

A Qualitative Exploration of the Psychosocial Development of Elite Youth Athletes

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Abstract

Sport participation has been identified as a valuable vehicle for promoting life skills development. However, there is a dearth of research that has explored how sport teaches life skills and how they are effectively transferred between settings. Through in-depth qualitative interviews, where four male, elite adolescent athletes and four of their coaches were interviewed about their experiences within an elite soccer academy context, the current research aimed to understand the experience of the coaches and athletes involved in an academy program as it pertains to psychosocial development and growth. A grounded theory methodology was employed to address the research questions. The themes (environment, relationships, psychosocial growth, culture, Senior team organization culture, coach philosophy, coach's personal experience, and athlete characteristics) were understood within the following framework: Whether or not the athletes fully embrace the opportunity, being in that competitive, professional environment creates a challenge that forces athletes to improve their life skills, specifically their communication, confidence, work ethic, drive, and sense of self. The athletes' mindset (growth vs. fixed) emerged as the critical factor that determines whether the opportunity is fully embraced or not. The results from the coaches' interviews revealed that the Academy environment provides a foundation that supports coaches in applying their coaching philosophies. Coaching philosophies were found to be based largely on coaches' personal experiences as athletes and emphasized developing strong relationships with the athletes as well as employing a holistic, mastery-focused approach. The current findings suggest that creating a mastery-oriented, facilitative environment is conducive to psychosocial growth and suggests that life skills may be implicitly learned and do not need to be explicitly taught. When athletes perceived that their coaches emphasized work ethic, technical, tactical, and emotional development, and embraced setbacks as opportunities they reported greater enjoyment and more psychosocial growth. As the current study focused on a single academy with a homogenous group of athletes, future research should explore how coaches and athletes in other settings and other sports experience psychosocial growth.

Keywords: Life skills, Positive Youth Development, Psychosocial Growth, Mindset, Sport Psychology

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Introduction

Sport participation has been found to be both protective and detrimental to the psychosocial health, development, and functioning of children and adolescents. Numerous studies have found that for adolescents, participating in sport acts as a protective factor against engaging in maladaptive behaviours such as drug use, cigarette smoking, alcohol use, and other risky behaviours (e.g., Certo et al., 2003; Landers & Landers, 1978; Melnick et al., 2001). Conversely, studies have also found that sports participation increases problematic behaviours such as alcohol use (e.g., Eccles et al., 2003; Holt et al., 2009). Some research indicates that participation in sport decreases suicidality and hopelessness, particularly in males (e.g., Lester et al., 2010; Taliaferro et al., 2008), while other studies have found that sport participation can induce high stress levels and psychological distress (Larson et al., 2006; Markser, 2011). Stambulova et al., (2009) suggest that career transitions are marked by increases in stress and uncertainty and can be a mental-health risk factor when an athlete does not have the requisite resources to cope with the transition. Sport participation also has been found to increase school engagement (Certo et al., 2003) and educational attainment (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles et al., 2003; Gould & Carson, 2008; Melnick et al., 2001), which has been shown to lead to improved occupation and income as adults even after controlling for social class and cognitive ability (Eccles et al., 2003). Additionally, the research suggests that participating in sport can facilitate the development of life skills, such as interpersonal skills, including developing positive peer relations and communication; intrapersonal skills including effective emotion regulation; as well as cognitive attributes such as goal setting (e.g., Danish et al., 2001; Danish & Nellen, 2015; Draper et al., 2013; Holt et al., 2009; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Petitpas et al., 2005). Yet, some research points to the opposite and demonstrates that sport participation can impede psychosocial development (Petitpas et al., 2005).

There continues to be a debate in the literature about the factors that lead to these disparate outcomes. Identity development has been identified as one contributing factor. Specifically, there are significant correlations between athletic identity foreclosure, the consequence of athletes aligning with their athletic identity without exploring other interests (Marcia, 1966). This may result in increased substance use, delayed career development, burnout, and maladjustment to transitions out of sport, whether it is a

