

RUNNING HEAD: STUDENT-ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT

High School Student-Athletes' Perceptions and Experiences of Leadership as a Life Skill

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Abstract

Objectives. The purpose of this study was to gain student-athlete perceptions of: (1) the definition of leadership for high school student-athletes; (2) the process of leadership development in high school sport; and (3) the factors that have helped or hindered leadership transfer between high school sport and other life domains.

Design. This study was grounded in an interpretivist ontological perspective and used focus group interviews to gather insights of student-athletes' leadership experiences.

Method. Purposeful sampling identified 33 high-school student-athlete leaders who were members of student advisory councils for high school state athletic associations in the United States. The 15 females and 18 males participated in focus-group interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data was then conducted.

Results. Results revealed that student-athlete leadership was viewed as a skill-set and a mindset, driven by individual agency. As an on-going developmental process, student-athletes gained awareness of leadership skills, increased self-expectations and self-confidence in their use and application of leadership skills, and developed a transformational leadership mindset, as they encountered and engaged with critical learning opportunities in high school sport and gained support from coaches and peers. Leadership application outside of sport was a multidimensional psychological process, including both conscious and implicit elements, and facilitated or constrained by environmental opportunities and social influences.

Conclusions. High school sport offers a unique context where self-agentic youth leadership development in sport and life can occur through experiential learning opportunities. To this point, future research directions and recommendations for practitioners will be provided.

Key words: youth leadership, youth sport, psychological skills, life skills

High School Student-Athletes' Experiences of Leadership as a Life Skill

High school sport represents one of the most prevalent extra-curricular contexts for young people in the United States (U.S.). In 2018, the 7.98 million student-athletes participating in high school sport in (National Federation of High Schools, 2019), represented approximately 47% of the 17.1 million high school students in the US (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). While high school sport is widely sanctioned within educational institutions in the U.S. and is deeply embedded in the culture of local communities (Coakley, 2015), it is also a unique setting within the larger education system with its demand on student time and commitment and its publicly-observable organized interscholastic competition (Turgeon, Kendellen, Kramers, Rathwell, & Camiré., 2019). When structured appropriately, high school sport provides the opportunity for youth to exercise psychosocial skills to enhance sport performance and can be a salient context for positive youth development (PYD) and the learning of life skills (Camiré, 2014; Turgeonet al., 2019). In particular, developing leaders is one of the publicized intended outcomes of participation in high school sport for student-athletes in the U.S. (National Federation of High Schools, 2019). Furthermore, leadership has been identified as one of the most important life skills for young athletes to acquire and develop to help them thrive in sport and in life beyond sport (Gould, Chung, Smith, & White, 2006).

Within sport, athlete leadership is defined as “an athlete occupying a formal or informal role within a team who influences team members to achieve a common goal” (Loughead, Hardy & Eys, 2006, p. 144). A number of positive outcomes at both team and individual levels have been associated with athlete leadership (e.g., performance; task and social cohesion), particularly when that leadership is perceived as effective (see Cotterill & Fransen, 2016, for review). Such psychosocial assets in the youth sport setting include: setting an example on and off the field,

organizational duties, motivating and encouraging teammates, offering mentoring and support, being a liaison between coaches, athletes, and referees, enforcing discipline, representing the team within the community, and obtaining support for the team (Dupuis, Bloom, & Loughead, 2006; Loughead, Hardy, & Eys 2006; Wright & Côté, 2003). Furthermore, studies have found that youth leaders possess an internal locus of control, high aspiration, competitiveness, emotional expressiveness and regulation, responsibility, respectfulness, trustworthiness, optimism, effective communication, and high self-esteem that can benefit them in sport and in multiple life domains (Dupuis et al., 2006; Yukelson, Weinberg, Richardson, & Jackson, 1983). While leadership characteristics and behaviors have been identified for youth athletes, leadership styles are also necessary to consider. Transformational leadership, in particular, has received support as an athlete leadership style to promote individual motivation and enjoyment as well as group cohesion and collective efficacy (Price & Weiss, 2013; Zacharatos, Barling, & Kelloway, 2000). Specifically, transformational leaderships focuses on inspiring followers to not only perform the task but to move beyond self-interests to actively contribute to goals of the group and their own development, and moves beyond transactional leadership which emphasizes direction, supervision, and feedback as rewards and punishments to shape follower behavior (Zacharatos et al., 2000).

With the focus on youth development, we must consider that there are significant differences in the needs, practices, and styles of adult versus youth leaders (MacNeil, 2006). Youth leadership research across different contexts (e.g., education, community) has examined individual leader characteristics and actions, the process of leading (Libby, Sedonaen, & Bliss, 2006), the unique nature of physical and emotional changes, the development of self-acceptance, and variety of learning contexts and value systems that young people experience (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Youth leadership development can be viewed as a continuous process that occurs in three

distinct stages: 1) Awareness; 2) Interaction; and 3) Mastery, where youth learn various cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills as they are presented with opportunities as well as barriers to use in developing and utilizing their leadership across multiple contexts (van Linden & Fertman, 1998).

To this point, Avolio (2007) encouraged researchers to consider unique leadership context while examining the dynamic interaction between leaders and followers. The argument for understanding the contextual-specificities of leadership development is further supported when we consider that while youth may develop leadership skills in one context (i.e., sport), it cannot be assumed that they will automatically and effectively transfer the leadership skills into another context (i.e., education; Gould & Carson, 2008; Pierce, Gould & Camiré, 2017). Examining the process of life skills development and transfer, Pierce and colleagues (2017) have proposed that life skills can be developed or internalized as discrete psychosocial skills, knowledge, general shifts in dispositions, and even identity transformations. When life skills have been internalized, life skills transfer is a youth/learner-centered process with characteristics of the learning context (i.e., high school sport) and the transfer context (e.g., classroom, employment, community engagement) influencing the nature and occurrence (or not) of life skills transfer. Critically, this perspective is grounded in person-in-context developmental perspectives where processes and contexts are situated and constrained within broader socio-cultural environments.

