

Character Development in Youth Athletes: A Case Study of the Sports Leadership Academy (SLAC) in Ghana

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Abstract

This study employed a qualitative case study to explore the benefits of the character development program on youth athletes in Ghana, which is offered by the Sports Leadership Academy. This study focuses on the improvement of life skills and positive youth development through the sports of basketball, soccer, and volleyball. The direct and indirect impact of sports programs on youth character development has been realized across nations but with few or little on the intentional module or strategies to teach athletes. Therefore, this study investigates the effects of a sports program drawn from its associated members, which includes athletes, coaches, program coordinators, and parents. The data from this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, uncovering benefits from participant responses such as psychological growth and development, improved self-discipline, the building of life skills, and the development of leadership skills. Participants expressed and highlighted the strength and approach the program's structure possesses to integrate psychological techniques like goal setting, self-talk and visualization, breathing techniques, and self-motivation with value-based coaching. However, the study uncovered a few challenges related to financial and human resource limitations and low parental involvement. Nonetheless, participants provided actionable recommendations for the improvement and continuous success of the program, where they discussed the need for integration into the school system, and the need for stronger education and support networks such as sports psychologists for athletes and coaches.

Keywords: Character Development, Psychological Skills, Sports Leadership Academy (SLAC), Life Skills, Positive Youth Development, Value-Based Coaching, Sports Psychology, Youth Athletes.

Introduction

Sports is believed and recognised to have a profound impact on youth development by fostering skills essential for success in various aspects of life and environments provided for success. Beyond the physical benefits it provides, sports serve as a medium for character development and leadership cultivation (Sujarwo et al., 2021). Programs structured with intentional coaching strategies can extend beyond athletic training to instill values such as teamwork, accountability, character, self-discipline, and self-control (Camiré & Trudel, 2013). Public and private organisations—including sports academies, training centres, and government initiatives—have increasingly adapted education models through efforts to nurture qualities such as discipline, respect, accountability, and honesty among youth athletes to help them become better leaders in society (Managare, A.C., et al., 2023).

For instance, Indonesia's National Education System Law No.2 (1989) emphasises character development as a structured or planned effort to create and cultivate spiritual strength, self-control, intelligence, and moral integrity needed by the individual and society. With that, similar principles apply within the realm of sports, where structured environments shape athletes' character and ethical foundations in sports and life settings. This generally stems from the expected notion of this being a framed excerpt even in sports, as character remains a great necessity whether in schools, communities, or even sports academies. In its development, (Lerner, 2018) describes character development as attaining the feelings, thoughts, and skills needed to act coherently across time and place to serve self and others in mutually beneficial and positive ways. Research has also identified key character traits promoted through sports participation, including discipline, hard work, teamwork, respect for others, honesty, humility, accountability, and integrity (Lickona, 2004; Brown, 2003), as cited in Lupori (2015). These become the prominent and most required value traits needed in youth athletes, as reported by high school coaches, who transition into various leadership roles within their families, professional environments, communities, and governments (Blanton, 2014).

Following this, the role of environmental factors—including community, families, and schools—is crucial in shaping youth character through sports participation and its related settings (Dorty, 2006). Character development under apprehended mediums and structures teaches, fosters, and builds the requisite values that extend beyond the sports field, hence influencing the student-athlete's moral reasoning and social interactions deployed for success (Hermino & Arifin, 2020). Within the Olympic Movement, respect has been employed as a fundamental value upheld by the International Olympic Committee, demonstrating the importance of character in competitive sports environments and also enlightening the image of international competition.

Given that young athletes represent a valuable human resource expected to assume leadership roles in society, leveraging sports as a fundamental tool and vehicle for character development is imperative for success (Lerner, 2018). Youth participation in sports with these structures in place enhances life skills such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and respect, ultimately preparing them for professional and social responsibilities. These learning experiences contribute not only to personal growth but also to a well-rounded character for the youth.

Research Problem

In Ghana, sports programs and activities are commonly integrated into school curricula and are primarily designed in communities to promote physical wellness. However, few programs specifically focus on developing character and leadership skills in athletes. Attributes such as honesty, positive attitude, self-control, discipline, respect, and humility are often times overlooked in favor of skill acquisition and competitive victories. In contrast, studies in the United States of America reveal that character development remains a strong and significant concern for parents. Research reveals that 95 % of American parents are

apprehensive about this and 74 % believe sports provides a valuable platform for addressing this need (The First Tee 2023) These statistics shows the growing recognition and support sports provides as a tool for shaping youth character.

Even though there are acknowledged benefits of character development through sports, contemporary challenges—such as the increasing emphasis on financial gains, the win-at-all-cost mentality, commercialization, and other materialistic elements—have led to the erosion of ethical values in sports (Arifin & Warni, 2017). The rise of young multimillionaire athletes and an emphasis on competition over moral development have contributed to this shift. In that light, character development or education in sports is often overlooked or even neglected, thereby leaving young athletes vulnerable to ethical lapses. This implication is further evidenced by real-world examples of athletes facing criminal charges due to character issues. For example, young basketball star Mike Williams was arrested and charged with three felony charges related to a shooting incident in March 2023 (San Diego Union-Tribune, 2023). Similarly, a 17-year-old student in the United States was involved in a school shooting on February 27, 2014, killing multiple students and injuring six others (US News, 2014). Such incidents show the urgent need for comprehensive character development programs to instill core values and prevent negative behavioral outcomes among young athletes.

