Creswell, 2013; Marjan, 2017). A Husserlian approach was not ideal for this research for three key reasons. First, the researcher intended to use the findings to interpret the meaning of the phenomenon and offer possible lessons learned by those who experienced the phenomenon. Second, the researcher was also a practitioner in the field of high school education and therefore athletics. The researcher's experience in the field benefited the review and analysis of the evidence. Third, the researcher proposed possible enhancements to the field of high school athletics that were identified through this process. Therefore, it was appropriate to utilize a different methodological approach that falls under the phenomenology category.

Martin Heidegger built on the work of Husserl, but Heidegger's work differs in one key aspect. Heidegger's philosophical approach, known as *hermeneutic*, argued that it is impossible to bracket or separate one's experience from those of another, because all people coexist in the world. Heidegger referred to this state of being as *Dasein* (Peoples, 2021). Because one cannot

separate him/herself from an event, Heidegger believed that past experiences and preconceptions, which he referred to as *foresight*, would influence any understanding of a phenomenon. Therefore, all descriptions of a phenomenon, according to Heidegger's approach, are also interpretations of the event (Burn & Peacock, 2019). A hermeneutic approach allows a researcher to work together with those who experienced the phenomenon to find and develop meaning and context related to the event being studied (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). This occurs through the philosophical approach known as the *hermeneutic circle*. When applying this approach to research, the use of the hermeneutic circle allows the researcher to study the whole subject to gain a better understanding of smaller parts of the phenomenon. An improved understanding of the minor aspects of the event can then in turn shape the researcher's understanding of the entire phenomenon (Peoples, 2021).

Building on the work of Heidegger, Jonathan Smith developed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. The IPA approach focuses on studying how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences. Researchers use this approach to "...attempt to understand what it is like to stand in the shoes of [the] subject..." (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 362). Similar to Heidegger and the concept of the hermeneutic circle, IPA often utilizes a *double hermeneutic* or dual interpretation approach (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). In this setting, the interpretation of the subject who experienced the phenomenon and that of the researcher, are equally important because both experiences contribute to and enhance the overall understanding of the event. The IPA lens also incorporates the theory of *ideography*, which calls for an in-depth analysis of single cases and individual experiences in their unique setting. The researcher reviewed individual cases to better understand each specific experience and then

compared and contrasted each case against the others, to identify similarities and differences among the group (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Definitions

The following terms are used throughout this study and are defined here to reduce the possibility that they will be misinterpreted or that the findings of this study will be misapplied. Merriam-Webster online dictionary was used for each of the following terms. A “high school” is defined as “a school especially in the U.S. usually including grades 9–12 or 10-12.” A “principal” is defined as “a person who has controlling authority or is in a leading position: such as...the chief executive officer of an educational institution.” A “pandemic” is defined as “an outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area (such as multiple countries or continents) and typically affects a significant proportion of the population: a pandemic outbreak of a disease.”

For the purpose of this study the use and meaning of the words “before,” “during” and “after” the COVID-19 pandemic must be clearly defined. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). The term “before” as related to the COVID-19 pandemic, was applied to any time prior to March 11, 2020. The term “during” as related to the COVID-19 pandemic, was applied only from March 11, of 2020 to July 1, of 2021. The later portion of the 2019-20 school year and the entirety of the 2020-21 academic year, including related athletic events, was considered to have occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the purpose of this study, the end of the pandemic was established by the ability of schools in Michigan to carry out high school athletics in a fashion that generally resembles pre-pandemic conditions. The term “after” was applied to any event that occurred from July 1, 2021,

and forward. A July 1, 2021, end date meant for the purposes of this research, the 2021-22 academic school year and beyond are considered post pandemic.

The selection of July 1, 2021, as an end date for the COVID-19 pandemic was based on a number of factors that enabled athletics in the 2021-22 academic year to operate in a mode that was more representative of the pre-pandemic environment. On June 22, 2021, any Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) orders that placed requirements and/or restrictions on athletics expired (Uyl, 2021g). In the 2021-22 school year, testing programs and vaccines were available for a majority of the year. These conditions significantly reduced the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on high school student-athletes in terms of school absences as a result of quarantine and/or isolation. In the fall of 2021, schools in Michigan began to have the option of using a testing regimen that allowed students and staff that were considered a close contact to a COVID-19 positive individual, to remain in school if they tested negative (Bennett, 2021). Students and staff that tested positive were still required to isolate. In late August of 2021, vaccines became available for those 16 and over. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Quarantine policies, established by individual county health departments, also became more diverse and flexible based on vaccination status and participation in the test-to-stay program. There were zero state-wide mandates pausing in-person instruction or athletic activity during the 2021-22 academic year. While COVID-19 still impacted schools in the 2021-2022 school year, it was at a significantly lower level than the final three plus months of the 2019-2020 and entire 2020-21 academic years.

The United States and WHO declared an end to the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2023. In a statement released on February 10, 2023, President Biden indicated that he anticipated ending the national emergency related to the COVID-19 pandemic on May 11, 2023

(The United States Government, 2023). Officially, the United States ended the COVID-19 national emergency on April 10, 2023 (Miller, 2023). The WHO ended the global health emergency associated with COVID-19 on May 5, 2023 (Person, & Rigby, 2023).

Some terms frequently used in this work are not defined in the common dictionary. The term “athletic director” is intended to refer to the individual most directly responsible for the supervision and execution of high school athletics associated with a specific high school. The athletic director most commonly reports to the high school principal. The terms “high school athletics” and/or “high school sports” are used interchangeably throughout this work. For the purpose of this research, “high school athletics” and/or “high school sports” refers to teams, student-athletes, athletic activities, competitions and/or associated events that involve primarily high school students participating on a school sanctioned team. (In some instances, middle school students are eligible to participate in high school sports.) The term “student-athlete” refers to a student that is participating in a school sanctioned athletic program and/or team.

The term “contact sport,” in the context of regulation and requirements associated with various COVID-19 state orders and mandates was defined by the MDHHS (2021c) as “sports involving more than occasional and fleeting contact, including: football; basketball; rugby; field hockey; soccer; lacrosse; wrestling; hockey; boxing; futsal; martial arts with opponents; and other sports meeting those criteria.”

The terms of “virtual” and “remote” related to instruction for the purpose of this research, is intended to refer to any period when a school was unable to provide, or a student was unable to or choose not to access instruction in a traditional setting within a school building. During the period of time of this study, virtual or remote learning occurred as the result of state mandates and orders, decisions by district/school leadership, parental choice as well as due to the isolation

and quarantining of students. The actual format or delivery method of instruction under a virtual and/or remote setting is not investigated or addressed in this work.

The Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) defines itself as “a private, not-for-profit corporation of voluntary membership by over 1,500 public and private senior high schools and junior high/middle schools which exists to develop common rules for athletic eligibility and competition” (Michigan High School Athletic Association. n.d.). In most cases in this work, high school teams, as well as specific high school sports and seasons referred to generally operate as voluntary members of various leagues as well as the MHSAA. It should be noted that not all high school sports are governed by the MHSAA. For a vast majority of the pandemic, all amateur sports, leagues, and organizations such as the MHSAA, travel sports and AAU were subject to state orders and mandates.

The data analysis associated with the research is based on the work of Peoples (2021). According to Peoples, “phenomenological data analysis is the process of transcending the mundane nature to reveal the essence of the phenomenon” (p. 58). One aspect of the data analysis process recommended by Peoples calls for the creation of “meaning units.” Peoples’ use of the term “meaning units” is based on the work of Giorgi (1985). Peoples (2021) defines a meaning unit as “the allocation piece of data that reveals a feature or trait of the phenomenon being investigated” (p. 60). Meaning units are established and determined by the individual researcher by reviewing the data and dividing it into smaller, more manageable parts, to allow for a more detailed analysis. The data, divided into smaller units is referred to as “meaning units.” (Englander & Morley, 2021, Giorgi & Giorgi, n.d.). In a flow chart demonstrating the steps of a descriptive phenomenological psychology method, Giorgi and Giorgi (n.d.) establish that “a meaning unit is determined whenever R [researcher], in a psychological perspective and

mindful of the phenomenon being researched, experiences a transition meaning when he or she rereads the description from the beginning (p. 254). For the purpose of this work, one can read “meaning unit” as “theme.”

Assumptions

It was assumed that COVID-19 had a predominantly negative impact on the operation of the K-12 educational environment. It was assumed that the subjects included in this study want to create and provide the best experience for students. This includes but is not limited to, providing the best possible learning environment as well as access to enriching extracurricular activities. It was assumed that athletic directors in particular see high school sports as an especially important and positive aspect of the high school experience and community. It was assumed that the lived experiences of principals and athletic directors will see the restriction of in-person learning and extracurricular activities as having a net negative outcome. Finally, it is assumed that during the pandemic, principals and athletic directors were engaged in a high degree of collaboration and communication related to various policies and/or restrictions regarding high school instruction and extracurricular activities.

Delimitations

The first and most important delimitation is the subject group of the study. The researcher opted to include principals as well as athletic directors. While the experience of principals and athletic directors were and are unique in their own right, given the nature of this study, the researcher believes it was appropriate to include both positions in the study for two specific reasons. First, portions of the study compared various characteristics associated with the experience and performance of high school student-athletes and non-athletes. Given the nature of the athletic director position, athletic directors likely spent most of their time engaged

primarily with student-athletes. Limiting the sample only to athletic directors would have potentially created a research environment where the experiences of non-athletes would not have been adequately represented in the study. This condition would have significantly limited the ability of the researcher to explore and understand what, if any, differences existed between athletes and non-athletes. To truly test some of the theories and beliefs associated with participation in high school athletics, it was essential to ensure that non-athletes and their experiences before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic were intentionally integrated into the study.

Secondly, it is the researcher's belief that as members of school administration leadership teams, principals and athletic directors were and are often involved in close collaboration regarding school policy. The researcher believes that this was especially true during the pandemic. For these two reasons, even when accounting for the individual responsibilities and lived experiences of principals and athletic directors, given the nature of the study and the high potential for shared experiences among both positions, the researcher felt comfortable including both roles in the sample group.

In addition to specific job duties, only principals and athletic directors that were in place before, during, and after the pandemic, in relatively the same position and building were included in the sample. This delimitation ensured that subjects had similar time frames from which to draw their lived experiences. It also ensured a basic level of consistency among the institutional settings of the lived experiences of participants during the time period examined in the study. Finally, this delimitation ensured the researcher more fully uncovered, highlighted and understood the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on high school sports over a sustained period. To gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was helpful

to be able to compare and contrast what may have changed as educational leaders lived through the pre (before), during, and post (after) pandemic period.

The researcher chose not to include student-athletes and coaches as participants. Given the stated intent of this study of examining the value and impact of high school athletics, focusing on principals and athletic directors ensured that the lived experiences of participants reasonably covered all sports, teams and athletics seasons consistently and evenly. The lived experiences of student-athletes and coaches, depending on the level (freshman, junior varsity, varsity), season of participation (fall, winter, spring), and academic year, varied widely based on the level of COVID-19 related restrictions in place at a given time. Additionally, given the methodology used in this study, to ensure reasonable coverage throughout the time period reviewed, the inclusion of student-athletes and coaches required a sample size beyond what is generally considered appropriate for an IPA based study.

A second delimitation was the geographic locations of the schools and administrators in the study. During the early stages of and throughout the pandemic, the Michigan state government issued executive and/or emergency orders that placed restrictions on the operation of schools. Therefore, to ensure that the sample was relatively homogenous, it was necessary to limit participants to those who served as administrators within the state of Michigan. It should be noted that local health departments also had the authority to issue orders limiting the operation of schools. There are no instances that the author is aware of, when orders issued by county health departments significantly impacted the operation of schools related to this study.

A third delimitation that impacted this study is the operational modes of the schools in the 2020-21 academic year. As a result of emergency and/or executive orders, decisions by school boards and/or administrators, student and/or parent choice, the mode of instruction varied

by school. In some instances, the instructional mode varied by student within a specific school. Some schools in the study only offered remote instruction for significant portions of the 2020-21 academic year. Other schools provided in-person and/or remote options. The operating mode of some schools limited the degree and frequency of contact among administrators, coaches, students, and parents.

Limitations

There were two primary limitations on this research. First, the sample size was limited to what is generally considered appropriate for a phenomenological study using an IPA approach. (Alase, 2017; Frechette, et al., 2020; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Urcia, 2021). The author included eight schools in the study, resulting in nine study participants. Second, given the author's past and current professional work, it was possible that the subjects may have had previous contact and interactions with the author. The study did not include subjects that had past or current professional reporting responsibilities with or to the author.

Significance

The results of this study can help all stakeholders have a deeper and richer understanding of the value and impact of high school athletics. This work allowed the researcher to review some commonly held theories and beliefs, both positive and negative, associated with high school sports. Anyone involved in athletics, including but not limited to student-athletes, parents, administrators, teachers, coaches, and fans, stand to benefit from this study.

In sheer volume, the single largest population that stands to benefit from this work is high school students. While this study focused on athletics, the impact of school closure, the restriction of in-person learning and/or extracurricular activities can be helpful in better understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on all students. The potential impact on

the restriction of other forms of extracurricular activities beyond sports, such as band and theater, may also be gleaned from this study. Within the high school student population, student-athletes are likely to benefit most from this study. As many as 66% of high school students participate in some type of athletic activity (Duffett et al., 2004). A study spanning 28 years by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found that over 57% of high school students participated in a school or community sports team within the past year (Riser-Kositsky & Peele, 2022). A more developed understanding of high school athletics has the potential to improve the experiences of virtually all high school students.

Ultimately, high school student-athletes are subject to the action and decisions of those who oversee schools on the operational, academic, and athletic levels. Helping adults charged with managing high schools, specifically athletics, will, it is the author's hope, lead to better decision making, resource allocation, as well as policy development and enforcement. In a typical (non-pandemic) environment, athletic directors and principals assume the greatest operational responsibility for high school athletics. The findings of this study can be used by school administrators to best serve their students, both athletes and non-athletes alike. The emotional and psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as experienced and witnessed by administrators in this study, can highlight the importance of the school setting and extracurricular activities in particular. Using the pandemic to examine some of the theories and beliefs commonly associated with high school athletics can help administrators review and improve the athletic environment, culture, and policies in their respective buildings.

At the school level, beyond the students, principals and athletic directors, coaches, counselors, student support positions and teachers can also benefit from this study. Being more aware of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted a key facet of a typical high school can help us

better serve students who may have a similar experience in the future. While the COVID-19 pandemic is an extreme example, disruptions in an individual student's ability to participate in sports can occur on a regular basis for various reasons. Limitations associated with a season and/or career ending injury and eligibility requirements, such as academic standards and school transfer, are a few common examples. This work can help school staff be better positioned to support, respond, and limit the potential academic, social, and psychological impact on students that experience a significant disruption to their participation in athletics.

Those who create policies on any level, school, county, state, and federal, also stand to benefit from this work. This study creates an opportunity for superintendents and central office staff to reflect on the impact of the policies they implemented and carried out during the pandemic. This work will also serve those in volunteer and/or government positions, elected or appointed, to have a potentially stronger understanding of the impact of their actions and decisions. Governors, health department directors and school boards can more fully understand the impact of the stoppage of or limitations on in-person learning and extracurricular activities during the pandemic. Should we be faced with a similar health situation as COVID-19 in the future, this work can contribute to a deeper and better-informed cost analysis discussion of requiring the modification of, or outright cancellation, of in-person learning and/or extracurricular activities.

This study will also contribute to the existing research literature related to athletics and specifically high school athletics. The study and debate over the value and impact of high school athletics has been present in the research literature since at least the early 1960s with the work of Coleman (1961). The interest and research in this field has continued and evolved over the subsequent decades. This research will contribute to the next chapter in this ongoing academic

dialogue. This work will allow for a new analysis of some commonly held theories and beliefs associated with high school sports in a very unique setting. The COVID-19 pandemic created an environment that is nearly unprecedented in American history. Not since the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 has anything similar occurred in the United States. This study will document a phenomenon that has occurred on average less than once a century. Given the subject, this study and the associated findings are applicable and valuable under any setting.

Beyond a pandemic setting, even when looking at other significant disruptive events, there are few applicable comparisons in recent history. With the exception of military conflicts and/or natural disasters, there are few other scenarios under which a significant disruption to education and related activities has occurred. Even when the United States was actively engaged in military operations in the nineteenth through the early twenty-first century, the disruption to schools was rather limited in geographic and temporal nature when compared to COVID-19. While there have been many natural disasters that have impacted schools and athletics, the impact of these events is also often confined to specific locations and/or districts and is typically limited in duration when compared to the COVID-19 pandemic. The multi-academic and calendar year duration of the COVID-19 pandemic allowed the researcher to study this topic over an extended period of time, under somewhat similar conditions, across a wide geographic range. The pandemic impacted major portions of the high school population across the entire state of Michigan in ways rarely experienced or investigated.

Conclusion

Perhaps as many as two-thirds of high school students participate in some type of athletic activity (Duffett et al., 2004). A study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention spanning 28 years, found that over 57% of high school students participated in a school or

community sports team within the past year (Riser-Kositsky & Peele, 2022). The value of high school athletics has been debated by researchers since Coleman (1961) first posited the impact of high school sports. Since the 1960s, a wide range of findings, spanning from only negative outcomes (Coleman, 1961; Davis, 2009) to more recent suggestions that participation helps to develop important life skills (Pierce et al., 2020; Sturges et al., 2020; Yeung, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the educational and extracurricular landscape, at least in the state of Michigan, created a unique environment in which some of the commonly held theories and beliefs associated with high school sports can be re-evaluated and examined. The author used a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology study, specifically incorporating an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, to describe, illuminate, and better understand the lived experiences of high school principals and athletic directors, as it relates to high school athletics, before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Sports have been referred to as a “microcosm of our society,” reflecting the positive and negative aspects of our culture (Rasmussen, 1999). The literature on the role of athletics in a school setting is rich and multi-faceted. A plethora of arguments have emerged, establishing many pros and cons, to varying degrees, of athletic participation for the student-athlete, the school, and the larger community. Researchers have explored many topics including, but not limited to, student self-identifying as an athlete (Brewer, et al., 1993; Costa, et al., 2020; Cowie & Myers, 2021; Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006). impact on academic performance (Camiré et al., 2013; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fejgin, 1994; Knifsend & Graham, 2011; Lipscomb, 2007; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003; Rees & Sabia, 201; Santesmases, 2010; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1990), student connectedness to the school (Marsh, 1992), development of life skills through sports (Pierce et al., 2020; Sturges et al., 2020; Yeung, 2015), as well as impact on academic institutions and the community (Davis, 2009; Healy & Healy, 1976). Each of these aspects of the research has attempted to address the fundamental question that has driven a majority of the investigation in this area: does high school athletics detract from or support the goals of schools?

The literature on this matter will generally fall into one of three major theoretical categories. The most critical of athletics is the *zero-sum model*, based in part on the work of Coleman (1961), one of the first researchers to formally study school athletics. The zero-sum model argues that athletics are a distraction from the objectives of secondary education. More recently, Davis (2009) has taken a similar view as Coleman (1961), arguing that modern interscholastic athletics must change significantly if they are to have a positive impact. A more complimentary view known as *developmental perspective* (Holland & Andre, 1987), suggests

that athletics support the development of the non-academic aspects of a student. Finally, the *identification/commitment model* or *commitment-to-school* (Marsh, 1992), argues that athletics can promote and accomplish academic and non-academic objectives. Given the impact of COVID-19 on schools and extracurricular activities, we are uniquely positioned to test these major theoretical approaches regarding the impact and influence of athletics within the high school setting.

In addition to the three major theoretical categories previously described, a list of specific contexts in which the impact of athletics can be studied and evaluated has developed. For the purposes of the literature review, the author has structured the review to reflect the rough chronological experience of the student-athlete followed by the review of the impact of athletics on the academic institution and community at large. The review will begin with a brief review of the rate of student participation in high school athletics. Next, the impact of athletic participation on academic performance, behavior, the development of life skills, athletics beyond high school and the long-term impact of participation will be addressed. The review also includes an analysis of the impact of athletics and academic institutions and the community at large.

After establishing the historical context of athletics, the literature review will address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operation of high schools and high school athletics in the state of Michigan. This section will address the significant disruptions and restrictions associated with the mode of instruction (in-person, remote, or hybrid) and athletic programs at the high school level during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Next the literature review will address the potential psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic specific to athletes. Finally, a summary of various approaches and attempts related to the resumption of high school athletics during the COVID-19 will be explored.

Level of Participation in High School Athletics

Perhaps as many as two-thirds of high school students participate in some type of athletic activity (Duffett et al., 2004). In a study lasting nearly 30 years, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that over 57% of high school students participated in at least one school or community sport within the past year (Riser-Kositsky & Peele, 2022). Nearly half of all high school students, participate in officially recognized high school athletic programs (Lieblein, 2016; Pierce et al., 2020; Pruter, 2013). In 2018-2019, across the United States, nearly 8 million high school students participated in athletics. In Michigan, over 300,000 high school students participated in school sponsored athletics in the 2018-19 school year. In the 2021-22 academic year, over 270,000 students in Michigan were involved in high school athletics. Michigan ranked 8th in terms of total participants based on the 2018-19 and 2021-22 surveys conducted by the National Federation of State High School Associations (2019, 2022). (Surveys were not completed in 2019-20 and 2020-21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.) Given this data, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and its effects over the following two plus academic years, created a new opportunity for us to reexamine the role that sports do, can and should play in secondary education. To put it bluntly, “In a year of countless deaths and financial misery, how important is a game, where, for instance, people chase a ball” (How Covid Played with Sport, 2020, p. 1)? Prior to exploring the potential impact of a pandemic environment on the student-athlete, it is necessary to understand the operating realities of the K-12 environment in the state of Michigan during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Academic Impact

Academics, Negative Impact

The academic impact of participation in athletics has produced evidence to support a wide range of outcomes. At the high school level, it is common for states, athletic associations, and/or individual schools to have minimum academic standards to allow a student to participate in sports. The MHSAA requires that students to have passed 66% of their courses from the previous semester, as well as be passing 66% or their classes in the current semester, to be considered academically eligible to participate in high school athletics (Michigan High School Athletic Association, 2022b). The MHSAA did drop this requirement for the first semester of the 2020-21 school year. Schools were empowered to establish the academic eligibility of their students as each school saw fit (Michigan High School Athletic Association, 2020b).

In theory, a minimum academic requirement should motivate a student-athlete to perform at a reasonable level. Rees and Sabia (2010), using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (an in-home survey), as well as a variety of statistical techniques, believe that research arguing that athletic participation can improve academic performance is overstated. Some researchers have argued or highlighted to varying degrees, that academic gains accomplished by some student-athletes are a means to an end of maintaining eligibility and eventually, a professional sports career, rather than intellectual growth (Beamon & Bell, 2002; DeMeulenaere, 2010). A quantitative study by Santesmases (2010), consisting of a closed-ended questionnaire, found that students not involved in an extracurricular activity do not appear to commit more time to academics than students engaged in after school activities. This research suggests that removing a student from athletics is unlikely to result in a stronger commitment to academics. Taking the negative view a step further, Slone (2018) argues that student-athletes are

actually discriminated against and are at greater academic risk than traditional students because of these academic based eligibility standards. If the eligibility standards are not met, the student-athlete stands to lose access to essential academic, social-emotional, and health support systems available as a result of a student's participation in athletics.

Academics, Positive Impact

Many researchers have argued that students who participate in extracurricular activities, in particular athletics, experience academic benefits such as higher grades and higher academic aspirations (Camiré et al., 2013; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fejgin, 1994; ; Knifsend & Graham, 2011; Lipscomb, 2007; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1990). Many of these studies relied on quantitative data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) of 1988 or the High School and Beyond Survey. Broh (2002) and Marsh (1992) found a small but consistent academic benefit from participation in interscholastic sports. Kohl (2017), in a study of approximately 1,500 athletes, found that students that participate in multiple sports see a greater academic benefit than single-sport athletes. McMahan (2020) also found that student-athletes performed better academically. In a small case study, in contrast to the argument of Slone (2018), Starostka (2014) argued that eligibility requirements could be raised, which would result in an improved academic outcome. DeMeulenaere (2010) suggests that in environments where academic success may not be celebrated among peer groups, student-athletes can use grade requirements associated with eligibility to justify their performance without being criticized and avoid any social fallout associated with a strong performance in school.

In attempting to determine the potential academic impact beyond high school, O'Bryan, Braddock, and Dawkins (2008), use multiple regression and path analyses to argue that for males, participation on a varsity sport as a 10th grader is a positive predictor of college-bound

behavior such as completed the SAT, sought out college admission information, and applied to college. College bound behavior however, as Miricale and Reese (1994) note, does not automatically lead to college success or graduation. Shifrer et al. (2015) found that the impact of sports participation on college attendance was consistent from the 1980s through the 2000s. Student-athletes saw a six to eight percent higher rate of attendance than non-athletes. Shifrer et al. suggest that this may be more the result of a greater rate of sports participation among more advantaged students.

Further research on this topic has suggested that the positive academic impact of athletics may not be evenly distributed across all demographic groups. Eide and Ronan (2001), using High School and Beyond survey data, argue that white male students involved in sports may actually have lower educational goals than non-athletes. For white females and black males, the impact is overall more positive. The researchers could not determine any impact of athletic participation on Hispanic males or Black and Hispanic females. When controlling for three specific variables (socioeconomic status, parent-adolescent relations, and cognitive development) Snyder and Spreitzer (1990) found that White, Black, and most Hispanic student-athletes were more likely than their non-athlete counterparts to attend college. The one exception was for Hispanics from upper class homes, with positive parental relations and high cognitive development. This group tended to be less likely to attend college. Some research on college student-athletes suggests that African American males that participate in football and basketball are less likely to graduate than their white counterparts (Harper, 2016). In a small case study, Adeyemo (2019) found that African American student-athletes, from various backgrounds, displayed strong interest and goals in academics and athletics. In contrast to Harper (2016) and

Adeyemo (2019), Beamon and Bell (2002) found that African American student-athletes at the college level believe they will become professional athletes, have lower academic outcomes.