planned or forced retirement through injury or deselection (Brewers & Petitpas, 2017). Further, Ronkainen et al., (2016) have reported that “athlete identity can be a positive source of meaning and self-esteem, but also highly problematic for well-being when sport is not going well or the career is abruptly terminated” (p. 57). Additionally, many studies suggest that the interactions athletes have, both positive and negative, with their peers, coaches, and parents determine whether or not positive psychosocial growth occurs (e.g., Gould & Carson, 2008; Holt, et al., 2009; Rongen et al., 2021). Others suggest that the environment itself accounts for many of the differences in development. For example, Petitpas et al. (2005) suggest that creating a task-oriented or mastery-oriented environment focused on effort and self-improvement as opposed to an outcome-oriented environment focused on winning, contributes to the positive or negative psychosocial development of the athlete. Bean et al. (2018) propose a framework with six levels, which are described in the subsequent section. They argue that creating an implicitly positive, mastery-oriented environment can lead to positive youth development (PYD), however, there is an increased likelihood of PYD as coaches move up the levels and increasingly target, teach, and provide opportunities for practice and transfer of life skills (Bean et al., 2018). Rongen et al. (2021) have further described three contextual elements specifically in the soccer academy context that promote PYD. They include staff acting as mentors by modeling warmth and open communication on and off the pitch, clearly outlined values with infrastructure to support them (i.e., emphasis on education with access to tutors), and a warm and caring environment. Previous research, then, suggests that the development of life skills is achieved through a positive coach-athlete relationship, a mastery-oriented environment, or a combination of these factors.

Gaining insight into the experience of those involved in sport at an elite level, from both coaches’ and athletes’ perspectives, could help to deepen our understanding of the influence of sport participation on psychosocial development and further elucidate the mechanisms of life skills development and life skills transfer. To date, there is a limited body of research that has explored players’ experiences of soccer academies (Rongen et al., 2021). Thus, the current study aims to explore how an elite soccer academy, heretofore referred to as the Academy, designed to link technical, tactical, and personal development in a training environment, contributes to psychosocial

development in youth. Specifically, the current study examines the experience of both coaches and athletes involved with the Academy through in-depth qualitative interviews to understand what aspects of the Academy youth participants see as important to their growth and development; how Academy coaches see their role in facilitating the psychosocial growth and development of their athletes; what role psychosocial factors play in the selection and advancement process of athletes; and why individuals have similar and disparate experiences within the Academy.

In addition to interviews, two self-report instruments, Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Skills (DERS, Gratz & Roemer, 2004) and the Youth Outcome Questionnaire (Y-OQ 2.01, Wells et al., 2003) were administered to provide a quantitative snapshot of the athletes' mental health and emotion regulation. This study bears potentially important implications for improving our understanding of how to facilitate psychosocial development in elite, adolescent athletes. Further, understanding how best to facilitate psychosocial development adds to the sport psychology literature and may inform sport psychology interventions aimed at improving performance and psychological outcomes in adolescent athletes.

Psychosocial Development in Adolescence

Psychosocial development is a broad umbrella term which can be conceptualized in many ways. It involves the development of both interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and incorporates terms such as “positive youth development” (PYD) and “life skills acquisition.” The PYD framework has become increasingly prominent and well researched within the youth sport context (Holt, 2016). Within this framework, the skills that can be gained from sport participation have been referred to as life skills, which can be defined as skills that enable an individual to succeed in the environments in which they live (Danish & Nellen, 2015). These are skills that are transferable between settings and include: physical attributes, such as throwing, kicking, and running; behavioural attributes, such as effective communication with peers or adults; cognitive attributes, such as effective decision making; interpersonal attributes, such as assertiveness; and intrapersonal attributes, such as effective goal setting and work ethic (Danish & Nellen, 2015; Danish et al., 2004). The 4 C's—competence, confidence, connection, and character (Côté & Gilbert, 2009)—furnish another framework that is used to evaluate

psychosocial growth. This framework accounts for both performance (competence) and psychosocial outcomes (confidence, connection, and character) in its evaluation of optimal athlete outcomes (Vierimaa et al., 2012). To further expand on these definitions, Pierce et al. (2018) defined life skill development through sport as:

The ongoing process by which an individual further develops or learns and internalizes a personal asset (i.e. psychosocial skill, knowledge, disposition, identity construction, or transformation) in sport and then experiences personal change through application of the assets in one or more life domains beyond the context where it was originally learned. (p. 11)

Thus, importance is placed on both how these skills are acquired and how they are applied in different settings.

There is debate in the field about whether life skills need to be taught explicitly to see transfer from the sport arena to other settings, such as the classroom, family life, work, and relationships or whether these skills can be learned implicitly if the learning environment is conducive to it (Chinkov & Holt, 2016). Some researchers argue that the inherent features of sport, such as the competitive environment, the rules of the game, and the sport context leads naturally to the development and transfer of life skills (e.g., Camiré & Kendellen, 2016; Camiré & Trudel, 2010; Chinkov & Holt, 2016). By contrast, other researchers argue that life skills need to be explicitly taught and that coaches need to intentionally target their development (Turnridge et al., 2014). For example, Allen et al., (2015) argue that coaches need to teach athletes explicitly how they can transfer life skills developed through sport to their everyday lives through the use of debriefs, imagery, and structured practice opportunities. Further, Bean and Forneris (2016) found that intentionally structured programs that deliberately target life skill acquisition, compared with their non-intentionally structured counterparts, had higher program quality scores and improved developmental outcomes. Bean et al. (2018) propose that it is not an explicit versus implicit dichotomy that yields PYD. Rather, they argue that there are progressive levels where the more a program explicitly targets life skill development, the greater psychosocial growth and development occurs. They outline six levels in their framework: 1) structuring the sport context to create an enriching and intrinsically motivating environment where athletes feel safe to take risks and learn from their mistakes; 2) facilitating a positive climate—encouraging a cooperative environment where athletes can develop positive relationships as well as feelings of efficacy and