High school sport has been idealized as a site for leadership development in popular culture. For this reason, a contextually specific definition of student-athlete leadership and a nuanced understanding of its development and transfer would provide both scientifically and practical utility. In fact, some researchers argue that more empirical investigation is needed to examine the claims of the positive impact of high school sports on youth leadership development

(Pot & van Hilvoorde, 2013). The examination of how student-athletes define leadership and perceive its relevance in relation to high school sport is necessary as coaches have identified poor leadership as one of the most frequently cited problems among adolescent athletes (Gould et al., 2006), and many high school sport captains believe that they are not provided the guidance, training, nor opportunities to exercise advanced leadership skills (e.g., mentoring teammates, managing conflict situations; Voelker, Gould, & Crawford, 2011). Thus, the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of student-athletes' perceptions of their experiences in developing leadership in high school sport and transferring leadership as a life skill between sport and other life domains. Specifically, this study examined (1) how leadership is defined by student-athletes in the high school sport context; (2) how high school student-athletes describe the process of leadership development; and (3) how high school student-athletes describe the process of transferring leadership between high school sport and other life contexts.

Method

Research Design

This study was grounded in an interpretivist ontological perspective, designed to seek detailed descriptions, interpretations, and meanings that student-athletes bring to their leadership in high school sport (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In line with this philosophical approach, purposeful sampling identified participants for focus group interviews. This methodology was used to gather novel, in-depth insights of student-athletes' leadership experiences. As the interpretivist perspective positions researchers in a constructionist epistemological role, we recognized our role as co-constructors of knowledge and understanding the meaning of the lived leadership experiences gathered through the focus group interviews (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011).

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants on the criteria of being a high school student-athlete who is currently an elected member of a student-advisory committee (SAC) in a state high school sport association in the United States. SAC's consist of high school student-athletes who have been recognized and selected for demonstrating "strong character, leadership and commitment to sportsmanship and integrity" in high school sports (MHSAA, 2019). A total of 33 current high school student-athletes from two different state SAC's participated in the study, including 15 females and 18 males, ranging from 14 to 18 years of age ($M = 16.24$ years, $SD = 1.07$). The sample included 25 White, three Black, three Hispanic, and two Asian-American student-athletes. At the time of the study, the student-athletes were in the first half of their sophomore year/10th grade ($N = 2$), junior year/11th grade ($N = 15$), and senior year/12th grade ($N = 16$), in high school. Student-athletes played between one and four sports ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.68$), including a range of team (i.e., baseball, basketball, lacrosse, soccer, softball, volleyball) and individual sports (i.e., cross country, dance, golf, swimming, tennis, track and field, wrestling). To further introduce the student-athlete sample, participants completed an adapted Transformational Teaching Questionnaire (TTQ; Beauchamp, Barling, Li, Morton, Keith & Zumbo, 2010) and the Life Skills Scale for Sport (LSSS; Cronin & Allen, 2017). The mean composite score for transformational leadership ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.46$; Range 1-5) and the mean score of leadership as a life skill ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.43$; Range 1-5) indicated that the sample included 'information-rich' (Patton, 2002) student-athletes who believed they possessed leadership as a sport and life skill.

Procedures

Following ethical approval from the university institution review board, information about the study was shared with SAC student-athlete members via their organization's SAC organizer in a group meeting. Each member was provided a parental consent form and youth assent form to

voluntarily complete and bring to the following meeting when the focus group interviews were scheduled. Consent and assent were obtained for all members of the two SAC groups. Prior to interviews, participants completed a demographic form (i.e., age, year in school, sport/s), the adapted TTQ and LSSS. While completed prior the interviews, survey responses were not reviewed and calculated until after the completion of the reflexive thematic analysis and used solely to describe the participant sample.

Focus Group Interviews. Focus group interviews, grounded in the interpretivist philosophical perspective, were designed to gather multiple descriptions and meaning of leadership experiences. These interviews created a space for participants to share personal experiences and challenges and extend themselves and each other, thus promoting the proliferation of new ideas and perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). In line with Krueger and Casey's (2009) recommendation for applied research, the SAC with 14 members was divided into two focus groups of seven participants and the SAC with 19 members was divided into three groups, two groups with six participants and one with seven. The student-athletes in each SAC were divided into groups that provided a relatively even representation of gender and year in school. This approach allowed for variety of leadership experiences, from different ages and stages in education, to be shared in each focus group. The first author led four focus groups and the second author led one focus group.

Participants were, first, provided with the goals of the focus group interviews, rights as a research participant (i.e., voluntary participation and confidentiality), ground rules (e.g., participants should refrain from speaking over another participant; all participants will be called upon) to ensure participants were respectful and provided each participant the opportunity to participate. A semi-structured interview guide was designed, based on the premise from socio-

ecological developmental theory that youth leadership development is a bi-directional process influenced by youth and their contexts (Lerner et al., 2006). In line with this premise, literature related to the process of leadership development in youth sport (e.g., van Linden & Fertman, 1998; Gould, et al., 2012) and the process of life skills development and transfer in sport (e.g., Holt et al., 2017; Pierce et al., 2017) informed the broad concepts covered and general flow of the interview guide. To focus on the first sub-purpose, an initial set of questions asked participants to provide personal definitions and experiences of leadership in the high school sport context (e.g., define leadership as it relates to your role and experiences as a high school student-athlete; describe your leadership roles in high school sport and identify the important skills and behaviors of student-athlete leaders in high school sport). To focus on the second sub-purpose, questions were asked about experiences and factors influencing leadership development in and out of sport (e.g., what experiences and events in sport helped you understand and believe that you were a leader in high school sport? What experiences or events limited your opportunities as a leader in high school sport?). To focus on the third sub-purpose, questions transitioned to a focus on perceptions and experiences of the transfer of leadership between sport and life contexts (e.g., Do you believe you have transferred leadership from sport to other areas of life? What factors in sport helped you transfer your leadership skills? What factors in sport limited you from transferring leadership skills?). Throughout the interview, each section focused on broad questions related to identifying factors influencing leadership development and transfer, then purposefully probed to examine development through the interactions between the youth (e.g., motivation, confidence) in contexts (e.g., specific sport experiences, coach-athlete relationships). Each focus group interview was audio-recorded, with interviews ranging in length from 48 to 70 minutes ($M = 58.4$ minutes, $SD = 8.6$ minutes).