Impact on Student Behavior and Personal Experiences

The early research by Coleman (1961) on the impact of athletic participation highlighted how students and student-athletes preferred to be seen by their peers. Other researchers have approached this issue by exploring the potential of a connection between athletic participation and negative social choices and/or actions. Kohl (2017) found that absenteeism among student-athletes was typically lower than the general student population. The rate of absenteeism dropped even lower for multiple-sport athletes. McMahan (2020) found that students had better citizenship scores and better attendance when participating in a sport. This finding is supported by Kohl (2017) who found that student-athletes are less likely to be suspended than non-athletes. Furthermore, multi-sport athletes were less likely than single-sport athletes to be suspended.

Outside of the classroom, Spruit et al. (2016) reviewed 51 studies, representing a sample size of over 400, found that athletes were no more or less likely to have been found to engage in behavior that would label them as juvenile delinquents. The same review found that participation in sport did not contribute to delinquent behavior among student-athletes. In contrast, Denham (2014) found that both male and female high school student-athletes are more likely to engage in substance use than non-athletes.

Other researchers have found that athletic participation can result in negative and positive personal experiences and outcomes for participants. In a small case study, Kendellen and Camiré (2015) found, to varying degrees, that favoritism by coaches related to playing time and/or discipline, aggressive behavior, stress related to demanding schedule and prioritizing athletics over academics, were referenced by former student-athletes as negative experiences.

Garcia (2015) found that issues with coaches and injuries were the two most prevalent negative experiences reported by students. Oldenkamp (2012) found that participation in sport potentially had a negative impact on the school experience of student-athletes. Garcia (2015) worked to identify positive experiences that student-athletes gained by participating in a program through a qualitative analysis of twenty-eight semi-structured interviews. The opportunity to develop friendships, to compete, the response of spectators, performing in public, and the experience of being on a team were generally reported as positive experiences by student-athletes.

Hartman et al. (2012) examined athletes and non-athletes in terms of their respective level of concern for social problems, interracial contact and attitudes as well as their views of gender roles and sex-based discrimination. The research also examined political affiliation. This research found that the level of concern for social issues and views of gender roles and sex-based discrimination was similar among athletes and non-athletes. Male athletes were found to have a more positive view of race relations than non-participants. Female athletes tended to be more likely to identify as Republican than non-athletes. In other areas, the difference between athletes and non-athletes was minimal. Overall, Hartman et al. found that participation in sport most often reinforces the predominant social ideology and contributes to social change.

Impact on the Development of Life Skills

The development of various life skills via athletics has also been evaluated as part of the overall analysis of the impact of athletic participation. A small study by Sturges et al. (2020) found that athletic directors believed various life skills were developed and strengthened as a result of a student's participation in athletics. Petitpas et al. (2005) established a framework that would support athletic programs in promoting psychological development through participation in sport. To be effective, some of the key elements identified by Petitpas et al. include: the

programs must be intrinsically motivating, voluntary, establish close relationships with adults, utilize goal setting and be evaluated over the long-term. Through a specific case study, Camiré and Bernard (2013) found that various life skills can best be developed when an intentional program focusing on these goals is integrated into the sports program. The challenge is that such programs require additional time and resources on the part of coaches and the community that can be difficult to maintain.

Yeung (2015), using the High School and Beyond survey, argues that leadership on the sports field can result in the transfer of skills, such as teamwork, time management, and organization. Yeung argues that strengthening these skills can result in a positive impact on the student in non-athletic settings. One small study found that even student-athletes that had a losing season can still experience positive outcomes related to the development of life skills (Lieblein, 2016). In some cases, students were able to take negative aspects of a losing season and create a more positive outcome, unaffiliated with the win-loss record. In a study of 33 high school student-athletes, Pierce et al. (2020) found that students developed action based (e.g. hard work...) and relational (e.g. empathy...) skills during competitive and social experiences related to athletics. The authors also found evidence that participation in sports supports intrapersonal and interpersonal skills.

In a small study of former high school athletes, Kendellen and Camiré (2015) found that participants experienced gains in leadership, social, and time management skills from their athletic experiences. The authors caution that we should not expect a uniform experience or outcome in relation to athletic participation. Kendellen and Camiré suggest that some student-athletes may already possess specific life skills that are accentuated and possibly enhanced through their participation in sport. Spreitzer (1994), using data from a national longitudinal

survey and a cross-sectional research design, found participation in sport was not predictive of the level of self-esteem in young adults. Furthermore, Spreitzer argued that there is little evidence that lessons from the playing field transfer to real life situations. This finding was further supported in a study conducted by Holt, Tink, Mandigo, and Fox (2008) consisting of fieldwork and interviews of 12 male student-athletes. The study found that life skills did not appear to be taught or learned through participation in athletics.

The recent emergence of name, image and likeness (NIL) deals may be the next chapter in the discussion of how athletics may aid in developing life skills in student-athletes. The mother of a high school basketball player suggested as much when addressing NIL and her daughter. ‘She had to take advantage of the opportunity where she can literally invest in her future at 17,...’ the parent stated, ‘we’re learning about how to manage money and just learn a lot of life skills that are way bigger than just NIL...’ (CBS Interactive, 2022, para. 15)

Identifying as an Athlete, Collegiate and Professional Potential

Much of the early research in this field argues that the impact of athletics on the high school and college level was and is overwhelmingly negative. The study of the perceived negative impact of sports in an educational setting is commonly referred to as the zero-sum model and attributed to one of the earliest evaluations of high school sports by Coleman (Marsh and Kleitman, 2003). Coleman (1961) argues that athletic goals are often accomplished at the cost of academic goals. Coleman conducted a survey of ten high schools in the Midwest in 1957-58. In his work, Coleman asked male students if they would prefer to be known as the best scholar or best athlete. Being known as the best athlete was more popular in nearly every demographic category established by Coleman. Building on Coleman’s research, Eitzen (1975) speculated that enthusiasm for sports would diminish in the future and athletics would cease to

be the dominant factor in social status for high school males. More recent research on this topic has found mixed results. A study by Goldberg and Chandler (1989) incorporating a questionnaire with a Likert scale, as opposed to the forced responses in Coleman's study, demonstrated that an increasing number of students want to be known as a strong student and a strong athlete. Holland and Andre (1994) conducted a study of 171 males and found that regardless of size and type of high school, every participant preferred to be remembered as an athlete. Fatih and Gul (2020) found that among male athletes, the prestige of being an athlete, remained a significant motivator.

While Coleman (1961) and others (Fatih and Gul; 2020; Holland and Andre, 1994) explored the real-time preference of many students to be seen as a strong athlete, more recent research addressing future hopes and/or assumptions of becoming a collegiate or professional athlete suggest that the appeal of being a sports star is still very strong and can negatively impact academic and career outcomes. The socialization process, according to Harrison (2000), formally and informally, creates a belief that professional sports represent the best possible chance of economic success, over other traditional, and statistically more likely, career paths. Beamon and Bell (2002), also found an unrealistic belief among some college athletes that a professional sports career is a realistic possibility. Similar to Harrison, Beamon and Bell argue that this belief is the result of a significant socialization process by family members, peers, and academic institutions. Beamon and Bell (2002), in their case-study of a division I football team, argue that the desire and assumption that a student may obtain an athletic scholarship and have a career as a professional athlete, may result in a hyper-focus on sports, rather than their academic development and/or traditional career paths. This condition is especially detrimental to student-athletes, given that approximately 7.9% of high school students will participate in sports on the

collegiate level, with an even smaller amount earning a partial or full scholarship. A small number of college athletes, 4.03%, end up playing on a professional level (NCAA, b). Koehler (1995), suggests that the first thing educators need to do is to help students and parents understand that the value of athletics occurs in real time. It is the actual experience itself, Koehler argues, not the potential of a scholarship offers or professional career, that should be the focal point of high school athletics.

Beyond the potential of becoming a professional athlete, college and some high school athletes have a new way to see the monetary value of athletics in real time in an unprecedented way. As of July 2021, amateur athletes have the potential to profit from their name, image, and likeness (NIL) as the result of the Supreme Court decision in the *NCAA v. Alston* case (The Athletic, 2021). In brief, the ruling established that student-athletes at the college level can be compensated for the use of their NIL and can utilize agents as a part of this process. While NIL deals vary, some provide potentially life changing sums of money. A highly recruited student-athlete in the class of 2023 signed an NIL deal worth as much as \$8 million (The Athletic, 2021). Some states allow NIL deals for high school athletes. As of November 2022, approximately 20 states allow high school student-athletes to participate in NIL agreements (Dosh, 2022). Elite high school athletes are securing NIL agreements in excess of one million dollars. One report on top tier high school NIL deals earners suggests agreements ranging from three to over seven million dollars (CBS Interactive, 2022).

The MHSAA has established specific limitations on the compensation and or benefits that a high school student-athlete can receive. At the time of this writing, neither the state of Michigan nor the MHSAA allowed NIL agreements for high school athletes (Michigan High School Athletic Association, 2022a. Section VIII, B and C). In October of 2023, a bill passed in

the Michigan House of Representatives that would legalize NIL agreements for high school athletes. The bill also included language that would prohibit schools and athletic associations from blocking students from engaging NIL contracts (LeBlanc, 2023).

Long-Term Impact of Athletic Participation

Beyond the impact at the high school, collegiate, and even professional level, some researchers have explored the effect that exposure to athletics can have during adulthood and on the larger community. In 2014, the Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE), recommended that team sports no longer be included in K-12 curriculum. Johnson (2018), refuted the recommendation of SHAPE, highlighting the importance of including team sports in physical education classes at the high school level to promote active lifestyles for students in the present and into their adult life. The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) and the National Youth Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey (NYPANS), indicate that team sports are often among the preferred activities among U.S. students and adults. Meeter et al. (2016) argues that opportunities for physical activity during high school years can contribute to healthier, more active adults. Considering the long-term impact of athletic participation at the high school level further highlights the importance of reviewing and understanding the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on high school athletics.

Impact on Academic Institution and Larger Community

In the review of the impact of athletics in academic institutions, some researchers clearly support the have zero-sum model proposed by Coleman (1961). Healy and Healy (1976) argue that many educators have questioned the value of athletics as a meaningful aspect of the educational system. Furthermore, they argue that athletics created undesirable interference from alumni whose primary focus is athletics, not education. Solberg (1970) went so far as to argue

that all interscholastic sports be discontinued due to the cost of the programs and the time it requires from student-athletes. Jable (1986) believes that the idea that athletics support academic goals is a ploy intended to obtain and ensure funding for athletic programs. Davis (2009) argues that factors such as a preoccupation with the outcome of athletic events, pressure on student-athletes, egocentrism on the part of student-athletes, and inconsistent academic standards for student-athletes are a detriment to all students.

In an effort to refute the previously referenced zero-sum model, some of the research that has been conducted in support of athletics has attempted to demonstrate the positive impact of athletics on the school and community. A study by Slone (2018) found that more than 84% of high school employees agree or strongly agree that athletics have academic, social, and physical benefits. On a very broad level, many researchers have argued that school-based athletics support larger school and societal goals. Durbin (1986) argues that participation in athletics supports the primary goal of high school education by fostering the development of productive citizens. Blecke (1979), a high school administrator, highlights that student-athletes have a responsibility to represent themselves and their school, among competitors as well as the larger community. Athletics and other extracurricular activities, according to Blecke, are a “real life competency test” that allows students to encounter stressful situations, similar to what they will encounter as adults (p. 119).

High School Athletic Environment During the 2020-21 School Year

In early March of 2020, the first cases of COVID-19 in Michigan were confirmed. As a result, the governor placed significant limitations on large gatherings, which included the closing of all K-12 schools for three weeks. (Exec. Order No. 2020-05, 2020; Haddad, 2020). As a result of the closure, all extracurricular activities were cancelled until further notice. Some high

school winter sports were in the midst of a post season tournament. Spring sports began on March 11 of that year (Michigan High School Athletic Association, 2018). Before the initial three-week closure expired, the governor issued an executive order restricting in-person learning for all K-12 schools for the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic year (Exec. Order No. 2020-35, 2020; Haddad, 2020). Schools were expected to create a “Continuity of Learning and COVID-19 Response Plan” that addressed, in part, how they would provide remote instruction for the remainder of the year (Exec. Order No. 2020-35, 2020). The cumulative effect of these orders and the restrictions they created resulted in an unfinished winter sports season and a complete cancellation of all spring sports in the 2019-2020 academic year at the high school level.

In preparation for the 2020-21 academic year, across the United States, a wide range of policies and plans were put into place regarding instruction modes as well as the ability to conduct extracurricular activities. As late as September 2, at least seventeen states had cancelled the high school football season. Twenty states had delayed the start of fall sports. Fourteen states were planning to or already proceeding with a traditional schedule (Mitchell, 2020). As Michigan schools looked to prepare for the 2020-21 school year, the first sign of progress came in late June of 2020. The governor issued an order that created a path that would allow schools to reopen for in-person instruction (Exec. Order 2020-142, 2020). In preparing for the 2020-21 school year, the MHSAA modified its academic eligibility rules. The MHSAA has historically required students to pass 66% of classes from the previous semester, as well as be passing 66% of their classes in the current semester, to be considered academically eligible (Michigan High School Athletic Association, 2022b). The MHSAA did drop this requirement for the first semester of the 2020-21 school year. Schools were empowered to establish the academic

eligibility of their students as each school saw fit (Michigan High School Athletic Association, 2020).

The future for athletics was much less clear. The June order suspended all extracurricular activities (Exec. Order No. 2020-142, 2020). There was so much concern that indoor sports would not be permitted, that the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) considered flipping the fall and spring sports seasons (Uyl, 2020a). In late July 2020, the MHSAA released the schedule for fall sports, calling for modified start dates based on the level of potential physical contact among participants (Uyl, 2020b). In mid-August, it was still not certain that all sports would be able to move forward. As a result, the MHSAA approved moving the high school football season to the spring (Uyl, 2020c). On August 28th, 2020, a group calling themselves “Let Them Play” staged a rally in Lansing, the state capitol, in support of allowing sports to begin immediately. In late August, schools in specific regions of the state with lower metrics associated with COVID-19 were able to hold competitions (Uyl, 2020d). By early September, all regions of the state were able to hold competitions (Uyl, 2020e).

In addition to the uncertainty associated with high school athletics, there was also significant variation in how schools would provide academic instruction in the fall of 2020. At the outset of the 2020-21 academic year, many schools opted to stay remote while others moved forward with in-person learning (Barrett & Gibbons, 2022, Higgins, 2020; Johnson, 2021, Wisely, 2021). Throughout the fall, many schools and athletic teams experienced positive cases of COVID-19, resulting in forfeits and cancelations in regular as well as post season play. On November 18, an order issued by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) paused all high school in-person learning and extracurricular activities for three weeks (Emergency Order, Gatherings and Face Mask Order, 2020). Winter sports, many of

which were scheduled to begin on November 18, were delayed (Novak, 2020) (Uyl, 2020i). For fall sports, this pause resulted in the high school football, swimming, and girls' volleyball post season tournament not being completed until January of 2021. Resumption of the fall sports post season tournaments required student-athletes and coaches to participate in a rapid testing program. 99.8% of all tests issued were negative (Novak, 2021; Uyl, 2020j).

The pause that was initiated on November 18 was extended in early December by an additional 12 days by the MDHHS (2020). In response to this extension, a second round of legal action was brought against the state by religious schools, parents, and advocacy organizations, hoping to allow a resumption of in-person learning at the high school level. The plaintiffs argued that restricting in-person learning was a violation of the students' First Amendment Rights (Jacques, 2020; Michigan Association of Non-Public Schools, 2020). In-person instruction at the high school level would not be allowed to resume, until January 13, 2021, at the discretion of individual school/district leadership.

Even though in-person instruction was permissible as of January 13, 2021, not all sports were able to resume standard practice or competition. Non-contact sports, such as bowling, were able to resume practice and competition with minor adjustments (Uyl, 2021a, b). In mid-January, MHSSA Executive Director, Mark Uyl, argued that the COVID related data associated with the fall post season tournaments and required COVID-19 testing, supported a resumption for all sports. 99.8% of all tests issued as part of the mandatory fall sports post season testing program were negative (Novak, 2021). Uyl proposed a start date of February 1 (Goricki, 2021). The test data did not sway the governor or MDHHS, who did not alter their position in relation to athletics (McCabe, 2020c). In late January, a new director of the MDHHS was appointed, which according to the MHSAA executive director, resulted in significantly improved communication

between the MDHHS and MHSAA (McCabe, 2021b). In late January, the Michigan Senate adopted a resolution in support of lifting the suspension on winter sports (Theis Supports Adoption of Resolution to ‘let them play’, 2021). On February 2, 2021, five student-athletes and a hockey association, sued the MDHHS over an order that prohibited contact sports through February 21, 2021 (Oosting, 2021).

Ultimately, full contact winter sports would be allowed to resume standard practices and competitions on February 8, 2021, with specific COVID-19 mitigation strategies (Kolade, 2021; Uyl, 2021c, d). The resumption of contact sports required masking for all sports when participants were actively engaged in competition, with the exception of swimming. Teams were required to utilize social distancing outside of in-game play, including on the bench and during travel to and from events. Spectators for in-door events were limited to two per student-athlete (McCabe, 2021b; MDHHS, 2021; Uyl, 2020h). Throughout nearly the entire pandemic, spectator limitations were in place, with restrictions as low as two fans per participant (Uyl, 2020g, h, 2021a, d). The presence of or access to sporting events can impact athletes, spectators and the community. Wann and Hackathorn (2019) found that fans can influence the performance of athletes. Grix et al. (2020) argue that spectator gatherings at and around sporting events are crucial opportunities for community bonding. This context is significant, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The next significant action by the state that impacted athletics occurred in March of 2021. In response to increasing COVID-19 cases in Michigan, the MDHHS issued an order that required all athletes 13 to 18 years old, coaches and related school/team staff, to undergo weekly covid testing beginning the week of April 2 (Uyl, 2021e). Schools could complete training to allow staff members to conduct the testing. The MDHHS indicated it would cover the cost

associated with the testing. The MHSAA Executive Director, Mark Uyl, argued that COVID numbers in adjacent states, where mask use was not required, were not seeing significant outbreaks tied to sports. Uyl believed that the rise in cases among high school students is more likely related to student contact outside of school and school related events (McCabe, 2021a).

In early April of 2021, Governor Whitmer recommended that youth sports be suspended for two weeks (“The Office of Governor,” 2021). Neither the governor’s office nor MDHHS took any steps that formally limited youth sports. From April onward, high schools and the MHSAA continued to operate the high school athletic schedule and events in a traditional fashion with the exception of masking, social distancing, regular testing of student-athletes and limited spectator capacity that was established through previous executive and/or emergency orders.

Understanding the unstable and shifting landscape of high school athletics in Michigan during the COVID-19 pandemic allows the researcher and reader to better understand the experiences of and impact on the student-athlete and other stakeholders. The depth of one’s understanding of the effect on student-athletes is strengthened when considering the potential mental and psychological consequences that the restrictions, disruptions, and limitations associated with high school athletics may have had.

Mental and Physical Impact of the Restriction of Athletics During COVID-19

The literature review has clearly established the potential positive and negative outcomes of participation in athletics. The timeline of how state orders and mandates impacted the ability of schools in Michigan to conduct athletics further establishes how truly disruptive the pandemic was for student-athletes. The physical and mental consequences of the confluence of three experiences, in-person learning, athletics, and a pandemic, should not be overlooked. MHSAA

Executive Director, Mark Uyl, touched on this point when advocating for high school athletics in September of 2020. Uyl (2020e), acknowledged that:

All of us share the fundamental belief that we must protect the health and safety of individuals...this includes not only COVID prevention measures, but also the mental health of teenage students...Many recent studies and publications surmise that the greatest health and safety risk currently is mental health. The opportunity to participate in fall sports will provide countless benefits for the mental health of our students (p. 2).

By investigating the potential mental and physical effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on student-athletes, we may be able to more fully understand the impact of high school athletics.

In March of 2020, K-12 students in Michigan, were required to move to remote learning. The restriction on in-person learning would remain in place for the duration of the school year. The impact of the move to virtual learning and the resulting loss of access to school buildings and associated support was immediate. The pandemic rapidly restricted access to “safe zones for youth,” such as schools, sports, and community centers, creating possible additional stressors for student-athletes (Noel-London et al., 2020, p. 7). It must be considered that the stressors associated with COVID can be severe enough to have created an adverse childhood experience (ACE). Research indicates that just under half of children encounter an ACE during adolescents. This rate is slightly higher among Black and Hispanic children (Noel-London et al., 2020). The pandemic created a greater likelihood that students would have an ACE due to social isolation, job loss among parents and/or caregivers, school closures, and other stressors related to the pandemic (Sanders, 2020). Many students experienced multiple transitions from in-person to remote learning due to state mandates, district action, parental preference, quarantine and/or isolation. Similar disruptions occurred for student-athletes. Many experienced the sudden halt

of a season due to mandates, COVID contact and/or diagnosis, forfeits, cancelations or other factors beyond their control. It must be considered that the collective impact of such experiences for some students was significant enough to be considered an ACE.

Beyond academic support, schools provide other key services and outlets for students. Food service, mental health support and health screening are just a few core services often provided by schools. The sudden and limited ability of students and families to access support that could traditionally be found in the school via counselors, teachers, administrators, coaches and support staff could contribute to or compound an ACE. Beyond basic services and support provided by the school, extracurricular activities can also have a significant impact on student mental health. School sponsored activities, including athletics, provide social and competitive opportunities for students to interact with other students and families. This interaction can help students to develop new social connections and understand cultures that may be different from their own (Gupta & Jawanda, 2020).

The move to remote learning and/or the suspension of various extracurricular activities, can be especially impactful on isolated families that have limited support systems and opportunities to interact with others. The cancellation of high school sports could also magnify income disparity between families that have the means to provide access to athletics through travel sports, AAU programs, private training and those that do not (Asif et al., 2020). Removing access to the social network that school provides can significantly alter a student's ability to stay connected with classmates and therefore negatively impact student mental health (Graupensperger, et al., 2020). This may be especially true for students with existing mental health needs. Social connection with friends was found to be one of the most beneficial actions in respect to mental well-being for students receiving mental health support (Cowie & Myers,

2021). Student-athletes faced multiple losses and breaks in their social relationships during the pandemic as the result of the loss of traditional access to both classmates and teammates.

School closures can also negatively impact students physically. Schools provide an important physical outlet for students through recess, gym classes, and organized sports (Cowie & Myers, 2021; Hoffman & Miller, 2020). Lockdowns and/or school closures can potentially significantly reduce a child's access to outdoor physical activity (Gupta & Jawanda). A study by Gilic et al. (2021) found that the drop-in physical activity when social distancing measures were in place was significant among boys, less so for girls. Student-athletes face the potential of a double penalty when in-person learning and athletics were disrupted by COVID-19

Student's Self-Identification as an Athlete During a Pandemic

Some athletes associate a significant portion of their identity with participation in sport. This condition has been studied and quantified through the development of the *Athletic Identity Measurement Scale* (AIMS) (Brewer, et al., 1993). Studies of athletes, both elite and recreational, have found that many athletes identify themselves based on their participation in sports (Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006). During COVID-19, studies suggest that the degree to which identities were connected to sports increased (Costa, et al., 2020; Cowie and Myers, 2021). Therefore, the psychological impact of the loss of athletics during the COVID-19 pandemic is potentially magnified. The uncertainty over the ability of a season to begin, continue, or conclude can create anxiety and disappointment (Kleps, 2020). For highly skilled athletes, the loss of or extended pause of a season may also negatively impact their ability to earn a college scholarship (de Silva, 2020; Noel-London et al., 2020). The potential scholarship impact, real or perceived, is another example of the potential negative result that a pause of athletics can have on athletes. Elite athletes experience mental health symptoms and disorders

equal to or at a greater rate than the general population (Poucher, et al. 2021; Reardon et al., 2020). An extended pause or outright cancelation of sports and related consequences could cause a significant disruption of how student-athletes view and identify themselves as well as their perceived self-worth, resulting in a mental health episode or worsening of existing conditions.

For student-athletes, especially those involved in team sports, the pandemic created unique physical and psychological stressors beyond simply living through a pandemic. Research on previous epidemics have found that there can be a stress as well as a stigma associated with an order to quarantine (Asif, 2020; Brooks, 2020; di Cagno et al., 2020). For student-athletes, a positive COVID diagnosis or a quarantine order, could significantly disrupt a season not only for the individual but for the entire team. This would be especially concerning for a student-athlete that has a high AIMS score.

While some student-athletes with a high AIMS score could be at increased risk of mental health challenges during COVID-19, the pause in sports may also have created the opportunity for student-athletes to develop an identity less associated with athletic activity (Reardon et al., 2020). Research of college athletes suggests that students whose identity was less connected to athletics were less likely to experience mental health issues because of the loss/cancelation of a season (Graupensperger, et al., 2020).

Resumption of Athletics During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The debate over the importance of athletics in a school setting emerged with renewed vigor during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the core of the most recent iteration of this debate is the question of whether or not the benefits of organized sports during a pandemic outweigh the risks. When a group of football coaches were asked about the impact of sports, one responded

by saying “I don’t claim to be an expert on viruses. What I do claim is to be an expert on high school kids and what I’ve seen is happy kids for two hours a day [during practice]” (Mitchell, 2020 p. 3). During the pandemic, specific examples of findings in the literature review can be seen in real time. These preliminary findings further validate the work of previous researchers and highlight the need for, importance of and opportunity in examining the value and impact of athletics during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hughes et al. (2020), in their framework for a return to sport in the midst of COVID, note that athletics has an important role to play in reestablishing some normalcy. To that end, at least as much as possible during a pandemic, various approaches to a resumption of athletics were proposed in Michigan. One approach attempting to balance the risk with the reward was to allow practice only, but no contests (Anthony, 2020). In some cases, the MHSAA did this, by increasing the number of contact days between coaches and student-athletes for out of season sports (Uyl, 2020d). This allowed for some seasons that were not completed or cancelled during the 2019-20 academic year, to make-up for some of the time that was lost. Beyond the actions of the MHSAA, others utilized varying levels of political and legal action in an attempt to secure the opportunity for athletics to resume.

