# Integrating Physical Activity, Coach Collaboration, and Life Skill Development in Youth: School Counselors' Perceptions

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## Abstract

Given the social, emotional, and academic benefits of physical activity related to youth development (Hellison, 2011), coupled with the minimal research regarding how school counselors can use physical activity for life skill development, this article focuses on school counselors' beliefs about collaborating with coaches and using physical activity to develop life skills. In surveying 338 school counselors, we found support for collaborating with coaches and using physical activity to develop life skills, in addition to interest in training opportunities for school counselors to integrate physical activity into their job. Implications for school counselors, coaches, and other stakeholders are provided.


*Keywords*: school counseling, physical activity, life skills, youth development, collaboration, coaches

## Integrating Physical Activity, Coach Collaboration, and Life Skill Development in Youth: School Counselors' Perceptions

Given the various benefits of athletic involvement on youth development, including the life and academic skill attainment that can be achieved using physical activity (Hellison, 2011; Coe, Pivarnik, Womack, Reeves, & Malina, 2006), school counselors can use physical activity as another tool to promote students' social, emotional, and academic health. However, minimal research exists that addresses how school counselors can use physical activity to help youth develop life and academic skills. The first step in remedying this limitation is to uncover the perceptions held by school counselors toward the role of physical activity in developing life skills in youth and their own involvement in facilitating this development.

### Role of Physical Activity in Academic Development

Researchers have found a positive relationship between physical activity and development of skills that contribute to academic achievement. More specifically, researchers have found that moderate to vigorous amounts of physical activity contribute to better memories, observation abilities, problem-solving abilities, and decision-making abilities (Keays & Allison, 1995). Tomporowski, Davis, Miller, and Naglieri (2008) found that greater intensities of physical activity were correlated with children's intellectual functioning, cognitive abilities, and academic achievement, while Coe et al. (2006) found that vigorous activity was significantly associated with children achieving better grades in mathematics, science, English, and world studies. Positive correlations were also reported between youth engaging in school-based physical activity and academic achievement (e.g., Carlson et al., 2008; Castelli, Hillman, Buck, &

Erwin, 2007; Santiago, Roper, Disch, & Morales, 2013). For example, Santiago et al. (2013) found a significant positive correlation ($r$ = .26) between aerobic activity and math performance among a group of 71 Hispanic fourth and fifth grade girls, albeit there were no differences for boys. Additionally, researchers have found a connection between participation on a sport team and academic achievement (Fox, Barr-Anderson, Neumark-Sztainer, & Wall, 2010; Stephens & Schaben, 2002), better academic adjustment (Fredericks & Eccles, 2006), and higher educational expectations (Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; Fredericks & Eccles, 2006).

**Role of Physical Activity in Life Skill Development**

The relationship between physical activity and life skill development has been widely explored in youth development literature (e.g., Danish, Fazio, Nellen, & Owens, 2002; Hayden, Baltzell, Kilty, & McCarthy, 2012; Hellison et al., 2000; Orlick, 2006; Whitley, Hayden, & Gould, 2012). Life skills, which Gould and Carson (2008) defined as skills that could transfer from the athletic environment to other areas of life, could be developed through physical activity when integrated appropriately and deliberately into play. Unfortunately, school counseling literature is devoid of publications exploring the role that physical activity could play in youth life skill development, which is problematic given the abundance of research on this topic in youth development literature in general. More specifically, participation on school sports teams has been found to help students develop higher emotional intelligence competencies, higher self-esteem, expanded social networks, healthier self-image, an enhanced sense of belonging, and reduced levels of depression and emotional distress (Camiré & Trudel, 2013; Fredericks & Eccles, 2006; Harrison & Narayan, 2003). In an exploratory study of urban high

school students who participated in a physical activity-based youth development program, Hayden et al. (2012) found that that urban high school students who participated in a physical activity-based youth development program identified increased effort in the classroom and in their respective sport, positive communication with and respect for teachers, and accountability to their teammates if they were on sports teams. Additionally, Hellison (2002, 2011) found that practitioners could use physical activity as a vehicle for teaching personal and social responsibility to youth when responsibility was woven appropriately into the physical activity. Martinek and Hellison, (1997, 1998) also found that physical activity and goal setting could promote growth and optimism, develop character, and increase resiliency among underserved youth.

Mere participation in physical activity does not lead to life skill attainment. Rather, practitioners must create an appropriate environment to facilitate learning of such skills. For example, Hellison (2002) suggested that in order for responsibilities to be learned through physical activity and then transferred to other domains outside the athletic arena, four themes needed to be present in the physical activity session: integration, transfer, empowerment, and teacher-student relationship. That is, any successful program incorporating Hellison's themes must integrate physical activity and learning of responsibilities, while being taught to participants to transfer responsibility from the physical activity setting to other areas of life. Additionally, successful programs incorporating Hellison's themes should empower participants while providing a caring climate that enables development of successful teacher-student relationships. Furthermore, Carlson (1999) found that cooperative games that promote team building, rather than competition, may lead to development of social skills that could transfer out

of the physical activity environment. Additionally, Ullrich-French and McDonough (2012) found that students who regularly attended an exercise program enjoyed more positive experiences and experienced higher self-worth than those who did not attend regularly.