Data Analysis and Methodological Rigor

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and a reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to gain rich social and psychological meaning interpretations of the focus groups (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2018). This analysis was not driven by existing PYD or leadership (e.g., transformational leadership) theoretical frameworks. It was however, guided by the tenets of meta-theoretical socio-ecological developmental theoretical perspectives, that focus on person-in-context (e.g., Lerner et al., 2006), and have informed PYD and life skills research (Holt et al., 2017; Pierce et al., 2017). For these reasons, the reflexive thematic analysis sought to gain an interpretive inductive understanding of student-athletes developmental experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun, et al., 2018), with a focus on how student-athletes constructed their own reality, under the socio-ecological theoretical assumption that youth development occurs through a bi-directional process of individuals and environments changing over time (Lerner et al., 2006).

Reflexive thematic analysis. The thematic analysis process followed the inductive, recursive and reflexive thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and colleagues (2018). First, the three researchers read and re-read the transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data. Second, the first two authors engaged in the first round of coding to individually identify semantic codes, or statements of interest, and surface meaning to answer the three research questions. The two researchers then discussed, and were informed by each other's interpretation of the data, and came to agreement on the lists of semantic codes that best represented their collective interpretation of the data. For the first sub-purpose, semantic codes were lists of skills (e.g., responsibility) and characteristics (e.g., focus on personal improvement) involved in student-athletes' definitions of leadership. For the second and third sub-purposes, codes were lists of experiences (e.g., teammate conflict) and influential factors (e.g., coach support for leadership) involved in leadership

development and transfer. The coding then moved to the second round and focused on latent coding. Latent codes represented the underlying meaning of a student-athlete stories and their developmental interaction between youth in their sport and life contexts. Latent codes, such as ‘differences in leadership self-expectations across academic years’ or ‘differences in coach expectations across academic years’, helped to explain the underlying process of leadership development and transfer that was not explicitly mentioned on the surface by participants. These semantic and latent codes were then shared with the third author, who acted as a critical friend to question, critique, and challenge the codes and the researchers’ perceptions of the data (Smith & McGannon, 2018). For example, specific critical discussions ensured that the identified leadership skills and characteristics were clearly defined, different and distinguishable.

Third, the first and second authors organized codes into themes and subthemes to explain patterns and meaning of the student-athlete perceptions and experiences and to examine the interaction of codes and themes, under the assumption that youth development is bi-directional. The themes focused on interpreting the meaning of the interaction between the youth and their developmental contexts and involved the identification of themes and sub-themes to explain the latent and semantic codes and describe how individuals changed over time and experience (e.g. enhanced leadership confidence with experiential leadership opportunities). Each theme had a central organizing concept (i.e., a leadership skill or characteristic or a specific psychological and environmental factor influencing the process of leadership development and transfer) to represent the data and address one of the three specific sub-purposes of the study (Braun et al., 2018). Collectively, the themes formed a list of key leadership skills and characteristics to define student-athlete leadership; and a thematic map to best represent the influential interactive processes (e.g., experiential opportunities; social influences; individual agency and psychological processes) to

explain how student-athletes constructed their reality of leadership development and transfer from high school sport.

Fourth, the critical friend reviewed the thematic map and through critical discussion and reflection, the three researchers refined the map, themes, and subthemes and named each to clarify the essence of the analysis. For example, the theme ‘social support’ was rephrased as ‘social influence’ to correctly encompass social factors that help *and* hindered leadership development and transfer. This review process transitioned to the fifth step, producing the final definitions and names of the themes and sub-themes. This final phase involved analytical generalizability (Smith, 2018). That is, while all themes and sub-themes were identified inductively, some definitions aligned with existing concepts from PYD and leadership literature. In these cases, some names for themes and sub-themes (e.g., transformational role model; implicit association for leadership transfer) were deductively changed with the participant meaning was retained.

Results

The reflexive thematic analysis revealed a unique definition and depiction of leadership for high school student-athletes. To address the three sub-purposes of this study, this section presents student-athletes perceptions of: (1) the definition of leadership for high school student-athletes; (2) the interactive process of leadership development; and (3) perceptions of leadership as a life skill; with participant quotes (using pseudonyms) and examples.

Definition of Leadership for High School Student-Athletes

Leadership was defined as a multidimensional psychological asset that provided individuals with a cue-to-action in sport and other life contexts. With a *skill-based* foundation, leadership was depicted as the use of *action-oriented skills* to lead oneself and others in high school sport (e.g., hard work, commitment, responsibility, accountability) and using *relational skills* to

build effective relationships in sport (e.g., active listening, empathetic, provides constructive criticism, respects others). These specific skills and characteristics associated with high school student-athlete leadership are presented in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

While the skills provided the behavioral foundation to effective leadership, leadership was also described as a *mindset*. The student-athletes contented that “the [leadership] mindset is more important than your actions...if you have the mindset then the actions will just come with.” (Ally) This leadership mindset involved a focus on continued *personal development* as a leader with the view that leadership was a privilege and that one has high self-expectations to be a leader in all situations. Maddie reflected that, “it’s kind of hard to like be a leader in a sport and not be a leader outside of a sport, like you, it has to carry over into everything you do.” Belief in the leadership mindset drove student-athletes to focus on being a “better person,” “doing the right thing,” and building respect from others as a leader in all contexts. Sam passionately claimed,

no one’s gonna remember you for your 40 point game, they’re going to remember you for being a nice guy or girl in school or outside of school, they’re gonna remember you for being the friendly person in the hallway that always said hi and always gave them a compliment and always made them feel good.

Inherent in this mindset was the philosophy that “not everything you do is going to be perfect. We are still in high school trying to lead other high schoolers, so we are going to make mistakes...we just have to realize we are doing our best to try.” (Julia) Emphasizing the view that leadership was about growing through mistakes, Patrick stated, “I think when you’re a leader it really shows the leadership you have, is when you make a mistake or make a wrong decision, it’s how you respond to that, and how you build yourself back up.” With a realistic outlook, student-

athletes viewed effective leadership as an aspirational goal to help oneself and help others. Samantha proclaimed, “being a leader and helping people improve, for me, that’s what I want to do for the rest of my life. For a goal outside of school, to start my career, I want to help people improve.” Thus, a vision to be a *transformational role-model* not only in sport, but in all life domains, was depicted. Their leadership role was to set an example as a role-model and “talking to my peers and trying to help them grow as leaders...I just remember that when I am doing something I have to be elite in whatever I do.” (Alex)

The Interactive Process of Student-Athlete Leadership Development

Leadership development is best explained through the interactive process (Figure 1.), that presents a developmental cascade of student-athletes in their developmental contexts. This process depicts the overarching themes, individual agency and psychological processes, experiential opportunities for leadership development and transfer, and social influences for leadership development and transfer, and their influence over time. Specifically, student-athletes were exposed to and experienced events and social interactions in high school sport that influenced their leadership skills and mindsets. In those moments, or later in time, student-athlete individual agency, reflection, and appraisal initiated cognitive or behavioral responses (i.e., psychological processes) which facilitated the development of specific leadership-related outcomes.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Individual agency and psychological processes facilitated leadership development.