While various public and private organizations—including sports academies, training centers, and government initiatives—have made efforts to incorporate character education or development into sports programs, a significant gap remains in the exploration of structured methodologies, implementation strategies, and their long-term effectiveness (Managare et al., 2023). In West Africa, specifically Ghana, research on youth development through sports programs remains limited. Empirical studies on the impact of sports programs on character and leadership skills among its subjects are exiguous (Lerner et al., 2017). Although sports-based character development has been widely studied in Western countries such as Indonesia and the United States of America, little research has been conducted in non-Western contexts, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. The Sports Leadership Academy (SLAC) in Ghana aims to address this gap by integrating structured pedagogical practices and life skills education into sports participation and training, focusing on character development, psychological growth, and value-based coaching.

Objectives of Study

Firstly, this research sought to provide an empirical case study to explore character as a program taught within a structured sports environment in the Ghanaian society with the Sports for Leadership Academy (SLAC) by examining its impact or benefits of character and leadership education program within the organization and life settings from the perspectives of its subjects. With this stated, we looked to gain an in-depth understanding of this character program run by a top sports academy in Ghana, West Africa, through the perceptions of athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators regarding the impact of the program and identify the structures created within its settings. The study offered and

proposed actionable recommendations from its beneficiaries to enhance the program's improvement and effectiveness in society.

Also, this research examined and assessed the challenges of this character program in its integration and implementation by this organization into sports training for the positive development of youth through sports participation. Lastly, this research will also add to existing literature and research streams in developing countries. It will become an academic and corporate reference point for further study and policy formulation.

Literature Review

Character Development in Sports

Character development has been a central focus and element in the mainstream method of education and youth development, with its origins in the United States of America in the late 20th century for its subjects. (Gao et al., 2023). While character development has traditionally been examined within the domains of social sciences, management, and moral education (Gao et al., 2023), its application in sports remains underexplored. Character is commonly defined as the set of moral and ethical qualities which distinguish an individual. It encompasses attributes such as compassion, honesty, humility, loyalty, respect, and responsibility (Lumpkin, 2011). Lerner (2018) further describes character development as the process of acquiring the cognitive, social, and emotional skills necessary to coherently act across time and place to serve self and others in mutually beneficial and positive ways. In the context of sports, character development is often linked to social and moral dimensions. Berkowitz & Grych (2000) categorize sports-related character development into two components:

- i. Social character—encompasses self-control, compliance, social orientation, and self-esteem.**
- ii. Moral components include empathy, conscience, moral reasoning, and altruism.**

Other researchers have proposed additional frameworks for character development in sports, highlighting the significant socio-psychological influences on an athlete's growth. Lickona and Davidson (2005) distinguish between performance character—traits such as discipline, perseverance, and resilience—and moral character, which includes honesty, integrity, and fairness. Similarly, Rudd and Stoll (2004) emphasize the interplay between social character and moral character in their study, arguing that sports cultivate and develop both dimensions through structured training and competition.

While several studies recognize sports as a vehicle for character development, few have systematically analyzed the mechanisms through which character traits are cultivated in structured sports programs (Gao et al., 2023), and even fewer have examined these mechanisms in specific sporting contexts. To clarify the concept of character development in sports, Liu et al. (2023) highlight the role of cognitive processes and executive functions, demonstrating that physical participation in sports fosters self-regulation, problem-solving, and personal responsibility. Therefore, these findings provide a broader

understanding that sports-based character development integrates both social and moral dimensions to holistically develop athletes.

Role of Value Based Coaching in Character Development

Value-based coaching is an intentional approach that integrates moral and performance character education into sports training (Camire' & Trudel, 2013). Studies show that athletes exposed to structured character development programs demonstrate greater self-discipline and responsibility (Lickona & Davidson, 2005), improved ethical decision-making and sportsmanship (Jacobs & Wright, 2017), and enhanced leadership qualities, including accountability and teamwork (Gould et al., 2007). This gives light to the DREAM model employed by SLAC's program, which aligns with these principles, reinforcing leadership and moral integrity.

Psychological Growth & Social Development in Sports

Psychological growth is a critical aspect to youth athlete development, enabling individuals to manage stress, maintain motivation, and overcome setbacks (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Therefore, research suggests that participation in structured sports programs helps foster mental toughness and emotional control, which helps athletes develop coping mechanisms such as self-talk, visualization, and breathing techniques to manage performance pressure (Friesen et al., 2013). Also, participation in sports is known to boost self-esteem, problem-solving skills, resilience in the face of adversities, and goal-setting abilities within individuals, contributing to the overall psychological well-being of the athlete (Weiss & Bredemeier, 2017).

Despite these benefits, research also highlights the need for professional psychological support to optimize athletes' mental resilience. Sarkar & Fletcher (2014) argue that sports psychologists play an important role in teaching athletes effective coping strategies for handling pressure, preventing burnout and anxiety, and enhancing mental skills training through structured interventions.