“mattering”; 3) discussing life skills with clear and deliberate discussions of life skill within the sport context; 4) practicing life skills by creating opportunities for athletes to practice skills; 5) discussing transfer through explicit conversations about how life skills can be used in other contexts; 6) practicing transfer with the provision of opportunities to use life skills beyond the sport context. They argue that there is a greater likelihood of PYD as coaches move across the spectrum toward increased presence of these elements. However, implicit PYD can occur when coaches appropriately structure the sport context and facilitate a positive climate by creating an environment where: athletes feel safe to take risks and make mistakes, coaches use mistakes as learning opportunities, positive relationships are encouraged through team bonding activities, and coaches support efficacy and “mattering” by involving athletes in decision making and problem-solving processes. Thus, they argue that implicitly creating a positive environment can yield PYD and that explicitly targeting and providing practice opportunities to develop and apply life skills enhances the development and transfer of life skills.

Adolescence is a developmental stage in which significant psychosocial growth and PYD occurs across numerous domains: biological, social, emotional, and cognitive (Santrock, 2015). Visek et al., (2009) identified three stages of psychosocial development for youth: mid-childhood (6-11 years old); early adolescence (10-14 years old); and mid-adolescence (15-17 years old). The authors note that these categories are not discreet. Depending on an individual’s unique physical and emotional maturation, stages may be reached at different ages. However, there are specific psychosocial milestones that characterize each stage.

Different physical, emotional, cognitive, and social developmental milestones are experienced at each stage of adolescence. According to Visek et al. (2009), children in the mid-childhood range are pre-pubescent and can master most physical tasks. Cognitively, children at this stage have shorter attention spans and do not employ abstract reasoning skills. Emotionally, they are beginning to experience more complex emotions and can demonstrate empathy. As youth progress to the early adolescence stage, they experience significant amounts of change and growth compared to the other stages. Physically, youth in early adolescence are entering puberty and experience growth spurts. Cognitively, adolescents are more able than children to reason abstractly and hypothesize but have difficulties linking their emotions to situations. Emotionally,

youth in early adolescence experience difficulties regulating their emotions, which results in a propensity for emotional outbursts. Socially, they experience an increased need for belonging. Thus, peer relationships become more important for youth at this stage. In mid-adolescence, youth are physically mature, are able to think more abstractly than younger children and adolescents, and are capable of considering morality and meaning. Nonetheless, they are still adolescents, struggling to manage their emotions, express their individuality, and evaluate their increased need for independence (Visek et al., 2009). The current study explored the psychosocial development in athletes in the mid-adolescence range within an elite sport context. As noted by Visek et al. (2009), this is an age when individuals are expected to demonstrate relatively stable physical characteristics, increased capacity for cognitive understanding, and developing emotion management and social skills.

Psychosocial Development through Sport

Elite adolescent athletes face many unique challenges related to psychosocial development in comparison to their non-athlete counterparts. For example, athletes are often in the spotlight and are expected to represent themselves, their schools, their teams, and their communities positively. Research suggests that athletes exhibit higher rates of psychological distress than the non-athlete community, yet they simultaneously experience improved body satisfaction, life satisfaction, and self-esteem (Purcell et al., 2020). As talent identification and early specialization programs have become increasingly prevalent, athletes increasingly are being exposed to inappropriate and unrealistic demands, which can lead to psychological overload (Bergeron et al., 2015). Recent research has highlighted that athletes experience comparable rates of mental health challenges to their same-aged peers (Rice et al., 2016) and that mental health conditions historically have been underreported for a number of reasons. Specifically, the “tough” culture of sport traditionally stigmatized mental health struggles, viewing them as weakness and thus prevented athletes from seeking psychological help (“Building a culture,” 2019). In competitive scenarios, where emotional intensity is heightened, there is increased task demand and elite athletes are required to exhibit a high level of skill in regulating emotions (Bell, 2015). Similarly, Perlini and Halverson (2006) report that professional athletes need to have skills to effectively manage stress, frustration, and intense moods so that they can demonstrate emotional restraint under

constant public scrutiny. According to Taylor and Collins (2019), the most identified reason that “high-potential athletes” do not successfully transition to the professional level is due to their lack of psychological resources, including poor motivation, emotion regulation, and stress management. Further, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills are considered when an athlete is being selected to a professional team (Perlini & Halverson, 2006). Thus, athletes with superior psychosocial skills are more likely to reach the highest levels in sport. To be successful, elite athletes must be adept at regulating their own emotions. They must also be able to interact well with others and contribute positively to the team atmosphere.