Koehler (1995) argues that one of the primary values of sport is the experience itself. Durbin (1986) and Blecke (1979) addressed the active citizenship and community representation aspects of school based athletic participation. Yeung (2015) as well as Kendellen and Camiré (2015) argue for the potential transfer of teamwork and leadership skills. These findings have been reinforced in the response of student-athletes to COVID-19 and its impact on high school athletics. In the late summer of 2020, while high school sports were restricted across much of Michigan, student-athletes, coaches, and parents met in the state capitol to urge the governor to

reconsider her position on high school athletics (Calloway, 2020). Students and teams demonstrated leadership when participating in rallies. Shortly after this protest, Let Them Play Inc., along with a youth hockey league and parents, filed suit against the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (Calloway, 2021). Legal counsel for the plaintiff referenced the potential long-term impact of sport. “The skills they will gain as a student-athlete...are lifelong skills about teamwork, grit and perseverance” (Calloway, 2021, pg. 1). The lawsuit also speaks to the previously mentioned concepts of the development of life skills through the participation in athletics. On two other occasions, Let Them Play Inc., joined by various parents, filed suit against the state. The second suit occurred in response to the extended pause of athletic activity announced in January of 2021. The third suit was levied in response to a mandatory testing program for athletes 13 to 18 years old. The plaintiffs argued in part that the testing violated due process rights (Associated Press, 2021). Collectively, the rallies, protests and lawsuits provided an opportunity for some student-athletes to show leadership, be productive and active citizens and represent their community, supporting some of the arguments in support of athletics.

Conclusion

The research on high school athletics can generally be divided into three categories. The zero-sum model, frequently attributed to Coleman (1961), the developmental perspective (Holland & Andre, 1987) and the identification/commitment model or commitment-to-school (Marsh, 1992). Within that larger framework, many researchers have explored the impact of sports on specific factors including but not limited to, student identification as an athlete, potential to become a professional athlete, academic performance, behavior in school and the development of life skills. Others have explored the impact on academic institutions and the larger community, as well as the long-term value of athletic participation. The COVID-19

pandemic disrupted K-12 education for significant portions of the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years. The impact of this disruption was magnified for student-athletes who experienced additional stops, starts, pauses, and restrictions associated with sports. The pandemic created an increased interest in high school athletics that played out in real-time via social and political activism as well as in the academic research. Collectively, the research is rife with positive and negative arguments related to the impact of sports. Overall, the research is weighted more towards positive outcomes and findings. The interpretative phenomenological analysis presented here will enable the researcher to test some of the commonly held theories and beliefs associated with high school athletics. It is the author's hope that this will empower those charged with developing policy, as well as school leaders, parents and ultimately students themselves, to make decisions and take action to create the best possible outcomes for high school athletics.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The methods and procedures outlined in this chapter describe the methodology for examining the lived experiences of principals and athletic directors regarding high school athletics before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter begins with a discussion of the rationale for the methodology, followed by an explanation of the study population and sampling procedures. Chapter three also highlights the data collection procedures, as well as how the data was analyzed, the validity of the study, and possible limitations.

Design and Rationale

Qualitative research strives to uncover “how individuals make sense of their world, how they experienced events, [and] what meaning they attributed to phenomena” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 1). It is the experience, rather than any causal relationship, the development of or testing of a theory, which is important in qualitative research. Qualitative research provides insights that may be difficult to identify or define through quantitative methods (Marjan, 2017). A qualitative approach aids in highlighting the complexities of a particular phenomenon (Stead, et al., 2011). In particular, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is well suited to uncover the complexities and depth of specific phenomenon because it is focused on the lived experiences of individuals who experienced said phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

IPA as Method

To gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of principals and athletic directors as it relates to high school athletics before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) first established by Smith,

Flowers and Larkin (2009). An IPA approach allows for a “co-creation of knowledge between researchers and participants” through open dialogue that allows for the sharing and interpretation of multiple perspectives. (Urcia, 2021, p. 5).

IPA draws on fundamental principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography. Phenomenology, developed by Edmund Husserl, focuses on how subjects perceive and talk about events as opposed to describing the phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Under this approach, the researcher would need to separate his or her own experiences, referred to as “bracketing,” from those of the participants. A strictly phenomenological approach would limit the research to a reporting of the lived experiences under a phenomenon, without any further evaluation or interpretation (Urcia, 2021). Building on Husserl, Heidegger developed hermeneutics, under which the goal is, while never completely attainable, to “understand what it is like to stand in the shoes of the subject” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 2).

Unlike a Husserlian approach, where the researcher is separated from the subject and only reports the findings without descriptions, an IPA approach, through the inclusion of the researcher, allows for a dual interpretation of the event (Urcia, 2021). This specific method is commonly referred to as the double hermeneutic approach, via the utilization of the hermeneutic circle. Participants provide one view of the phenomenon while the researcher, through analysis, coding and decoding, tries to make sense of the participant’s experiences in ways that the participant may not be aware of (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The IPA researcher “is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of X” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35).

Ideography is an in-depth analysis of a single case and individual perspectives. An IPA approach utilizes and capitalizes on the benefits of the single subject approach central to an ideography, with one important additional step. With an IPA approach, the researcher moved

back and forth between an individual focus and a reflection of the collective experience of all study participants. This allowed the lessons learned from each individual participant, as well as lessons from the whole group, to strengthen the overall findings from the research. Through the process of comparing and contrasting multiple individual experiences, the researcher was able to identify similarities and differences in the lived experiences of the participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Researcher Role

The author conducted and facilitated semi-structured interviews. Given the nature of an IPA approach and utilization of semi-structured interviews, the author engaged in unscripted dialogue to better understand the lived experiences of the participants. In this way, the author became a pseudo participant in this process. In an IPA study, the author is not expected to bracket his/her own experiences on the subject. However, the researcher made an effort to not allow his own lived experience to influence his approach to and interaction with participants. The author took steps to implement various reflexive practices throughout the research process (Peat et al., 2019). Practices included: introspection, intersubjective reflection, mutual collaboration, social critique and discursive deconstruction (Finlay, 2002). A research journal was also kept, allowing the researcher time and space to process his own lived experience and protect against instances where the research may have highlighted or drawn specific experiences to the forefront of the researcher's consciousness. Journaling also aided in identifying the need or opportunity for follow-up interviews to ensure the lived experience of the participants was accurately recorded and not intentionally or unintentionally influenced by the author. Collectively, these practices helped to ensure that the researcher engaged in and with the hermeneutic circle. Utilization of the hermeneutic circle ensured the author intentionally moved

back and forth among individual lived experiences of the participants, the researcher's own experience, and the understandings that arose from the accumulated collection of individual interviews (George, 2021).

Given the selection of participants, it was possible that the author had previous professional interactions with some of the subjects. The author previously served as a principal at a school that was a member of the athletic league from which participants were drawn. The author also served on the board of said athletic league. The formal interactions related to these specific positions held by the author ceased in the summer of 2018. Given the period of time included in this study (primarily 2019-20 through 2021-22 academic years), it is unlikely any past professional interactions significantly influenced the lived experiences of the participants as it relates to the study.

The author also has other personal experiences relevant to this topic that the reader should be aware of. As a student, the author participated in high school sports and at the club level collegiately. The author has over 20 years of lived experiences as a teacher, coach, and administrator. In his professional capacity, the author has served on the executive board of the largest Catholic athletic league in the nation (CHSL, 2023). During the research associated with this study, the author was serving on the executive council of an academic and athletic league consisting of public and nonpublic schools in mid-Michigan. The author also served on the board of the Michigan Association of Non-Public Schools (MANS). MANS was part of a suit filed against the state of Michigan in December of 2020, as a result of an order restricting the ability of high schools to offer in-person learning (Burns, 2020; MANS, 2020). The author was on the MANS board throughout the period of time under examination in this work, as well as while actually carrying out the associated research.

Participants

Due to the nature of the study and in an effort to obtain a strong understanding of the impact of the pandemic on high school athletics, the participant group was established through purposive, specifically, criterion-based sampling. When necessary, snowball sampling techniques were also utilized. Participants were selected primarily based on their job title and responsibilities. Most, if not all participants had the title of principal or athletic director. The combined position of vice principal/athletic director was also represented. The author only included principals and athletic directors that worked in their respective positions, at the same school, before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-20 through 2021-22 academic years) (See Appendix A, B).

The author identified nine participants based on purposive and criterion sampling techniques. The author also attempted to utilize snowball sampling, but this proved unsuccessful. This sample size placed the study within a generally accepted range for IPA research (Alase, 2017; Frechette, et al., 2020; Peoples, 2021; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith et al. 2009; Urcia, 2021). The sample represents eight individual schools/districts, from six counties, the four primary regions of the state of Michigan (mid, northern, southeast, west), and all four classes (or levels) of the Michigan High School Athletic Association. Based on the enrollment, geographic location and the inclusion of public and nonpublic schools, the sample of the participants allowed the author to ensure reasonable saturation. The sample size also created the opportunity for negative cases or examples to arise (Holley & Harris, 2019; Morse, 1995; Smith et al., 2009).

Recruitment was conducted through direct discussion, contact via email and/or U.S. mail. Various central office staff, league directors and/or commissioners were consulted to identify

schools and educators that met the key criteria for participation in the study. In an effort to secure the strongest possible sample, some central office staff, league directors and/or commissioners were asked to provide a letter or email communication of support to their constituents to encourage participation in the study. Secondly, some central office staff, league directors and/or commissioners were asked to send out recruitment information to schools that they worked with. Finally, the author was prepared to ask central office staff, league directors and/or commissioners for an opportunity to appeal directly to potential participants at a professional gathering of principals and/or athletic directors.

Instrumentation, Procedure and Data Collection

Given the utilization of an IPA approach, the researcher used semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and when necessary, follow-up interviews as the primary instrument of data collection (Leedy & Ormond, 2010; Marjan, 2017; Peat et al., 2019; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The initial one-on-one interviews all utilized the same core questions (see Appendix C). This allowed for the development of potential follow-up questions specific to a participant as well as the subject group as a whole. This aided in developing a stronger understanding of the lived experience of each participant. Follow-up interviews and/or email communication allowed the author to seek clarification, identify consistencies and/or inconsistencies across the lived experiences of the participants. This proved especially useful when comparing the experiences of principals and athletic directors.

The author utilized a virtual meeting platform approved by the university to record the audio and visual aspects of the interviews. This enabled the researcher to capture verbal and non-verbal responses and communication. Transcripts of the interviews were captured to promote rich data collection and analysis. The author kept brief notes during the interviews. A

journal was also kept by the researcher to capture potential key findings about the individual lived experiences as well as the author's own thoughts and reactions to the interviews. The author intended to keep each interview 60 to 90 minutes in duration but did not end any interview before completing the established interview questions (Alase, 2017; Frechette et al., 2020).

Data Analysis

The author utilized the following general process as suggested by Peoples (2021, p. 59)

1. Read the entire transcript and remove the unnecessary language.
2. Generate preliminary meaning units. (See definitions for description of "meaning unit.")
3. Generate final meaning units (or themes) for each interview question.
4. Synthesize final meaning units into situated narratives under each individual interview question. (Repeat these steps for each participant.)
5. Synthesize situated narratives into general narratives, integrating all major themes of participants.
6. Generate general description.

Based on the utilization of the IPA approach, the author implemented the hermeneutic circle through journaling and follow-up communication with study participants when appropriate throughout the process described above.

The transcripts were coded by hand as the use of software aided coding "can limit a researcher's ability to dwell on a text because it essentially separates the researcher from the data" (Peoples, 2021, p. 66)

Validity and Reliability

In an attempt to ensure the validity and reliability of this research, the author reviewed the eight-step procedure established by Creswell and Poth (2017). Not all eight steps were relevant or possible given the nature of this study. The author applied the applicable steps of peer review, explanation of researcher bias, member checking, and rich descriptions. The author engaged in peer review by having colleagues working in central office staff positions and/or principals and athletic directors not involved in the study, review the methods, results of the research and/or conclusions that emerged. The author has previously established the potential researcher bias earlier in this chapter in describing the role of the researcher. The format of semi-structured interviews facilitated rich descriptions to be recorded and studied.

The author provided participants with the opportunity to engage in member checking of the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews as well as the interpretations and findings established by the author. It should be noted that a disagreement between a participant and the researcher does not inherently mean that an interpretation or finding is not correct (Peoples, 2021). If such a disagreement arises, it encouraged the author to review the data and conclusions to ensure that he can support the findings.

Ethics

The author met any and all regulations or expectations of the institutional review board. The author met the required ethical standards by using voluntary participation and informed consent. Participants were able to leave the study at any time (see Appendix A; B). In addition, the author ensured anonymity by creating and using pseudonyms in any formal or published writing associated with the study. The confidentiality of the participants was further

strengthened by appropriately securing and protecting any data and/or data storage associated with the study.

Given the nature of the time period of the study, it is possible that psychological harm of participants occurred. This may be the result of personal and/or professional experiences or trauma experienced during or after the pandemic. Participants may have lost a family member during the COVID-19 pandemic and a discussion of this period of time may have resulted in a heightened sense of that loss. Working in education during the pandemic subjected many educators to significant professional, emotional, and personal stress and anxiety (American Educational Research Association, 2022). Revisiting that time period may have reactivated and/or strengthened the emotional and psychological responses associated with the pandemic.

Data for this study was collected by a virtual meeting platform as well as electronic communication. All recordings were stored securely on the university's digital meeting platform, with username password protection. Any known recordings and related documentation were destroyed upon successful completion of the dissertation.

The author was and is not unaware of any conflict of interests that exists. The author strove to avoid any power differentials through the use of purposive sampling. The author did not consider any participant with which he had a direct or indirect professional relationship in which the participant would be considered a subordinate. Even with the intentional exclusion of those whom the researcher had a direct professional relationship with, the author's current professional role may have created a perceived power differential in some participants. The author took explicit steps to clarify that participation in the study is voluntary and has no relation to or impact on the participants' professional duties or standing.

Conclusion

The author utilized a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, specifically incorporating an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. Data was collected primarily through semi-structured interviews. The author used reflexive practices in an effort to guard against his own personal experiences overriding those of the participants. The author identified nine participants through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The researcher ensured that no participants had any professional reporting responsibility to the author. As the study focused on a pandemic, the author took care to be mindful of possible psychological effects on participants. Data was analyzed through the applicable steps described by Peoples (2021). The validity and reliability were ensured through the process established by Cresswell and Poth (2017). Appropriate steps were taken to protect the confidentiality of the participants and protect any data that was gathered throughout the process. The actions and steps listed here contributed to a strong analysis and richer findings that are explored in chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

In chapter four, the author presents the research findings through key themes and subthemes as extracted from the data, supported with evidence from the lived experiences of the study participants. The goal of this work is to better understand the lived experiences of high school principals and athletic directors, as it relates to high school athletics, before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The setting of the research and relevant demographic information for the subjects involved in the study is also addressed in this chapter. Information related to the data collection process is also included. The chapter closes with an analysis of the findings and explores how the findings connect with the previously provided literature review, as well as an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework.

Setting and Data Collection

The participant-based research for this study was conducted electronically, using a virtual meeting platform and other forms of electronic communication. With the permission of the participants, the semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed through the tools provided by the virtual meeting platform. When appropriate, for direct quotations, transcripts were cross referenced with the recorded interview to ensure accuracy. In one instance, the researcher encountered some disruption to the interview due to limited internet connection. Email communication was used for fact checking, to ask follow-up questions and/or to obtain clarification on specific comments and/or topics. Throughout the data gathering and analysis process, the researcher utilized the practice of journaling.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted via a virtual meeting platform. Video recordings and transcripts were generated through the digital platform. All but one participant

activated his/her camera during the interview. The average interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. As a result of the interviews being conducted virtually, individual interviews occurred at various settings based on the location of the participant and the researcher. In some cases, both the participant and researcher were in a separate school building, typically within an office or meeting room. For some interviews, the researcher was in a residential office setting, while the participant was in a school office or meeting room environment. For other interviews, the participant was in a residential setting while the researcher was in a school office or meeting room setting. Some participants utilized laptop or desktop computers during the interviews, while others employed mobile phones. It is the researcher's belief that most connection disruptions that occurred were the result of a cellular or wireless connection versus a wired internet connection and was limited to one interview. To ensure accuracy for the impacted interview, the author engaged in specific and detailed member checking.

The setting of an active school building and/or academic year did create some minor challenges in conducting the participant-based research portion of this study. It is the researcher's belief that the daily demands placed on administrators, in addition to the potential time required to participate in this study, discouraged some educators from taking part in the study. Even when potential subjects agreed to take part in the study, aligning the schedules of two practicing educational leaders proved to be challenging. This difficulty resulted in possible participants opting not to engage in the study. In some instances, the semi-structured interviews were delayed or interrupted when participants had professional responsibilities related to the operation of an active school building. In general, such disruptions were the exception and limited in duration. The researcher does not believe that such disruptions significantly impacted the research.

The data collection plan in chapter three created the potential for focus groups. The initial proposal of focus groups was included in the event that the researcher was able to identify a larger number of participants, allowing the creation of two subgroups: one for principals and one for athletic directors. It was hoped that such a participant sample may have allowed for a greater examination of the similarities and or differences of the lived experiences of the two primary positions included in the study. Due to the final make-up of the subject group, the researcher still explored the unique experiences among participants based on their role, but without a focus group(s). Of the three athletic directors included in the sample, two of the three had other administrative duties. This factor made it difficult to cleanly divide the sample into focus groups based on job responsibilities. Considering the difficulty the researcher experienced in obtaining participants and the challenges in scheduling the interviews, the author does not feel a focus group with the sample size and related demographic characteristics would have been likely or productive.

Participant Demographics

A sample of nine principals and/or athletic directors was secured for this study. This sample size exceeds the low-end range established for a phenomenological study. Smith et al. (2009) recommends a sample size of between three and six. A sample of nine exceeds the mid-range recommendation of six to eight by Turpin (1997, as cited in Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012). Nine participants is very close to the average of 10, found by Greenwald (2004, as cited in Frechette et al., 2020). It is the author's belief that the sample meets the goal of "a small purposive sample with rich and diverse lived experiences of the phenomenon..." (Frechette et al., p. 6, 2020).

The researcher contacted over 70 different public and/or nonpublic schools/districts across the state of Michigan in an attempt to obtain permission to seek participants. The researcher received approval from 25 schools/districts to seek study participants. From the initial list of 25 schools, the researcher identified nine subjects that met the study criteria and were willing to participate. The subjects represent eight schools/districts from six counties across the state. The primary geographic regions of the state are included in the sample. Southeast, west, mid, and northern Michigan are all represented in the study. Of the eight schools, four are public and four are nonpublic schools. All four classes of the Michigan High School Athletic Association are represented in the study (Michigan High School Athletic Association, 2023). Based on the information provided by the participants, approximately 68% of the overall student body represented in this study participate in high school athletics.

The demographic information and sample data below and in Table 4.1 is being shared with the reader in the hope that it will allow the reader to gain a deeper insight and better understanding of the findings. While more specific participant data may prove useful to the reader, out of respect for and in an effort to protect the anonymity of the participants, some data has been normed for the sample. The typical participant has over 23 years of professional experience in K-12 education and has been in their current position for over eight years. Every participant was involved in high school sports as a student. All but one subject coached at the high school level. One participant was an active coach during the time examined in this research. Four of the study subjects had children that participated in high school athletics during the period of time under review in the study.

Table 4.1*Participant Demographic Information*

| Pseudonym | Role | Played High Schools Sports | Has served as a High School Coach | MHSAA Classification (2023-24) ^a | Public or Nonpublic | Percent of Student Body in School Athletic Programs |
|------------------|--|-----------------------------------|--|--|----------------------------|--|
| Connor | Principal | Yes | No | B | Nonpublic | 90% |
| Davis | Principal | Yes | Yes | B | Public | 35% |
| Evan | Athletic Director and Assistant Principal | Yes | Yes | A | Public | 55% |
| Greg | Principal | Yes | Yes | A | Public | 75% |
| Jake | Principal | Yes | Yes | D | Nonpublic | 85% |
| Kevin | Principal (Athletic Director for portion of study) | Yes | Yes | C | Public | 70% |
| Luke | Athletic Director | Yes | Yes | A | Public | 75% |
| Mary | Principal | Yes | Yes | D | Nonpublic | NA |
| Valarie | Principal and Athletic Director | Yes | Yes | D | Nonpublic | 70% |

^a Class A, 807 students and above, Class B, 806-380 students, Class C, 379-177 students, Class D, 176 students and below. (Michigan High School Athletic Association, 2023)

Findings

The investigation was guided by four primary research questions designed to elicit and allow for unfiltered responses from the participants to uncover their lived experiences related to the phenomenon. To better understand the commonalities and exceptions among the participants' experience, the researcher coded the data multiple times utilizing two approaches.

For the first cycle of coding, the author employed *In Vivo* and *Values* coding, as described by Saldana (2021). The author reviewed each transcript manually, twice, based on the specific coding technique. Coding was carried out directly on to the paper copies of the transcript for each interview. The author then transferred the handwritten coding notes into a separate Microsoft Excel sheet for each coding strategy. In the second coding cycle, both sets of codes were individually categorized alphabetically to aid in the identification of patterns. Each set of codes were then categorized further through Microsoft Excel as well as a tabletop exercise to identify themes and subthemes (Saldana, 2021). From this work, three main themes emerged as most reflective of the lived experiences of the study participants.

Themes

Analysis of the data and its subsequent theme development yielded three themes that related to the research questions and the areas of focus within this study. Excerpts from the research supporting each theme and related sub-themes, followed by analysis, is included in this chapter. The primary themes are:

1. The importance and value of high school athletics
2. The impact on students
3. The impact on school operations

The Importance and Value of High School Athletics

Every participant addressed the role of and impact that athletics had in their school, on their students, parents, and community. The administrators in the study also shared how their lived experience before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted, modified, and/or solidified their own professional and in some cases, personal, view of athletics. Study participants also addressed how the pandemic impacted the view of athletics among various

stakeholder groups. Throughout the data collection process, participants commented on how the importance and view of athletics evolved during the period of time under examination. In some cases, participants saw minor to no changes. Others experienced significant shifts.

In the School

Prior to the pandemic, all participants indicated that athletics had a positive impact on their school, student-athletes, and community. Many study participants see athletics, as well as other extracurricular activities, as part of developing a well-rounded student and as an important aspect of the educational experience. In relation to athletics, Kevin said:

We offer everything...look at our [school size]...they are awfully hard to maintain, but we have all those offerings for our kids because that's what we want to do. We want to give kids those opportunities...kids just want to be involved in stuff and we encourage that...I talk about that at every speech I ever have with kids and parents...school is not the most fun place to go and sit down all day if all you are thinking about is going and listening to your teacher all day. That is not where you build your memories...you build your memories...with your comrades that are out there on the field with you or on the court.

Luke commented that athletics are “a huge outlet for these kids...to be able to participate and go to school at the same time and ...to truly be that ‘student-athlete.’” Evan indicated that athletics are “extremely important...it is a part of our identity...it is part of the [mascot] nation...part of the [mascot] nation identity.” Jake commented that athletics is “...a huge part of our school culture...it [athletics] is critical...it is where a lot of your camaraderie, your school spirit, your culture is all brought out through athletics.” Valarie said “I think all of our kids should be involved in something...educational athletics or band, being involved is important for our kids.

You can see the difference in the kids that are involved in sports or the band.” Davis had a more subtle perspective, saying that “there is definitely support behind our student-athletes, but it [athletics] does not drive what we do.”

Evan highlighted the impact that a resumption of sports had on the rest of the student body during the pandemic. High school sports “played a role for those kids that don't participate in athletics because they were able to still watch something that seemed normal...and that was a cool role that it [athletics] played as well.”

Professional and Personal Perspective

When exploring the importance of athletics at the school level in the wake of the pandemic, some administrators found themselves strengthened in their pre-pandemic beliefs. Others experienced a noticeable shift in a different direction on a professional as well as a personal level. Jake did not experience any change in his view of athletics, in part because to Jake, “sports and school to me is one thing.” Mary said her experience during COVID “just strengthens my view of the importance of athletics.” Kevin shared that his view of athletics did not change because:

I have always been involved in athletics because athletics has always been extremely important to my life...if it was not for football, I probably would not have gone to college...I would not have taken the route that I took...to get here [a high school administrator]...sports, for me, saved me. So I treat sports [as an administrator] the same way.

Connor felt that his experience:

brought a greater appreciation for the power of it [athletics], the power of having a great athletic experience...post pandemic, having seen what our students went through and

knowing and hearing countless stories of how that [athletics] brought the kid through that tough time...I appreciated it before, but I think I have a greater appreciation for how important it is.

Evan's conviction for the importance of athletics was also strengthened as a result of his experience during COVID-19.

I would say first and foremost, you realize how truly important, if you didn't realize it before, you realize how important athletics is. The fact that the students have a place to go every single day. The fact that they have a routine...that's another avenue for them to socialize. It's another avenue to make connections. It's another avenue to experience success...It's extremely important. And then when that got pulled away from people, a lot of people were just lost. They really didn't know what to do.

Some participants in the study experienced changes in their professional and personal beliefs related to athletics. Luke realized how important athletics was to him in his professional role and personally.

I wake up in the morning and I know that I've got soccer and volleyball tonight and it is just part of my routine, part of my day. But then, when that was gone,...unlike a teacher, I was like what the hell am I going to do? My wife is a teacher, so she would wake up and turn her camera on...and for me, without having sports...I didn't have a purpose...it was so odd to me not having the ability to interact with our athletes.

Greg indicated that the pandemic, from a professional perspective:

...solidified the importance of athletics, but also other extracurricular activities and what their place is in school on one hand, but on the other hand....maybe this is just some personal growth that bleeds over into the professional world,...athletics isn't the 'be all

end all,'...I see it through a little different lens than I think maybe even a lot of people in our community do now.

Professionally, Davis shared "I think because of my background, I have really seen the potential of athletics in young people's lives" and that during the pandemic "as a principal, I learned just how important sports were to some kids and their families...I have also learned through the eyes of a principal that there are so many other wonderful opportunities." On a personal level, Davis's view on athletics shifted.

Before COVID, you [Davis's children] got to do something...you have to be in a sport. That was something that we raised our kids [on]... and after COVID, we kind of laxed on that because we thought family time is very important...If you don't want to run cross-country, if they hate it, what are we doing?...You can get a job or we can just relax and go fishing as a family. We don't always have to be chasing you around and watching you compete. As a parent, it helped our family realize that it is really okay if one of my own children don't participate in a sport...If it increases our family time and...we still believe they're getting all the benefits of learning what it means to be a good human being with or without sport, I think that's a win.