Leadership was developed through adolescence and viewed as continually evolving. Student-athletes believed that they were in control of their leadership development as they described the importance of individual agency and specific psychological processes as they progressed through unique leadership experiences each year at high school. These processes are defined by the sub-

themes: enhanced leadership awareness and empowerment, recognizing expectations and confidence, and embracing a leadership mindset. Collectively, these sub-themes revealed the latent maturational process or ‘developmental cascade’ (Lewin-Bizan, Bowers, & Lerner, 2010) depicted in Figure 1, showing how student-athletes actively engaged with, and used high school sport experiences to grow and apply leadership skills and mindsets.

Enhanced leadership awareness and empowerment. While some student-athletes described awareness of leadership potential prior to high school, the progression through the years of high school was perceived to directly impact leadership development. Student-athletes claimed that through opportunity, encouragement and/or necessity in their first two years of high school, they became aware of the need for youth leadership in sport and empowered to exercise leadership skills later in their high school years. The process of observing and modeling the behavior of others was recognized as key to enhancing leadership awareness. “As a freshman, you know and learn who to go through, the seniors and the juniors, who you go to for help.” Then, “as you progress through, you learn that, you have to be that next one in line to take over.” Observing others helped to create awareness of their own vision for leadership, as explained by Katie, “it’s just a lot of learning and watching the upper classman and trying to envision yourself leading.” This passive phase of increasing awareness helped to lay a foundation for its further growth. Sam concluded, “no one’s gonna listen to the freshman, so I think that’s when I learned to be more of a leader academically and in school, because like, it wasn’t my place on the field.”

Recognizing leadership expectations and confidence. Consequently, the awareness of transitioning from under- to upper-class (i.e., 9th & 10th grade to 11th & 12th grade) in the US high school system raised expectations for personal and athletic leadership: “after my sophomore year when there would be some issues with the team, I felt a natural urge to speak up and take

charge...when there was something wrong all eyes fell on me, it felt like a leadership position.”
(Joe)

Awareness of leadership responsibilities increased throughout the years of high school and could not be ignored. Sarah stated: “you’re an upperclassman, you’re so much more aware of what you have to do and how good you have to behave, because the underclassmen look up to you.” Subsequently, these responsibilities increased perceived expectations of their leadership role from coaches, peers, and the community:

My junior year, I kind of noticed the freshmen looked up to me, and you could tell they were intently paying attention when I was saying something, and I think I kind of realized and it made me think, “maybe I shouldn’t be acting that certain way”, I just tried to keep that more in check now, now that I’m under more scrutiny. (Sam)

Embracing a leadership mindset. Then, in their senior year, explicit responsibilities and opportunities to lead became clear, whether student-athletes felt prepared or not. Student-athletes described that gaining greater confidence and self-expectations from effectively using leadership skills lead to the mindset-based leadership and focus on personal growth and being a role model for others. For Sarah, this mindset encouraged her to help others:

It’s a reflex by now, you just do it, and it’s not necessarily like taking charge of the situation or like putting yourself in charge...it’s sometimes, sitting and being quiet, and doing your best work, so people try to do what you’re doing.

Experiential opportunities for leadership development. The developmental cascade, infused with critical incidents and varying levels of social support, provided both positive and challenging experiences for student-athlete leadership development. High school sport was identified as providing a unique context for developing leadership because it provided organized

competition with opportunities for personal and group success (e.g., team selection, winning games) as well as challenges and adversity (e.g., injuries and losing), and exposure to new people and experiences (e.g., interactions with peers outside school and travel to new places). Sam highlighted:

That's one of the cool part about sports, it gives you so many different experiences, throws so many challenges and obstacles in your way that force you to become a leader, it's practice for real life where you can use the skills that you've acquired in sports.

As a senior, Ella stated, "I wouldn't be as inspired if I wasn't a student athlete." She continued, summarizing the importance of the sport experience on her personal development, "if I didn't play sports, it motivates you a lot, not only on the court but in real life, bettering yourself as an athlete or as a team, it makes me want to better people outside of school."

It was in these situations and descriptions that participants described seeking and identifying other opportunities to lead. Student-athletes were gaining leadership skills and mindsets through the inherent high school sport events and challenges and they were also identifying opportunities to use the leadership skills and mindsets when they encountered new challenges, such as injuries for Lucas:

I started getting injured every soccer season, I couldn't stay healthy. I would break bones or get concussions and I just kept getting injured. There hasn't been a season where I haven't been injured for at least a couple weeks. So, I started to learn how to just be a good teammate, even if I can't be a leader on the field, but to come to every practice and every game still and be the water boy. Even though that's not where I wanted to be, it was the only way I could help out the team.

Subsequent psychosocial changes, outlined in Figure 1, included enhanced awareness of their leadership potential and development compared to previous years, increased self-expectations to be a leader, increased confidence in their leadership ability, and a mindset to seek and identify opportunities to act as a leader:

When I became a leader, I just lost this big tournament in tennis...and this older gentlemen comes up to me and starts talking to me...he told me some stuff umm, was that, it was very inspirational to me, and I had the passion to tell my teammates the same thing, when they're down, and be the shoulder they can cry on or something, that person that supports them, so they know they have somebody that cares about them...somebody they can relate to, so that's what really helped me. (Maddie)

Social influences for leadership development. Through a variety of social interactions, student-athletes were exposed to real leadership responsibilities and claimed an increase in their confidence and self-expectations as a leader. Opportunities for leadership development occurred both in situations where coaches and peers supported them and held high expectations, and in challenging situations where there was conflict and problems with coaches. Student-athletes did not reference explicit leadership education or intentional leadership instruction from coaches but rather focused on how their positive relationships with coach and adult role-models enhanced their self-belief and expectation to lead. Logan summarized this theme by first stating, "that was my experience becoming a real leader...the positive leaders in my life before, have inspired me to be a leader," and following up by saying:

but the negative one's forced me to be one...when I was a junior I became a captain, and we got a new coach that our team really disliked, and he's just a bad, bad leader. So it got our team super down, we started not trying at all just because we don't wanna win for him,

because we don't wanna give him the effort or anything like that, and we were upset with our athletic director for hiring him...it just put me into a position where I just had to be a leader, I had to make that connection, even though I don't like the coach too...it forced me to be that bridge, to connect with, to understand what he's saying and try to phrase it in ways that our players can actually listen to it and respect it, to make us a better team.