Recent research has found that adolescent athletes have unique psychosocial needs as they are not only preparing for careers in sport at an elite level, but they are also in the process of identity formation and rapid psychosocial development (Henriksen et al., 2014). Henriksen et al. (2014) suggest that successful psychological sport skill interventions in adolescents should target not only the adolescent, but their team and coaches as well. Psychosocial development is, therefore, paramount to athlete development and performance enhancement. However, recent studies have indicated that sport academies and programs do not always offer adequate opportunities for psychosocial growth and development. For example, in the United Kingdom, soccer academies place a heavy focus on performance (Nesti & Sulley, 2014) and provide limited opportunities for identity development outside of soccer (Champ et al., 2020). Thus, while it is recognized that successful athletic development environments take a holistic approach to develop athletes’ abilities and skills to face challenges in both the sport and personal spheres (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017) while they are playing and beyond, it is unclear if academies are meeting those needs. Camiré and Santos (2019) suggest that soccer academies may find it challenging to “reconcile developmental objectives within progressively professionalized climates where intense competition and privatization are becoming the norm” (p. 31). There seems to be a disparity then, between what is understood to be “best practice” and what is implemented. It is, therefore, important to explore the perspectives of those involved in elite sport contexts to further elucidate how they view their experience, whether their psychosocial needs are met, and what factors are important for their psychosocial growth.

The literature suggests that while elite athletes tend to demonstrate better emotion regulation skill and more developed psychosocial abilities than their non-athlete counterparts, there is debate as to whether sport participation in and of itself can lead to the development of these life skills. There is a debate in the literature about whether life skills need to be taught explicitly or if they can be implicitly learned through sport participation. On the one hand, the literature posits that sport programs provide youth with challenges that they do not face in other contexts such as school (Turnnidge et al., 2014), which then allows youth the opportunity to implicitly acquire and apply life skills in non-sport domains (Weiss et al. 2013). Through a retrospective look at players' experiences in academy settings in the UK, Rongen et al. (2021) found that all the players indicated that they successfully transferred the life skills acquired in their respective academies to their post-academy lives, and that transfer occurred naturally. Further, the players indicated that the academy was a vehicle for personal development and they reported improved ability to cope with pressure, greater capacity to overcome disappointments, and increased resilience as a result of the academies' high-challenge environments which had a strong focus on performance and continual assessment, which suggests that life skills acquisition and transfer occurred implicitly.

On the other hand, some researchers suggest that implicit acquisition of life skills should not be assumed to be automatic (e.g., Bean & Forneris, 2016; Coakley, 2016; Coalter, 2013) and that program leaders must specifically target their acquisition (Bean et al., 2018; Holt et al., 2016). There is also evidence that whether life skills can be absorbed implicitly is dependent on the age of the individual. Allen et al. (2015) argue that youth often fail to recognize that the skills they have developed through sport can be transferred to other contexts. While Rongen et al. (2021) found that the sport context was conducive to PYD, their research indicated that those outcomes were enhanced when sufficient practice, tangible support, and staff acting as mentors were available to the players.

The coach's role in fostering positive development among youth athletes has increasingly been recognized as a key factor in promoting psychosocial growth in youth athletes and in implementing effective youth sport programs (e.g., Camiré et al., 2011; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Pierce et al., 2018; Strachan et al., 2011; Vella et al., 2015). A growing body of evidence suggests that a positive coach-