**Role of School Counselors in Physical Activity-Based Youth Development**

The ASCA National Model (American School Counselor Association, 2012) and the School Counselor competencies (American School Counselor Association, 2007) emphasize that school counselors are in a position to be leaders and advocates in schools for students' social, emotional, and academic development. A small body of research has been conducted on the role of school counselors in promoting student wellness through physical activity. For example, utilizing an interdisciplinary approach to working with other stakeholders to promote skill building through teamwork in physical education classes (Hollingsworth, 2010), as well as promoting enrichment programs that combine academic subjects with physical activities (Steen & Noguera, 2010), were identified as ways in which school counselors could assist in helping students build life skills or academic skills through physical activity. While minimal research has been conducted on the role of school counselors in using physical activity, Pérusse, Kailimang, and Krell (2009) described direct and indirect ways that school counselors could support students' involvement in school-based physical activity. They suggested that school counselors could be directly involved, particularly when physical activity programs included behavioral components, through delivering classroom lessons focusing on behavior monitoring and goal setting, while leaving exercise and nutrition components to classroom teachers (e.g., health and PE teachers). They could also provide consultation sessions to classroom teachers, sharing techniques on teaching

life skill transfer, and/or engage in leading classroom discussions with students during health and PE classes that focus on life and academic skill development. School counselors could follow up with students through individual and group counseling to reinforce skill attainment when more focused attention is warranted (Cook & Hayden, 2012). Finally, school counselors could be involved in creating an environment that builds students' life and academic skills through integrating physical activity into the school day through the delivery and coordination of services among various stakeholders and school personnel. For example, school counselors could coordinate services with coaches, PE teachers, health teachers, the school nurse, parents, and other invested stakeholders (Cook & Hayden, 2012). Hayden, Cook, and Whitley (2014) identified ways in which school counselors can incorporate physical activity and life skill development into their jobs, using the ASCA National Model as a framework, while providing a series of core curriculum lessons for school counselors to use when working with children.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of the present study was to increase our understanding of the beliefs held by school counselors on how they can integrate physical activity into their jobs and the frequency with which they report engaging in physical-activity based activities with students. More specifically, we sought to answer the following research questions:

(a) What influences school counselors to use physical activity as a means of developing relationships with students?

(b) In what ways do school counselors perceive physical activity to contribute to youths' overall development?

We also attempted to ascertain school counselors' opinion on collaborating with coaches and receiving training in how to use physical activity to help youth develop life skills that they could then transfer to various domains in life. The following three variables were examined via survey questions administered to practicing school counselors: coach collaboration, school counselor training and involvement in employing physical activity, and life skill development via physical activity. Descriptive statistics, *t* tests, and ANOVAs were conducted to examine research questions and relationships between identified variables and demographics using SPSS, Version 21.0. The alpha level was set to .05 for all statistical analyses.

## Methodology

### Measure

In order to answer our research questions and explore school counselors' opinion on collaborating with coaches and receiving training in how to use physical activity to help youth develop life skills, we developed a survey (Appendix A) designed to gather demographic information and uncover school counselors' perceptions of collaborating with coaches and using physical activity for positive youth development. To develop content validity, a team of five experts on the topic of youth development, counseling psychology, school counseling, and coach education collaborated to brainstorm items for the survey that appropriately assessed school counselors' perception of physical activity. One of the experts had experience as a school counselor, three had experience as coaches, and all had experience working in a

school. The survey employed a five-point Likert-type scale, with possible responses ranging from (1) disagree, (2) somewhat disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) somewhat agree, and (5) agree.

As a preliminary means to test construct validity, we ran a principal components factor analysis of the survey items using varimax rotation. Factor analysis of the 18-item survey could be conducted given the KMO measure of sampling adequacy was .925 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (Fields, 2013). A factor analysis of the 18 items resulted in a three-factor solution. In reviewing the scree plot and eigenvalues greater than one, three factors accounted for 63.37% of total variance, with factor one explaining 25.59% of total variance, factor two adding an additional 19.43% of total variance, and factor three explaining 18.34% of total variance. In reviewing the rotated component matrix, on factor one, seven items loaded strongly, with two items loading fairly strong on both factor one and factor three. Because of the lower factor loadings, we excluded the two items from further analyses. The seven survey items that loaded on factor one included questions on the topic of collaborating with coaches, so we identified this factor as the Coach Collaboration Subscale. The Coach Collaboration Subscale included items that were indicative of counselors' interest in collaborating, or ability to collaborate, with coaches in relation to promoting positive youth development. The following is a sample item from the Coach Collaboration Subscale: "It's important to collaborate with coaches when gathering information on students." Four items loaded on factor two, which included items that were indicative of counselors' interest in learning how to integrate physical activity and coach relationships into their work with youth, so we identified this factor as the Training & Involvement Subscale. A sample