Valarie shared a belief related to a reduced value in athletic competition that was strengthened as a result of her experience during the pandemic.

Maybe because I'm old...It's just a game. You know, people were losing their lives with COVID... and I felt bad for the kids, but it's just a game. It really is just a game...These kids sometimes put so much pressure on themselves...sometimes I know I as a coach, I put so much pressure on myself, I have to step back and say this is just a game you know, there's other things in life that are important...Sports and educational athletics are

important for our kids. Building relationships...team building and leadership roles and stuff like that, but when you walk off that court, win or lose, if you've done your best, it's all you can ask. And tomorrow, it was just a game...Early on in my career, I was like, we gotta win everything. And now it's like, it is just a game...we're gonna wake up tomorrow and yeah, we're gonna be sad [if we lost, could not play] and we're just gonna move on. We're gonna learn from that and hopefully not have it happen again.

Clearly the individual experience among study participants related to the professional and personal view of athletics varied. While the degree of importance that athletics has in the minds of some participants has changed, all participants still retained a net positive view of high school athletics.

In the Community

During the pandemic, even when athletic competitions were permitted, spectator attendance was often severely limited (McCabe, 2021b; MDHHS, 2021; Uyl, 2020g, h. 2021a, d). This significant change provided the opportunity to gauge how the community valued high school athletics. All participants indicated that their community saw high school sports as a net positive. Kevin mentioned that before the pandemic, his community saw athletics as “extremely vital...because that is where you have your opportunity to have your community all together.” Others shared that athletics were “very important” (Connor; Davis; Mary; Valarie) to the community and that “the community places a pretty high value on it” (Greg). Jake has a slightly different view. He believes that his “community embraces athletics larger than it should.”

During the pandemic most study participants noticed how the community view of athletics may have been highlighted or changed under the unique and evolving circumstances

related to attending athletic events. Valarie did not notice any change in the way the community approached athletics. Greg recalled that:

The first thing that comes to mind was lots of contention. ...And I think with athletics as in school and general, you saw a lot of the differing opinions that came out about what we should be doing...throughout COVID...we shouldn't be shutting down...the rules and stipulations that were put on participating in those activities...because kids still kept doing things outside of school. So why can't we do things inside of school?

Kevin noted that “one of the best football and basketball teams we had ...was that COVID year of 2020-2021...one of my teachers said ‘I didn’t get to see them play’... because they could not come to many games because there were limits.” Connor noticed that “What otherwise would have been a normal ice hockey season became the biggest thing ever. And same thing with girls volleyball...[athletics] was basically the one thing we could all still get together for.” Mary mentioned that “During COVID, we had some very exceptional teams and it really brought the community together.” Similarly, Evan noted that “We had a state title run during COVID...it was huge...just a huge point of pride, it was something to look forward to.” The sentiment of community pride in athletics was also highlighted by Jake. One particular experience stood out to him.

I went to speak somewhere...it might have been rotary or something, and these old ladies, they were so excited to have sports back in the area, whether it was our school or another one...they were ecstatic about it. Almost more than the players themselves were...especially if you went to that school and you are older now, maybe your kids are gone, and you get an opportunity to go watch football or whatever...this is a tight knit community...I think the community was just thrilled to be back in action.

For Luke, his experience highlighted potential conflict between academics and athletics in the eyes of the community. Luke's school voluntarily implemented full remote learning during portions of the 2020-21 academic year while allowing athletics to continue. "We had some parents saying, 'Oh wait a minute. If it is good for our athletes to be here face to face...then why aren't we back in [classroom] seats.'"

When exploring how the community valued athletics after the pandemic, Davis drew an interesting conclusion that bridged the pandemic and post pandemic time periods. When spectator restrictions were in place:

Some people...were very upset that they could not attend...I think there was a new appreciation for just being able to do things that we took for granted. And that appreciation was shown by people's disappointment when they could not attend or participate.

The findings indicate that communities continue to value athletics and that high school sports are an important component of the community. There was little evidence of significant change or decline regarding how the community valued athletics in the wake of the pandemic.

Parents of Student-Athletes

The experience of administrators with parents, as it related to high school sports, helps to further explain and demonstrate the value and importance of athletics. During the pandemic, some of the participants found parents to be more appreciative, supporting and understanding. Some administrators found they had less conflict with parents during the pandemic than before or after. There were a number of factors that contributed to this outcome. Connor said, "athletics was the only time where for pretty much three quarters of that school year where we

saw parents...parents weren't allowed in the building outside of school sports.” Connor also highlighted a theme mentioned by many study participants.

There was a sense from people who may not even agree with a lot of what we're trying to do [related to education during the pandemic], who were still very thankful and appreciative of knowing how much we had to do to make sure their kid could be in-person to play a sport.

Similar experiences, such as parents being “very supportive” (Luke) or “a sense of thankfulness” (Connor) were also referenced. Evan recalled that:

The parents were great. There was a lot less parent complaints and needling over little things... it was honestly... quite refreshing, because you know they [parents] realized what was going on and they realized that their student-athlete was getting an opportunity to do something here that not everybody had the opportunity for.

Other school and department leaders found that engagement with parents took a distinct negative turn in the 2021-22 school year and onward. Connor found that 2021-22 “was actually one of the hardest years because all these people who had been so supportive [in 2020-21] were sending out stuff to other parents in parent group chats about who amongst the administration was pro freedom and who is pro mask.”

After the pandemic, some aspects of the parental view of athletics returned to their pre-pandemic state. Evan experienced that after the pandemic.

We're back to the playing time conversations every day now with every sport...I almost feel like parents believe that their kids are owed something a little bit more now with athletics. During COVID it wasn't a problem because they were just happy to be there... and now it's kind of back and it is worse now because they [parents] saw what happened

when sport was taken away from their kid and they didn't like it...now they're kind of worried about, well, what if they regress...if they're not getting the playing time and they want to walk away from the sport or what if ...they're not going to go and play in college and they won't have the sport there...what's gonna happen...that is one thing I have noticed that has gotten pretty bad.

In contrast to Evan, Jake has found that “parents [are] not yelling at me anymore and I think it [parent behavior related to athletics] has just gotten better.” Others, such as Kevin, found no significant change among the parents of student-athletes post COVID-19.

It's probably been about the same...most of our parents are great. I don't think that has necessarily changed a whole lot.... But I will say... there are always gonna be those parents... that need to basically let their kid be a kid...[but] I don't think COVID caused it.

The findings suggest that during the pandemic, many parents were appreciative of the outlet and opportunity that athletics provided for their child. Unfortunately, after the pandemic, a significant number of study participants found that parents became more demanding, placing more strain on administrators and coaches.

Student-Athletes

In reflecting how they experienced the student-athlete view of athletics during the pandemic, many administrators found students typically displayed greater appreciation for the opportunities athletics provided. Greg experienced that:

Right when they came back [to school]...some of them could see what their friends lost out on who graduated a year before them and they didn't get to have these experiences...[students were] appreciative that they were back and able to do those things

and...[that] we were here providing them...maybe more appreciative than they ever would have been because you take that stuff for granted.

Valarie recalled students being “more appreciative of athletics...more appreciative of the opportunity, but apprehensive...nervous...” Even in instances when sports were stopped mid-season and/or during the postseason, Valerie found that her student-athletes “were appreciative of what they had.” When sports resumed “kids were excited to be back.” The students thought ‘this is great, we get to play, we get to finish, win, lose or whatever’, [they had] an opportunity to finish, to complete something and not have the pandemic take it away from them.” Davis found a “general deeper appreciation of being able to participate.” with an “undercurrent of frustration about all the restrictions.” Davis also noted that “...our students, at least the couple years after [the pandemic], were so much more appreciative...” Connor found that students “valued it [athletics] more...during the pandemic...they valued it significantly more...I attribute that to the amount of effort that I think they [students] saw their parents, the school, that everybody had to go through to make it possible.” The fact that students were required to participate in regular COVID testing “kind of made the higher stakes, like okay ‘I am doing something that is important.’”

Luke found that “when they [government agencies] reinstated it [athletics]. it was more of a we don’t take things for granted anymore.” Student-athletes:

...became a little more appreciative of what they have...I saw this with my own son...when he was able to play again, it was like... ‘I am not gonna let this one go...every play is gonna count, every practice is gonna count’...”

Evan experienced that throughout the pandemic, students remained committed to their sports.

The students were so excited to be here...you normally see kids coming late to practice or stuff like that. They were there early. They were prepared. They wanted to stick around...as the season went on... [with] all the starts and the stoppages...Every time they were able to come back it was just the hope that was there. That hey, this is something we need...and that was a huge deal...they were excited. They were all excited to be there. It wasn't like, 'oh gosh, I have to go to cross country practice today.'

Greg found students on both ends of a "spectrum" during COVID:

I think there were some kids that came back and thought, 'this isn't as important as I thought it was.' You know, it's not all encompassing. There's more to life. But there were kids that came back and said, 'I am so happy to be back,' you know, to normality...like the two ends of the spectrum....

After the pandemic, many administrators experienced changes in how students valued sports. Connor found that "looking back on it [during the pandemic], you had less kids skipping practice...Where as now, if you miss, I think there's probably more excuses [from students]." Evan found that following a return to standard school operating procedures "there was noticeable excitement immediately after the pandemic [among students], but then after a period of time, we went back to the status quo." Similarly, Valarie found that after the 2020-21 academic year "it was back to normal" regarding students' view of athletics. Post COVID, Luke experienced a more negative change among students, finding that the appreciation displayed during the pandemic waned.

Unfortunately, I think that [appreciation] is gone now...I hate to say it, but I think we have turned in the wrong direction...I think it has become more of an entitlement piece

now, where before it was ‘I am thankful that I am able to play.’...it has been a rough go...since COVID.

Similar to parents, student-athlete appreciation for athletics and those that help facilitate high school sports, appears to have peaked during the pandemic, with some regression post-pandemic. The acknowledgment of taking sports for granted that emerged in the wake of the cancellation of sports early in the pandemic as well as the deeper level of appreciation for high school athletics appears to have dissipated. Most student-athletes have returned to a pre-pandemic perspective view of athletics, or worse.

Impact on Students

The literature review in chapter two highlighted how scholars and educators believe high school athletic participation may impact student-athletes. In this portion of chapter four, the researcher will focus on how the lived experience of administrators before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, may highlight how student-athletes were impacted regarding the development of life skills, identifying as an athlete, collegiate athletic opportunities, as well as from a mental health perspective. Categories specific to the operation of a school, including academic performance, attendance, discipline, level of athletic participation, and school policies, are addressed in a distinct section of chapter four.

Life Skills

Administrators saw student-athletes display specific life-skills, particularly during the pandemic, which supports the argument that athletic participation can promote the development of and display the use of particular life skills. The most common skills that emerged in the research study were resilience, empathy, leadership and teamwork.

At least four of the participants used “resilient” or “resilience” specifically during their interviews. Greg found that “Students who are engaged in school...student athletes, outside of normal school functions, did have a little bit better resilience when coming back to school.” Jake experienced that “Resilience would be the best thing I can say [that came from COVID]. We all learned a lesson in resilience...resilience is definitely something the kids showed, great resolve.” Reflecting back, Luke said “I realize our kids are extremely resilient. They're amazing people... those 2021 and those 2022 kids that were truly impacted by COVID, it just gives them a sense of resiliency.” Evan noticed a combination of resilience and indirectly, leadership.

The resilience of the student athlete, if they really want something, it shows the lengths that people will go through to get it...it was tough to work out. It was tough to train. It was tough to stay ready. And a lot of our student athletes did some wonderful things that year...they couldn't have done that if they didn't have some type of self-training or self-monitoring or discipline at home...That was pretty amazing to see.

Empathy was another life skill that some participants experienced among students. Connor did not use the word empathy but implies that students recognized how much effort was being put into getting sports started and keeping them going. Others were more direct. Davis found that “I think they [students] recognized what each other were losing and they were much nicer to each other.” Jake “saw kids have more empathy during COVID. They saw their peers having to sit out.” Davis experienced the confluence of resilience, empathy, and teamwork.

I think it really taught people to persist to...carry on. More so than a normal sport season because you know we're overcoming this obstacle together. It was clearly an obstacle that they had to overcome as a team and I think there was a sense of unity because of that. Like we're all kind of in this mess together...We are all [school name, mascot], but when

you're on the cross country team or the volleyball team, that's just a tighter group [than the school as a whole] and I think the obstacle was so in their face that it pulled them closer together.

Leadership and teamwork are often cited as a benefit of athletic participation (Calloway, 2021; Kendellen and Camiré, 2015; Pierce et al., 2020; Yeung, 2015). During COVID-19, Kevin saw leadership from student-athletes from a professional and personal perspective.

My son was on the 2021 football team. Everything was shut down, all the public weight rooms. We have a weight room in our barn. We were the hangout, like all his buddies came over here to lift weights. We had students from [the local college]...from [other high schools] coming over to lift. At the time I thought it was awesome, but not great, because they should not have been doing it. But it was what we would have celebrated any other year...they got together and formed their own seven on seven at a park. They went out and played seven on seven against [other high schools] and the coaches didn't know anything about it...Those are things we could have been celebrating...but that year, it's like, that is awesome, but you probably shouldn't do that.

Leadership and teamwork were not limited to the athletic arena. Some administrators experienced student-athletes displaying leadership within the school during the pandemic. James recalled that “kids came to me with all kinds of ideas of how to get around things...let's do this...there were solutions.... kids were working for a common cause whether it was [for] graduation or a sporting event.” Mary witnessed that:

Students learned to push the limits a little bit more...to not go along with policy, because they see that sometimes policy is not helpful.... they found their voice. But as the adult it makes us re-look at it [policy]. We talk a lot about what are you willing to fight for? We

had to talk [with students]... let's talk about what are things [that] might be negotiable with some good conversation.

It is clear that study participants believed that the combination of athletics and the COVID-19 pandemic created an environment where students could enhance and develop life skills. While this is a positive outcome of the pandemic, this gain came at a significant cost in other areas.

Identifying as an Athlete

How the pandemic impacted student-athletes identity with their respective sport, based on the experience of the study participants, was mixed. Evan clearly saw students whose athletic participation was closely aligned with their identity.

The spring sports that year, of 2020...was a disaster for some of them [student-athletes].

I don't think a lot of them recovered from it, to be honest with you. It was something that was completely devastating...it was really rough for them... Some of these spring sports kids kind of lost their way.

Similar to Evan, Davis experienced “some very painful difficult conversations, telling people. their son or daughter could not participate and how much that really cut at the core of who they [the students] were.” Mary found that “some students, exceptional in their sport...they were juniors and seniors, and it was their time to be the leader of the team, and when that was gone, they struggled with that.” During the pandemic, Connor found that athletics “seemed like it became more of an identity because it was the only thing you could really do.”

Greg saw less direct impact. He believed that the pandemic “increased some of the natural tendencies, but I don't know how significant it was... it wasn't shocking.” Jake noticed that students did not want to be connected to sports for a unique reason. Students “were almost

embarrassed at times to say what sport they were on because they knew it was being canceled every darn week.” Luke expressed not noticing any significant change but upon reflection, identified the value of considering the factor of how students may identify as an athlete.

I don't know, to be honest with you... I don't think I paid attention to it...And I don't know if that would have changed during COVID... I didn't see anything on my end of it,...but I wasn't looking for that in particular....And I wish, in hindsight,...I wish I would have taken a look at that and just seeing the differences between our kids at that time.

After the pandemic, Jake felt that students may be more connected to their sports because of what they missed during COVID, “Thinking about it, kids are more attached to getting recognition for their sport now, post COVID.” Kevin and Valarie both indicated that there was little to no change in their students in this respect. The impact of identifying as an athlete is not limited to a student’s time during high school, especially if they had intentions of continuing their athletic career.

Collegiate Athletic Impact

The review of the literature related to high school athletics has established the strong desire among male students to be known as a good athlete (Coleman,1961; Fatih and Gul; 2020; Holland and Andre,1994). The literature has also identified the desire and expectation of many student-athletes to play at the professional level (Beamon and Bell, 2002; Harrison, 2000). Based on the research study, experiences related to the pandemic and the impact of participating in college sports fell clearly into two categories. Some study participants found that high school student-athletes had similar access and opportunities related to college athletics before, during and after the pandemic. Connor, Davis, Evan, Jake and Valarie all experienced little to no impact. In some cases, it was because athletic college scholarships were not common at their

respective school. Others in this group felt that in general, during and after the pandemic, that kids who wanted to play collegiately, still found a place to play.

Three administrators experienced COVID limiting opportunities for their student-athletes. Each of these academic leaders also had a child involved in high school athletics at the time. Kevin said:

It was definitely an issue because...in that 2020-2021 year, we couldn't do any [campus] visits, couldn't go to games. There weren't any games that fall, a lot of games were shut down. So, there were definitely a lot of doors that were closed just because the opportunities weren't available.

Both Greg and Luke experienced their student-athletes having fewer or different scholarship opportunities because of COVID, at no fault of the students. Luke said:

Dealing with it personally, with having my own kid, he signed earlier on. But there were many kids in his class, in that 2021 class, that really wanted to play but they were impacted by COVID, are still impacted by COVID truly to this day...[college] kids got an extra year of playing [eligibility], a 'COVID year.' So now you are lining up against a kid that's 25 years old because you had a red shirt year, a gray shirt year, and a COVID year. So, I really do think they're taking opportunities away from our typical high school athlete...had this [COVID] not have happened, there would probably be room on college campuses [rosters] for these high school kids to get those opportunities. But unfortunately, there was no room.

The changes Luke noticed were significant enough for him to seek a better understanding of what was happening.

I spoke with [a college coach] in particular when they came to school and [we asked] ‘are you not interested in our kids anymore? ...We had a pretty good pipeline for a couple years’...and he [college coach] said, ‘it has nothing to do with your kids. We don't have room on our rosters due to, you know, these extra years that the kids were given and the extra scholarships taking the money [scholarship dollars] away [for incoming students]’...I can tell you firsthand, our kids were impacted by that. Yes, without a doubt. And not just in football, but every athlete that wanted to play at the college level were impacted for sure.

Greg, also had personal and professional experiences in this area. While Greg also cited limited roster spots, he saw that impacting student-athletes in multiple ways.

I think it has had an impact on kids that maybe looked to participate in athletics in college. Due to...kids getting extra eligibility...it's harder to play in college now...Those kids that were in school [college] during COVID hit the lotto...They took...one or two years from kids who are still in high school ...I can speak for my own son who's in eleventh grade. He had designs of playing basketball at college and he still does to a certain extent. But you look at it now, a lot of division one kids are playing division two, division two kids are playing division three. It's not like it was pre COVID, where if you really wanted to play, you could go to a division 3 school...even if you were an okay high school player. It's not like that anymore. And I think that attitude has changed with high school kids.

When considering the impact of the pandemic on the ability of a high school student-athlete to transition to college sports, it appears that the overall effect was mixed. On a large scale, in terms of matriculation to the collegiate level, the study suggests that there was minimal

change during and after the pandemic. However, on the micro level, the research has identified significant disruption to the experience of individual student-athletes.

Mental Health

Mental health is addressed last in this section on student impact not as an indicator of minimal importance, but rather because the previous sections related to life skills, college opportunities and identifying as an athlete, each contribute in unique ways to mental health. The topic of mental health was not an explicit part of the interview process, but some participants shared how the pandemic impacted the psychological wellbeing of student-athletes. Luke noticed that not having athletics “was a big blow...Some kids got back with it... some kids are mature enough to handle it and some [kids]...they just didn't know how to respond to that adversity...and that was a challenge for them.” Connor recalled:

We had a couple of kids who were all-state. A senior in [2020-2021],...a kid who was all state, I think, twice [previously] and he didn't win the award [in 2021]...he didn't have his junior year [season, due to the pandemic]. It was a very traumatic thing...for certain parents and families because they couldn't win certain awards.

Davis experienced:

The kids who love track, who love baseball, who love softball. I think that left a really sad sore spot in their high school careers that probably led to depression...I think that really impacted our class of 2020 and class of 2021. Both of those groups...really probably experienced some form of depression or anxiety or frustration because of things outside of their control. That really impacted who they thought they were and how they defined themselves and what they valued and kind of why they come to school...I think that left a lasting impact.

Evan noted, much like Davis that:

The spring sports that year of 2020... We [administrators] were here every single day ... we spent a lot of time calling people and following up with them...a lot of them were student-athletes. They really were...It really was a bad time in terms of the mentality of students and their mental health...‘I [student] can't even participate in something that I love...I'm missing out on this...did I play my last game?’, I keep going back to the seniors, for that spring [2020] sports season. That was just a horrible way for things to end...I think that played a tremendous role on the negative effect on their mental health for a lot of them.

Evan also experienced that athletics could be a healthy coping mechanism for student-athletes.

Getting COVID tested every week and having to deal with that stress and all the other stressors that they had to deal with throughout the whole process and having to worry about...being quarantined and all these other things. It's a lot to put on a teenager's plate and they handled it...They viewed athletics as kind of like their way to get away,...That ‘hey this was our sanctuary, this was our place to get away from all of our troubles,’ and I truly believe that athletics played a huge role in that.

The research study has highlighted that student-athletes may have been at a greater risk of experiencing a negative mental health outcome because of their association with athletics. The study also suggests that high school sports could provide a mental health benefit for student-athletes.

Impact on School Operation

One of the goals of this study was to determine if any lessons can be gleaned from the experience of principals and athletic directors that may support changes in how schools and/or

athletic programs operate. The researcher asked about various aspects of school operations in an effort to better understand how the lived experience of administrators during and after the COVID-19 pandemic shaped decisions among school leaders.

Academics

The impact of the pandemic on the overall academic performance has been widely addressed in the educational literature (Di Pietro, 2023; Goldberg, 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Schwartz, 2022). The goal of examining academic performance in this study is limited to determining if administrators experienced changes among student-athletes related to academics during and/or after the pandemic. The researcher found that academic performance among student-athletes was difficult to measure concretely due to changes in school grading policies, learning modes, and Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) eligibility rules during the pandemic.

Two of the schools in the study operated completely on a virtual model for at least the first semester of the 2020-21 academic year. The remaining schools offered in-person instruction from the beginning of the 2020-21 school year or within roughly the first month to six weeks of that year. Throughout the 2020-21 academic year, many schools in the study that were in-person also provided a virtual option for students.

Specific to academics and athletics, at least five schools in the study, including public and nonpublic, adopted the temporarily relaxed MHSAA athletic eligibility standards during the 2020-21 academic year (Michigan High School Athletic Association, 2020). Evan was surprised that his school opted to lower the eligibility standards. "...that's something that I never thought our school would do...Just let them play...we were letting kids play that had like a 1.5 [grade

point average], which would never have happened here [normally].” Reflecting on the decision to lower the academic standards, Evan believed:

It was good because I think for the most part, you saw a lot of the student-athletes get back on track. And if they didn't have the participation in athletics, then...their routines are completely done and they probably wouldn't have [gotten back on track]...especially the kids that were gonna be seniors that year [2020-21], they probably would have just been like, ‘Whatever. I'm not able to play sports. I'm not gonna go to college. Why do I even care about school anymore?’ They probably would have been completely done.

Davis highlighted the challenge he had in tracing virtual students' eligibility.

It was difficult to track eligibility for our virtual students...I know we struggled with that... it was more difficult to keep an eye on athletes' grades because you are working [a third-party virtual learning platform]. It's tough to say, hey, this week you're ineligible because you only got X percentage in the course. Well, that X could have been from work he did two weeks ago...it was tough to say, hey, I know it says you're getting “A”s in all your classes, but you have not been on [online, participating] in so long...you're ineligible this week.

Other schools, including public and nonpublic, opted to retain the higher pre-pandemic MHSAA academic eligibility standards. Kevin said, “We stuck to...the normal guidelines... because you know if we're looking at it just for athletics, that they can be eligible now...you [may] also have a kid that's potentially off track for graduation.”

In exploring the academic performance of student athletes during and after the pandemic, the findings were generally positive. Connor found that “although academics may have improved in many student athletes, there are others...who I would have to imagine got

quarantined many times and fell behind..." Greg found that "Our athletes still perform at a higher level academically than non-athletes." Perhaps most important from the academic standpoint was what Greg observed about students returning to the classroom. He found that "your athletes and kids who do extracurriculars were able to get back into the swing of things a little bit easier," in theory minimizing the potential for a negative academic impact.

In contrast to others in the study, Evan, who did not initially support the lower eligibility standards, but ultimately saw it as a positive measure, experienced some lower academic performance among his students.

They want to make sure that they get through school so that they can go out and participate in the things that they enjoy and you know there's nothing wrong with that if it serves as a motivator. But when they don't have that type of crutch [higher academic standards], we saw some horrible grades...I remember the 2020-2021 school year. We were just...banging our heads against the wall...why in the world are freshmen class grades so poor right now? Just the amount of failures...the Ds and Fs were triple what we have experienced before [the pandemic] and that kind of carried on to the following year [2021-2022]. We have righted the ship a little bit now.

The academic benefit associated with participation in high school athletics was difficult to measure in this study. The anecdotal evidence shared by study participants does support the belief that student-athletes perform better than the average student.

Attendance

As referenced previously, some schools in the study operated virtually for significant portions of the 2020-21 school year. Other schools gave students and families a choice between in-person and virtual learning. Valarie and Connor did not notice a change in attendance

practices among student-athletes. Connor said “I believe the attendance probably remained the same. We already had relatively tight attendance requirements...I think the thing with COVID is that it essentially mandated it [attendance]...there was paper trails because there were just so many [COVID] tests.”

Others found that attendance changed during the pandemic. Evan indicated that:

I truly believe that the student athletes were more likely to come back in-person [as opposed to virtual learning]. They really were. We did have some that did hold out and then stayed completely online, but a majority of them were here in person. I think they felt more comfortable [in-person]...especially with the practices and everything of that nature, they wanted to be here on campus.

Davis also found that student-athletes were more likely to attend in-person. Greg believed that “attendance with our athletes was better” compared to non-athletes, “but overall, in general, our attendance went pretty much right back to where it was.”