Social development emerges as sports serve as a socializing platform to teach athletes the importance of teamwork, team-building, collaboration, and inclusion (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). It reveals that sports participation, especially in team environments, helps to foster stronger interpersonal relationships through peer interactions, improved leadership and communication skills, and inclusion in the community. Jacobs & Wright (2017), in their study, found that inclusive sports environments empower female athletes and also boost their self-efficacy. Therefore, inclusive sports programs create opportunities for female athletes to develop confidence, leadership skills, and thrive in mental resilience.

Role of Parents in Sports Development and Structural Limitations

Parent involvement is a key factor in an athlete's long-term success and character development (Mirehie et al., 2019). Through this study, it is further revealed that active parental engagement contributes to higher motivation and commitment of athletes to training programs and schedules, a better reinforcement of character values at home, and

stronger academic and personal development outcomes. It is also known within Indonesia's Character Strengthening program for the youth in schools that without parental support in educating children's character, the school culture-based program will not yield its results, showing the relevance of parents in forming or shaping the athlete's desired character (Mangare et al., 2023).

Despite this significance, parental involvement in youth sports programs is often limited due to challenges such as financial limitations—because parents cannot afford program fees and related expenses—time limitations due to work schedules and other commitments (Amorose et al., 2013). On the other hand, some parents also lack awareness of such models and oftentimes overlook or underestimate the potential they have to positively affect the athlete over time (The First Tee, 2023). The existence of these financial limitations affects the sustainability of these youth programs (Amorose et al., 2013), and as such, research suggests that government funding, community partnerships, and corporate sponsorships should serve as primary resources to help sustain youth sports programs (The First Tee, 2023).

Positive Youth Development (PYD) through Sports

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework emphasizes the strengths and potential of young individuals rather than the deficits within the behavioral patterns of the youth (Lerner, 2002). Unlike most traditional deficit-based models, which seek to correct deviant behavior, PYD promotes asset building by fostering self-efficacy, resilience, and leadership skills (Lee et al., 2017).

This is a strong foundation, knowing that Positive Youth Development (PYD) programs have been widely implemented in sports contexts, incorporating structured lessons on goal setting, teamwork, and communication skills to enhance youth athletes' overall development. This strength-based developmental approach aligns with Lerner's (2002) perspective that focuses on the inherent strengths, assets, and competencies of the youth rather than on reducing the deficits or behavioral problems they may be experiencing. Therefore, just as the name may suggest, the positives within the human—in this case, the youth athlete—become the focus for development, which leads to long-term positive outcomes, including academic success, social responsibility, and career readiness. This may not be neglecting the other areas of deficiency but is a broader approach to focus on the innate positive abilities of an individual so that the inefficiencies are overcome by the positives or strengths the individual may possess.

The continuous effectiveness of PYD programs in sports is well documented. Studies highlight that participation in structured sports programs contributes to the development of significant life skills such as self-discipline, respect, and communication (Gould et al., 2007), as well as resilience and management (Walinga, 2012), providing structure for development.

Theoretical Framework: Sports-Based Youth Development Programs (SBYDP)

The Sports-Based Youth Development Program (SBYDP) model extends beyond athletic performance to support the social and psychological development of young athletes (Petitpas et al., 2005). This framework highlights and aligns with the broader Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach in reinforcing the idea that sports can serve as a medium for life skills education rather than just a competitive venture.

As such, the SBYDP has the advantage of not only teaching special physical skills in basketball, football, or tennis but also building character through life skills lessons taught and developed, such as discipline, time management, goal setting, self-control, and leadership, which can equally be handed down or applied outside of sport contexts (Wright & Jacobs, 2018). In the application and transfer of life skills in SBYDP, several key concepts are emphasized to make sure athletes or the youth build social skills such as communication, teamwork, and leadership skills. Also, elaborating on the program's development when being implemented is the existence of mentorship and role models, character, and ethical development through values that are set and instilled to encourage their decisions both on and off the field (Wright & Jacobs, 2018).

These sports-based development programs are specifically the nonphysical lessons or skills learned through sports (e.g., leadership, respect, self-control, humility) that are seen to be essential and applicable to certain areas in the life of the youth at school, home, and the community at large. Petitpas et al. (2005) developed a framework designed to assist the implementation of youth development programs. A necessary component classified as the third states that in the skills youth should learn through sports participation, programs created should intentionally teach youth skills such as goal setting, problem-solving, and a wide range of social skills.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to investigate the impact of SLAC's character development program on youth athletes in Ghana. (Yin, 2009) asserts that case studies are appropriate when the objective is to explore complex social phenomena within real-world context. Given the unique structure and pedagogical focus of SLAC, a case study framework was deemed suitable for an in-depth exploration of its character development strategies, benefits, and challenges. With this understanding, a qualitative approach was chosen to gain rich, descriptive insights from participants, including athletes, coaches, parents, and program coordinators. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexible yet focused discussions on participants' experiences and perceptions of SLAC's program.