athlete relationship optimizes psychosocial development. For example, Holt et al. (2009) suggest that the social interactions with peers, parents, and coaches lead to life skill acquisition. They further demonstrated that the relationship with an athlete's coach can be positive if the importance of perseverance and effort is emphasized or harmful when there is an overemphasis on winning (Holt et al., 2009). Allan and Côté (2016) further elucidated the effect of the coach-athlete interaction. They found that coaches' emotion regulation skill affects their athletes' interpersonal behaviour in games and practice. Specifically, they found that athletes of "calm, inquisitive" coaches reported significantly more prosocial behaviours and less antisocial behaviours towards opponents than athletes of highly aroused coaches. Furthermore, when coaches foster positive relationships between athletes, there is a greater sense of belongingness, which is associated with positive motivation and engagement (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Strachan et al., 2011 Vella et al., 2016). Similarly, Petitpas et al. (2005) identify numerous factors that affect life skill development through sport. They suggest that PYD is optimized when acquiring life skills is combined with acquiring sport skill in a safe yet challenging environment, with caring adult mentors (coaches and parents) and peers. They further suggest that if these factors are not in place to promote psychosocial growth, then sport participation can be damaging to psychosocial development in youth. Rongen et al. (2021) also advocate for positive relationships with staff. Specifically, they indicate that there are three contextual elements that enhance PYD: staff acting as mentors to players both on and off the field; program values being clearly aligned and supported with daily practices; and the context being experienced as warm and caring. Petitpas et al. (2005) propose a task-oriented or mastery model of athletic development that focuses on effort, self-improvement, and intrinsic motivation. This leads to youth who are more likely to demonstrate a good work ethic, to persist in the face of failure, and to commit the necessary time to build both physical and life skills. Rongen et al. (2021) found that while all players reported that their academy involvement prepared them for life beyond soccer, personal development was greater when it was actively structured by staff and strong interpersonal relationships were formed. They further argued that PYD outcomes were dependent on the interactions of three developmental contexts: a) the demands of the academy; b) the behaviours that were encouraged by the academy; and c) the quality of interpersonal relationships between players, their teammates, and staff. Further, Bean et al. (2018) argue that life skills development and transfer is optimized when coaches are explicit about their approach. Thus, research

suggests that coaches play a key role in facilitating the development of psychosocial and life skills through interpersonal relationship building and by creating a task-oriented or mastery environment.

By contrast, Miller and Kerr (2002) emphasize the impact of the environment itself, as opposed to the relationship with the coaching staff, in promoting psychosocial development in youth. They suggest that there is something about the sports “arena” that contributes to personal growth and development. They argue that structured sport activities provide an environment where “adolescents are awake, alive, and open to developmental experiences in a way that is less common in other parts of their daily lives” (p. 175). Their model suggests that there are factors such as engagement, that contribute to the growth and development of athletes. They further posit that sport should provide opportunities for the mastery of physical and technical skills in addition to the development of ethical conduct, citizenship, and lifelong skills (Miller & Kerr, 2002). In addition, some researchers argue that sport is inherently competitive with a skill building focus that exposes athletes to experiences that can promote life skill development (Bean et al., 2018; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005) and have highlighted that the high-challenge context of elite sport programs is a vehicle for personal development (Rongen et al., 2021).

It is clear from the research, however, that some environments are superior at promoting life skill development compared with others. Watson (2011) suggests that autonomy and mastery-oriented environments result in less stress and more intrinsic motivation, which has also been mirrored in research by Petitpas et al. (2005). Additionally, Henriksen and Stambulova (2017) state that successful environments take a whole-person approach and develop athletes’ competencies and skills to allow them to navigate challenges in their sport and in life. They further argue that environments with supportive relationships, access to role models, support of the wider environment, including athletes’ schools and parents, where the development of psychosocial skills is supported, and with a strong, coherent organizational or team culture, are superior in their ability to guide youth athletes through the transition to becoming elite, adult athletes. Thus, they conceptualize the environment to include both micro and macro levels, which considers the team as well as the larger context in which the team is embedded. Drew et al. (2019) make a number of recommendations to help athletes

successfully navigate the increased physical and mental demands that result from transitioning to a higher level of competition. Specifically, they suggest that transition is facilitated when an organization's culture emphasizes development and when athletes are paired with a senior mentor who can provide guidance through their transition. Clear referral pathways and processes are also recommended to assist athletes in accessing mental health resources. It is clear from the extant research that while the sport arena can offer opportunities for psychosocial development, the effect of the context is dependent on other factors, such as the team's structure, the strength of the interpersonal relationships within that context, and whether a mastery-oriented environment is supported or not.

Despite recent research aimed at examining the acquisition and transfer of life skills from sport to other contexts, there continues to be debate about how these skills are acquired and little is known about how participants and coaches make meaning of their involvement in sport programs. Furthermore, in sport programs where high performance is the top objective, it is unclear if and how these life skills are specifically targeted and taught. Much of the research to date has focused on skill acquisition in recreational athletes or in programs specifically designed to teach life skills, such as PYD programs. To date, the extant research has not examined how life skill development is facilitated by sport participation nor has the research explored how these skills are developed in elite, competitive athletes. Rongen et al. (2021) argue that the existing research has failed to consider contextual academy factors in promoting PYD and indicated that the "voice of the players at the centre of soccer academy programmes seems particularly underrepresented" (p. 361).