Other study participants noticed more subtle changes in attendance. In one case, a student-athlete opted to remain virtual for reasons connected to athletics. Luke found that some of his athletes:

...realized that if I [the athlete) was sitting close to somebody that tested positive, I would have to sit out. So, while they were in season, a lot of the kids chose to be hybrid...My wrestlers were a good example. They would be in school [out of season] because it wouldn't impact them [athletically]. But as soon as their season rolled around, I think their [in-person] attendance definitely did dip because they knew to avoid, number one, being contact traced, or...testing positive themselves. They simply avoided the situation.

Mary also found that athletics impacted attendance, but in a different way than Luke.

Mostly when we were not in session [athletically] I'd say players were...more apt to miss...I think a lot of students used that to their advantage. But when [sports] started going...they had to be in school because we had policies about athletics... and they wanted to be in school. I think that impacted the students drive to attend school.

Kevin experienced some contrast among those who did and did not participate in athletics and/or other school activities.

From the student athlete perspective, it [attendance] stayed relatively the same...what I think I did make a larger note of...are the kids that didn't get involved...It [COVID] gave them more of a venue where...they didn't want to be involved outside of school...so it gave them more of a tendency not to attend.

Overall, it appears that athletics had a positive effect on student attendance during the pandemic. However, athletics did have the potential to push some student-athletes towards virtual attendance.

Discipline, Participation, School Policies and Coaches

The researcher explored the lived experience of principals and athletic directors within the setting of high school athletics and student-athletes related to student discipline, athletic participation and school policy during and after the pandemic. The role of coaches was not explicitly part of this study, but comments shared by some participants related to coaching connect to the existing literature. The findings from the study on these topics are complicated by the potential for a participant's experiences to reflect the entire student body and/or school. The topics in this section are not as specific to student-athletes as other topics included in the study.

In general, the findings related to discipline, participation, school policies and coaches were inconsistent. Few clear themes emerged from the research. The unique experiences

captured in the study are still of value as they may provide future researchers with opportunities for deeper investigation into these areas. The author feels it is necessary and appropriate to include the findings as these topics are addressed in other portions of this document.

Discipline

Due to the virtual operating model of some of the schools in the study, some administrators did not have students in the building for significant portions of the 2020-21 school year. Therefore, some school leaders had limited reason or opportunity to discipline students in a fashion similar to the pre-pandemic period. For those who were in person for a majority of the 2020-21 school year, discipline appeared to be less of an issue. Connor found that “it was actually the easiest year, probably in my career” in terms of discipline issues. Davis also found that “in general [negative] behaviors were much less...much less discipline problems” in 2020-21. Valarie did not experience any changes, expressing that “my kids aren't bad” and that “no changes” that stood out to her related to discipline.

Other participants experienced a move in a negative direction during and/or after the pandemic. Evan noticed a change when students returned to the classroom.

Before COVID, our student athletes were always a population that we can count on to almost never get in trouble with anything...They were great. We always said [athletes are] leaders in the classroom...It seemed like that expectation right after COVID wasn't fully there. And when those students that came back...[among] student-athletes, we had a lot more discipline [issues]. And it was consistent with, the other student population, you know, they [student-athletes] had the same problems...Definitely saw an uptick in that with the regular population as well as with student athletes.

Kevin noticed some changes related to student discipline. He commented that “I think it's societal, that you're seeing more changes just in society” than things specific to student-athletes.

One specific issue related to discipline that arose during the research was the willingness of some students to take action to avoid testing positive on the COVID-19 tests that were required for student-athletes. Mary noted the level of “deception or the things they [students] would try to stay eligible.” Luke was struck by:

...the amount of scams that kids knew and it's like, ‘hey, if I put Vaseline in my nose and he's not quite getting all of my droplets...’, I mean it was baffling to me that instead of just following the norm, kids were again finding loopholes... to beat the system...to stay eligible.

Evan also referenced students utilizing Vaseline or a similar substance to avoid testing positive.

Greg also indicated that he experienced students taking deliberate steps to avoid testing positive.

The pandemic environment appears to have reduced the overall number of discipline issues present in schools. The data did not indicate if this was more or less present among the student-athlete population. What did stand out most related to discipline was the willingness of some student-athletes to intentionally sabotage a COVID-19 test to ensure a negative result, allowing for continued athletic participation.

Participation

Similar to discipline, the findings related to the level of athletic participation during and after the pandemic were mixed. It does not appear that the pandemic had a significant impact on the overall willingness of students to engage in high school athletics. However, early in the pandemic, there appeared to be some decline in the fall sports season of the 2020-21 school year. Some study participants experienced an immediate impact early in the pandemic. Luke observed

a distinct drop in football in the fall of 2020-21. “Our numbers at the seventh, eighth grade, JV varsity and freshman football definitely dipped. No other sports took a hit, but that sport in particular...our numbers decreased for about 2 years during that timeframe.” In contrast to a decline or even no change in participation levels, post pandemic, Jake experienced “the highest participation levels we have ever had.”

Others noted that the pandemic appears to have accelerated trends that were present before COVID-19. Evan found that:

Before [COVID] we were probably a little bit higher [rate of participation]...I started seeing it really with COVID. We have seen the decrease and it's kind of a lot in the female sports...We also have noticed boys tennis...we used to have freshman, JV and varsity. Now, all of a sudden, we're just a varsity team this year for the first time ever... I think that has to do with demographics as well though...our changing school...Our numbers haven't gone down huge, but they've gone down.

Mary noted that at the high school level she did not experience significant changes in participation. However, she expressed concern over the long-term impact of the pandemic on athletics. Young children that may have played community based recreational sports if not for the pandemic “didn't have the experience to get involved in a sport and develop a love of the sport. Now that they are in sixth grade and seventh grade, they are not joining the sport because of that awkward age of self-awareness.”

The pandemic appears to have had a very real negative short-term impact on the level of participation in the fall of the 2020-2021 academic year. The pandemic may have also further exacerbated participation trends that existed prior to the pandemic. In the medium-term, most

participants experienced minimal to no change. The largest impact among participation may have occurred among recreational sports at the elementary age.

School Policies

During the pandemic, most changes to policies associated with athletic programs were the result of outside agencies such as the MHSAA, county, and/or state health departments. These examples include but are not limited to the ability to conduct sporting events (Executive Order 2020-05), spectator capacity (Uyl, 2020g), COVID-19 testing requirements for athletes and coaches (Uyl, 2021e), eligibility standards (MHSAA, 2020), and contact days for out of season sports (Uyl, 2020d). At the schools represented in the study, few, if any significant policies related to athletics were changed as a result of the pandemic. The study identified five specific examples of changes to individual policy during the pandemic that are affiliated with or impacted athletics.

The most dramatic example of a new policy at the school level related to sports and the pandemic was the decision to cancel all athletics. Only one school in the study opted to cancel athletics voluntarily. This decision was short lived and only partially impacted the 2020-21 fall athletic season. Jake made the decision to cancel all sports until he was "...pinned up against a wall at a meeting..." and the pastor made the decision to resume sports.

Luke experienced how policy related to offering only virtual instruction while allowing athletics to continue was not well received by some in his community. "We had some parents saying...'wait a minute...if it's good for our athletes to be here face to face...then why aren't we back in seats [for instruction]'?...that was a tough pill to swallow for some parents."

The third example of policy change addressed academic eligibility standards during a portion of the 2020-21 school year. Schools that had academic standards above what was required by the MHSAA all opted to maintain or reinstate them during or after the pandemic.

Some general practices or operating norms related to athletics did change as a result of the pandemic. The fourth notable change in policy is related to facility maintenance. Cleaning was an aspect of athletics that took on a heightened focus during the pandemic. Connor recalled “there was significantly more cleaning during the pandemic. That was probably the most notable” change. Valarie brought up “the recommendations, washing the equipment down and all that” as a change in operations.

A few participants noted how schools and/or student-athletes began to provide more individualized or personal supplies and equipment for athletics. Connor noted that his school “went from a lot of shared equipment to pretty universally everybody had everything their own.” Valarie observed that “more people brought their own water bottles and I still see even today...I'll put two jugs out for each team and at the end of the night I'm like, did anybody drink this water?” Luke recalled “we took a page from the NBA's book and our benches for basketball and volleyball...spaced out seating and each kid had their own basket with their own towel, their own water bottle.” Mary observed that “We do have more closed gym practices, we haven't really opened it back up.”

Only one participant specifically referenced a formal policy change at the school level because of the pandemic. Evan indicated that his experience with parents during and after the pandemic resulted in establishing “policies that talk about how you communicate and who you can communicate to and what the different steps are...On my end, that's probably the biggest change...I was so inundated with phone calls and emails.”

Other than seemingly minor changes to operations, few schools appear to have made significant modifications to existing athletic related policy. Kevin said “Nothing changed from what we would traditionally do. And if there is anything, we have more [academic] safeguards...I think that is built in for everybody [all students]. Luke said that “Besides the ones that were mandated by the state...no...we really didn't have our own policies set in place or change things much more than what the state already mandated.”

Coaches

The researcher did not directly ask questions related to coaching or coaches during the interviews. However, in responses to some of the semi-structured interview questions, a few participants noted the role of and/or impact of coaches during their response. Connor noted that during the pandemic, we heard a “lot of positive things from parents about their kid’s coaches” and that the experience highlighted “the power that a coach has to make or break a kid's day. Connor also experienced “just how important...the mindset of a coach is...” and how it can impact student-athletes. “We knew that before the pandemic, but...you really saw it during it [the pandemic].” Greg believed that the relationship between coaches and the student-athletes were a driving force behind students wanting to be in school and/or participate in athletics during the pandemic.

Davis commented that an athlete’s ability to persist during the pandemic was often “coach dependent” because a student often assumed a mindset similar to that of his/her coach. Similar to Greg, Jake believed that “if kids like their mentor, teacher, coach and the coach likes them, great things are going to happen.” Coming out of the pandemic, Jake felt that “a lot of coaches are much better trained to deal with everything from” mental health to concussions.

Analysis

In the findings section of this chapter, the researcher identified and documented three primary themes and multiple related sub themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews. The primary themes include: The importance and value of high school athletics, the impact on student-athletes and the impact on school operations. In the analysis section of chapter four, the author will explore connections between these primary themes and the literature, as well as what practitioners and researchers may be able to glean from this study. The results of the research study suggest that the pandemic most commonly magnified and/or accelerated preexisting conditions, trends and or tendencies associated with high school athletics that were present prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis also identifies possible opportunities and challenges that administrators may face in maximizing the positive impact of high school athletic programs.

Throughout the analysis, when possible, the researcher will work to test the primary theories associated with high school sports on each of the identified sub themes. The literature on the value or impact of high school athletics, as previously addressed in the literature review, can generally be divided into three major categories: *Zero-Sum* (Coleman, 1961), *developmental perspective* (Holland and Andre, 1987) and *identification/commitment model or commitment-to-school* (Marsh, 1992).

The Importance of and Evolving Value of Athletics

Overall, the pandemic and its impact on athletics, based on the lived experience of administrators, supports the theories promoted by Holland and Andre (1987) as well as Marsh (1992). All participants from the study suggested that athletics and participation in high school sports has a net positive impact. The observations of administrators regarding the opinion of

parents and the community also support the argument that sports do more good than harm. (The student-athlete component of this topic will be addressed later in chapter four.)

Administrators

Based on the findings, all study participants see athletics as a net positive for student-athletes, the overall school population and for the larger community. This level of support for athletics among the participants is supported in the literature. Slone (2018) found that 84% of high school employees believe athletics has multiple positive benefits. The high rate of support among the sample group is not surprising given the professional responsibilities and personal experiences of the participants. Three of the nine participants are athletic directors. One of the principals in the study had previously served as an athletic director. Every administrator in the study participated in high school sports and all but one coached at the high school level. Four participants had children involved in high school athletics during the pandemic.

Many subjects found their positive perception of athletics reaffirmed if not strengthened, as a result of the pandemic. The assessment of the value and importance of athletic programs shared by administrators both before and after the pandemic generally align with the theories promoted by Marsh (1992) as well as Holland and Andre (1987). The evidence does not support classifying any study participant as supporting Coleman's (1961) view of athletics as distracting from and/or being counter to the goals of a high school. The study identified many possible negative consequences associated with athletic participation. The unexpected cancelation and/or pause of athletics seasons, forfeitures of games, mandated isolation and quarantine resulting in missing athletic contests, virtual learning (mandatory or optional), the inability to socialize, losing the opportunity to be recognized for athletic achievements, intentionally attempting to sabotage of COVID-19 test, and modified collegiate athletic opportunities, all clearly had a

negative impact on many student-athletes. The potential negative outcomes identified in the study were overwhelmingly a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and not solely the result of participation in high school athletics.

In the instances when administrators in the study modified their professional and/or personal view of athletics as a result of their lived experience during the pandemic, they were not directly critical of or opposed to athletics. The on-again, off-again nature of athletics during portions of the study allowed some participants to more clearly recognize opportunities outside of athletics that could produce equally positive outcomes for students and families. This finding supports the work of Reardon et al. (2020), that the pandemic may have helped student-athletes to develop an identity less dependent on sports. There was also an increased awareness among some of the opportunity costs associated with athletic participation. Limiting access to other life experiences and/or family time were specifically referenced. Even with these potential drawbacks associated with athletic participation, no administrator in the study advocated for a significant change in the presence of or role of athletics within his or her school.

In the “worst” case, administrators obtained a more holistic view of the role they felt athletics could and should play in a school setting. In some instances, which meant acknowledging the varying and sometimes competing opportunities available to students and families. For some participants, this was recognizing that athletics is not inherently better or worse than many of the other options available to students and/or families. Working or pursuing other extra-curricular activities are two examples. Although two study participants acknowledged that athletics has less importance for them personally after the pandemic, they still recognized the value of athletics in the high school environment and did not advocate for significant change to the system.

The Community

From a community and parent perspective, study participants did not identify any major changes in the way their respective communities valued athletics during or after the pandemic. Some study subjects did recognize changes in the way the community and parents tended to engage and interact with administrators on items related to athletics. These interactions, while not always positive, indicate that parents and the community continue to see a high value in athletics. A combination of qualitative and quantitative data indicates that communities continue to place a high value on athletics.

During the pandemic, spectator access to indoor high school athletic events in Michigan was often extremely limited, as low as two per student-athlete (Uyl, 2020d, 2020h). Within the study sample, multiple administrators referenced experiencing the impact of limitations on spectators from various perspectives. Ranging from disappointment in not being able to attend, anger that the school was enforcing policies, detachment from the accomplishments of the team, to increased fan engagement were referenced. It is clear that even during the pandemic, high school sports remained something that some communities rallied around. Multiple study participants indicated how sports in general and especially a postseason tournament run, gave the school and community a reason to come together as well as something positive to look forward to during the pandemic. This example further supports the commitment-to-school model promoted by Marsh (1992). The findings also suggest that the commitment to school is not limited to student-athletes but can also positively impact the general student population as well as members of the community.

Even though many schools added the ability to live-stream athletic contests during the pandemic and the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) frequently made state

championship level competition available for remote viewing before, during and after the pandemic, in-person attendance is still preferred by many. Based on attendance at MHSAA tournaments in 2022-23, there was clearly some pent-up demand for high school sports. In the 2022-23 school year, the MHSAA experienced its highest spectator turnout since 2016-17. Over 1.4 million spectators attended postseason competitions during the 2022-23 academic year. This total represents an increase of nearly 10 percent over the 2021-22 school year (Kimmerly, 2023b).

Data related to local attendance was not specifically sought out by the researcher or provided by the study participants. The fact that attendance at sporting events following the pandemic was not highlighted by any administrators in the study suggests that there was limited change in the level of community support once capacity limitations were removed. When the issue of attendance was brought up by participants, any changes that were referenced were not a direct result of the pandemic. Two study participants referenced changes in attendance at the school level. One administrator, in reflecting on a decline in engagement, suggested that other recreational activities were the cause for the decrease in attendance. Another school leader credited a very intentional effort related to branding the athletic programs for an increase in spectators. While the work of Holland and Andre (1987) applies primarily to the student-athlete, the evidence from this study clearly indicates that high school sports can also generate an identification or commitment-to-school among the community. In contrast to the minimal change at the community level, administrators in the study were struck at the extremes that they often experienced when engaging parents during and after the pandemic.

Parents

Study participants largely found parents to be very supportive during the pandemic. Many administrators referenced the appreciation that parents (as well as students) displayed for the effort that was made to ensure sports seasons could happen. After the pandemic, parents' demeanor largely returned to what it had been before the pandemic, but not in all cases. It is from this exception to the norm in the post pandemic environment where we may be able to reinforce and/or extract a lesson that all parties can benefit from.

During the pandemic, parents appear to have been grateful for the opportunity for their child to play and compete. After the pandemic, some administrators found parents engaging in behavior that was similar to what they experienced before the pandemic. In a post pandemic environment, Evan found that many parents seem to expect more for their child related to athletics. Evan believes that post-pandemic, parents have a greater understanding of the actual impact that athletics can have on their child. It could also be a continuation of the trends that existed pre-pandemic that was made more recognizable due to the overall positive engagement with parents during the pandemic. Perhaps the gratitude displayed by many parents during the pandemic resulted in administrators being more susceptible to a post pandemic dip in support and appreciation. These are topics that could be addressed by future research. The response of many parents suggest that athletics plays a role in the student's life outside of the sport itself, supporting the theory of developmental perspective (Holland and Andre, 1987)

In considering the value parents place on high school athletics in a post pandemic environment, administrators are encouraged to consider the findings of Beamon and Bell (2002). They argue that family members and peers also contribute to promoting statistically unlikely outcomes related to college and professional athletics. High school administrators face a

significant challenge to offsetting some of the messaging that their student-athletes may be exposed to. A number of administrators in the study noted how student and parent behavior tended to change for the worse as athletics returned to a pre-pandemic footing. That challenge of keeping the focus on the immediate benefits of athletics participation may become even greater in the near future with the pending legalization of name, image, and likeness (NIL) for high school athletes in Michigan (LeBlanc, 2023).

Summary

The study documents that some administrators, parents and members of the community were seeing that the value of high school athletics as being in the immediate present. Parents, community members and administrators often displayed greater appreciation for the real-time opportunities related to participating in athletics. Parents brought legal challenges to the suspension of in-person instruction and/or athletic activity. Administrators, out of necessity, often took on significant work to comply with testing mandates to allow students to participate in athletics. Even the MHSAA took action that demonstrated their view of the real-time value of athletics. One could argue that the modification of the academic requirements also aligns with the goals of Koehler (1995). Even in acknowledging the negative impact of a paused, shortened or cancelled season, participants saw students and families valuing the more short-term aspects of athletic participation. Some administrators experienced students and parents being significantly impacted by losing the ability to compete and or be eligible for season specific awards.

It must also be considered that the real-time impact of athletic participation may not have been the sole motivating factor for all parties in the examples within this section. Without the real-time benefits, the long-term benefits associated with college and/or professional sports

may be less likely to be obtained. The study documented actions taken by administrators as well as parents to promote and preserve access to high school athletics. However, the findings from the study do not provide any evidence to indicate that parents, or administrators were undertaking specific action to directly preserve potential college or professional opportunities. This specific question may be better addressed in future research.

The Student-Athlete

Among all stakeholders, the student-athlete was most directly impacted by the pandemic and how it altered the high school athletic environment. The research study identified four areas where principals and athletic directors felt student-athletes were especially affected: the value of athletics, the development of life skills, collegiate athletic opportunity, and mental health. Similar to the analysis of importance and value and athletics previously addressed in this section, a review of the student experience, as reported by administrators, also supports the overall positive theories associated with athletics of developmental perspective (Holland and Andre, 1987) and commitment-to-school (Marsh, 1992).

Value of Athletics

Many administrators in the study shared experiences that highlight the impact that the sudden cancellation, pause, forfeit and/or ineligibility due to isolation or quarantine can have on students. The range of responses among students in the short and medium-term provides insight, although often indirectly, into the value that athletics can hold in the lives of student-athletes. Four experiences: disappointment, appreciation, entitlement and declining importance, are worthy of further analysis. A complete understanding of the value of athletics among student-athletes must also include consideration of the analysis of other subthemes specifically addressed

in this chapter such as mental health and the impact on collegiate opportunities. These sections are addressed separately within this chapter.

It is clear that the pandemic created significant disappointment and loss associated with high school athletics. This is especially evident during periods of the pandemic when high school athletic activity was not permitted. The disappointment some study participants experienced among student-athletes and their families indicates athletics has a high value in specific households. That value may be tied to a number of different factors such as identifying as an athlete, as well as a desire to play at the collegiate level and beyond. The willingness of students, families and schools to utilize the legal system also highlights the value that athletics had for some students and families. The actions of many students suggest that participation in high school athletics must have a value beyond the sport itself, further supporting the work of Holland and Andre (1987).

The pandemic also appears to have contributed to many athletes being more appreciative, at least in the short term, of the opportunity to participate in sports. During the pandemic, many administrators indicated that students were more appreciative of the opportunity to practice and compete, as well as an acknowledgement of the work administrators undertook to make that possible. Collectively, this appreciation suggests a stronger commitment to school, as suggested by Marsh (1992). After the pandemic, some participants noted student demeanor taking a more negative turn towards entitlement. The experience of increasing entitlement among some student-athletes is clearly counter to the developmental perspective (Holland and Andre, 1987) and could be argued as supporting the zero-sum theory (Coleman, 1961).

According to some administrators, the pandemic allowed individual student-athletes to realize that athletics was not as important. If this change results in ceasing participation in

sports, this shift in the value of athletics indirectly allows for a small test case in the commitment-to-school model (Marsh, 1992). It is unlikely that students who opted not to return or continue in athletics will experience an increase in commitment to school unless athletics was replaced by another school related activity. This potential change could also create a setting in which the developmental perspective (Holland and Andre, 1987) could be reexamined. Further research is needed to determine if and to what degree these changes did or did not occur.

Life Skills

Proponents of high school athletics often argue that the life skills benefits associated with participation in high school sports extends well beyond the respective playing surfaces (Camiré and Bernard, 2013; Lieblein, 2016; Petitpas et al., 2005; Pierce et al., 2020; Sturges et al., 2020). Other researchers have countered this belief and found limited to no transference of life skills as a result of athletic participation (Holt et al., 2008; Spreintzer, 1994). The lived experience of high school administrators suggests that the pandemic contributed to very specific life skills being developed or strengthened, especially among student-athletes. This finding aligns with the view of high school athletics promoted by Holland and Andre (1987), arguing that sports could positively impact the development of student-athletes.

The life skill of resilience was explicitly referenced during interviews by nearly half of the subjects in the study. Other participants used different language to express skills similar to resilience. Empathy, leadership, and teamwork were other life skills that were highlighted by administrators as being fostered and developed in student-athletes during the pandemic. At a minimum, the resilience that many administrators observed among student-athletes during the pandemic further supports and reinforces the value and importance of athletics in the lives of many student-athletes. Especially in the 2020-21 school year, in the fall and winter sports

seasons, student-athletes experienced varying levels of restrictions and or complete pauses in the season. Often there was little certainty of when athletics would resume, if at all. When considering the impact of these findings, administrators would ideally find ways to take these lessons and apply them in a non-pandemic setting.

Administrators also experienced students taking initiative by advocating and preparing for a resumption in play in various ways. These findings support the ideas proposed by Petitpas et al. (2005) Pierce, (2020) and Yeung (2015). Petitpas et al. argue that for life skills to be developed, the athletic program must be in part, intrinsically motivating, voluntary and include goal setting. High school athletics in general, especially among the sample schools, as well as in the findings of the study, appear to meet these qualifications. The sample schools have a higher-than-average rate of athletic participation and is voluntary at all schools. Multiple study participants specifically referenced students desire, or “goal,” to compete and in some cases, for state titles.

Yeung (2015) argues that leadership and organization skills experienced in sports can translate into other areas. In the case of the 2020-21 school year, these skills were displayed in athletic and non-athletic settings. Outside of direct athletic activities, in the fall of 2020, student athletes demonstrated leadership skills by participating in and helping to organize protest at the state capitol over the restriction of athletics (Calloway, 2020). In other instances, student athletes participated in lawsuits against the state for similar reasons (Associated Press, 2021; Calloway, 2021). Some study participants acknowledged how students engaged in direct conversations with administrators regarding a resumption of athletics, working to find a solution and/or arguing for a resumption in athletics. The study sample includes schools and student-athletes represented by various associations and advocacy groups, as well as plaintiffs, that were

directly involved in the lawsuit against the state in an effort to allow high school academic and athletic opportunities to resume (Burns, 2020; MANS, 2020).

Athletically, based on the findings from the study, some student-athletes made a significant effort to remain physically ready for a return to competition. This was often done without guidance of or prompting from coaches and/or administrators. The study findings support those of Pierce et al. (2020) related to action-based skills, such as hard work, being developed through participation in sport.

The findings of the study also support the work of Lieblein (2016) who found that life skills could still be developed during a losing season that are unaffiliated with the win-loss record. Student-athletes in the spring of the 2019-20 school year, as well as the fall and winter of 2020-21, lost portions of their season due to state mandates as well as local COVID cases. While this is a modification from the “losing record” definition used by Lieblein, the author believes the cancellation or suspension of competition is similar enough to an outright loss to warrant comparison. Even if one were to choose to reject this modification, many high school athletes experienced forfeits and/or missed games due to positive COVID-19 test directly or among teams, as well as the associated contact tracing and quarantine (DeCamp, 2020; Fominykh, 2021; Kolade, 2021; McCabe, 2021a, b, c; Nothaft, 2021; Novak, 2020).

Collegiate Athletic Opportunity, Impact at the High School Level

The findings from the study associated with athletic opportunities at the college level are sharply divided into two groups. One group of administrators experienced no significant impact. For some in this group, students from their school playing at the college level was not common and therefore they had little first-hand experience in this area. Others did have experience with students moving on to college sports but did not notice much change during or after the

pandemic. The second group of administrators witnessed what they considered to be a significant disruption to the process compared to the pre-pandemic environment. This impact was largely the result of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) offering an additional year of eligibility due to the impact that the pandemic had on some of the collegiate athletic seasons during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years (NCAA, 2021). It is important to note that the study participants that experienced noticeable changes each had a child that appeared to have been impacted by the changes COVID-19 created in college athletics. The experience of these administrators as a parent is an important part of their lived experience and may help other administrators better support student-athletes and their families in the future. The impact of the pandemic on opportunity at the college level can and should allow high school administrators to reflect on the goals of their athletic program.