Case Selection

In Ghana, many sports academies prioritize grassroots talent development and athletic performance meant to strengthen the sports development sector in the nation but often lack structured frameworks for character and leadership development. Even though several

academies claim to integrate values-based coaching, few studies have explored their approaches, implementation strategies, or effectiveness. In that regard, SLAC was selected as a representative case due to its intentional focus on character development as part of its structured sports program, its multi-sport training model, where it incorporates basketball, soccer, volleyball, and tennis, and lastly for its diverse stakeholder involvement—including coaches, parents, and administrators. SLAC operates as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) based in the capital Accra and has been running its character development program for over three years. Given its emphasis on life skills, psychological growth, and value-based coaching, SLAC presents an ideal case for exploring the impact of structured character education within sports settings. As such, an exploratory case study was thus used in this study to examine the strengths and weaknesses, goals, and recommendations of the character development program in the Sports Leadership Academy from the perspectives of the coaches, parents, and athletes in Ghana, who were 20 in total.

Participants

The academy's founder or president (CEO) who is also a coach and the main facilitator for the character development program, holds a bachelor's degree in Sports & Entertainment Management and a professional diploma in Neurobiology and Psychology in Team Sports. He has been the head coach of this foundation for 17 years since 2007 which runs under his foundation called Impact Youth Foundation, but has had the Sports for Leadership Academy for 3 years now, giving him decades of experience as a counselor and character and leadership coach for many renowned sports academies including Right to Dream Africa. The six coaches for this academy's character development program were between the ages of 26-38 years ($M=32$) with 4-10 years of coaching experience ($M=6$). They all received consent forms from the researcher through their emails provided by the program and sports academy founder. Three coaches were football coaches, with two being male and one female, and two were basketball coaches with one being male and the other female.

The academy and program at the time of the study had one male volleyball coach, making a total of six (6) coaches. Except for one coach, all the coaches had a bachelor's degree and all completed a short period of internship with the program before being hired, so they could become accustomed to the goals and strategies deployed by the organization for execution. All 9 athletes interviewed were between the ages of 16-20 years ($M=17$) and were recruited for the interview by the program director or founder of the sports academy 6 were males and 3 were females. They all played different sports being 4 for basketball and 3 for soccer. All athletes were at least involved in the character development program for at least two seasons (2 years). They all lived with their parents in the capital city and were registered in the program.

Finally, the parents of the athletes in the program were presented by the program head, only three had given approval and shown consent to participate in the study. Out of the three parents, one had one of their children as part of the participants in the athletes.

Parents held a variety of professions, where one is a principal of an institution, a businesswoman, and an entrepreneur respectively. All parents were females.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with coaches, athletes, parents, and the program director to explore their perspectives on SLAC's character development program. Interviews lasted 30-50 minutes and were conducted via Google Meet (coaches, parents, and CEO) and in person (athletes) with the assistance of research assistants. All participants were provided with informed consent, ensuring their voluntary participation and anonymity. A preliminary interview guide was distributed before the interviews, allowing participants to familiarize themselves with key discussion topics (see Appendix B). Also, the interviews were recorded with permission from the interviewees and transcribed for analysis. Data was collected after dates were scheduled with all participants, with the first being the CEO, the athletes, the coaches, and lastly the parents in a specific timeline (as explained in Table 1.0 below) according to the availability and schedule of participants.

Table 1.0 Data Collection; Timeline

Date	Activity	Data	Interviews
31/03/2024	First Collection	Data	Program Director /CEO
April 10-15	Second Collection	Data	Two Athletes Two athletes
April 15-21	Third Collection	Data	Three Athletes Two Athletes Two Coaches
April 22-30	Fourth Collection	Data	Two Coaches
May 01-13	Fifth Collection	Data	Two Coaches
May 15-22	Sixth Collection	Data	Two Parents
May 23	Closing Interview		One Parent

(Source: Author)

Data Analysis

To supplement interview data, SLAC's official documents (e.g., mission statement, character development curriculum) were reviewed. These materials provided insights into the program's goals, values, and pedagogical strategies. The data collected from interviews was analyzed through thematic analysis (TA) to examine and interpret the patterns in the data. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis is a flexible method for analyzing and reporting data from multiple sources of evidence and various types of participants.

Coding Process

These units were clustered under specific sub-themes; as improved psychological benefits, stronger coach-parent/coach-athlete relationships, and lack of financial resources) and labeled under the impact of the program. To achieve this, thematic analysis was systematically utilized (Braun & Clarke, 2013), where data was first familiarized, with transcripts reviewed to identify recurring themes and patterns. Secondly, initial coding was used to categorize key statements into preliminary themes, such as psychological benefits, challenges, and values coaching. Thirdly, these generated themes were refined by grouping similar codes into broader themes to help align with the research objectives.

Lastly, themes were categorised under three main structured themes being the;

- Benefits of SLAC's character development program
- Challenges
- Actionable Recommendations for improvement

Pseudonyms were also used to represent participants withholding their identities as consented; Camp director = CD, Coaches = C1, C2, etc., Parents=P1, P2, etc. and Athletes = A1, A2, etc.

Research Constraints

Some constraints are considered as a result of the chosen research design for this study. The lack of funding, proximity, access to ready or available participants, and their schedule are highlighted as the main constraints to the study. Due to funding constraints, the study included a small sample of participants. A larger sample could have provided a more comprehensive perspective on SLAC's program. Also, as a result of the strict timeline for the study, it limited the possibility of conducting follow-up interviews, and the academy recruits seasonally, meaning athletes or new participants were not available at the time of the data collection.