Psychosocial Development in PYD Programs

With the research pointing to the psychosocial development that occurs within the sport context, many sport programs have been developed, such as Right to Play, The First Tee, Fight with Insight, CHAMPS, Play it Smart, and SUPER, with the intent of teaching life skills through sport. Research suggests that engagement in these types of life-skill building sport programs can lead to immediate and lasting psychosocial growth and development. For example, the Right to Play 10-year progress report (2010) indicates that participation in the Right to Play program led to improved school

participation, reduction of violence, increased health-promoting behaviours, enhanced interpersonal skills, and stronger leadership skills. Similarly, Danish, et al. (2001) found that the First Tee program led to immediate boosts in athlete confidence and empathy. They also found that participants had improved communication skills and greater confidence in their ability to cope with environmental and emotional challenges that they might face. Draper et al. (2013) found that participation in Fight with Insight, a program for young sexual offenders, reduced recidivism and resulted in positive interpersonal and intrapersonal outcomes. Danish and Nellen (2015) suggest that participation in the GOAL program led to improved goal setting and school attendance as well as a decrease in violent behaviours, and alcohol and cigarette consumption. There is strong evidence that life skill sport programs are effective at teaching transferable life skills. However, despite the increasing number of these programs, there is little known about how psychosocial growth occurs, what role coaches play in this development, and how the coaches and participants make meaning of their experience.

While the research supports the idea that sport is a valuable vehicle to teach youth critical life skills that can, in turn, decrease engagement in risky behaviours and improve long-term mental, social, and academic development and functioning, there is limited research that examines how life skills are taught (Gould & Carson, 2008). Additionally, there is limited research that has explored how sport programs are experienced by participants and how coaches understand their role in the psychosocial development of the athletes. Furthermore, previous research has primarily examined the development of life skills in programs explicitly targeting their development. There is a dearth of research that examines the development of these skills in programs with performance or outcome as a major objective. Previous research has posited that athletes' voices have been underrepresented in the research and that contextual factors need to be considered to delineate what is affecting outcomes (Rongen et al., 2021).

Identity Development

Adolescence is a time when individuals become more future focused and start making decisions about their careers, values, and relational goals. Thus, identity formation becomes a key focus (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Kroger, 2007). During adolescence, individuals begin to engage in exploration that provides them with

experiences and information to make informed decisions about their own values, interests, and skills. Marcia (1966) identified four approaches to identity development: identity achievement, which is defined as identity commitment following exploration; moratorium, where identity exploration is in progress; foreclosure, defined as identity commitment without exploration; and diffusion where no identity commitment or exploration occurs. Identity formation is considered an interactive process between an individual and their environment such that an individual's interests and skills draw them to particular contexts. Those contexts either accept or reject that individual as belonging to that group or context, which further shapes their identity development (Kroger, 2007).

For elite athletes, this identity exploration process is often limited for a number of reasons. For example, the time commitment demanded by most elite sport programs limits the athlete's ability to engage in outside interests or exploration (e.g., Beamon, 2012; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Danish et al., 1993). As well, athletes often receive approval from peers, parents, teachers, and coaches for their athletic participation (Beamon, 2012). There are both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards from achieving athletic accomplishments (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). In addition, according to Brewer and Petitpas (2017), the sport system often rewards conforming to team norms as opposed to independent thinking. Rongen et al. (2021) further described how the "all needs met" environment of soccer academies combined with a strong performance focus, "leads to a single-minded commitment to soccer posing a risk of players "naively" buying into the soccer dream at the expense of education and other pursuits" (p. 370). As a result, many athletes overidentify with their athletic identity, which can result in identity foreclosure. According to Marcia (1966), identity foreclosure occurs when individuals make commitments to a particular life role that is accepted by their social group and parents to avoid the discomfort of identity crises.

Athletic identity foreclosure has been associated with a number of negative consequences, such as substance use, burn out, difficulties adjusting to career transitions and/or career termination (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). The research indicates that this is particularly problematic when athletes are de-selected, injured, or retire from their sport. For example, Beamon (2012) found that on retirement, the athletes that they interviewed reported feeling depressed and experienced loss likened to those grieving a family member. They found that some athletes are unable or unwilling to engage in

exploratory behaviour even after their sport careers ended and that they maintained their foreclosed athletic identities. Beyond their post-retirement identities, Marcia (1993) found that individuals who do not engage in the exploratory process are more likely to adopt their parents' views, have lower autonomy, and an external locus of control, which affects their psychosocial growth, motivation, and sport performance. According to the International Olympic Committee consensus statement on youth athletic development (2015), youth should avoid early sport specialization because diverse sport participation enhances motor development, athletic capacity, and opportunities to find activities they excel in, while also reducing the risk of injury. Côté and Vierimaa (2014) also found that diversity of activities at a young age was related to continued sport participation and elite performance. Thus, identity exploration and formation are important factors that contribute to psychosocial growth and development. It is particularly salient in academy or "talent identification" contexts where there is a great emphasis on single-sport focus. The research indicates that some programs do not adequately support and encourage athletes in their academic pursuits (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017), which makes their transitions out of sport that much more difficult and stunts their identity development.