The results of the study highlight an issue that was not present in the literature review before and/or early in the pandemic. de Silva (2020) and Noel-London et al., (2020) addressed the impact that a disrupted season and the pandemic could have on high school students in terms of the ability to be scouted and/or recruited in a traditional sense. Specific to the concerns raised by de Silva and Noel-London et al., when addressing scouting or recruiting, administrators in the study believe that film and stats obtained prior to the pandemic was sufficient, given the circumstances, for recruiting purposes. None of the study participants raised individual concerns or noted any raised by parents or students related to the impact that the pandemic had on scouting and/or recruitment regarding to the ability of a college coach to see a high school student compete during the 2019-20 or 2020-21 school years.

Findings from the study suggest that high school students were more impacted by the additional years of eligibility that was granted to college athletes and increased competition for

finite roster spots and scholarship dollars. A more nuanced observation indicates that some college bound athletes may have found themselves playing at a lower collegiate level (Division 2 or 3) than initially desired due to slower roster turnover.

Less than 8% of high school athletes will play at the college level (NCAA, a). Only 4% of college athletes will play on a professional level (NCAA, b). These facts, combined with the lived experiences of administrators that experienced a significant change to the college athletic landscape during and after COVID-19, highlight the importance of setting realistic expectations and goals related to high school athletics. Beamon and Bell (2002) believe that in part, schools play a role in overstating and exaggerating the probability of a professional sports career. Koehler (1995) urged parents and educators to realize that the benefit of athletics occurs in real time, not in a potential scholarship or professional career.

Mental Health

From the early stages of the pandemic, some argued that resuming athletic activities would help to diminish the negative mental health impact of the pandemic on students (Uyl, 2020e). Noel-London et al. (2020) argue that the pandemic increased the potential of children experiencing an adverse childhood experience (ACE). The study supports the concerns raised by Uyl and Noel-London et al. Many administrators commented on the negative impact that not having access to athletics had on students. Participants shared comments such as "...completely devastating...a negative effect on their mental health..."(Evan), "...a very traumatic thing..." (Connor), "...probably led to depression..." (Davis), and "...they [students] just didn't know how to respond..." (Luke).

The positive impact when activities could be conducted was also highlighted by study participants. Comments included "...kids were excited to be back..." (Valarie), "I am doing

something that is important...” (Connor), “...every play...every practice is going to count...” (Luke) and “...this is something we need...” (Evan). Hughes et al. (2020) highlighted the role sports could play in establishing some normalcy. Evan experienced the impact that sports could have across the general school population. Athletics allowed students to “...watch something that seemed normal...” This example is an important reminder that the impact of athletics can extend well beyond the playing surface. The mental health impact on student-athletes clearly supports the developmental perspective (Holland and Andre, 1987) of high school athletics. The results of the study related to mental health largely support and reinforce the findings in the literature. The findings provide ample opportunities to inform future practice and research and will be addressed in chapter five.

School Operations

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted schools across the nation as well as in Michigan. Schools in Michigan were closed for approximately the last two and a half months of the 2019-20 school year (Exec. Order No. 2020-05, 2020; Exec. Order No. 2020-35, 2020; Haddad, 2020). In the fall of the 2020-21 school year, some schools returned to in-person learning, others opted to stay completely remote, and some schools offered a hybrid approach (Higgins, 2020). In some districts, remote instruction was the sole mode of education for a significant portion of the year (Barrett & Gibbons, 2022; Higgins, 2020; Johnson, 2021; Wisely, 2021). This operating reality created an opportunity to test some of the commonly held beliefs associated with the impact of high school athletic participation on academic performance, attendance, discipline as well as rates of participation in high school sports. Beyond the student-athletes, the pandemic also created a unique opportunity for administrators to evaluate the impact of existing policies.

Academics

Given the specific focus and methodology of this study, the author did not seek to gather or identify quantifiable academic data to allow for comparison and analysis of pre, during and post pandemic environments. When attempting to identify qualitative data, the variations of operating modes, learning platforms, and grading policies that were in place among the schools represented in the study make reliable comparisons difficult and at worst, potentially misleading. Furthermore, during the 2020-21 school year, the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) modified their academic eligibility policy, allowing schools to choose to amend the requirements for participation in athletics (MHSAA, 2020). Five of the eight schools in the study (62%) opted to lower their academic standards related to athletic eligibility. Collectively, these conditions limit the direct comparison and analysis that can be completed with high confidence between the literature and the findings of this study related to the academic impact of high school athletic participation. Even with this limitation, there are valuable insights that can be found in the research study. The literature review identified four primary arguments suggesting that athletic participation has a negative effect on academic performance and six arguing that sports have a positive academic impact. Of these ten collective arguments, based on the findings of the study, four stand out for deeper analysis.

One of, if not the most common argument that athletic participation has a positive academic impact, is that student-athletes perform better in the classroom than their non-athletic counterparts (Camiré et al., 2013; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fejgin, 1994; ; Knifsend & Graham, 2011; Lipscomb, 2007; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1990). The study found general agreement among participants on this argument. This belief was expressed as a general acceptance among participants that student-athletes perform better in the classroom. None of the

study participants referenced explicit data from their own student population to support this premise. One of the most interesting reasons offered for stronger academic performance among student-athletes specific to the pandemic was their ability to “get back into the swing of things a bit easier” when in-person instruction resumed (Greg). This comment came from an administrator in a district that was virtual for approximately two-thirds of the 2020-21 academic year. This observation reinforces the identification/commitment to school model proposed by Marsh (1992) and has an application beyond the pandemic.

If you were to apply this finding expressed by Greg across a normal school year, it could be argued that students who are involved in fall sports may experience a smoother and more effective transition from summer break to the first few weeks of academic instruction. In winter and spring, returning after a week-plus long break from classes may be eased because student-athletes may retain some structure to their day and engagement with the school as a result of practice and/or game schedules. In the spring, with athletic seasons that often carry beyond the last day of instruction, especially for seniors, athletic participation may help maintain academic engagement with summer break on the horizon.

The study found only one explicit and one hypothetical example of poor academic outcomes among student-athletes when compared to non-athletes. Evan noted that he experienced more failing grades during the pandemic than at any other point in his career. He did not, however, explicitly tie poor grades to participation in athletics, noting only that many student-athletes were struggling. Although Evan’s observation is an outlier among the study participants, it should serve as a reminder to current and future school administrators that we need to ensure that the belief that student-athletes typically experience better academic outcomes does not become a self-perpetuating myth. Interestingly, even though Evan saw a significant

decline in academic performance, he believes that the lower eligibility standards helped to limit the potential harm to student-athletes by allowing more students to stay engaged and helped expedite the academic recovery after the pandemic.

The only other example of a potential drop in academic performance among student-athletes was anecdotal in nature, rather than based on direct first-hand experience. Connor suggested that student-athletes had an increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 at practices and/or games and therefore were more likely to be a close contact and subject to more frequent quarantine (or isolation if they tested positive for COVID-19). This could result in missing more classes than a non-athlete, potentially resulting in negative academic consequences. Connor did not provide any evidence from his students and/or professional experience that spoke directly to this comment. Beyond the two indirect examples from Evan and Connor, no other administrator indicated that they experienced athletic engagement having a negative impact on the academic accomplishments of student-athletes before, during or after the pandemic.

A more critical view of academic performance among student-athletes is offered by Beamon and Bell (2002), as well as DeMeulenaere (2010). They argue that student-athletes seek to meet or exceed academic eligibility standards because they want to be able to participate in sports and not to realize intellectual growth. The study provided mixed results when testing this argument. Evan explicitly acknowledged that eligibility was likely a larger motivator than academic growth among some of his student-athletes, especially during the pandemic. As noted previously, he also experienced an unprecedented drop in the academic performance of some of his student-athletes during the pandemic, including when eligibility standards were lowered. Evan also stated that he did not have any objection to athletics serving as a primary motivator for academic performance. It appears that Evan accepted that athletics could serve as the means to

an end, even if the means were not ideal. Kevin noted that without athletics, his high school academic career and professional life would likely be very different. Interestingly, Kevin's school opted not to lower the academic eligibility standards during the pandemic. The experiences of Kevin and Evan support the argument of Beamon, Bell and DeMeulenaere. Neither administrator seemed to be conflicted about the fact that athletics was an academic driver. These findings suggest that it is important to take a holistic approach when evaluating the value and impact of athletic participation, even if that may come at the cost of some intellectual and/or academic goals or outcomes.

In contrast to the experience of Evan, no other administrators noted a significant drop in grades among student-athletes during the pandemic. Furthermore, there was no indication of a noticeable decline in academic performance among student-athletes attributed to the lowering of academic eligibility standards during the pandemic. These findings suggest that student-athletes did not take the path of least resistance when it came to eligibility. If, according to Beamon, Bell (2002) and DeMeulenaere (2010), eligibility was a greater motivator than intellectual growth, one should expect to have seen a drop in the academic performance of student-athletes when the eligibility standards were lowered. The study suggests, at least within the sample, that the concern raised by these authors is not common or significant enough to warrant comments from a vast majority of administrators.

The previously referenced modification to the academic eligibility policy of the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) during the 2020-2021 school year create an opportunity to test two other arguments related to the academic impact of athletic participation (MHSAA, 2020). Slone (2018) argues that academic eligibility standards hurt student-athletes because of the potential to limit a student's access to support that can be essential to the

academic and non-academic development of the student. The non-academic aspects of Slone's argument are evident in the actions of the MHSAA. The decision of the MHSAA to allow schools to modify the eligibility standards potentially lowered the threshold for students to participate. Increasing the probability of eligibility via lower standards allowed more student-athletes to maintain access to the "safe zones" that Noel-London et al. (2020, p. 7) argue sports provided during the pandemic. The Executive Director of the MHSAA, Mark Uyl (2020e), in his effort to resume athletics in the fall of 2020, indirectly provided some of the reasoning behind this modification when he commented on the potential negative mental health impact that continuing to restrict athletics could have on student athletes. Many administrators in the study mentioned the negative impact that the abrupt cancellation of athletics in the spring of 2020 had on student-athletes. The lesson from the pandemic could be useful when considering the impact of a classification of a student as academically ineligible that would result in a student not being able to participate in athletics.

The experience of two administrators supports the potential negative academic impact that eligibility requirements could have. Evan found that the lower standards encouraged students to stay engaged in school that otherwise may not have done so had they been deemed academically ineligible under the pre-pandemic standard. The belief held by Greg that athletics allowed students to more easily return to and engage in school was addressed earlier in this chapter. In both cases, under the pre-pandemic eligibility rules, fewer students would have likely retained access to the indirect academic benefits highlighted by Evan and Greg.

In contrast to Slone (2018) argument for lower eligibility standards, Starostka (2014) argues that eligibility standards should be raised and would result in a better academic outcome for student-athletes. The return to pre-pandemic academic eligibility standards provides an

opportunity to test Starostka's argument. None of the study participants that lowered their eligibility standards indicated they experienced any significant challenges related to eligibility when the more rigorous, pre-pandemic, MHSAA eligibility standards were reintroduced. One could even consider the decision of some schools not to lower their standards during the pandemic as an indirect test of Slone's (2018) argument. The findings do not indicate that schools that maintained the more demanding standards had any increased difficulty related to maintaining student-athlete eligibility. Based on the finding that students were generally able to maintain pre-pandemic grades during a significantly more challenging operating environment, it could be argued that many students could be capable of further enhancing their academic performance. Based on this finding and Starostka's (2014) argument, it is possible that increased eligibility standards may motivate students to reach higher academic benchmarks.

At face value, the fact that a majority of the schools in the study opted to lower their eligibility standards may suggest to some that these schools value athletic eligibility over academics. Based on the evidence from the study, the reasoning for adopting the lower standards ranged from acknowledgment of the challenges of operating in-person and virtual academic platforms simultaneously, concerns about continued academic engagement across multiple academic years, as well as placing a significant value on the non-academic impact and overall importance of athletics. For the schools that opted to retain the pre-pandemic standards, only one school cited a specific reason for doing so. The potential of a student being eligible for athletics, but not for graduation, was enough for one school to retain the higher eligibility standards. Among the schools that retained their pre-pandemic eligibility standards, it does not appear that there was significant discussion or debate regarding adjusting the eligibility policy.

In all cases, it appears that administrators had the best interest of their students at the center of their respective decision.

When evaluating the academic impact that athletic participation can have, the reader is encouraged to consider that the administrators in the study may not have explicitly been tracking the academic performance of student-athletes much more beyond the benchmarks for eligibility during the pandemic. The 2020-21 and for some schools, the 2021-22 academic years, were not conducive to conducting an explicit analysis of the academic performance of student-athletes or a review of the eligibility rate under the revised MHSAA policy. While such work would be likely to identify more nuanced changes in academic performance, it is unlikely that such a focus was a high priority administration during or immediately after the pandemic.

Attendance

McMahan (2020) and Kohl (2017) found a positive correlation between school attendance and athletic participation. Before the pandemic, attendance typically meant being physically in the classroom. The pandemic created an environment where students could attend virtually and be considered “present,” and thus eligible for athletic programs assuming all other academic standards were met. In the study, all but one administrator commented on attendance related to student-athletes in some capacity. Only one study participant observed a meaningful negative change in the attendance of student-athletes. At worst, all others believed there was no noticeable change to attendance rates/format among student-athletes during the pandemic. At best, at least three administrators believe that student-athletes were more likely to choose in-person learning compared to non-athletes. The summary findings again suggest Marsh’s (1992) commitment-to-school theory continues to hold true.

The study found two specific examples of a student-athlete(s) opting to utilize virtual over in-person instruction. One student, a golfer, chose to spend significant portions of the 2020-21 academic year in a warmer climate because of the opportunity this allowed the student to actively work on his golf skills. The primary difficulty associated with this specific example, according to the administrator, was not related to the engagement and/or performance of the student. It was the extra work it created for teachers in supporting virtual attendance for this specific student that made it memorable for the study participant. An athletic director experienced that some athletes, especially wrestlers, were more likely to move to virtual instruction during the season. This choice, according to the administrator, was solely based on the thought that not being in the classroom would make them less susceptible to contact tracing and therefore less likely to miss a portion of their season. In both cases, it appears that student preference of attendance was influenced heavily by the potential impact on athletics. These two cases reinforce the findings noted earlier in this chapter related to the evolving importance and value of athletics among some student-athletes and parents during the pandemic.

Based on the specific findings from the study that student-athletes preferred in-person learning, it can be argued that participation in athletics continues to have strong positive impact on attendance. This is especially noteworthy when considering the wide availability of “virtual” programs that students had access to during the 2020-21 academic year. At a time when almost all students had access to a virtual option and in-person learning may have increased the potential of missing athletic practices and games, according to administrators, student-athletes overwhelmingly opted to go back to school.

Discipline

Regarding student-athlete behavior related to school, McMahan (2020) and Kohl (2017) found that athletic participation has a positive impact on discipline. Outside of school, Spruit et al. (2016), found participation in sports had no significant bearing in engaging in activity that would classify a young person as a juvenile delinquent. Similar to the analysis on academic performance, for similar reasons, this study did not identify specific changes or differences related to disciplinary data such as the number of detentions or suspensions among student-athletes.

The findings related to student discipline are perhaps the most diverse among all the subthemes explored in this study. Some administrators thought the 2020-21 school year was the “easiest” (Connor) of their career and that the number of negative behaviors was significantly reduced during the pandemic (Jake). Valarie saw no change in her students. Evan and Kevin noticed changes for the worse among students. Others saw students pushing the boundaries and testing the limits during the pandemic, specifically related to athletics. An effective analysis requires a broad view of discipline, beyond specific write-ups or records of specific infractions. Some of the findings support the developmental perspective of Holland and Andre (1987). An argument could also be made that athletics drove some students to engage in behavior(s) that supports the zero-sum model proposed by Coleman (1961)

Four of the study participants (Evan, Greg, Luke, and Mary) believe that some of their students took deliberate steps to decrease the likelihood of testing positive for COVID-19 (e.g. using Vaseline to line the nasal cavities, not swabbing the nasal cavity correctly). “Finding loopholes...beat[ing] the system” (Evan) allowed students to have a potentially false negative which would allow them to continue to participate in sports. While this example is specific to

the pandemic and its immediate aftermath when student-athletes were subject to testing, the basic idea is not without precedent and has application beyond the pandemic. While COVID-19 is not an injury in the traditional sense, it can carry with it a similar impact of missing multiple practices and/or games. In some cases, students and/or families will attempt to return to athletics sooner than what some would consider ideal (Carroll & Johnson, 2023). Therefore, it is not surprising that students would take actions to avoid testing positive. The intent to deceive is not a desirable behavior nor would a reasonable person consider such behavior a positive result of participation in athletics. In this instance, athletics clearly promoted and resulted in a negative behavioral outcome among some student-athletes.

The second negative behavioral outcome is more subjective, especially given the overall positive evidence in the literature on the non-academic impact of athletic participation. However, it is less subjective when viewed through the lens of Coleman's (1961) work. Connor and Luke both experienced students voluntarily choosing to utilize virtual instruction over in-person learning with the distinct goal of protecting or expanding their opportunity to participate in athletics. This decision supports the finding of Coleman (1961) as well as Fatih and Gul (2020), that male students prefer to be known for their athletic ability rather than their academic performance. More directly, here we have a case of athletics resulting in students choosing to engage in a learning platform that at least during COVID, was generally less effective than in-person learning for most students (Anderson, 2022; Goldhaber et al., 2023; Leech et al., 2022). It is difficult to find a stronger example of the arguments at the center of the zero-sum model.

Evidence from the study also found that student behavior was enhanced as a result of the pandemic in a way that closely aligns with the enhancement of life skills and the developmental perspective of Holland and Andre (1987). As previously addressed under the value of athletics

section, many administrators observed that behavior among student-athletes was more positive in nature and commonly reflected greater appreciation for the opportunity to compete as well as a recognition of the work school administrators undertook to make athletics possible. Some administrators experienced students being willing to “push the limits a bit more” (Valarie) in the hopes of finding ways for athletics to begin, resume and/or continue. This occurred in many forms, such as protests at the state capitol, deliberate conversations with administrators in terms of specific school policy and/or interpretations of state or health department orders related to athletics. Administrators in this group did not express a significant objection to students engaging in various forms of dialogue.

Participation

The rate of participation in athletics is one metric that can indicate changes to the importance or value that students place on high school athletics. The sample schools have a high level of athletic engagement when compared to historical norms. In the schools represented in the study, on average, 68% of the student body participate in a school athletic program. By comparison, a 30-year national study found that 57% of high school students participate in at least one school or community-based sport (Riser-Kositsky & Peele, 2022). This would suggest that sports hold a place of high value among the schools in the study. A comparison of the rate of participation during and after the pandemic across the state and among the sample schools further indicates that the value of athletics among students was and remained relatively strong.

The MHSAA data on athletic participation documented a 11.6% drop from the 2019-20 to 2020-21 school years (Kimmerly, 2021a, 2021b). Numbers rebounded nearly 7% in 2021-22 and an additional 2.5% in 2022-23 (Kimmerly, 2022, 2023a). Participation rates in 2022-23 were 2% lower than the pre-pandemic levels of 2019-20 (Kimmerly, 2021a, 2023). Enrollment

in MHSAA member schools across the state in the four-year period from 2019-20 to 2022-23, declined an average of 2% per year (Kimmerly, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2023a). While decreasing enrollment is likely to have attributed to some of the decline in participation, it is unlikely to be the sole factor in the lower levels of participation found after the pandemic. Various studies have found that nearly half of all high school students participate in officially recognized high school athletic programs (Lieblein, 2016; Pierce et al., 2020; Pruter, 2013). Therefore, it is doubtful that of the 2% average loss in enrollment consisted solely of high school student-athletes.

Based on the data collected from the study, the impact of the pandemic on athletic participation among the participating schools is minimal, at least in the short term. None of the study participants noted significant changes to participation after the pandemic that they feel are attributable to COVID-19. Of the changes that were highlighted by participants, most seem to have been present prior to the pandemic or related to factors not directly attributable to COVID-19. For those schools that were experiencing a decline in the rate of participation and/or the reduction of the number of teams they were fielding, the pandemic may have accelerated that process, or inadvertently brought those changes into sharper relief. It is important for administrators when reviewing athletic programs and participation not to assume that the pandemic is the primary cause for a reduction in participation. Doing so may result in missing an opportunity to address what may be an ongoing issue within a program or shifting student interest that may be more directly responsible for the decline in participation.

What remains unclear is the medium to long-term impact that the pandemic may have on athletic participation rates at the high school level. The research study suggests that the athletic impact of COVID-19 may have been more significant at the elementary and/or middle school

levels. Similar to high school sports in Michigan, community sports programs were canceled and/or paused as a result of state mandates. A 2021 study by the Aspen Institute found that 44% of parents reported that their respective community sport program had closed, merged or returned with limited capacity during or after the pandemic. The same study found among the various levels of sports programs (community, travel, school based...), that school-based sports were most likely to have resumed at a pre-pandemic level. Two national representative surveys found the rate of regular participation in team sports among six- to seventeen-year-old children dropped 6% from 2019 to 2022 (Lee, 2023). These findings of these studies support the lived experience of some of the study participants.

From a high school perspective, in the short-term, administrators may be well served to intentionally engage, to the degree permissible under MHSAA regulations, with leaders and coaches of community programs to reduce the long-term impact of the pandemic on high school sports. Such collaboration can help coaches at all levels better understand how they can reengage elementary and middle school students to avoid a potential drop in participation at the high school level over the coming decade. It may prove useful to track participation rates over the next 10 to 15 years to more clearly determine if COVID-19 truly impacted a child's ability, willingness and/or opportunity to engage in a sport at the high school level.

School Policies

Of the various subthemes addressed in this section and the overall chapter, the findings related to school policies before, during and after the pandemic proved to be the least significant based on short to medium-term outcomes. With limited exceptions, the athletic policies or practices that were modified and/or created were often the result of actions of an outside agency, such as the MHSAA, county, or state health department. Post pandemic, any change

implemented solely at the discretion of school leadership specific to athletics appears to be typically inconsequential in terms of the overall operation of an athletic program, much less an entire school. No specific reasons were explicitly given or identified for the lack of modifications to school policy.

It is the author's belief, as was as his personal experience, that the lack of policy revisions and/or updates was likely largely driven by the desire of school leaders to return to a pre-covid mode of operation that would feel very comfortable compared to the seeming constant changes during the pandemic. The reader is encouraged to consider that the MHSAA issued 37 updates from June 1 of 2020, through the end of June of 2021 (see Appendix D). This equates to approximately three updates per month, over a calendar year. Beyond a shifting athletic landscape, high schools in Michigan were disproportionally impacted by a mandated move to remote instruction from mid-November until early January during the 2020-21 school year (Burns, 2020; CBS, 2021; MANS, 2020.) In addition, schools were also working to implement the evolving definition of what a close contact was and carry out contact tracing based on the most current definition which was further subject to change based on duration of exposure, masking as well as vaccination status of individual students (Abbott, 2021; Hui, 2022)(J. Strasz, Bay County Health Officer; C. Harrington, Saginaw County Health Officer, personal communication).

Connection to the Theoretical Framework

As addressed in chapter three, the author utilized an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to conduct this study. As part of the IPA method, the researcher is able to include his/her interpretation of the phenomenon, via *dasein* and the *hermeneutic circle*, allowing for a dual interpretation of the event being studied (Urica, 2021). The opportunity to gain insight

to the lived experience of nine administrators at public and nonpublic schools across the state of Michigan, representing all of the MHSAA classifications, as well as the author's personal experience, allows for the researcher to gain a better insight on his own experience related to high school athletics before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Collectively, this experience resulted in the author modifying some of his previous beliefs associated with the subject as well as strengthening others.

The author believes that his own *dasein* related to the pandemic and the operation of a school allowed him to identify with and share in some common experiences with the participants, creating a degree of empathy between the researcher and study participants. The shared experiences allowed the researcher to identify insight that a researcher with a different background may not have fully appreciated or understood. Also, the ability of the researcher and participant to reflect on the lived experiences and possible lessons would have been different with a researcher lacking high school experience during the phenomenon under examination.

One of the first ways the author's understanding of the phenomenon was altered is related to the end date of the pandemic that was established for the purposes of this study. Portions of this document and the related research were underway prior to the United States Government declaring an end to the national emergency associated with the pandemic in April of 2023 (Miller, 2023). The author established July 1, 2021, as the end of the pandemic for a number of reasons that are addressed in the definitions section of chapter one. Based on conversations with various study participants, it became clear that not all administrators would agree with the logic used by the author in establishing the July 2021 end date. While the perspectives of these specific administrators are valid and important, the author did not change the end date of the

pandemic. The established end date was based on factors that are essential when comparing and contrasting athletic seasons that occurred under very different and important operating dynamics.

A second aspect of the author's understanding of the phenomenon that was expanded is related to operating a school solely via virtual instruction for an extended period of time. The author's lived experience was only with schools prioritized in-person learning for the duration of the 2020-21 academic year. The study allowed the author to better understand the lived experience of administrators that were virtual for a majority of that school year. That new perspective allowed the author to obtain a sample that is more representative of the diverse and evolving modes of school operation that existed across the state during the 2020-21 school year.

The ability to compare and contrast the lived experience of administrators and the author's as it related to the cancellation of seasons, forfeits of games, and quarantining of student-athletes was a third way that the hermeneutic circle was utilized. The study allowed the author the ability to identify commonalities as well as differences in his own approach to these challenges as well as the response of students, parents, coaches and administrators, to that of study participants.

Most importantly, taking the collective lived experiences and using the findings as a lens through which to examine and reexamine the three primary views of high school athletics proposed by Coleman (1961), Holland and Andre (1987), and Marsh (1992), as well as the various sub themes addressed previously in this chapter, have all allowed the author to gain a richer understanding of the multi-faceted impact of high school athletics.