item from this subscale is: “A training that helps me understand how sport and physical activity can develop life skills would be helpful for my profession.” Lastly, five items loaded on factor three, which included items that addressed counselors’ perceptions of using physical activity as a means of developing relationships or life skills with youth, so we identified this factor as the Life Skill Development Subscale. A sample item from this subscale is: “It is practical to use sport or physical activity as a means to develop life skills.” All three subscales were found to have strong internal consistency, through using Cronbach’s alpha (Coach Collaboration Subscale, α = .85,Training & Involvement Subscale, α = .88, and Life Skill Development Subscale, α = .87).

**Participants**

Three hundred and thirty eight (51 male and 287 female) respondents completed the survey. One participant did not complete the survey in its entirety. Participants were respondents to an email sent by the principal investigator (PI) to the American School Counselor Association’s (ASCA) listserv inviting people to participate in a short, voluntary survey addressing their perceptions of incorporating physical activity into their jobs in various ways (e.g., as a means of developing life skills). The participants’ age ranged from 23 to 60 years old, *M* = 39, *SD* = 11.8, and 317 (93.5%) self-reported race/ethnicity as White, 13 (3.8%) as African American, four (1.0%) as Latino, two (.6%) as Asian, two (.6% as Bi-racial), and one (.3%) as other. Years of experience working as a school counselor ranged from one to over twenty years (*M* = 11.7, *SD* = 5.8). One hundred and sixty five (49.0%) self-reported working as a school counselor in a high school, with 57 (16.9%) in a middle school, 43 (12.8%) in an elementary school, 37 (11.0%) in K-12, 12 (3.6%) in K-8, and 23 (6.8%) at the district/other level, with one non-

respondent. In terms of what type of school they worked in, 284 (84.8%) self-reported working in a public (non-charter) school, 9 (2.7%) in a charter school, 27 (8.1%) in a private school, and 15 (4.5%) reported “other,” with three non-respondents. Sixty-six (19.6%) participants reported working in an urban school, 144 (42.9%) in a suburban school, and 126 (37.5%) in a rural school, with two non-respondents. In terms of professional affiliation, 307 (91.1%) were ASCA members, 30 (8.9%) were not ASCA members, one participant did not respond, and 228 (67.9%) of participants were members of their state school counselor association, while 108 (32.1%) were not members, with two non-respondents.

In terms of prior or current athletic involvement, 234 (69.6%) self-reported being athletes at the high school level, 102 (30.4%) were not athletes at the high school level, with two non-respondents, and 72 (21.3%) were athletes at the college level while 266 (78.7%) were not athletes at the college level. Fifty-two (15.6%) respondents were athletes at the post-collegiate level, while 282 (84.4%) were not athletes at the post-collegiate level. Seventy-eight (23.2%) respondents were athletic coaches and 258 (76.6%) were not athletic coaches, with two non-respondents. Years coaching ranged from 0 (in first year) to 38, with an average of 4.4 years.

**Procedure**

We requested ASCA members to complete the online survey through an email containing an introduction to the study (Appendix B) and a link to the survey (Appendix A). We maintained confidentiality and anonymity through various means. First, we asked for limited identifying information on the survey. The demographic information gathered on the survey included, gender, age range, ethnicity, years in current role,

years in the profession, and school type (i.e., public versus private; urban, suburban, versus rural; elementary, middle, versus high). We did not gather names of participants nor did we gather names of schools. Furthermore, since this was a nationally distributed survey, it was not possible to identify the schools or school counselors from the limited identifying information as there were many schools represented. All data were stored electronically on the PI's work computer in a password protected file. Access to data was restricted to the PI and five co-investigators (one assistant professor, two doctoral students and two master's students within the Department of Counseling and School Psychology at the university at which the PI is employed), all of whom received Human Subjects training and, recognized the importance of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. The study received IRB approval from the university at which the PI was employed.

## Results

Before examining our two research questions, what influences school counselors to use physical activity as a means of developing relationships with students?, and in what ways do school counselors perceive physical activity to contribute to youths' overall development?, we first examined descriptive statistics to ascertain level of physical activity use in promoting youth development. In response to the statement "I use sport or physical activity as a means of developing relationships with students, of 288 respondents (75.0%), 250 (86.8%) responded affirmatively and 38 (13.2%) responded negatively. Additionally, an overwhelming 301 (90.6%) participants agreed or strongly agreed to the following statement: "Sport or physical activity contributes to youths' overall development," while 29 (8.7%) reported a neutral response and 3 (.9%)

disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. See Table 1 for additional demographics. Because the majority of the sample identified using physical activity as a means of developing life skills with youth and valuing the role of physical activity in contibuting to youths' overall development, we conducted various analyses to better understand the representation of the sample in terms of our two research questions to examine interest in and use of physical activity as a means of developing relationships with students and developing life skills in students, based on particular demographic variables.