Also, during the data collection there were constraints as a result of access to the participants. Three participants for the athletes and one for the parents were not available and opted out due to personal reasons. However, the rest were all brought upon agreement to a specific and convenient times for all participants as shown in *Table 1.0 (Data Collection & Timeline)*

Results

The case study of SALC's character development program generated nine sub-themes across the perspectives of participants (athletes, coaches, and parents). These themes were categorized into three main areas, which are to find the benefits derived from the character and leadership program, and the challenges and recommendations for improvement its subjects may have.

Thematic analysis revealed psychological growth, values, and leadership development, and team cohesion as major benefits, while financial constraints, limited parental involvement, and lack of resources emerged as significant challenges. Participants also suggested integrating character education into schools, increasing mentorship support, and improving parental engagement to enhance the program's effectiveness. The figures below further explain the structural framework of themes from the study responses from all participants.

Table 4.3 - Displaying Themes from Participants Responses

Main Themes	Sub themes	Athletes Responses	Coaches Responses	Parents Responses
Benefits of the program	Psychological Growth & Development	Improved mental resilience, emotional control, and focus	Noted improvements in athletes' confidence, emotional control and growth mindset	Observed increased self-confidence, self-esteem and emotional stability in their children
	Values and Leadership Development	Improved responsibility, discipline, and time management	Emphasized value-based coaching and leadership development	Noticed increased accountability and work ethic at home
	Team Cohesion and Inclusion	Improved teamwork, communication, and belonging	Peer mentoring and leadership opportunities within the team	Appreciated the program's inclusive nature
Challenges	Resource and Financial Constraints	Lack of facilities and equipment	Limited financial resources for program expansion	Difficulty in meeting financial contributions
	Low Parental Involvement	Parents should engage more in sessions	Parental engagement impacts athlete commitment	Acknowledged minimal involvement in program activities
Recommendations	Integrate Character Education in Schools	Advocated for character programs in schools	Suggested integration into the education system	Supported embedding character education into school curricula
	Establish Stronger Mentorship Networks	Need for mentors and sports psychologists	Need for specialized psychological training and support	Recognized the importance of mentorship
	Enhance Parental Involvement	Recommended workshops and more engagement	Stressed the importance of active parental participation	Suggested regular parent workshops for better program impact

Source (Author)

Benefits of the Program

Psychological Growth & Development

Athletes reported significant improvement in mental resilience, focus, and emotional regulation, attributing their progress to structured psychological training techniques integrated into SLAC's program.

"Coach always says that what we feed our mind is what we become, whether positive or negative. So, when I face tough situations in games, I usually use positive self-talk or breathing techniques to stay calm. Over time, this has helped me remain mentally strong even beyond sports." – (Athlete 1)

Coaches highlighted the role of psychological tools, such as visualization and self-talk, in enhancing confidence, managing anxiety, and fostering a growth mindset among athletes.

"We've seen athletes become mentally tougher. Some were very nervous during games, but with continuous use of breathing exercises and goal-setting strategies, they have learned to manage pressure better." – (Coach L)

Parents also observed positive behavioral changes in their children, particularly in self-confidence and emotional stability.

"My son used to struggle with confidence, but after joining SLAC, he's much more self-assured. He no longer hesitates to speak up in school or take initiative at home." – (Parent 3)

Values and Leadership Development

SLAC's emphasis on values such as discipline, resilience, effort, attitude, and meekness (DREAM model) contributed to the development of leadership skills among athletes. Many participants reported greater responsibility, discipline, and improved time management.

"Before, I used to be lazy, but SLAC has changed my mindset. Now, I wake up early, follow a strict training routine, and manage my schoolwork better." – (Athlete 5)

Coaches also reinforced this by noting that value-based coaching plays a critical role in shaping athletes' character, ensuring that they develop leadership attributes both on and off the field.

"We instill discipline and accountability in athletes. These values are transferable to real-life situations, helping them grow as responsible individuals." – (Coach T)

Parents also confirmed that SLAC's character program has had a direct impact on their children's self-discipline and work ethic, ensuring the strength of the character development program to its subjects.

"I noticed my son becoming more responsible—he now completes his assignments on time and helps out at home without being asked." – (Parent 1)

Team Cohesion and Inclusion

A last subtheme that recurred from responses was that athletes emphasized the importance of teamwork and peer support, stating that SLAC fosters a sense of belonging and collaboration among its members, especially for all team sports, i.e., basketball, volleyball, and soccer. The program promoted teamwork, respect, and diversity among athletes and emphasized that this impact and strength developed through the program has given most of them the ability to work within a group.

"Before SLAC, I wasn't comfortable working in teams. Now, I understand the importance of communication and supporting my teammates, both in sports and academics." – (Athlete 4)

Coaches noted an improvement in athletes' communication skills and ability to work effectively in groups, leading to stronger peer relationships.

"We encourage peer mentoring. Senior athletes help younger ones, reinforcing leadership and cooperation within the team." – (Coach G)

Female athletes also expressed appreciation for SLAC's inclusive environment, stating that they felt valued and respected within the program.