(Logan)

Conversely, student-athletes described experiences and situations where they received little support from coaches and teammates, which constrained their leadership experiences and development. For some student-athletes in these situations, they found it difficult to be confident and empowered in utilizing their leadership skills. One student-athlete, James, reflected on the mentorship of his soccer coach, stating, "he isn't exactly too supportive of leadership on our team...he doesn't like it when people give him other ideas that go against his own, it's a lot tougher to try and be a leader without getting in a bad relationship with him."

Leadership as a Transferrable Life Skill

Student-athletes reflected on both successful and unsuccessful experiences of transferring leadership as a life skill with reference to both personal and situational factors influencing transfer. Jane's statement reflected the group's view that leadership transfer does not always happen easily or automatically for student-athletes: "You can be a champion in the sports arena and a chump in another part of your life. To be a good person...you have to be a champion in every aspect of your life, and sometimes that's hard." (Jane)

Both personal factors and situational factors were identified as semantic codes and represent key indicators of student-athletes' ability and likeliness to apply leadership as a life skill. Personal factor included: conscious awareness (i.e., active thinking and reflecting about leadership

transfer), implicit association (i.e., no active thinking or reflecting about leadership transfer), high self-expectations, and self-confidence to transfer leadership. Situational factors included: identified opportunities available and the support provided. Inherent in the descriptions of leadership transfer was the bi-directional interaction of situational and personal factors influencing leadership transfer. That is, student-athletes stated that opportunities and support for transfer influenced their awareness, self-confidence and self-expectations for transfer, and vice-versa. Three notable latent themes represent the interaction between personal and situational factors and are presented in this section.

Awareness of leadership skills and awareness of transfer opportunities enhanced leadership transfer. For student-athletes who described leadership transfer outside of sport, reflection on and conscious awareness of leadership skills and mindsets were often discussed alongside awareness and identification of leadership transfer opportunities. These opportunities were identified in school (e.g., classroom group work, classroom learning environment), the workplace (e.g., leadership roles), and personal life (e.g., family interactions). The importance of reflection was first recognized as an important process to increase awareness of leadership skills and opportunities, as emphasized by Lucas:

I think reflection of leadership is really important to remind yourself of what it means to be a leader outside of sport...reflecting on it and reflecting on ways you are doing it and reflecting on negative things and positive things is definitely helpful in kind deciphering on how you can be a better leader and it's not just constant like you are definitely having a changing mindset, you aren't fixed and there are ways to improve.

Student-athletes believed that reflection then helped to trigger conscious decisions to lead others and identify opportunities across contexts. Jared stated:

It [transferring leadership] does take some conscious decision-making because not always are you going to remember your responsibilities as a leader, as a captain, as a teammate, as a role model. I think sometimes it does take conscious effort to look back and reflect and think, ‘okay what would a leader do? What can I do to show a good example to my sister, my teammates, my friends, my coach?’

It was noted that opportunities for transferring leadership varied across contexts: “it definitely shifts between classrooms, some teachers will let there be a strong student presence and allow you to work together...other times teachers will be super strict and say ‘oh well my classroom my rules, I’m running it this way.” In these later situations, if student-athletes were not aware of, or did not identify opportunities or support to lead, transfer was less likely to occur.

Social support for leadership transfer enhanced awareness and self-expectations for leadership transfer. Parents, teachers, coaches, peers, teammates, and siblings were identified as key influencers who acted in supportive or unsupportive ways to help or hinder the transfer of leadership skills and mindsets. Examples were provided to show how respect from others, verbal encouragement from others, and being held to high standards by others in school and the community enhanced self-expectations for leadership transfer. Describing support from teachers, Logan believed that they “hold athletes to higher standards because athletes give the school a reputation...they go out to play for your school so some teachers expect athletes to become leaders in the classroom because they know how to lead on the court.” Maddie reinforced this with reference to her peers in school, saying:

You have to be a leader for the rest of the school because most of the time people look up to the athletes...people look to their leader and whatever they’re doing, they’re probably gonna follow them, especially the younger kids.

Alternatively, however, student-athletes recognized that a lack of support for applying leadership skills in the classroom decreased their self-expectations and hindered leadership transfer. Again, student-athletes reflected on experiences where teachers limit self-expectations for transfer, “they [teachers] support students being the leaders in sport, but not in their class.” (Greta) Sarah expanded with an example of how peers responses to leadership in the classroom undermined her self-expectations for transfer: “if you have an idea and no one [peers] is responding or you have to fight every step of the way to get it done, that wears a person down and then they are like “well I’m not doing this anymore.”

Enhanced self-confidence to transfer leadership facilitated implicit association for leadership transfer. Self-confidence was identified as being critical to helping or hindering leadership transfer. Ella pronounced, “I feel like confidence in yourself helps to apply it to other places. If you’re good at leading in sports I feel like it can make you more confident in other aspects of life.” However, the complexity of confidence was highlighted when student-athletes recognized that self-confidence to lead in sport could be different to self-confidence to transfer the leadership to the different contexts. Sam stated: “I can be a leader in my classes, my science classes, no problem because I have a higher aptitude for those subjects...but math, its harder for me to take leadership in, because I’m just not as interested.” In particular, opportunities and support to use leadership skills in the classroom impacted that confidence:

When you’re thrown in a new environment, you just haven’t gotten the chance to make them all trust you, so that’s why they just won’t listen to you, they won’t respect you, so that’s why you may be more afraid to show your leadership qualities because you haven’t put in the time and effort with them that you have with your teammates. (Daniel)

For some student-athletes, however, self-confidence in their developed leadership mindset was identified as being vital to how they viewed and pursued transfer opportunities. When student-athletes described confidence transferring their leadership mindset, they believed it could be applied in any situation, even without support of others. Olivia stated:

Since I had the not really supportive teachers, it pushes me to be more of a leader in class because I wanna prove to them that sports does have that impact on me and it makes me a better leader and it also makes other people better people, better leaders too, so I feel like it just motivates me even more if they don't support me just to prove them wrong.