Ultimately, the use of the dasein and the hermeneutic circle allowed the author to ask better questions and consider new perspectives when analyzing the findings. For the participants, dasein and the hermeneutic circle allowed them to see more of the positives that

may have emerged out of what was a very challenging time. It also enabled some participants to consider how they may respond to a similar situation in the future and how their experience related to COVID-19 may shape their actions. Collectively, the IPA approach will result in a better understanding of the phenomenon of high school athletics before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Validity and Reliability

Credibility

To ensure that the research findings were credible, I attempted to build some rapport with participants prior to beginning the formal semi-structured interview. I reminded each of his/her rights and options related to further participation in the study. I clarified how the author would work to maintain anonymity. I gathered factual information related to school and professional demographic data for my study as well as to work to place participants in a relaxed frame of mind through the use of factual questions. The average interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, over a virtual meeting platform, allowing participants to select a setting and environment of their choosing. Member checking was utilized by seeking clarification on general items relevant to the overall study as well as to the individual interview. Participants also received a copy of the transcript from their interview and were provided with an opportunity to clarify or correct any comments they made as well as any follow-up comments made by the researcher.

Transferability

Findings, insights and analysis created as a result of the investigation of the lived experience of the study participants may be similar to those found related to other individuals or populations with similar experiences. One of the challenges of the transferability of this study is

that it explicitly seeks to better understand the value of high school athletics in a once in a century pandemic setting. The reader is cautioned to consider how the pandemic conditions may have altered or impacted the ability of school leaders to track and be mindful of specific aspects of high school athletics that were or would be considered common place in a more traditional operating environment.

The reader is cautioned not to generalize the findings due to the unique impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the operation of individual schools. This is true within the state of Michigan, as during a portion of this study, schools in different regions of the state were subject to varying levels of restrictions related to high school athletics. Especially outside of the state of Michigan, the reader is strongly encourage to avoid generalizing the findings of this study as schools in other states were not subject to the same rules, regulation, and/or orders.

Various demographic data associated with this study should also be considered related to the transferability of the findings. The schools in this study have a higher-than-average rate of students participating in athletics compared to national averages. Every administrator in the study felt that athletics was a net positive for the school. Four participants in the study had children that were involved in high school athletics during the pandemic, thus providing experience and insight beyond solely that of serving as a school leader. Each of these factors are likely to have influenced the lived experience of the study participants and therefore, the findings of this study.

Even with the stated limitations of transferability referenced above, the author believes that the summary of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on high school sports provides insights for high school student-athletes, principals, athletic directors and other administrators,

coaches, parents, community health leaders, as well as those who contribute to the development and implementation of policies that impact K-12 education.

Dependability

A specific and detailed explanation of the research process was provided in chapter three and followed throughout the execution of the study. Repeating the steps and processes provided in any future research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on high school athletics may yield comparable findings. As previously noted, conditions specific to individual schools and/or states will impact the ability to obtain similar findings.

Confirmability

In an effort to protect the research from personal bias, I listed possible areas of bias in chapter three. The author also utilized journaling throughout the process to document and study any bias that may influence the study. The research explicitly selected a method (IPA) that allowed the author to include his own experiences as an intentional and valid component of the research.

When identifying the data to establish the findings, the author read the transcript of each interview separately and hand coded the document, creating preliminary meaning units or themes (Peoples, 2021). The two specific coding techniques of *In Vivo* and *Values* coding were employed (Saldana, 2021). After each interview was coded as described, the author examined the collective results to identify commonalities as well as exceptions that were present in the coding. The author used electronic communication to seek further clarification or fill gaps in the interviews. Finally, the author used member checking to obtain any modifications or clarifications from the participants.

Conclusion

In chapter four, the setting and data collection process was clarified, as were the demographics of the study participants. The major findings from semi-structured interviews with nine subjects were established and clarified, utilizing the participants own language to support the findings identified by the author. The findings were then analyzed, when possible, using the three prominent overarching theories associated with the impact of high school sports (Coleman, 1961; Holland & Andre, 1987; Marsh, 1992). More specific arguments in the literature were also tested against the major themes and subthemes that emerged from the study. The author established how the study utilized the IPA methodology as discussed in chapter three. Finally the researcher documented the actions that were taken to maximize the validity and reliability of the study while being mindful to acknowledge potential limitations to the applications of the findings. The finding and analysis completed in this chapter will serve as the foundation for chapter five. In the following chapter the author will reevaluate the research questions in light of the findings, address the potential implications of the study, and offer possible recommendation for application on the school environment as well as future research on the topic of high school athletics.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the research questions that served as the foundation of this study seeking to better understand the lived experience of high school principals and athletic directors before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic related to the value and perception of high school athletics. Answers to the research questions, based on the findings and analysis presented in chapter four, are presented in this chapter. A comparison of the past and present importance and value of high school sports, as found in the study, is also addressed. The potential implications of this study for current and future high school administrators, coaches, parents, and student-athletes are also offered to the reader. Possible topics for future research to build on the findings of this study and the understanding of high school athletics are also suggested.

Answering the Research Questions

RQ 1: What are the lived experiences of principals and/or athletic directors before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic considering the value and perception of high school athletics?

Prior to the pandemic, all study participants reported having a positive view of high school sports. All participants reported that athletics has a positive impact on the school and were well supported by the community. Study participants shared many of the perceived positive impacts and few, if any of the negative outcomes, associated with athletic participation addressed in the literature.

During the pandemic, based on the actions of students, parents and school administrators, it is clear that there was a high value placed on athletics. This is evident by the various efforts

made to begin and/or preserve athletics such as protests, lawsuits, and COVID-19 testing. Administrators experienced parents and student-athletes being more appreciative of the opportunity to practice and compete. Individually, some administrators gained a better appreciation of just how important athletics was to some students and families. For other school leaders, while athletics was still viewed as a positive, the degree of importance diminished for various reasons. Opportunities outside of sports and a realization that they and/or others placed excessive emphasis on athletics were cited as factors contributing to this change.

Alterations to the value and perception of high school athletics at the individual level that developed during the pandemic continued to become solidified after the pandemic as participants had the opportunity to reflect on their lived experiences. The post-pandemic value and perception of high school sports did not result in any systematic changes at any participating schools. No significant policy changes were introduced voluntarily by schools because of the individual and/or collective experiences during the pandemic. Overall, the value and perception of high school athletics remains generally unchanged when compared to pre-pandemic conditions.

RQ 2: How did the lived experiences of high school principals and athletic directors before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic affirm or contradict the perceived value and impact of high school athletics as established in the literature?

As referenced in chapter two, the literature on the impact of high school sports will generally fall into three categories: Zero-sum (Coleman, 1961), developmental perspective, (Holland & Andre, 1987) and/or commitment-to-school (Marsh, 1992). When reviewed holistically, the study identified significant evidence to support the theories proposed by Holland and Andre, as well as Marsh, indicating that high school athletics has an overall positive impact.

Based on the findings of the study, positive outcomes associated with high school athletics outnumbered those critical of sports by a ratio of more than six to one. Within the subthemes where an argument could be made to support a zero-sum view, outcomes associated with the developmental perspective and/or the commitment-to-school could also be identified.

Beyond the three broad categories presented by Coleman, Holland and Andre and Marsh, researchers have explored a wide range of specific outcomes associated with athletic participation. The impact on academic performance (Camiré et al., 2013; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fejgin, 1994; Knifsend & Graham, 2011; Lipscomb, 2007; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1990), student behavior (Denham, 2014; Spruit et al., 2016), attendance (McMahan, 2020), substance use (Denham, 2014), the development of life skills (Pierce et al., 2020; Sturges et al., 2020; Yeung, 2015), perceived future achievement in sports in the collegiate and/or professional ranks (Beamon and Bell, 2002; Harrison, 2000), college-bound behavior and enrollment (Dawkins et al., 2008; Shifrer et al., 2015), and overall health (Johnson, 2018; Meeteer et al., 2016) have been investigated. These topics were addressed in detail in chapter two. The study did not allow for meaningful comparison of all topics in the literature. Where possible, based on the findings of the study, a comparison between the literature and study results is included. When reviewing the findings, the reader cautioned not to make direct comparisons across multiple schools in the study. Given the diversity of operating models during the pandemic, attempting to do make direct comparison can result in potentially misleading and inaccurate assumptions.

Athletic participation among the sample schools was more than 10% higher than that found in a multi-decade long national study (Riser-Kositsky & Peele, 2022). Compared to data provided by the MHSAA, sample schools experienced less drop-off in participation during the

pandemic than the average school. The study suggests that changes to participation rates after the pandemic are more likely the result of conditions that were present before the pandemic.

Academically, the findings of the study generally support the arguments that athletic participation has a positive impact on and/or correlation with performance in the classroom (Broh, 2002; Camiré et al., 2013; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fejgin, 1994; Knifsend & Graham, 2011; Lipscomb, 2007; Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003; McMahan, 2020; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1990). This finding is largely based on perceptions of study participants rather than specific academic data and/or measurements. The adjustments to the MHSAA eligibility standards support Starostka's (2014) premise that higher eligibility standards could result in better academic outcomes for student athletes. Although present and acknowledged by some study participants, significant evidence was not found to support the argument that academic performance is driven by athletic motives, rather than intellectual growth (Beamon & Bell, 2002; DeMeulenaere, 2010). The study did not discover sufficient evidence to allow an analysis of other academic topics addressed in the literature review.

Regarding student behavior, the study found mixed results. Kohl (2017) found that absenteeism was lower among student-athletes. Attendance record and/or preferences for virtual or in-person learning were not explicitly provided by study participants. However, there was a consensus among administrators that student-athletes were more likely to choose in-person learning. Similarly, specific data on student discipline were not shared as part of the study, but many administrators found that especially during the pandemic, there was a noticeable decline in infractions as well as a greater level of appreciation and gratitude among student-athletes. These outcomes support the findings of McMahan (2020) regarding citizenship of student-athletes. Negative findings connected to student discipline associated with COVID-19 testing and

behavior among student-athletes after the pandemic suggest that athletics can contribute to less than desirable actions on the part of student-athletes.

The study found some support for the argument that life skills can be developed and enhanced through participation in sports (Camiré and Bernard, 2013; Lieblein, 2016; Petitpas et al., 2005; Pierce et al., 2020; Sturges et al., 2020; Yeung, 2015). This primarily occurred during the pandemic via the development or enhancement of what many participants referred to as resilience. Empathy, teamwork, and leadership were also referenced. The study also supports the argument of Lieblein (2016), that life skills can be developed regardless of win-loss record. Actions of students advocating for a resumption of sports supports Durbin's (1986) argument that sports can help to develop citizenship skills as well as Blecke's (1979) premise that student-athletes represent their community.

Early in the pandemic, it was argued that resuming athletic activity would have mental health benefits for student-athletes or at least reduce the potential for negative mental health outcomes associated with the pandemic (Noel-London et al., 2020; Uyl, 2020e). The findings from the study strongly support these assertions. Administrators observed and/or believe that significant mental health problems were created as well as magnified due to the cancellation of athletics early in the pandemic. In contrast, when sports resumed, study participants experienced students having positive mental health outcomes associated with their participation in high school athletics.

Pertaining to college athletics, the primary topic addressed in the literature early in the pandemic was the impact that COVID-19 could have on the ability to be scouted by college programs (de Silva, 2020; Noel-London et al., 2020). This claim was not supported in the research study. The study identified an issue that is not present in the literature review. The

most significant issue identified in the study was the granting of extra eligibility for college athletes and the subsequent reduction in roster spots and/or scholarship funds for graduating high school students. The study did not indicate a decline in the rate of students that desired or were able to play at the college level. Nor did the findings indicate any significant change in the average number of high school student-athletes that went on to compete collegiately (NCAA, a)

RQ 3: How did high school principals and athletic directors experience changes, if any, in the way their respective students, families, coaches, and/or community viewed and/or valued athletics before, during, or after the COVID-19 pandemic?

The response of student-athletes aligns closely with specific phases of the pandemic. When all sporting events were prohibited, the action of some students clearly demonstrates that athletics has a high value. Protesting, participating in lawsuits, and conducting student-led workouts demonstrate a strong commitment to athletics. Once sports were able to resume, many administrators experienced students displaying a greater level of appreciation and satisfaction in the ability to practice and compete. Post pandemic, many study participants experienced a shift of students' approach to athletics. Rather than appreciation, some administrators observed an increase in the sense of entitlement among students as it relates to athletics. Other administrators observed students return to pre-pandemic attitudes. In other instances, some students appeared to value sports less after the pandemic. Beyond student-athletes, the study displayed the impact that attending sporting events could and did have on the general student body, especially during the pandemic.

The experience of the administrators as it related to the parent view of high school sports largely mirrors that of the student-athlete experience. Disappointment at the outset of the pandemic when all sports were cancelled, followed by appreciation when sports were permitted,

followed by increased expectations after the pandemic. Some administrators believed that parent behavior related to sports was noticeably worse after the pandemic because parents were more aware of how impactful the loss of athletics could be on their child. Other administrators experienced parents returning to pre-pandemic behavior and overall approach to athletics after the pandemic.

The view of coaches did not emerge as a topic of significance in this study. Three administrators raised the topic of coaches in an indirect manner during their respective interviews. These comments were related to observations administrators made related to coaching in a very general sense. Study participants did not specifically address any changes in how coaches may have viewed athletics before, during or after the pandemic.

Among the various demographic groups addressed in the research questions, the community view of sports experienced the least amount of change. No major changes were identified by participants on this front. In some cases, local trends of declining engagement that were present prior to the pandemic appear to have been magnified or expedited due to conditions present during the pandemic. However, an examination of spectator attendance during and after the pandemic suggests that overall, communities continue to value the opportunity to participate in and engage with high school athletics.

The research indicates that during the pandemic, some postseason runs and even regular season games took on increased importance because these events were one of the few opportunities that the community had to come together. During the pandemic, administrators often observed disappointment or negative responses to the capacity limitations that were implemented by the state. One way this disappointment and the response to it can be measured is by considering attendance at MHSAA tournament events. In the 2022-23 school year,

spectator attendance was the highest since 2016-17, suggesting that the value of sports among many high school communities is steady, if not growing (Kimmerly, 2023b).

RQ 4: How did the lived experiences of high school principals and athletic directors before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, change or alter their respective view on high school athletics, if at all?

Overall, all study participants held and maintained a positive view of athletics before, during and after the pandemic. Compared to pre-pandemic beliefs, many administrators emerged from the pandemic equally convinced of the importance of high school athletics. Others made slight modifications to the value and role they feel athletics should have but retained a net positive view of high school sports. This aligns with the findings of Slone (2018), that a vast majority of high school employees see athletics as beneficial. Any significant criticisms of athletics raised by participants are directly attributable to environmental and operating factors related to COVID-19 as opposed to participation in athletics.

The experience of some administrators during the pandemic did result in some subtle changes related to what they valued about athletics and/or the degree to which they valued high school sports. Some participants, reflecting on their experience during the pandemic, were even more convinced of the importance of high school sports. From a school and community standpoint, an opportunity to gather and celebrate something positive was highlighted during the pandemic. So too was the mental health impact that sports did and could have on individual student-athletes.

For other administrators, while they still valued athletics, the pandemic created a greater sense of appreciation for other opportunities outside of athletics that could have equally as positive outcomes. Other extracurricular activities, jobs and/or more time with family were

referenced. In some instances, the opportunity costs associated with athletic participation was brought into more sharp relief. Other participants experienced a change in the priority they placed, or feel should be placed, on high school sports. In these instances, the change in emphasis of athletics occurred more on the personal than professional level.

While the study identified consistency and/or changes in the view of athletics among various stakeholders, the impact, positive or negative, was not strong enough to warrant any significant change in policy and/or the operation of athletic programs at any of the schools in the study. None of the participants argued for significant alterations to the operating model of high school sports in Michigan as a result of their lived experience during or after the pandemic.

RSQ 1: How did the lived experiences of high school principals and athletic directors during the COVID-19 pandemic change or alter school policy related to athletics, if at all?

Overall, there was little lasting policy change related to athletics as a result of the pandemic. The greatest degree of change was temporary and occurred during the 2020-21 academic year. During the pandemic, most policy changes that impacted athletic programs were the result of actions of outside agencies such as the governor, state and/or county health departments, as well as the MHSAA. Actions by state and county level officials established when and how athletics could occur. The study did not identify any substantial policy changes related to athletics as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic or athletic experiences during the pandemic. The most common changes that occurred as a result of the pandemic were not enshrined in official policy language and are generally related to health procedures that were implemented during the pandemic and remained in place afterwards.

Implications

The Perceived Importance and Value of Participation in High School Athletics

This study began with a desire to better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted the importance and value of high school athletics. The answers to this and related research questions, indicate that in a general sense, the importance and value of high school sports after the pandemic remains largely unchanged for a majority of stakeholders. The pandemic appears to have created conditions that allowed pre-existing ideas associated with sports, positive, neutral and/or negative, to become more solidified in the minds of the study participants as well as those with whom they interacted. Although there was little change to the pre- and post-pandemic view of athletics, the pandemic period of the study demonstrated that sports did and continues to have high importance and value for many stakeholders.

When access to high school athletics was restricted or limited, students, parents and schools took very public, as well as private actions, to advocate for a resumption of sports. Protests and lawsuits associated with access to high school athletics occurred at various points during and after the pandemic. In some cases, some students took it upon themselves to continue to engage in athletic activity outside of official school channels. When athletics were allowed under specific criteria such as masking and/or COVID-19 testing, a vast majority of students opted to meet these conditions rather than forgo high school athletics. Schools took on the additional work of coordinating and conducting testing for athletes, as well as the required state reporting associated with the testing. Additional time, energy and resources were invested in preparing and maintaining athletic facilities for student-athletes and spectators.

The expectations and requirements related to health-related protocols, cleaning and testing for student-athletes during the pandemic (2020-21) and after (2021-2022) were similar to

what was required of schools that offered in-person learning. While this comparison may not appear significant on the surface, it suggests that many school leaders saw access to athletics as equally important as access to in-person academic instruction. Athletics is typically classified as an extracurricular activity. The lived experience of high school principals and athletic directors suggests that they, as well as many student-athletes and parents, see high school sports as an essential high school activity.

Holistic Research Theories Associated with Participation in High School Athletics

Some of the earliest literature to explore the impact of high school athletics argued that sports were a detriment to the student-athlete as well as the school (Coleman, 1961; Eitzen, 1975; Jable, 1986; Solberg, 1970). Over time, subsequent research has identified more positive aspects associated with athletic participation. The lived experience of the study participants overwhelmingly supports the developmental perspective (Holland and Andre, 1987) as well as the commitment-to-school (Marsh, 1992) views of high school athletics. Based on themes and subthemes from the study, the evidence identified ten categories in which the work of Coleman, Holland and Andre and/or Marsh could be examined. Evidence supporting the developmental perspective and/or commitment-to-school model were found in all ten categories. Furthermore, the support for the developmental perspective and commitment-to-school model were generally evenly represented across the 10 categories identified by the author. This suggests that the impact of athletic participation is equally important inside and outside of a school setting.

The zero-sum model proposed by Coleman (1961) was evident in only two of the ten categories. Interestingly, the two examples supporting a zero-sum perspective were only found in conditions specific to the pandemic. An examination of the individual views of principals and athletic directors that participated in the study reflects similar findings. Although three

administrators emerged from the pandemic with a diminished view of athletics, all retained an overall positive regard for the actual and potential impact that sports can have on student-athletes, the school, and the school community.

This study indicates that the work of Coleman and others that have similar arguments, has a very limited, if any, application in the current setting of high school athletics. This should not suggest to the reader that participation in high school athletics is solely positive and that there is no potential for negative outcomes. The study identified examples of negative outcomes associated with sports that contributed to less-than-ideal results. However, even when these findings are taken into account, the lived experience of the study participants indicates that the potential for positive outcomes far outweigh the likelihood of negative results, thus largely nullifying the zero-sum model proposed by Coleman (1961). The findings of this study further reduce the validity and credibility of the zero-sum model. Future researchers may include Coleman's work in their literature review to provide context but would be best served to cease including Coleman in future analysis.

Potential Benefits for Students Associated with Participation in High School Athletics

The literature has identified various positive outcomes for students that are associated with participation in high school sports, including but not limited to, stronger academic performance (Broh, 2002; Camiré et al., 2013; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fejgin, 1994; Knifsend & Graham, 2011; Lipscomb, 2007; Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003; McMahan, 2020; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1990), better attendance (Kohl, 2017), better student behavior (McMahan, 2020), and the development of life skills (Camiré and Bernard, 2013; Lieblein, 2016; Petitpas et al., 2005; Pierce et al., 2020; Sturges et al., 2020; Yeung, 2015). The study participants supported and reinforced these ideas.

The evidence provided by administrators in the study to support the claims of the benefits of athletic participation was overwhelmingly anecdotal in nature. Even when accounting for the methodology implemented in this study, the lack of school specific qualitative and/or quantitative data serves as a signal that some of the perceived impacts of athletic participation may be subject to becoming self-perpetuating without being firmly grounded in actual school specific analysis or review. In a worst-case scenario, this view may lead school administrators to believe that the positive student outcomes associated with participation in athletics occurs automatically and does not require any intervention or intentional action on the part of athletic directors, coaches, and/or parents.

The study indicates that in particular, the development of life skills is especially subject to the risk of not being fully realized. Camiré and Bernard (2013) argue that life skills are developed when an intentional program focusing on specific goals is incorporated in the athletic program. Most of the life skills development that study participants referred to was associated with conditions specific to the pandemic and not a purposeful effort to build this skill among student-athletes.

A strong administrator would not accept or utilize what appears to be a laissez-faire approach when working to determine the impact of an academic program. Unfortunately, based on the results of the study, it does not appear that the same standards for program evaluation are shared between academic and athletic programs. This represents a potentially significant lost opportunity to enhance the experience of multiple stakeholder groups.

Sudden Loss of Access to Athletics

The scale of the impact of the pandemic was unprecedented in the lives of most school administrators and student-athletes in Michigan. However, on a smaller scale, similar

disruptions have and will continue to occur on the athletic front, but for different reasons. The lived experiences during the pandemic can help to shape how administrators, parents, and student-athletes respond to sudden disruptions to athletic seasons that may occur as the result of injury, various eligibility issues, the completion of a season or athletic career, as well as public safety concerns. The literature review, as well as the study, identified the potential benefits of athletic participation as well as the possibility of negative mental health outcomes associated with the loss of access to athletics (Noel-London et al., 2020; Uyl, 2020e). The results from the study suggest that being very intentional in terms of the support provided to students who lose access to sports is essential to supporting the mental health of and maximizing the positive impact of athletic participation on student-athletes.

The results of this study should be considered when establishing eligibility policies at the school and state level. More importantly, the results highlight the value and importance of policies and/or programs that may minimize the likelihood of a sudden loss of access to athletics. The findings previously addressed regarding the impact that athletic participation can have inside as well as outside of the school setting further magnifies the potential consequences for not ensuring supports are in place for students that experience a sudden loss of access to athletics. Collectively, the study reinforces a holistic approach to supporting student-athletes and building systems that can support all students regardless of whether they are eligible, at risk of being ineligible, or outright ineligible.

At the state level, the MHSAA establishes eligibility standards that can impact a school's ability to participate in postseason tournaments. This study should also encourage the MHSAA, as well as athletic associations of other states, to review their eligibility standards. State level eligibility standards are often enacted to establish and/or maintain a competitive balance among

schools and to preserve and support the academic goals of a high school education. While important and appropriate, those goals can and do have a very real impact on student-athletes. Schools that opt to implement eligibility standards above what is established by the MHSAA are also encouraged to review the impact of their policies.

The pandemic clearly demonstrated the impact that a loss of access to athletics can have on student-athletes. This experience combined with the recognition that non-pandemic related factors will continue to create a loss in access to athletics on a smaller scale, reinforces the importance of schools having structures in place to inform students and parents of eligibility standards as well as to support student-athletes that may be classified as ineligible for as much of a full season of a sport that they previously participated in.

Participation Levels

The study identified only isolated cases of a drop in the rate of participation at the high school level. The most explicit of these cases was specific to the fall season of 2020, when health concerns were high, remediation efforts were limited, and the ability of sports to proceed was in a state of flux. The study suggests that the impact of the pandemic on athletic participation at the high school level was minimal. MHSAA participation data supports this conclusion (Kimmerly, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2023a). The most significant impact appears to be among high school students with a marginal interest in or commitment to athletics. Given the overall positive impact of athletic participation documented by this study, the evidence suggests that continued efforts should be made to encourage and/or maintain engagement in sports and/or possibly other extra-curricular activities associated with the school.

Outside of high school athletics, a few study participants commented on the impact of the cancellation of youth sports seasons. The drop in overall participation in youth sports in their

community as a result of the pandemic was also referenced. The observations of these study participants are supported by multiple national studies (Aspen Institute, 2021; Lee, 2023). This is a factor that could impact high school athletics over the coming decade. The pandemic may have resulted in some children missing an opportunity to become integrated in a sport that would likely culminate with participation at the high school level.

Impact on the School and School Community

Policy Changes

One of the most striking findings from the study is the apparent dearth of lasting, voluntary, policy revision and/or modifications that occurred at the school level as a result of the lived experiences of administrators during the pandemic. With the exception of the MHSAA eligibility standards during the 2020-21 school year and protocol of communication standards at one school, no other significant permanent policy changes were identified by study participants. Even the most impactful policy change, the modified MHSAA eligibility policy, did not impact all schools, as some opted to retain traditional academic eligibility benchmarks. Perhaps school leaders were fatigued by seemingly ever-evolving policies and operating standards that schools were subjected to in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. For context, the MHSAA issued an update, modification and/or clarification on average nearly every 10 days from June of 2020 through June of 2021.

As schools have resumed standard operating procedures, perhaps school leaders will be more able and willing to reflect on their experiences during the pandemic and consider possible policy changes that will better support desired student outcomes. Such a process may also support the effectiveness of existing policies. Both outcomes would benefit the experience of the various stakeholder groups that have been identified in this study.

Student-Athlete and Parent Interaction with Administrators

The study identified significant changes and shifts in the behavior of some student-athletes and parents from the pandemic to post-pandemic period. During the pandemic, many study participants found their engagement with student-athletes and parents much more positive and supportive in nature. In sharp contrast, after the pandemic, the study indicates that student-athlete and parent behavior deteriorated. While student-athletes and parents still valued athletics, it appears that their expectations may have increased while their empathy or tolerance for less than perfect outcomes was significantly reduced. These results should be considered when school leaders review objectives and standards of their athletic programs. Equally important is how school leaders communicate the standards to student-athletes, parents, and coaches. The results also suggest that administrators may need to be more intentional in the type of support that is provided to coaches in what appears to be a more demanding environment post-COVID.