There is a risk then, of athletic identity foreclosure when athletes specialize in a particular sport from a young age and neglect opportunities to explore their other interests. Furthermore, talent identification programs or academy settings that aim to identify and train youth athletes to become high-performing professional athletes may impede an athlete's identity development and lead to athletic identity foreclosure.

Research Context: An Elite Soccer Academy

The goal of the Academy is to develop and prepare its athletes for the psychological and physical demands of becoming professional athletes in North America and Europe. Their mission is to maximize a player's potential on and off the field through a "soccer lifestyle" philosophy that targets technical skill development in addition to personal development. The Academy provides selected athletes with soccer training as well as educational and housing opportunities. Athletes from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and parts of Eastern Canada are selected to play on one of the four teams in this program: U14 (athletes aged 12-14); U 15 (athletes aged 15); U 17

(athletes aged 16-17); and U 19 (athletes aged 18-19). Athletes from out of town are housed with local families through a billeting program.

Significance of the Research- Qualitative Approach

Although many studies have demonstrated that sport participation can lead to positive developmental outcomes such as: psychological health, increased school engagement, improved grades, and social development, little is known about how sport participation influences child and adolescent development or about the meaning those involved attribute to their participation in sport programs such as the Academy. Furthermore, the majority of the existing research has examined the relationship between sport participation and psychosocial development in adolescents in the United States and in the United Kingdom. There is a dearth of research that explores the relationship between sport participation and psychosocial development in Canadian adolescents.

The present study aims to explore the impact of participating in an elite, “soccer lifestyle” program on the psychosocial development of elite youth athletes within Canada. Qualitative interviews were conducted with coaches and athletes involved with the Academy to elucidate the experience of coaches and athletes participating in the Academy program as it pertains to psychosocial development and growth. Further, through these interviews, the researcher explored how coaches view their role in facilitating change and development in youth participating in the Academy as well as how the athletes interpret their involvement in the Academy. According to Gould and Carson (2008), we know very little about how life skills are developed through sport, and qualitative research is particularly well suited to exploring new areas, such as how coaches teach and develop life skills in their athletes. Furthermore, Rongen et al. (2021) have indicated that the extant literature has not accounted for the contextual factors that lead to PYD in academy contexts and that athlete voices have been underrepresented. Accordingly, the qualitative approach, with coach and athlete interviews, is an ideal way to explore and begin to illuminate the ways through which life skills are developed through sport. An idiographic exploration of the significance and meaning each coach and athlete attributes to their experience allows for commonalities and, importantly, differences in their experiences of the Academy to be explored and understood. The

comparison of these individual experiences leads to a deeper understanding of what aspects of the Academy are seen as important from the perspective of those coaching and those participating in the program.

Current Study

The aim of the current study is to explore how participation in sport at an elite level contributes to psychosocial development in adolescent athletes. The current study examined the experience of both coach and athlete participants in an elite soccer academy program through in-depth qualitative interviews to answer the following questions:

- (a) what aspects of the Academy do youth participants see as important or helpful in their growth and development;
- (b) how do Academy coaches see their role in facilitating the psychosocial growth and development of youth participants;
- (c) what role do psychosocial factors play in the selection and advancement process of athletes; and
- (d) how can we make sense of similarities and differences of individuals' experiences within the Academy?

Considering the exploratory nature of this study, in addition to the in-depth interviews, self-report questionnaires measuring emotion regulation skill (Difficulty in Emotion Regulation Scale; Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Appendix A) and mental health (Youth Outcomes Questionnaire Self-Report; Wells et al., 2003; Appendix B) were administered to the athlete participants at the time of the interview to provide a quantitative indicator of the athlete's psychosocial functioning. These questionnaires were used to assess the athlete's psychosocial functioning by providing normative data, offering a comparison of how well these athletes function compared to their same-aged and gendered peers in the areas of emotion regulation and mental health. It was hypothesized that because elite athletes are required to demonstrate a high level of emotion regulation skill (Bell, 2015), their scores on these instruments would reflect effective emotion regulation skill and positive mental health outcomes.