Driven by self-confidence, student-athletes then claimed that leadership transfer can occur “automatically” or through implicit association. Participants discussed applying leadership skills subconsciously through confidence and repetition, “there is just so much repetition...you have so many opportunities to be a leader that it's just instinct, like there is a situation and I already know what I am supposed to do because I am a leader.” (Samantha) They described applying the identity-based leadership mindset because: “it's part of who you are. It's not ‘oh I am going to try and be a leader right now’...it's just a thought you have in your head and you just carry it out (Daniel).

Discussion

This study explored high school student-athlete perceptions and experiences of (1) the definition of student-athlete leadership; (2) the process of leadership development; and (3) the process of leadership transfer between contexts. The reflexive thematic analysis revealed that student-athlete leadership was defined as both a skillset and a mindset, determined by individual agency yet directly influenced by specific sport-related experiences and the individual's social support systems. Leadership development was depicted as an on-going interactive process, a positive developmental cascade, as student-athletes, through their individual agency, encountered

and engaged with critical learning opportunities and interacted with social support systems in an upwardly iterative cycle. Leadership transfer and application outside of sport (e.g., in the classroom) was a multidimensional psychological process, including both conscious and implicit cognitive elements, and facilitated or constrained by environmental opportunities and social support.

This study found that student-athletes gained confidence using action-based (e.g., hard work, time management) and relational (e.g., empathy, active listening) skills during their competitive and social experiences in high school sport and believed that these skills represented their leadership. These skill-based findings reflect both task leadership (e.g., helping the group accomplish goals) and social leadership (e.g., satisfying member needs) functions that have been identified as key roles for team and peer leaders in sport (Fransen et al., 2014; Loughead et al., 2006). Additionally, findings support the contention that intrapersonal (e.g., time management, emotional regulation) and interpersonal skills (e.g., social competencies) can be attributed to participation in high school sport participation (e.g., Forneris, Camiré & Williamson, 2015; Wilkes & Côté, 2010). Student-athletes in this study believed that their high school sport experiences and execution of action-based and relational leadership skills provided a leadership foundation for the mindset-based (e.g., focus on followers' personal growth, desire to be a transformational role model) to develop. In this vein, a process of leadership development focused on leading by example and then leading and encouraging others was revealed (Janssen, 2004). Yet, leadership skills and the confidence to enact them were necessary, but not sufficient to be a leader. Student-athletes' continued application of leadership skills through the inherent experiences and social interactions in high school sport helped to form a mindset and self-concept that shaped student-athletes' views of their environments such that they perceived increasing affordances or

opportunities for application of their leadership. Such findings support the contention that the inherent nature of high school sport can support the development of leadership (Camiré, 2014), and youth athletes do not require formal titles (i.e., captain) for leadership opportunities (Fransen, et al., 2014).

From a youth-centered developmental perspective, student-athletes' belief that they were a "leader" and viewing leadership as "part of who I am" helped to move them from being an individual student-athlete with effective psychosocial skills to truly and consistently embodying a leadership mindset for personal development and being a transformational role-model. This particular conception of youth leadership closely aligns with transformational leadership as a leadership style placing emphasis on supporting the transformation of current followers into future leaders (Zacharatos et al., 2000). The progression from transactional toward transformational leadership has been promoted for both youth sport coaches (Turnnidge & Côté, 2017) and youth athletes (Gould & Voelker, 2012). While this study did not examine the transactional to transformational continuum, the findings provide an addition to youth leadership literature by highlighting that student-athletes progressed from focusing on leading themselves to then develop a transformational focus on leading others. The focus on helping teammates and peers grow and develop as leaders may also reflect a social identity view of leadership, by creating a shared social identity of who a student-athlete leader is and can be. Recent studies have, in fact, found that leadership focused on creating a shared sense of 'us' can positively impact confidence and performance (Fransen et al., 2014).

The student-athlete leadership developmental cascade, as presented in this study, showed youth leadership development as personal growth through the bidirectional influence of person-in-context (Lerner, 2006), and across distinct phases. The term 'developmental cascade' is used

here in the intra-individual sense, outlined by Lewin-Bizwan and colleagues (2010) and Masten and Cicchetti (2010), as a cumulative and momentum-gathering trajectory of developmental experiences (i.e., person-context interactions) over time toward positive or negative developmental outcomes, rather than the inter-individual ‘cascading’ spread of transformational leadership through an organization as theorized by Avolio. These findings reflect alignment with van Linden and Fertman’s (1998) stages of awareness (e.g., leadership awareness and empowerment in the early years of high school), interaction (e.g., experiential opportunities and support throughout high school), and mastery (e.g., confidence in the leadership mindset in sport and life). Importantly, the depiction of this process fulfilled Avolio’s (2007) recommendation for a nuanced explanation of the conception and development of leadership, in the unique context of high school sport. Not only did student-athletes identify the organized and competitive nature of high school sport and the exposure to new people and experiences as being central to their leadership experiences in sport (Camiré, 2014), the chronological structure of high school in the United States provided natural distinct phases that influenced leadership development. That is, even without intervention from coaches or adults, student-athletes appeared to be conditioned toward the process of leadership development as they progressed from their freshman to senior year of high school, learning from role models in classes ahead of them and mindful of the cohorts “filling their shoes” behind them.