In examining descriptive statistics for the three aforementioned subscales (Coach Collaboration, Training & Involvement, and Life Skill Development), the overall mean score for Coach Collaboration was the highest of the three subscales ($M$ = 4.11, $SD$ = .70, $n$ = 336), indicating that respondents reported somewhat agreeing to be interested in, or able to collaborate with coaches. The overall mean score for the Life Skill Development subscale was 3.78 ($SD$ = .87, $n$ = 336), indicating that respondents reported somewhat agreeing to be interested in using physical activity as a means of developing relationships or life skills with youth. The overall mean score for the Training & Involvement was the lowest of the subscales ($M$ = 3.60, $SD$ = 1.02, $n$ = 336), indicating that respondents reported somewhat agreeing to be interested in a training that helps them integrate physical activity or develop strong relationships with coaches in their work, but slightly less interested in training and involvement than they were in the other two areas (coach collaboration and life skill development). Mean scores and standard deviations of items were obtained and presented in Table 2. One-way

analyses of variance and *t*-tests using SPSS were performed to further examine how respondents differed based on self-reported demographic data.

**Coach Collaboration Subscale**

In conducting analyses on Coach Collaboration, there was a significant mean difference obtained, $t(332) = 2.525$, $p = .012$, between participants who self-identified as ASCA members ($M = 4.14$, $SD = .69$, $n = 304$) and those who self-identified as non-ASCA members ($M = 3.80$, $SD = .75$, $n = 30$), with ASCA members reporting greater interest in engaging in coach collaboration. Additionally, participants who self-identified as collegiate athletes scored significantly higher on Coach Collaboration, $t(333) = 2.023$, $p = .044$, ($M = 4.26$, $SD = .68$, $n = 71$) compared to those who self-identified as non-collegiate athletes ($M = 4.07$, $SD = .70$, $n = 264$). Furthermore, participants who self-identified as post-collegiate athletes scored significantly higher on Coach Collaboration, $t(330) = 2.460$, $p = .014$, ($M = 4.33$, $SD = .62$, $n = 52$) compared to those who self-identified as non-post collegiate athletes ($M = 4.07$, $SD = .71$, $n = 280$). Finally, there was a significant mean difference, $t(331) = 3.299$, $p = .001$, between participants who self-identified as coaches ($M = 4.34$, $SD = .54$, $n = 75$) and those who self-identified as non-coaches ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .72$, $n = 258$), with coaches reporting higher scores on Coach Collaboration. However, there were no significant findings based on years of working in the field, age of participants, school level/school setting, or whether participants attended their most recent ASCA or state annual conference ($p < .05$).

**Training & Involvement Subscale**

For Training & Involvement, there was a significant mean difference, $t(332) = 1.996$, $p = .047$, between participants who self-identified as ASCA members ($M = 3.63$,

*SD* = 1.00, *n* = 304) and those who self-identified as non-ASCA members (*M* = 3.24, *SD* = 1.26, *n* = 30), with ASCA members reporting greater interest in training that helps them integrate physical activity. Additionally, participants who self-identified as collegiate athletes scored significantly higher on Training & Involvement, *t*(333) = 3.027, *p* = .003, (*M* = 3.92, *SD* = .98, *n* = 71) compared to those who self-identified as non-collegiate athletes (*M* = 3.52, *SD* = 1.01*, n* = 264). Finally, participants who self-identified as coaches scored higher on Training & Involvement, *t*(331) = 3.053, *p* = .002, (*M* = 3.91, *SD* = 1.01, *n* = 75) compared to those who self-identified as non-coaches (*M* = 3.51, *SD* = 1.01*, n* = 258). However, there were no significant differences for years of working in the field, age of participants, school level or school setting, or whether participants attended their most recent ASCA or state annual conference (*p* < .05).

**Life Skill Development Subscale**

For Life Skill Development, there were significant differences in life skill development mean scores, based on a one-way ANOVA used to test for differences among reported school settings (i.e., urban, suburban, rural), *F* (2, 330) = 4.409, *p* = .013. Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons of the three groups indicated that the rural counselors (*M* = 3.94, 95% CI [3.1, 4.08]) self-reported significantly higher scores on life skill development than the urban counselors (*M* = 3.58, 95% CI [3.35, 3.81]). Comparisons between the suburban counselors (*M* = 3.72, 95% CI [3.57, 3.87]) and the other two groups of counselors were not statistically significant at *p* <.05. Participants who self-identified as collegiate athletes scored significantly higher on Life Skill Development, *t*(333) = 3.186, *p* = .002, (*M* = 4.06, *SD* = .89, *n* = 71) compared to those who self-identified as non-collegiate athletes (*M* = 3.70, *SD* = .85*, n* = 264). Additionally,