Community Impact

Various administrators involved in the study highlighted the impact that restrictions related to spectator attendance had on their community (McCabe, 2021b; MDHHS, 2021; Uyl, 2020g, h. 2021a, d). Especially during the pandemic, at some schools, athletics appeared to present one of the few opportunities for a community to gather together. In a similar vein, some study participants noted that the ability to have athletics, even for spectators, helped to bring something that “seemed normal” into a very abnormal environment (Evan). The results of the study further highlight that the ripple effect of high school sports extends well beyond the student-athletes. Recent attendance data gathered by the MHSAA suggests that spectator interest in high school sports is increasing in the wake of the pandemic (Kimmerly, 2023b). Collectively, these findings suggest that the commitment-to-school model (Marsh, 1992) could

and should be updated and expanded to include the impact of high school sports on the general student population as well as the school community.

Recommendations

In Practice

The results of the study can help administrators, parents and students take action that can increase the positive results, while reducing the potential for negative outcome, of high school athletics. The author has suggested possible steps that each group can take to further enhance the experience of those who interact with and/or participate in high school sports.

Administrators

The study demonstrated that high school sports continued to be valued and, in many cases, highly valued across various stakeholder groups. These results reinforce the consideration that high school athletics should be given in relation to the allocation of finite financial and physical resources. From a budgetary standpoint, how school funds are used to support athletics should be reviewed. The findings of this study should be considered if/when administrators are questioned about the “value” of athletics. The study should also reinforce the value of strong booster organizations and their ability to supplement athletic budgets.

Operationally, when school leaders are considering eliminating a program, the potential impact on students should be considered. Administrators should explore what, if any, alternative programs may be in place to fill the void in the high school experience of students that had previously or potentially would have participated in a defunct program. Administrators are encouraged to consider cooperative programs with other schools to start and/or sustain programs. Intramural programs also offer an opportunity to maintain or create opportunities for students. School leaders should also consider identifying opportunities for students outside of the school to

continue to participate in athletic opportunities outside of formal school teams and intentionally share that information with students and families.

This study also highlighted changes related to parent and student-athlete behavior from the pandemic to post-pandemic period. In most cases, these changes were not for the better. School leaders are encouraged to consider how they may be able to help student-athletes and parents adopt a mindset and expectations that may result in behavior that promotes and develops outcomes that more closely reflect the appreciation and support that was common during the pandemic. If not in place already, athletic directors could consider an orientation program for all new and/or incoming parents and student-athletes that can establish and reinforce the core values and expectations for all associated with a school's athletic program. Such a program may include other important information related to eligibility, academic, physical, and mental health resources, as well as statistics and requirements related to collegiate athletics.

Internally, the author recommends that administrators conduct a self-audit of their athletic programs to better understand if and how their athletic department is maximizing the potential positive impact of athletic participation identified and/or reinforced in this study. An audit could include an annual review of the academic performance as well as the discipline and attendance records of student-athletes compared to their peers. Given that less than eight percent of high school athletes continue on to the college level, perhaps most important in the long run for the student-athlete, is to ensure that the school has or institutes an intentional approach to building life skills through athletic participation (NCAA, a). This would require a commitment from coaches as well as support from the athletic director.

Part of ensuring that athletic programs achieve and maximize ideal outcomes should include intentional training and support for coaches. The study identified the influence that

coaches could and did have on student-athletes during the pandemic. If athletics and therefore coaches are expected to be an extension of the school, school leaders are strongly encouraged to ensure that the hiring and development of coaches reflects and incorporates those goals.

Training should be provided for coaches beyond their specific sports to help maximize the non-athletic benefits that are associated with high school sports. This is especially true if administrators expect life skills to be developed as a result of participation in high school athletics (Camie and Bernard, 2013). Individuals serving in the athletic department in a paid and/or volunteer role must be aware of and understand the mission of the school and the role that athletics can play in that process.

Included in the proposed self-audit, from a social and emotional perspective, administrators are encouraged to consider the supports that are in place, or should be put in place, to reduce the potential for and/or impact of a sudden loss of athletics. The experiences of various administrators in this study clearly established the potential impact that a sudden loss of athletics can have on the mental health of student-athletes. Ensuring that pro-active supports are in place for at-risk students, is an ideal first step. School leaders should also consider and create supports that will reduce the potential negative consequences of a loss of athletics. One way to approach this goal is to consider how seasons and/or careers can be interrupted and/or ended and then develop specific responses to each. Another approach may include having student-athletes complete something similar to the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer, et al., 1993) to identify and support students who may be more at risk to the adverse effects to a loss of athletics.

A review of school and athletic policy should also be included in the audit. One of the most surprising outcomes of the study, from the author's perspective, was the limited number of policy modifications that occurred as a result of the pandemic. Policy review and creation could

serve to codify some of the potentially positive outcomes that emerged from the pandemic.

School leaders are also encouraged to reflect on health and safety protocol. How attendance and academic progress is defined for virtual students would also be beneficial. The study suggests that expectations for coaches, parents as well as for student-athletes firmly established via school policies, are needed more now than in the past. Also, potential policy establishing criteria for cancellations of games, seasons and/or programs should also be considered.

School administrators and others are encouraged to see the potential for athletics (at any level) to counter the learning loss and lag in social-emotional development often attributed to the pandemic. This study has clearly identified that athletic participation during the pandemic helped build stronger connections to school and helped students re-engage and or stay engaged with the academic and social aspects of school. If athletics was able to have such an impact during a pandemic, it is reasonable to believe that the same can occur outside of a pandemic.

This study also documented the reduction in access to community/recreational sports programs during and after the pandemic. To promote the medium and long-term health of high school athletic programs, administrators and coaches should consider working with various youth sports organizations to better understand how the pandemic may have impacted participation at the local level and the potential impact that this may have in the future at the high school level. Possible next steps may include, depending on state athletic associations rules related to recruiting and undue influence, collaborating with local organizations to create opportunities for first-time participants and/or more novice athletes. Offering no-cost clinics to engage with youth in the community, ensuring that team sports, to the degree possible, are present in elementary and middle school physical education classes, and providing free tickets to high school athletics events should be considered.

Parents

Based on the findings of the study, parents would be well served to encourage their children to participate in high school athletics. This study has contributed to and strengthened the existing research that has identified the many positive impacts of participating in sports. Parents of student-athletes, based on the results of this study, should strive to partner with the school leadership and coaches in establishing and reinforcing reasonable goals and outcomes associated with high school athletics. This should include accepting that a vast majority of the benefits of athletics occur in real-time (Koehler, 1995) as well as the statistical reality of a potential collegiate and/or professional athletic career. The study indicates such an approach is possible and was clearly evident during the pandemic. Parents are encouraged to consider how they can model and reinforce such a view of athletics. Similar to school leaders, parents should also consider how they can support their child if he/she experiences a sudden loss in access to athletics.

Students

Similar to parents, student-athletes are encouraged to live in the “athletic moment” and strive to be aware of the opportunity that each practice and/or game represents. Consider the students in high school during the pandemic, especially the classes of 2019-20 and 2020-21. Many of those students lost out on significant athletic opportunities. Unlike their college counterparts, an extra year of high school eligibility was not granted, nor was it practical or legal under existing MHSAA rules (MHSAA, 2022b). Secondly, focusing on the real-time benefits of high school sports will help to manage expectations associated with athletics. This is especially true for student-athletes involved in highly competitive programs where try-outs and/or cuts are necessary. If a student-athlete finds that his/her playing career is not on the trajectory that they

believed it would be, or if that career is ending, being open to accepting a different role on the team or pursuing another opportunity will help to protect their mental health and will likely support the development of life-skills.

This study identified benefits associated with high school sports for student-athletes and non-athletes alike. Students are encouraged to take advantage of participating in athletics through the various non-player roles such as spectator, student manager, and statistician. The study suggests that these activities can also promote a commitment to school (Marsh, 1992), which is likely to have a positive effect. In some instances, administrators acknowledged that the positive impacts connected to athletics can also be present in other extracurricular activities. Beyond athletics, if a school does not have a specific athletic program or opportunity, students are encouraged to discuss the possibility of adding said program with appropriate members of the school staff.

In Future Research

To build on the findings of this study and expand our understanding of the impact of high school athletics, future researchers are encouraged to test the results presented in this research by applying similar questions across different geographic areas, expanding and diversifying the subject pool and utilizing various methodological approaches.

A mixed-methods or quantitative study would allow additional data to be gathered, providing researchers with information that could aid in identifying if outcomes found in this study are regionally and/or nationally representative of the experience of other high school administrators. Such an approach could also help to identify how state specific policy may have impacted various stakeholder groups related to high school athletics.

Investigating retention rates of athletic programs during the pandemic and beyond would provide statistical data to supplement the qualitative data used in this study. Comparing retention data across various states could help to determine what, if any, impact state specific policies during the pandemic regarding athletics may have had on participation. A qualitative and/or quantitative study of state level high school athletic associations and/or organizations could also serve to highlight differences among states and or regions.

A better understanding of retention rates could also provide a unique way to further test some of the benefits associated with athletic participation. Investigating academic performance, behavior and attendance records of the same student, during and outside of athletic participation, could more clearly determine if the benefits of athletics are more correlational or if sports directly produce such results in students. To identify and track possible lasting impacts of the pandemic on engagement in athletics, a longitudinal study tracking participation rates at the community, middle, and high school level may also prove insightful.

In addition to expanding the methodology and geographic range of future work, including coaches, parents of high school athletes, and former high school athletes would significantly expand the perspectives and experiences represented in the literature. Furthermore, the participants in the current study were largely homogeneous culturally and were predominantly male. Future work should strive to include a diverse group of subjects and or sample set that is more representative of sex as well as racial and ethnic groups.

Specific to the impact of high school sports during the COVID-19 pandemic, a study explicitly investigating the similarities and differences among schools that were largely operating in-person versus fully remote for at least a semester of the 2020-21 school year would also

deepen our understanding of the value and impact of athletics on student-athletes and the school community.

Conclusion

With the exception of the academic function of schools, no other aspect or program associated with a high school impacts more students than athletics. Multiple studies have found that over half of high school students participate in sports and close to 50% of high schools students participate in programs directly affiliated with their school (Duffett et al., 2004; Lieblein, 2016; Pierce et al., 2020; Pruter, 2013; Riser-Kositsky & Peele, 2022). Michigan has frequently ranked among the top 10 states for participation in high school sports (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2019, 2022, 2023). Among the schools in this study, on average over 68% of students participated in high school sports. This study intended to utilize the COVID-19 pandemic and the related disruption that it caused to the operation of the high school environment in Michigan, to examine the value and perception of high school athletics.

In the 2019-2020 and 2020-21 school years, high school athletics were subject to multiple extended pauses as well as evolving requirements, regulations and limitations that impacted student-athletes, coaches, and spectators. Specifically, the research sought to identify how, if at all, the perception and value of high school sports may have changed before, during and/or after the pandemic. The author also sought to use the experience of school leaders to test and reexamine some of the major findings and theories present in the existing research literature associated with participation in high school athletics.

To accomplish this goal, the author focused on the lived experiences of high school principals and athletic directors that were in the same building before, during and after the pandemic. Utilizing a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, specifically

incorporating an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the researcher strove to better understand the lived experience of high school administrators, as well as his own experiences as an educational administrator. Using purposive and criterion-based sampling, the author established a participant group of nine high school principals and/or athletic directors. The end goal of the research is to maximize the lessons that could be extracted from the pandemic with the hopes that the findings would lead to a better experience for all those associated with high school athletics.

The study demonstrated that the value and perception of high school athletics was high before, during and after the pandemic. The importance of and appreciation for sports among parents and students increased during the pandemic. After the pandemic, while the value of athletics remained high, pre-pandemic norms among students and parents related to athletics reemerged. The pandemic did not create any significant changes among participation rates at the high school level in the short-term. Athletic trends that existed before the pandemic were highlighted and even accelerated during the pandemic. Matriculation to college athletics remained consistent, but the pandemic may have impacted the division at which some student-athletes would participate. While schools were constantly updating operating procedures during the pandemic, the experience did not result in meaningful changes related to the operation of high school athletics after the pandemic.

In large part, the study supports the overwhelmingly positive view of the value of athletics present in the developmental perspective (Holland and Andre, 1987) and commitment-to-school (Marsh, 1992) theories. The study generally supports the literature regarding the positive impact that participation in athletics can have on academic performance, discipline, attendance, and the development of life skills. In particular, the life skill of resilience was

frequently identified by study participants. The study also highlighted the impact that losing, as well as retaining, the ability to participate in sports could have on the mental health of student-athletes.

The findings from the study also provide insight that can shape the future of high school athletics. As witnessed during the pandemic, this study indicates that there is room for improvement regarding the interaction between administrators, student-athletes, and parents. To ensure that athletics continues to have the positive outcomes established in the literature, administrators are encouraged to track relevant data more closely at the school level. Lessons from the pandemic can enable school leaders to better understand the effect that a sudden loss of access to athletics due to injury and or ineligibility can have on student-athletes. Ultimately, with this knowledge, administrators can respond more effectively and reduce the negative outcomes for student-athletes. Athletically, the lingering effect of the pandemic on high school sports may be five to 10 years away. The drop in participation in youth sports during the pandemic should be monitored and if possible, actively countered to avoid a possible decline in participation at the high school level (Aspen Institute, 2021; Lee, 2023).

Through the lived experience of nine high school principals and athletic directors, this study clearly established the value and importance of high school athletics in general, but especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research highlighted the impact that sports can have on student-athletes well beyond practices, games, and after their athletic career concludes. The research should also serve as a reminder that the influence of high school sports includes the general student population as well as the larger community. It is the researcher's hope that collectively these findings will serve educational leaders, coaches, parents as well as student-

athletes, in maximizing the benefits of high school athletics that this research has reaffirmed and/or identified.

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APPENDICIES

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Appendix B: Consent to Participate

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Appendix D: Timeline of Limitation on High School Athletic Activity, March 2020-June 2021

**Appendix A
Recruitment Flyer**

University of Michigan – Flint

A Study of the Lived Experiences of Principals and Athletic Directors in Relation to High School Athletics Before, During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

VOLUNTEERS WANTED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY

If eligible based on the criteria below, you are being invited to participate in a research study that seeks to understand the lived experiences of principals and athletic directors related to high school athletics before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. You will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview (approximately 60 to 90 minutes). Follow up interviews are possible (30 minutes). There is also the potential for focus group interviews (approximately 60 minutes). Participants may take part in the individual interview process and not participate in focus group interviews.

The topic of all interviews will focus on how the lived experiences of principals and athletic directors before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic supports or refutes commonly held beliefs and theories related to the impact of high school athletics.

In order to participate, you must meet the following criteria:

1. Must be at least 18 years of age
2. You must be or have been, a high school principal or athletic director
3. You must have been working in the same position (principal or athletic director), at the same school, from at least the fall of the 2019-2020 school year through the end of the 2021-22 academic year

Your confidentiality

This study is not affiliated with any group, and no one will know you are participating, other than the researcher and other participants in potential focus groups. Reporting of the results will not include any identifiers. All personal identifiers will be removed by the researcher and all recordings will be destroyed immediately upon completion of the study.

If you are interested in participating in this study or would like more information, please contact:

Cormac Lynn at 989-860-6567 or clynn@diosag.org

All communication is confidential

Appendix B
Consent to Participate

University of Michigan Flint
303 E Kearsley St, Flint, MI 48502

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

TITLE

EXPLORING THE VALUE AND IMPACT OF HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS
THROUGH THE LENS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

INVESTIGATOR

Cormac Lynn, Doctoral Candidate, Education Department, clynn@diosag.org, 989-860-6567

ADVISOR

Dr. Nathaniel McClain, Assistant Professor of Education, College of Arts and Sciences,
namcclai@umich.edu, 810-762-3260

SOURCE OF SUPPORT

This study is being performed as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in educational leadership at the University of Michigan – Flint.

PURPOSE

You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate the lived experiences of principals and athletic directors in relation to high school athletics before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. You will be asked to participate in semi-structured interviews and possibly focus group interviews. Follow-up interviews are also possible to allow for clarification and in an attempt to ensure accuracy. Your lived experiences as a principal or athletic director before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to commonly held beliefs associated with the value, or cost, of athletics at the high school level will be the topic. All interviews will be recorded digitally (audio and image) and transcribed. The interviews will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. You may choose not to participate in any focus group interview and still participate in the individual interview and follow-up interviews. You may also be asked to review the transcript (or your respective portion of the transcript) of interviews that you participate in to ensure accuracy. These will be the only requests made of you.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

The risks may include possible emotional discomfort created from revisiting and sharing your experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic. A risk may exist that confidential information may be disclosed by group members participating in focus group interviews. Although it is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, the researcher has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

COMPENSATION

Participants in the study will not be compensated in anyway. Participation in the project will not require any monetary costs on your part.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All research materials (written and recorded) will be stored in a secure fashion. Written documents will be kept in locked storage in the researcher's home. Recorded digital files will be downloaded and password protected on a separate drive, kept in locked storage at the researcher's home. Any identifiable information will be removed from the written or recorded documents. Final data will be drawn from transcripts without any identifiers and/or the use of pseudonymous. All recordings will be destroyed upon final submission and approval of the research document to the university.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw at any time.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT

I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project. I understand that should I have further questions about my participation in this study, I may contact Cormac Lynn by phone at 989-860-6567 or by email at clynn@diosag.org. I am also contact Dr. Nathaniel McClain, advisor, by email at namclai@umich.edu or by phone at 810-762-3260. I also understand that I can contact the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board by phone at 734-936-0933 or by email at irbhsbs@umich.edu.

 Participant's Name

 Participant's Signature

 Date

 Researcher's Name

 Researcher's Signature

 Date

Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Institution:

Interviewee (Name, Title):

Interviewer: Cormac Lynn

PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION: What are the lived experiences of principals and/or athletic directors before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic considering the value and perception of high school athletics?

Interview Protocol – Introduction

Thank you for talking with me today. Based on our prior conversations, you are someone who has a great deal to share about your lived experiences related to athletics before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. My research focuses on how the lived experience of principals and athletic directors supports or counters some of the commonly held beliefs associated with participation in high school athletics. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the experience of student-athletes and provides current researchers with a chance to examine some of the beliefs and theories associated with athletic participation in a new light. It is my hope that this research will empower those charged with developing policy, as well as school leaders, parents and ultimately students themselves, to make decisions and take action to create the best possible outcomes for all stakeholders involved in high school athletics.

Your responses are important to me. I want to make sure I capture everything you say. I would like to record our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? I will also be taking written notes.

I have taken steps to ensure the confidentiality of all participants. A pseudonym will be used when referencing a specific interview or quoting from a transcript. I am the only one that will have access to the recordings. The recordings will be destroyed once the research is complete.

Do you have any questions about the interview process or how the data will be used?

The interview should last 60 to 90 minutes. During the interview process, I have a number of scripted questions that I will ask you. Based on your responses, I may ask unscripted follow up questions.

Do you have any questions at this time?

Interviewee Background

Demographics

1. What is your name

2. What is your age
3. What is your gender?

Employment

4. Where did you work during the time period included in this study (2019-20 through 2021-22 academic years)?
5. What was/is your position?
6. How long have you been in that position?

Athletic Background

7. Did you play sports at the high school level?
8. If yes, what sport(s) and level(s) did you participate in?
9. Have you coached at the high school level?
10. If yes, when, what sport(s) and levels did you coach?
11. Do you have coaching experiences outside of the high school level?
12. If yes, what sport(s) and age levels did you coach?

School information

13. How would you describe the demographics of your school?
14. What was the average enrollment of your school in the 2019-20, 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years?
15. What was your mode of instruction during covid? (in-person, remote, student choice...)
 - a. First semester 2020-21
 - b. Second semester 2020-21
16. How would you describe the importance of athletics in your school and school community?
17. What percentage of the student body participates in the athletic program at your school?
18. Did your school participate in a test-to-stay program during the 2021-22 school year?

Main Interview

In terms of this research and interview, before the pandemic is intended to apply to the time period before March 13, 2020. During the pandemic is intended to apply to anything between March 13, 2020 and July 1, 2021. After the pandemic is intended to apply to anything after July 1, 2021.

19. How have you experienced athletics impacting high school students before the COVID-19 pandemic?
20. Did you experience any differences in terms of how athletics impacted students during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. Did you experience any trends in attendance preferences among student athletes related to attendance?
 - b. Did you experience any significant changes to the attendance of student athletes during or after covid? Were any practices noticeably different from non-student athletes?
 - c. Did you experience a change in the academic performance of student-athletes during the pandemic?

- d. Did you experience a change in behavior or the number of disciplinary issues among student-athletes during the pandemic?
 - e. Did you experience a change in the way student-athletes valued athletics during the pandemic?
 - f. Did you experience any changes in how student-athletes identified as an athlete or with their sport during the pandemic?
 - g. Did you experience any changes in the way student-athletes viewed their potential college or professional athletic opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - h. Did you experience a change in the development of life-skills that may be developed as a result of participation in sports, among student-athletes, during the pandemic? (Possible examples include, but are not limited to, goal setting, initiative, problem solving, positive thinking, responsibility, respect, risk-taking, self-control, communication skills, teamwork and leadership.)
21. Did you experience a change in the way parents or the community valued athletics during the pandemic?
 22. Did you experience a change in the way athletics impacted the school community during the COVID-19 pandemic? If so, how was that different than before the pandemic?
 23. Did you experience any differences in terms of athletics impacting students after the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. Did you experience any changes in how student-athletes identified as an athlete or with their sport after the pandemic?
 - b. Did you experience any changes in the way student-athletes viewed their potential college or professional athletic opportunities after the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - c. Did you experience a change in the academic performance of student-athletes after the pandemic?
 - d. Did you experience a change in behavior or the number of disciplinary issues among student-athletes after the pandemic?
 - e. Did you experience a change in the way student-athletes valued athletics after the pandemic?
 - f. Did you experience a change in the development of life-skills that may be developed as a result of participation in sports, among student-athletes, after the pandemic? (Possible examples include, but are not limited to, goal setting, initiative, problem solving, positive thinking, responsibility, respect, risk-taking, self-control, communication skills, teamwork and leadership.)
 24. How have you experienced high school athletics impacting the school community after the COVID-19 pandemic?
 25. Has your experience with high school athletics, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, altered your approach to or value of athletics?
 - a. Did you change any policy related to athletics as a result of this your experience before, during or after the pandemic?
 - b. Did you change your approach to this aspect of your professional responsibilities in any way?
 26. Is there anything else you would like to share with me related to high school athletics before, during or after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Appendix D
Timeline of Limitation on High School Athletic Activity, March 2020-June 2021

| Effective Date | Summary of Limitation(s) or Modification(s) |
|--------------------|--|
| March 12, 2020 | All MHSAA winter sports postseason tournaments are suspended immediately and indefinitely. |
| March 16, 2020 | All MHSAA athletic activity is suspended through at least April 5, 2020 |
| March 24, 2020 | Suspension of all MHSAA athletic activity is extended through April 13, 2020. |
| April 3, 2020 | MHSSA cancels remainder of the 2019-20 winter and spring sport seasons. |
| June 2, 2020 | Outdoor “summer activities,” associated with high school sports can resume. Social distancing is required. Competitions are not permissible. |
| June 9, 2020 | Some areas of the state can resume indoor “summer activities” with specific caps on the number of participants. Outdoor participant levels vary based on geographic region. Social distancing is required. Competitions are not permissible. |
| July 1, 2020 | MHSAA announces contingency plan that includes switching the fall and spring sports seasons due to potential limitation on indoor activity. (All MHSAA spring sports are exclusively outdoor sports.) |
| July 17, 2020 | MHSAA plan for fall includes: a possible delay to the start of the fall season, the potential that low-risk (non-contact) sports may proceed but high-risk (contact) sports may be postponed. |
| July 29, 2020 | MHSAA approves a “phased in” approach that includes: the elimination of scrimmages for all fall sports, limits on the number of teams that can participate at a single site competition (invitationals, tournaments), low-risk sports can begin practice and competition on August 12. Moderate risk sports can begin practice on August 12, but competitions are not permissible. Football may only conduct practices that consist of conditioning and physical training, without pads, except for helmets. |
| August 14, 2020 | MHSAA announces the postponement of the football season to the spring of 2021. |
| August 20, 2020 | MHSAA announces the start of competitions for girls volleyball, boys soccer, and girls swimming and diving, for specific geographic regions of the state. |
| September 3, 2020 | MHSAA announces the reinstatement of the fall football season. Competition may begin, in some sports, based on geographic region. |
| September 10, 2020 | Face masks are required at all times in contact sports. |
| October 9, 2020 | Spectator capacity for indoor is set at 20 or 25%, based on geographic region. Outdoor event spectator capacity is set at 30%. |
| October 23, 2020 | For winter sports, spectators are limited to 2 per participant. |
| November 15, 2020 | All athletic activities are suspended through at least December 8. |
| December 18, 2020 | MHSAA announces a plan to resume fall sports post season tournaments in January of 2021. Participants are required to participate in a COVID testing program (and test negative) to compete. |

| | |
|------------------|--|
| January 6, 2021 | Winter sports may only engage in outdoor conditioning, with social distancing. (In-person instruction is permissible.) |
| January 16, 2021 | Non-contact winter sports may begin indoor practices, with competitions permissible in late January. Contact sports may begin indoor practices, with no physical contact and social distancing, with competition slated to begin on February 1. |
| January 22, 2021 | A delay in full-contact practices for contact sports is announced. |
| February 8, 2021 | Contact sports may begin full-contact practices. Spectator limitations are modified. In facilities with fixed seating of more than 10,000, the maximum number of spectators is 500. In facilities with fixed seating of less than 10,000, the maximum number of spectators is 250. In a facility with no fixed seating, the maximum number of spectators is 100. It is announced that wrestlers will be required to participate in a testing program (and test negative) the day before a competition. |
| April 2, 2021 | Required weekly testing of all spring sports athletes and coaches begins. |
| June 1, 2021 | Spectator limitations for outdoor events are rescinded. |
| June 22, 2021 | All remaining MDHHS requirements and/or restrictions associated with athletics expire. |

Note. This timeline provides a partial chronological list of significant action and/or changes to the status of high school athletic activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. All information contained in this document is based on *MHSAA Coronavirus Updates*. The complete list of COVID updates from the MHSAA can be found at <https://my.mhsaa.com/coronavirus>