Our findings further suggest that such a coach-driven approach may stagnate the depth in which leadership can be perceived, developed, and integrated for transfer by student-athletes. This is not to say that coaches were not important in the leadership development process; student-athletes in this study did recognize that social support from coaches (e.g., providing expectations and encouragement) helped to facilitate experiential leadership development and application

during naturally occurring sport and life experiences. Thus, rather than (or at least not only) explicit and direct teaching of leadership skills, athletes valued coaches' provision of supportive and reflective environments in which athletes were encouraged take agency for and develop awareness of their own leadership process. These findings reflect the effective coaching approaches for PYD identified by Rathwell and Young (2018), with university coaches identifying the need to empower athlete agency by promoting self (e.g., goal setting; emotional regulation) and social (e.g., communication) regulation. In our study, there was recognition that coaches who are controlling and not youth-centered in their approach may have the power and potential to limit leadership development and transfer across contexts. In these situations, individual agency was perceived to be important to shape student-athletes view of leadership and its development in an experiential manner. In fact, sometimes they acted as leaders in sport and life in spite of the behavior and perspectives of coaches, teachers, and other adults in their lives. In the sport literature, Pot and van Hilvoorde (2013) argued that the term "school sport" has been used uncritically as a cultural and developmental tool and that empirical findings from school sport studies have been over-generalized. With this in mind, we must continue to recognize that the way coaches' structure their environment can impart both positive and negative developmental outcomes from high school sport (see Turgeon et al., 2019). The critique of the "adultification" of high school and youth sports cannot be ignored. Our findings support the idea that a coach's outcome-focus and control can limit life skill development and transfer (Pierce et al., 2019) and an adult-centered, rather than youth-centered philosophies and approaches are problematic for youth development (Coakley, 2015).

Psychological processes were inherent in the discussion of student-athlete agency in the development and transfer of leadership. Awareness and self-reflection, self-confidence, and self-

expectations have been found to facilitate life skills transfer from sport (Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Pierce, Erickson, & Dinu, 2019), and our findings support their importance for high school aged adolescents. Support was also found for both explicit cognitive processes (e.g., conscious decision-making to apply life skills; Kendellen & Camiré, 2019; Pierce et al., 2019) and implicit association (Jørgensen, Lemyre, & Holt, 2019) as guiding psychological processes in life skills development and transfer from sport, yet recognized that self-confidence in the specific life skill (i.e., leadership) and self-confidence to transfer the skill was an important pre-cursor to support these processes. Our findings further expand our understanding of life skills transfer and application across contexts by framing the interaction of both contextual and individual processes. Noticeably, student-athletes' experiential opportunities to apply life skills (e.g., group projects) and social support for transfer (e.g., encouragement from teachers) in the classroom and workplace helped to develop transfer self-confidence, self-expectations and awareness. Interestingly, while a lack of opportunities and a lack of support were seen to limit leadership transfer, self-confidence in leadership skills and a strongly integrated leadership mindset was a key process helping student-athletes overcome contextual limitations to transfer.

Future Research Directions

This study provides a definition of leadership subjective thematic map of youth leadership development that may provide conceptual and practical insights for understanding and examining leadership in sport and other youth activities. While it must be recognized that the participants in this study had been identified and rewarded as student-athlete leaders (i.e., selected to advisory council) and had unique experiences and interactions not afforded to all student-athlete leaders, the definition and process of leadership development and transfer provide interesting avenues for future youth-centered research. For example, case-study research could ideographically explore

leadership development to understand the nuanced, individual experiences across specific youth sport contexts (e.g., PYD programs, recreational youth sport program, selection-based camps or programs). Studies exploring youth leadership and life skills in sport, while understanding the complexity and all-encompassing nature of ecological meta-theories (e.g., Lerner et al., 2006), should pursue innovative methods to understand the bidirectional nature of development. For example, mixed-methods and longitudinal approaches could assess how youth athlete leadership changes through adolescence and influences and is influenced by adult leaders (e.g., coaches, teachers, parents) in and out of the sport context. Finally, the contextually-situated nature of leadership development, as espoused in such ecological approaches and emphasized by the results of this study, suggests that future work should put more direct focus on the unique and variable experiences of diverse student-athletes in different contexts (Kochanek & Erickson, 2019). Such focus would allow for examination of the degree to which current leadership development and transfer processes are sensitive to and supportive of the needs of all student-athlete leaders, including those who experience marginalization by culture, race, class, gender, or other aspects of their identities. For all student-athlete leaders, in both marginalized and privileged positions, further research is needed to understand the degree to which leadership development and transfer in high school sport includes elements of broader social responsibility and critical awareness of their followers' diverse cultural backgrounds (Kochanek & Erickson, 2019).

Practical Implications

These findings have important implications for youth leadership development practices in and beyond sport. First, the alignment between the PYD philosophy and transformational leadership should continue to be emphasized practically. For example, Turnnidge and Côté (2017) have recently designed and implemented “person-centered” coaching workshops for youth

coaches, using this leadership framework to develop transformational coaches who support the development of athletes into leaders – similar approaches might be taken more directly with potential athlete leaders themselves. Second, a practical focus on developing self-efficacy, as a situation-specific form of confidence, could support life skills transfer from sport. As examples of targeting the sources of self-efficacy, coaches and teachers should help youth identify and experience successful transfer accomplishments (e.g., use of leadership in a class project), highlight peers modeling of leadership skills in the classroom or workplace, or verbally supporting and encouraging leadership transfer attempts (Bandura, 1989).

Finally, coaches should leverage the opportunities and structure of high school sport that create an organic developmental pathway for student-athletes to follow. The four years of high school provide distinct phases to learn and develop personal and sport leadership skills and for a leadership mindset to evolve through experience and support. While explicit leadership development initiatives (i.e., in-person and online programs (e.g., Gould & Voelker, 2010; Pierce, Blanton, & Gould, 2018) can be effective in developing leadership skills (e.g., communication), such approaches should be viewed as a foundation for self-agentic development of student-athlete leadership mindsets. Student-athlete leaders also want to know how to respond to real conflicts and challenging situations that arise with adolescents in high school sport (Gould, 2018). With this in mind, coaches should deliberately plan and allow for the natural timing and structure of the four-year high school sport experience and the competitive and social experiences and challenges inherent in sport to serve as “real” experiential leadership learning opportunities. The coach’s role, then, is to take advantage of and promote student-athlete agency in these learning opportunities, and to provide support by building student-athlete awareness, self-confidence and self-expectations to lead in sport and other life contexts. Mirroring a constraints-based approach to skill

acquisition (Davids, Button, & Bennett, 2008; Orth, van der Kamp, & Button, 2018), this approach may help coaches to actively shape an environment in which athletes are encouraged and supported to take autonomy and agency to experience (and occasionally fail at) leading through competitive and social sporting experiences and promote the growth of both leadership skills and a leadership mindset for sport and life.