participants who self-identified as post-collegiate athletes scored higher on Life Skill Development, $t(330) = 2.437$, $p = .015$, ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .90$, $n = 52$) compared to those who self-identified as non-post collegiate athletes ($M = 3.73$, $SD = .86$, $n = 280$). Similarly, there was a significant mean difference, $t(331) = 2.978$, $p = .003$, between participants who self-identified as current athletes ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .86$, $n = 72$) and those who self-identified as non-current athletes ($M = 3.70$, $SD = .86$, $n = 261$), with current athletes reporting greater interest in integrating physical activity in their work for the purpose of developing students' life skills. Finally, participants who self-identified as coaches scored higher on Life Skill Development, $t(331) = 4.101$, $p < .001$, ($M = 4.12$, $SD = .83$, $n = 75$) compared to those who self-identified as non-coaches ($M = 3.67$, $SD = .85$, $n = 258$). However, there were no significant differences for years of working in the field, age of participants, school level, or whether participants attended their most recent ASCA or state annual conference ($p < .05$).

## Discussion

This study addresses the perceptions held by school counselors toward the importance of physical activity in developing life skills among youth and their role in helping to facilitate this development. Overwhelmingly, school counselors indicated using physical activity as a means of developing a relationship with students and indicated believing that physical activity contributes to youths' overall development. After conducting a factor analysis of the 18-item survey that we developed, we identified three subscales: Coach Collaboration, Training & Involvement, and Life Skill Development. The Coach Collaboration subscale included items that are indicative of counselors' interest in collaborating, or ability to collaborate, with coaches in relation to

promoting positive youth development. The Training & Involvement subscale included items that are indicative of counselors' interest in learning how to integrate physical activity and coach relationships into their work with youth. The Life Skill Development subscale included items that address counselors' perceptions of using physical activity as a means of developing relationships or life skills with youth.

Across all three subscales, significant findings emerged in relation to respondents' current status as a coach. Respondents who identified as both a school counselor and coach were significantly more likely to value the collaboration between school counselors and coaches, were more interested in undergoing training as a counselor to help facilitate positive youth development through physical activity, and were more likely to consider physical activity as a valuable way of helping youth develop life skills to succeed in different life domains.

Collaboration between school counselors and coaches can yield positive consequences for young athletes, as sharing information may allow coaches to develop a deeper understanding and knowledge of youth development, while creating a more positive learning environment for young people (McGowan, Brady, & Despres, 2012). Increased collaboration between coaches and school counselors may also contribute to richer consultations between school counselors and parents, as it offers school counselors an additional lens into youths' development. For example, through collaboration with coaches, school counselors can have a better understanding of young people's interests and strengths, allowing them to discuss the relationship between physical activity and young people's social and emotional health, their values, and their ability to work with others in sport, in the classroom, and in life. Finally, school

counselors and coaches may consider working together to hold workshops for parents and young people on topics relevant to the influence of physical activity on social and emotional health, such as its potential role in moderating stress and anxiety in the classroom.

It may be that school counselors who are currently coaches recognize the transferable life skills developed through sport and their application to the classroom. For example, Gould, Collins, Lauer, and Chung (2007) discussed the importance of coaches identifying deliberate strategies for life skill development, including facilitating students' active involvement in goal setting activities, providing individualized feedback, and building strong relationships with students that can lead to further life skill development. Researchers found that coaches provide athletes with opportunities to use their life skills in the sport setting, engage athletes in moral dialogues, and model appropriate use of life skills within and outside of physical activity settings (Camiré & Trudel, 2013; Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2009). Furthermore, McLean and Mallett (2012) found that coaches who were once athletes themselves identify the importance of sport involvement not only for physical gains, but also in acquiring skills to shape their development as people. Among these coaches, building life skills in athletes is an important aspect of the coaching experience; these coaches identified themselves as mentors to their athletes. While coaches serve a distinctly separate role from school counselors, they offer a creative way to integrate life skill development and sport involvement. It may be that school counselors who are also coaches have a more developed understanding of how coaches can integrate life skill development into physical activity and, therefore, value collaboration more than school counselors who

are not coaches. Given this awareness, it is not surprising that school counselors who are also coaches are significantly more likely to show interest in undergoing training to help facilitate positive youth development through physical activity.

In both the Coach Collaborative subscale and the Training & Involvement subscale, there was a significant mean difference between ASCA members compared to non-ASCA members. Given that one of ASCA's priorities is to provide professional development (ASCA, 2012), it comes as no surprise that ASCA members may be interested in developing their expertise as school counselors through collaborating with others and display interest in receiving training to become better equipped to use physical activity as a means of helping youth develop life skills. In interpreting this difference, however, caution must be executed because the respondents were primarily ASCA members (91.1%).