"It's great that SLAC prioritizes female athletes. I feel more confident knowing that we are given equal opportunities and recognition." – (Athlete 3)

Challenges Faced by the Program

Resource and Financial Constraints

Limited funding was identified as a major challenge, restricting access to resources, qualified personnel, and training equipment.

"The biggest challenge is financial resources. We need funding for proper facilities, more training sessions, and better learning materials." – (Coach I)

Parents also acknowledged the strain of financial commitments on the program's sustainability, emphasizing the need for external sponsorship.

"Some parents struggle to meet financial contributions, and this affects the academy's ability to provide consistent training and development opportunities." – (Parent 3)

The CEO/Camp director responded by highlighting the need for financial support, funds, and sponsorships to enhance the scope of impact they seek to serve. In his response, he stated:

"Because of the cost factor of training and certification, so the cost factor of it also, I would say, is one of the challenges that we're facing, that we are looking for us to be able to place more funds on that, so two things, you know..." – (CEO)

He further mentioned the limited human resources being a challenge and not only the financial, nevertheless, it is the financial limitation that challenges the human resource development or involvement as mentioned above. He affirmed that by stating:

"I'll say the first challenge that stands out is the lack of human resources due to financial resources, with regard to character development. It is a new subject or approach we have introduced, so it may be understandable."

Low Parental Involvement

Despite the program's success, low parental engagement was a recurring challenge. Athletes and coaches noted that some parents showed minimal interest in their children's progress, affecting motivation levels within the academy's program.

"I've thought about it. Maybe like, involving parents more because most are not really involved." – (Athlete 1)

"Parents need to be more involved. They should attend sessions and follow up on what we learn so they can reinforce these values at home." – (Athlete 2)

Coaches highlighted that parental support is crucial for sustaining long-term character development.

"Parental involvement makes a huge difference. When parents engage, athletes show greater commitment and discipline." – (Coach J)

Despite the few parents involved in the development process of the athletes, coaches identified that having parents is a great supplement to the success of the sports academy's program. Some responses included the following coaches:

"Also, with the parents not being fully involved, I am not saying all but just a few are, and if all come, it will be good for us and the children." – (Coach G)

Coach G went further to state the reasons why the low involvement of parents in the academy's program is a challenge and demands reform for effective development and success, by saying:

"Yes, because you know sometimes when we meet to discuss the progress of the program, maybe about the children, it comes up to us knowing that we don't mostly have their parents coming around, but maybe their caretaker or driver. So if we want a direct follow-up on the child's progress outside of the program, we do not have so much to work with." – (Coach G)

Recommendations

Integrate Character Education Programs into Formal School Curricula

Participants suggested that SLAC's character development model be integrated into formal education to maximize its impact. Few athletes highlighted this theme as a way it can be disseminated to schools so other individuals in their age groups can benefit.

"This program should be introduced in schools so that more students can benefit from character and leadership education." – (Athlete 3)

In a similar suggestion, Athlete 7 gave a response towards the same theme, where he mentioned their belief in the program to benefit the masses. In their account, they stated: *"What I would recommend is for them to broadcast this program everywhere they go so that they'll call more people into the system so that more teams and more sports programs can help build players both in sports and in their character."* – (Athlete 7)

The CEO also emphasized the importance of embedding character education into the broader education system:

"We aim to expand SLAC's reach by integrating character training into school sports programs, ensuring long-term impact." – (CEO)

Discussion

The findings in this study explored the impact of SLAC's character development program on youth athletes in Ghana, focusing on its psychological, social, and leadership benefits. The findings align with the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework, which emphasizes strength-based approaches to foster self-confidence, discipline, and resilience in young athletes (Lerner, 2018). The key themes that emerged from the study include psychological growth and development, leadership development and value-based development, and financial constraints and limited parental involvement.

Psychological Growth and Development

The study found that SLAC's program significantly enhanced athletes' mental resilience, emotional control, teamwork, discipline, and focus. Psychological techniques such as goal setting, self-talk, visualization, and breathing exercises were widely reported as beneficial. This is consistent with literature on the holistic development of sports programs, with focus not only on physical development but social and psychological such as communication, respect, confidence, and self-discipline, respectively, to support them in life and sports. (Lerner, 2018)

Also, research by Friesen et al. (2013) suggests that structured mental training helps athletes cope with pressure, manage anxiety, and develop resilience. Similarly, Holt & Nolt (2011) emphasize that psychological skill development is integral to sports-based youth programs, reinforcing the idea that mental training fosters long-term emotional stability. However, this study also revealed that access to sports psychologists or mental performance coaches remains limited, preventing athletes from receiving specialized mental support. This gap is consistent with Sarkar & Fletcher's (2014) research, which highlights the significance of mental skills coaching in competitive sports and that its integration in SLAC's training model and framework would enhance its effectiveness.