Conclusion

High school sport is positioned to have a unique influence on student-athlete psychosocial development (Turgeon et al., 2019), with personal and team-based leadership being one asset that can be uniquely shaped over this time and experience. Student-athletes viewed leadership as both a skillset and a mindset developed and transferred across contexts during the structured four years of high school sport. As an on-going interactive process, leadership can and should be developed in sport. Coaches and adults should not narrowly define leadership for youth as a specific role in sport nor control and direct its growth towards their desired outcome, but rather leverage the experiential learning opportunities that sport offers and help by guiding and supporting youth through these situations and challenges to help them create their own depiction and mindset for leadership in sport and life.

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Table 1. Student-athletes leadership skills and characteristics

Theme	Sub-theme	Semantic Code
Skill-based leadership	Action-oriented skills	Effective under pressure
		Committed
		Willing to do things others are not
		Accountable
		Responsible
		Hard working
		Relational skills
	Personal development	Active listener
		Provide constructive criticism
		Trusting
		Humble
		Respects others
		Empathetic
		Builds relationships
Mindset-based leadership	Personal development	Be a "better person"
		Do the "right thing"
		Lead myself then lead others
	Transformational role-model	View leadership as a privilege
		High self-expectations
		Help others grow
		Set example for others
		Prioritize team-first orientation

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of transformational leadership and life skills measures

Measures	M	SD
Transformational Leadership (composite)	4.27	0.46
Transformational Leadership - Idealized Influence	4.44	0.42
Transformational Leadership - Inspirational Motivation	4.58	0.50
Transformational Leadership - Intellectual Stimulation	3.59	0.85
Transformational Leadership - Individualized Consideration	4.48	0.50
Life Skill - Teamwork	4.40	0.38
Life Skill - Goal Setting	4.10	0.68
Life Skill - Social Skills	4.24	0.74
Life Skill - Problem Solving	3.84	0.87
Life Skill - Emotional Skills	4.04	0.72
Life Skill - Leadership	4.41	0.43
Life Skill - Time Management	4.13	0.60
Life Skill - Communication	4.31	0.67

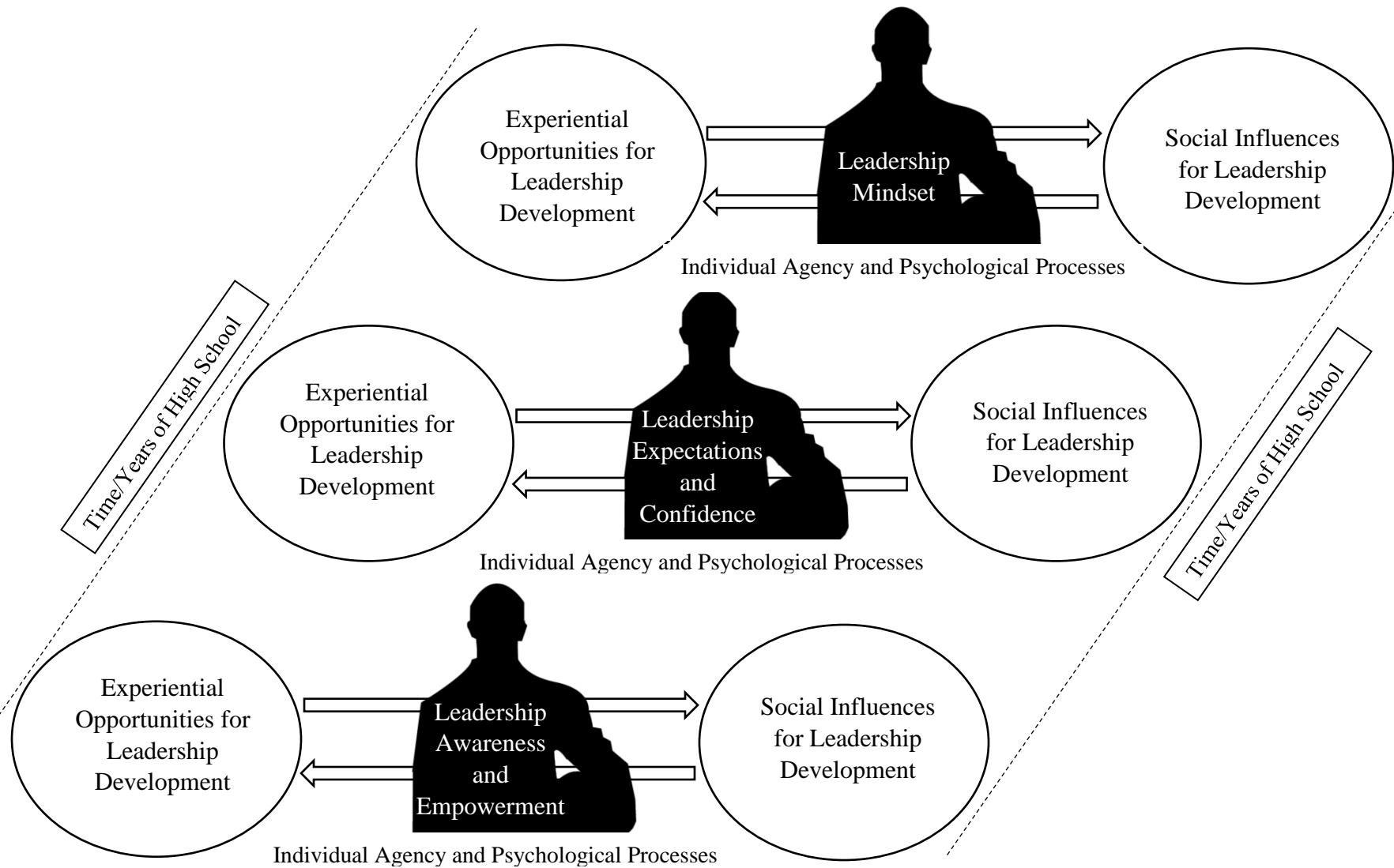


Figure 1. The Interactive Process of Student-Athlete Leadership Development