In the Coach Collaborative subscale and the Life Skill Development subscale, there was a significant mean difference between respondents who are post-collegiate athletes compared to non-post collegiate athletes. That difference may be influenced by respondents' previous or current athletic involvement. In conducting phenomenological interviews with elite athletes from various sports, Becker (2009) found that many athletes discuss the life skills they learned from their coaches and the feelings that accompany being part of a team when asked to reflect on their experiences. They highlighted learning how to manage high-pressure situations, deal with adversity, and work collaboratively and effectively with others. It is plausible that their post-collegiate athletic experiences contribute to them finding value in collaborating with coaches and recognizing physical activity as a vehicle for life skill development.

Concerning Life Skill Development, there was a significant mean difference between respondents who were athletes during high school compared to non-high school athletes. Research supports the idea that engagement in physical activity during adolescence has positive long-term effects as a person goes through life, such as contributing to increased physical activity levels as an adult (Hallal, Victora, Azevedo, & Wells, 2006; Telama, Yang, Viikari, Välimäki, Wane, & Raitakari, 2005). More relevant, however, is that many former high school athletes attribute skill development and growth of life skills to their high school sport experiences (Gould & Carson, 2010). Specifically, former high school athletes credit participation in high school sports for helping them develop skills such as teamwork, effort, goal setting, time management, leadership, initiative, responsibility, and emotional control. Furthermore, individuals who participate in high school sports identify their high school athletic experiences as positive (Gould & Carson, 2010). Therefore, based on their personal high school sport experiences, school counselors who were high school athletes may be inclined to believe that sport should be used for life skill development.

Additionally, there were significant differences in life skill development mean scores based on school setting. The rural counselors self-reported significantly higher scores on the Life Skill Development subscale compared to the urban counselors. No statistically significant differences emerged between the suburban counselors and the other two groups of counselors. This finding suggests that rural school counselors are more interested in using physical activity as a means of developing life skills. This may be attributed to a shortage of school sports' teams in more rural areas. It may also be attributed to urban school counselors feeling overworked and burdened with large

counselor caseloads. In a national survey of school counselors and administrators (College Board, 2012), it was noted that schools in urban and suburban settings average a caseload of over 410 and 402 students, respectively, while schools in rural settings average a caseload of approximately 362 students. While suburban school settings also include counselors' average caseloads as larger than those in rural settings, the additional resources (e.g., school-based sports teams) in suburban settings might lower school counselors' interest in using physical activity to develop life skills.

The primary finding of this survey study is that those respondents who have previously been involved in sport or physical activity think it is worthwhile to incorporate physical activity into their interventions with students. That is, they expressed value in collaborating with coaches to best serve students, as ascertained through the Coach Collaboration subscale. They identified the importance of training and professional development designed to help school counselors understand how to practically integrate physical activity into their work with young people to best serve them, as determined through the Training & Involvement subscale. Finally, they identified physical activity as a means of developing life skills among young people, as demonstrated by scores on the Life Skill Development subscale.

**Limitations**

While this study provides meaningful data to support school counselors integrating life skill development and physical activity, results need to be interpreted with care. Given that the survey was distributed to school counselors through the ASCA membership database, it mainly reached current or previous ASCA members. This may bias the sample, given that school counselors who are members of their national

association may be more interested in professional development opportunities. Additionally, given that 93.5% of the respondents were White (non-Latino), the results cannot be generalized across race/ethnicity. Likewise, given that 85% of the respondents were female, the results cannot be generalized across gender. These percentages do, however, resemble the ethnic and gender composition of school counselors nationally, with approximately 75% of school counselors identifying as White (non-Latino) and 77% of school counselors identifying as female (College Board, 2012). Furthermore, since this is a survey-based study that includes school counselors' self-report on interest and engagement in physical activity-based interventions, the respondents may have self-reported more frequent engagement or preference for training, for example, in hopes of appearing more positive in the survey. The survey results are relatively positive overall, which might suggest this bias. Or, it may be that school counselors who have a strong interest in physical activity chose to complete the survey, biasing the results. Given that the introductory email explaining the study indicated that the study was exploring school counselors' perceptions of using physical activity for life skill development, school counselors who support this concept might have been more inclined to devote time to finishing the survey. Despite these limitations, the results provide preliminary data to suggest the importance that participating school counselors place on collaborating with coaches and incorporating life skill development and physical activity.