Value-Based Coaching and Parent Involvement

SLAC's intentional approach to character development through value-based coaching sets it apart from conventional sports programs. From the coach's and parent's perspective, the direct outcome of the positive development was objectively communicated based on the

previewed influence they directly experienced whether in the academy, at home, or at school. Positive outcomes definitely shed light on the invaluable service the sports programs provide, and as such, parents and coaches gave their accounts in that regard. Offering regular workshops on sports psychology concepts for athletes, parents, and coaches will improve overall athletic well-being and performance.

Value-based coaching also ensures that athletes internalize moral and ethical principles, which they apply both on and off the field. Lumpkin (2011) asserts that character-focused sports programs develop integrity, discipline, and perseverance, which are all essential traits for future leadership roles in society. Despite these strategies, a coach must lead by example, as stated by coaches, in the positive outcomes they expect to see in these athletes. Through this, there is a creation of a safe environment. This is consistent with literature as a study by Camre et al. (2013), in assessing the strengths of a high school program created to teach athletes values, showed that a positive outcome of the program was the aforementioned values the athletes possessed, such as respect and honesty, while coaches also confirmed that through strategic developmental modules, and lastly, parents also attesting to its transfer at home.

Challenges and Recommendations for Program Improvement

However, addressing challenges such as parental involvement and funding is essential to ensure the program's sustainability and scalability by introducing structured parent-coach engagement sessions to educate parents on the role of character development in sports. Mirehie, M et al. (2019), in their study, examined the impact of low parental involvement and resources of deprived families on athlete development and access to sports. They revealed that the ineffectiveness of parents predicated on economic and cultural factors may determine their involvement. In relation to funding in youth sports development, programs such as the First Tee in Florida, USA, as a nonprofit organization, heavily depend on the funds and support of international and national organizations. (The First Tee, 2023) With parents, it was revealed that despite the great significance of the program, other parents were not fulfilling their payments to the organization. One parent in the interview mentioned she is a principal in a middle school, and according to Time Camp (2023), the average salary of a Ghanaian worker (specifically the middle class) is between 400-500 USD, and a cost of living index at 37.65 USD. With this data, the single parent in the interview expressed concern about the cost not becoming too expensive as time progresses because it will be more difficult having all three children signed up for the program. This is consistent with literature as Mirehie et al. (2019) reveal in their study in the USA that lower-level income parents have a decreased interest or level of participation in sports due to financial constraints, while higher and middle classes do have an increased level of participation. Another notable highlight in SLAC's program was its commitment to gender inclusion. Female athletes expressed appreciation for equal opportunities provided within the academy, which aligns with Jacobs & Wright (2017), who emphasize that inclusive sports programs empower young women, enhancing their confidence and leadership abilities.

However, the study suggests that more effort is needed to ensure female representation in leadership roles, particularly in mentorship and coaching positions. Research by Camire & Trudel (2013) found that female athletes benefit significantly from role models within their sport, reinforcing the need for more female coaches and mentors within SLAC. This will greatly be a guide to encourage female athletes to take on mentorship roles, guiding younger participants in team building and leadership exercises, and also expand gender-focused leadership workshops to ensure female athletes receive equal training opportunities in sports leadership and decision-making.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of the Sports Leadership Academy (SLAC) sports program on youth character development, psychological growth, leadership skills, and social inclusion through sports participation in Ghana. The findings reveal that SLAC's structured character education program, which integrates value-based coaching, psychological skill development, and teamwork training, has significantly contributed to athletes' personal and social growth. Key findings include the psychological growth of athletes, where they developed mental toughness, self-confidence, and emotional regulation through SLAC's goal setting, visualization, and self-talk techniques. However, the absence of sports psychologists limits full mental skill development. The study also reveals SLAC's DREAM model (Discipline, Resilience, Effort, Attitude, Meekness) plays a crucial role in shaping athletes' accountability, discipline, and leadership qualities. However, the low parent involvement weakens the reinforcement of these values outside the sports contexts.

Athletes also reported improvement in team cohesion, communication, and gender inclusion, which aligns with global trends in sports-based youth development programs and models. However, resource constraints limit mentorship programs that could greatly enhance peer support. The major challenge highlighted was financial and structural, where the academy faces limited funding, inadequate training facilities, and low parental engagement for expansion and sustainability. Despite these challenges, SLAC has demonstrated the transformative power of shaping character, leadership, and resilience among youth athletes in Ghana. By addressing major challenges such as financial limitations, parental involvement, and psychological support, SLAC can greatly impact youth development in Ghana and beyond by the inclusion of the character development program into the school curricula.

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Appendices

Appendix A (Consent form)

Joel Opoku Tham
Graduate Student, University of Thessaly
Greece

Sports for Leadership Academy
East Legon, Accra
Ghana

Dear [Participant]

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Study

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study titled 'A Case Study of a Ghanaian Sports Academy's Program Designed to Teach, Foster and Equip Young Athletes in Ghana with Character and Leadership Skills & Values'. The name of this academy is the Sports for Leadership Academy (SLAC), in Ghana West Africa where the subjects of the research will be undertaken.

Before deciding to participate, it is imperative to understand the aim or purpose of the study, procedures, risks /discomfort involved, expected impact and dissemination of results(confidentiality) as outlined below;

Aim of the Study: The primary goal of this study is to examine the effectiveness, strengths and challenges of the Character and Leadership Program taught within the organization towards the development of the youth participants involved. As well as explore the foreseeable expectations for change and recommendations for its growth and expansion within the educational ecosystem in Ghana and beyond.