**Future Research**

This study provides an initial lens into understanding the perceptions held by school counselors about incorporating physical activity into their jobs, and suggests that

counselor educators, PE teachers, administrators, and various other stakeholders in young people's education are positioned in a unique way to help school counselors begin this integration. Understanding that some school counselors value the idea of integrating life skill development and physical activity to serve youth, we can now begin to develop training programs that provide realistic ways in which school counselors can develop this set of skills in a supportive school environment. The first step in developing physical activity-based positive youth development training programs that can be facilitated by school counselors is to identify schools that are currently developing and implementing programs incorporating life skill development and physical activity. Understanding the current landscape of physical activity-based positive youth development programs and best practices for implementing them allows researchers and practitioners to create training programs to support school counselors' involvement in such programs and initiatives. Hayden, et al (2014) provide a curriculum guide for school counselors interested in using physical activity as a means of developing life skills with fourth through eighth grade students, basing their guide on a successfully implemented program. Given that the majority of respondents are members of their national association and, therefore, may be more interested in professional development and training opportunities, future research might explore the perceptions held by non-ASCA members on integrating life skill development and physical activity to gauge the amount of school counselors' interest in incorporating physical activity and life skill development into their job description and responsibilities. Additionally, results of this study imply that school counselors may believe collaborating with coaches is important to the success of young people, suggesting that coaches can be meaningful

contributors to the educational plans determined by school faculty for particular students with whom they have an existing relationship. To that end, future research can assess the ways in which coaches can be more involved in students' educational plans and can address how to integrate coaches in a practical and deliberate way. Future research can also assess how school counselors can collaborate with coaches and share successful strategies for reaching youth through physical activity.

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**Table 1**

*Demographic Data*

| Variable | | *n* | Mean% |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 51 | 15.1% |
| | Female | 287 | 84.9% |
| Race/ethnicity | White/Caucasian | 317 | 93.5% |
| | African American | 13 | 3.8% |
| | Latino | 4 | 1.0% |
| | Asian | 2 | .6% |
| | Biracial | 2 | .6% |
| | Other | 1 | .3% |
| School employment level | High school | 165 | 49.0% |
| | Middle school | 57 | 16.9% |
| | Elementary school | 43 | 12.8% |
| | K-12 school | 37 | 11.0% |
| | K-8 school | 12 | 3.6% |
| | District/other level | 23 | 6.8% |
| Type of school employed at | Public | 284 | 84.8% |
| | Charter | 9 | 2.7% |
| | Private | 27 | 8.1% |
| | Other | 15 | 4.5% |
| School employment setting | Urban | 66 | 19.6% |
| | Suburban | 144 | 42.9% |
| | Rural | 126 | 37.5% |
| ASCA members | Yes | 307 | 91.1% |
| | No | 30 | 8.9% |
| State school counseling association member | Yes | 228 | 67.9% |
| | No | 108 | 32.1% |
| Prior high school athlete | Yes | 234 | 69.6% |
| | No | 102 | 30.4% |
| Prior college athlete | Yes | 72 | 21.3% |
| | No | 266 | 78.7% |
| Post-collegiate athlete | Yes | 52 | 15.6% |
| | No | 282 | 84.4% |
| Current athletic coach | Yes | 78 | 23.2% |
| | No | 258 | 76.6% |

**Table 2**

*Means and Standard Deviations for Participant Survey Responses*

| Survey Item: Coach Collaboration Subscale | *M* | *SD* | *n* |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I feel comfortable collaborating with coaches when gathering information on students. | 4.35 | .90 | 332 |
| 2. Coaches have a perspective on students that other adults might not have. | 4.38 | .80 | 331 |
| 3. I consult coaches to address student needs (i.e., before a referral for evaluation is needed). | 3.42 | 1.25 | 331 |
| 4. It's important to collaborate with coaches when gathering information on students. | 4.05 | .92 | 332 |
| 5. Coaches could provide valuable information (play a valuable role) at student support meetings. | 4.14 | .91 | 335 |
| 6. Coaches have an important role in student development. | 4.48 | .70 | 331 |
| 7. I would like to collaborate more with coaches when supporting students. | 3.95 | 1.03 | 332 |

| Survey Item: Training & Involvement Subscale | *M* | *SD* | *n* |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I would be able to provide better services to students by completing a training that helps me identify how sport and physical activity can develop life skills that can be transferred to students' academics. | 3.40 | 1.31 | 330 |
| 2. A training that helps me understand how sport and physical activity can develop life skills would be helpful for my profession. | 3.73 | 1.15 | 333 |
| 3. I would be interested in learning how to better collaborate (and develop interventions?) with coaches. | 3.72 | 1.16 | 330 |
| 4. I would be interested in learning about the skill set/training of coaches. | 3.52 | 1.16 | 330 |

| Survey Item: Life Skill Development Subscale | *M* | *SD* | *n* |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. It would be beneficial to use sport or physical activity in order to develop relationships with students. | 4.05 | .95 | 333 |
| 2. It is practical to use sport or physical activity as a means to develop life skills. | 4.26 | .83 | 329 |
| 3. I use sport or physical activity as a means of developing relationships with students. | 3.21 | 1.36 | 332 |
| 4. I consider using sport or physical activity when developing life skill interventions. | 3.45 | 1.18 | 328 |
| 5. It is helpful to use sport or physical activity as a means to develop relationships with students. | 3.92 | 1.00 | 330 |

# Appendix A

Survey Items

Directions: *The purpose of this survey is to identify school counselors perceptions of the role of coaches and sport participation in young people's lives. Please respond to each question to the best of your ability. If you are unsure of your response, please choose the response that most closely aligns with your views. You may choose to leave questions blank or stop completing the survey at any point. Your responses will be kept* ***confidential****. Please do not indicate your name or your school's name on this document. Your responses will be used in preparation of a manuscript for publication in a counseling or education journal. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey.*

*For the purposes of this survey, a coach refers to an instructor of an athletic team. It does not refer to a physical education teacher. An athlete refers to any individual engaging and proficient in sport or physical exercise. Some examples include team competitors (e.g., basketball players), individual competitors (e.g., triathletes), or people who enjoy physical exercise (e.g., fitness walkers). Life skills refer to personal assets, characteristics, and skills that can be developed in sport and transferred to other non-sport settings. Some examples of life skills include goal setting, self-regulation, and perseverance. This definition is adopted from Gould & Carson (2008).*

**Scale: Disagree (1) Somewhat disagree (2) Neither agree nor disagree (3) Somewhat agree (4) Agree (5)**

**Coach Collaboration Subscale**

1. I feel comfortable collaborating with coaches when gathering information on students
2. Coaches have a perspective on students that other adults might not have
3. I consult coaches to address student needs (i.e., before a referral for evaluation is needed)
4. Its important to collaborate with coaches when gathering information on students
5. Coaches could provide valuable information (play a valuable role) at student support meetings
6. Coaches have an important role in student development
7. I would like to collaborate more with coaches when supporting students

**Training & Involvement Subscale**

1. I would be able to provide better services to students by completing a training that helps me identify how sport and physical activity can develop life skills that can be transferred to students' academics
2. A training that helps me understand how sport and physical activity can develop life skills would be helpful for my profession

3. I would be interested in learning how to better collaborate (and develop interventions) with coaches
4. I would be interested in learning about the skill set/training of coaches

**Life Skill Development Subscale**

1. It would be beneficial to use sport or physical activity in order to develop relationships with students
2. It is practical to use sport or physical activity as a means to develop lifeskills
3. I use sport or physical activity as a means of developing relationships with students
4. I consider using sport or physical activity when developing life skill interventions
5. It is helpful to use sport or physical activity as a means to develop relationships with students

## Appendix B

Introductory to the Study

Dear school counselor,

I am a professor at the _____ in the Department of Counseling and School Psychology. I am asking your participation in a study designed to elucidate the perceptions held by student support staff toward the role of coaches and sport participation in young people's lives. I am conducting the study with two PhD candidates in Counseling/School Psychology and two M.Ed. candidates in Mental Health at the _____. By kindly completing our short, online survey, you will be providing critical information to help us contribute to the emerging field of life skill development through sport participation in young people's lives. You can access the short survey using the link below. Please respond to each question to the best of your ability. If you are unsure of your response, please choose the response that most closely aligns with your views. You may choose to leave questions blank or stop completing the survey at any point. Your responses will be kept **confidential and any data will be kept in a password-protected file on the principal investigator's computer and in a locked file in the principal investigator's office at** _____. Please do not indicate your name or your school's name on this document. Your responses will be used in preparation of a manuscript for publication in a counseling or education journal. If you have any questions or concerns, you may reach out to the principal investigator, _____, through email (_____), phone (_____), or writing (_____). Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey and help us further the field of sport based youth development in schools.

Warmly,

_____ and research team

## Biographical Statements

Laura A. Hayden, Ed.D. is an assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts Boston in the Department of Counseling and School Psychology, College of Education and Human Development. She is the graduate program director of the school counseling program and faculty member within the doctoral counseling psychology program. Dr. Hayden primarily conducts research that focuses on life skill development through physical activity and positive youth development in urban settings.

Amy L. Cook, Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the school counseling program at UMass Boston. She conducts research focusing on social justice and multicultural issues in school counseling practice and counselor educator preparation. Recently her research projects have focused on examining ways to promote academic achievement and social/emotional development among at risk youth.

Alexandra Scherer, M.S. is a graduate of the mental health counseling program at the University of Massachusetts Boston in the Department of Counseling and School Psychology, in the College of Education and Human Development.

Scott B. Greenspan, M.S. is a graduate of the mental health counseling program at the University of Massachusetts Boston in the Department of Counseling and School Psychology, in the College of Education and Human Development.

Meghan Silva is a doctoral student in the counseling and school psychology program at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her research interests include increasing student involvement in intervention planning, as well as developing interventions that increase student acceptability and foster self-determination in students.

Melanie Cadet, M.S., is a 3rd year graduate student in the counseling and school psychology PhD Program at the University of Massachusetts Boston. She is currently a practicum counseling intern at Salem State University Counseling and Health Services. Currently, Melanie's primary research interests include exploring the experiences and ethnic identity development among individuals who identify as multiethnic.

Erik Maki is a 3rd year doctoral student in the counseling and school psychology program at the University of Massachusetts Boston.