Description of Research Activities (Procedure): Your participation will involve;

1. In-depth interviews to gather qualitative insights into the program's design, goals and objectives (CEO & Coaches)
2. In-depth interviews to discuss your experiences with the Character and Leadership Program. (Athletes, Coaches and Parents)

Appendix B (Interview Guide)

Appendix B: Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

My name is Joel Opoku Tham, a research student and second year master's student pursuing an MSc in Sports Psychology and Exercise Science at the Department of Physical Education and Sports Science, University of Thessaly, Greece, Trikala campus

Purpose of Study

As part of my master's dissertation at the University of Thessaly, Greece. I seek to explore the structures, benefits and challenges, gain an in-depth perspective and understand a Character Program in a young and top sports academy in Ghana, West Africa designed to equip the youth or young athletes with life skills and character by conducting a qualitative case study.

Participants

- Camp director/Founder (1)
- Coaches or Trainers (3 each from every sports, total of 12 coaches)
- Athletes/Student-Athletes/Trainees (2 each, male and female 10 in total)
- Parents (4 parents)

Semi-structured interview questions

Name of Interviewer:

Name of Interviewee:

Place of Interview:

Date of Interview:

Research Questions

- What are the goals, visions and program structures used within the organization and how is it organized for effectiveness? (Trainers, CEO)
- What are the underlying benefits and challenges of this character and leadership program since its implementation? (Trainers, trainees, CEO, parents)
- What are the required changes within the program and expectations of the entire model for youth sports development? (CEO, trainers, trainees)
- What recommendations remain as foreseeable expansion or growth of this module among the young athletes in the sports and educational ecosystem? (Trainers, trainees, and parents).

Interview Guide

For Trainers (Coaches)

Goals, Vision & Structure

- Let's discuss your responsibilities in your current position at the organization or the position you held while you were a trainer there.
- What are some structures laid out in the organization to help develop character among your athletes in the program?
- Describe how you ensure that your coaching is aligned to the vision and goals of the organization.

Benefits & Weaknesses

- Describe the benefits you have experienced under this program in your organization to the athletes or youth and possibly as a coach (with tangible examples)
- Are there any transformative examples of this program module you have observed in the athletes you have worked with? Provide details of the example.
 - How significant do you see parental involvement in the development program?
- What are some of the hurdles you have experienced with the execution of this program?

Future expectations & Recommendations

- Are there any changes? Whether adding or subtracting you believe as a coach the program should adopt in executing the module? (If so, explain why)
- In your own description, where and what do you see about this program in the short term for your organization and the society/country at large?
- What are some recommendations you can give to support the growth of this program regarding the psychological well-being of the youth athlete?

For CEO/President & Founder

Goals, Visions & Structure

- What are the underlying structures that are put in place in the organization to develop character among your student athletes in the program?

- As the founder, can you describe your initial goal and vision behind the creation of this program and why?
- What is the character focus in teaching the athletes on a regular basis in terms of the types and values?
- * What is the duration for the teaching of this program and for the athlete in terms of learning?
- How long has this program been rolled out and what was the experience when it first began and how it has been to date?

Benefits & Weaknesses

- What are some of the benefits you have seen athletes or the youth benefit from this program since its conception or implementation?
- Tell me about your experience as a founder throughout this program for the athletes and regarding the equipping of coaches to teach this program.
- What are some of the reports or feedbacks you receive from your stakeholders (parents, athletes & schools)?
 - How significant do you see parental involvement in the development program?
- Are there any challenges you have encountered in executing this program, whether in its implementation or teaching to the athletes, or interests from athletes or parents? (Can you describe)

Future expectations/changes

- Are there any specific changes you might have noticed since the implementation of this program that you believe should be added or taken out.
- What are some foreseeable expectations or successes you see this program have in the future?
- What are some recommendations you can give to support the growth of this program regarding the psychological well-being of the youth athlete?

For Athletes/Trainees/Student Athletes

Benefits & Weaknesses

- As an athlete in this program, what are some of the benefits you have received since you enrolled in this organization?

- In terms of the sports you are enrolled in, what are some of the psychological benefits the character and leadership programs provide for you either on the field or off the field? (**Note: individual** or team sports)
- What are some of the reports you receive from your peers in relation to the character program taught in this academy?
- In terms of your character, can you share your experience before and after you joined this program?
- What are some challenges you have perceived in your enrollment in this program since you started?

Future expectations & Recommendations

- With your experience since enrollment, what are some of the recommendations you will give for the growth and expansion of this program in the society?

For Parents

Benefits & Weaknesses

- As a parent can you describe your child's character before and after enrolling them in the SLAC character program, by stating examples of notable values and life skills seen.
 - What is your influence or significance of parent involvement to you in SLAC for their wards?
- What influenced your decision to agree to the enrollment of your child in this program and to the continuation in the program till now?
- Are there any challenges you have encountered so far since you enrolled in your ward?

Future expectations & Recommendations

- What are some expectations you have towards the progress of this program for youth development through sports?
- What recommendations would you give towards the growth of this program and its expansion?