This study has important implications for improving our understanding of how to facilitate psychosocial development in elite, adolescent athletes. In addition,

understanding how to best facilitate psychosocial development will add to the sport psychology literature and may inform sport psychology interventions aimed at improving performance and psychological outcomes in youth athletes.

Methods

Approach to Inquiry

Due to the exploratory nature of the current study and the desire to deepen our understanding of how participants experience their involvement in elite sport programs, a qualitative methodology was used. This was considered important because, despite recent work examining the process of life skill development and transfer, the literature provides conflicting models (e.g., implicit vs. explicit models) of psychosocial skill development and transfer and there continues to be little known about how life skills are developed through sport. Qualitative research is particularly well suited to exploring new areas, such as how coaches teach and develop life skills in their athletes (Carson & Gould, 2008). Additionally, according to Tutty et al. (1996), the qualitative approach is also well suited to explore personal experiences within a natural context. Accordingly, the qualitative approach, where coach and athlete interviews were conducted in their training facility, was an ideal way to explore and begin to illuminate the development of life skills through sport. The current study used a constructionist paradigm, which “recognizes mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510). This approach fits with the current research goals to understand how the athletes and coaches interpreted their experiences in the Academy and how psychosocial development occurred, with the understanding that the researchers’ background influences their interpretations. This approach allowed the researcher to explore and understand how the participants had different experiences of their environment. These individual differences of how the participants experienced the Academy, were important to understanding how psychosocial skills are taught through sport, how that experience is interpreted, and the larger cultural and environmental factors that are important for the development of life skills in an elite sport context.

Understanding the contextual and cultural elements that frame an individual’s experience is paramount to understanding his constructed meanings (Morrow, 2005). As

Levitt et al. (2018) describe, “qualitative researchers do not aim to seek natural laws that extend across time, place and culture, but to develop findings that are bound to their contexts” (p. 29). Thus, the current study aimed to understand the context, culture, and environment that shaped the athletes’ and coaches’ experiences of the Academy and the psychosocial growth that occurred within that context. These elements were explored deeply through the interviews to gain an understanding of the culture, context, and environment of the Academy itself; the culture, context, and environment of the community where the Academy is run; as well as the larger Canadian culture within which the Academy is situated. Additionally, the researcher positioned the participants’ experiences within their family of origin and “home” culture. In other words, the researcher explored the values that were important to the athletes and their coaches coming into the program. The definitions of culture were grounded in the participants experience and reflected their words. This study integrated three data sources: athlete interviews, coach interviews, and quantitative data (administered to the athletes only) to achieve what is referred to in qualitative research as triangulation. Triangulation is a way to explore an experience from multiple angles and provides more validity to the research.

Participants

Selective sampling was used to recruit and interview coaches employed by the Academy as well as male athletes participating in the Academy’s U-17 program. In total, four coaches and four athletes participated in the study.

Coach participants were all full-time head coaches in the Academy. Other inclusion criteria were:

- English speaking
- Adults, at least 19 years of age,
- A minimum of level A in coaching certification
- At least five years of coaching experience

All the coach participants had previous experience coaching youth in community programs and had participated in soccer, as athletes, at a high level. I will describe each coach below.

Allan is a professional coach who has been coaching at the Academy for three years. He has coached male and female athletes locally and abroad. He played soccer competitively at an elite level both locally and abroad.

Jason has been coaching professionally for eight years. He has coached athletes locally and abroad and has worked with athletes ranging from adolescence to young adults. He played soccer competitively at an elite level both locally and abroad.

Ryan is a professional coach who has been with the Academy for eight years. Prior to coming to the Academy, he coached youth in local community programs and has achieved a Youth Pro License in coaching.

Sean is a professional coach who has been with the Academy for two years. He played soccer competitively at an elite level both locally and abroad.

The athlete participants were individuals who had participated in the Academy for at least six months in the U-17 age group. They were a homogenous group in that they were all male athletes ranging in age from 15 to 17 years old participating in the U-17 program. All of the athletes had been playing soccer competitively since childhood. Participants had been part of the Academy for between six months and three years. The athletes differed in terms of their cultural and family backgrounds as well as where they came from to attend the Academy. I will describe each athlete below.

Ethan is a 15-year-old male who has been playing for the Academy for two years. He lives locally with his family.

Ivan is a 16-year-old male who joined the Academy this year. He moved from out of the region and is billeted with a host family.

Trent is a 17-year-old male who joined the Academy this year. He moved from out of the region with his family and now lives locally with his family.

Dan is a 16-year-old male who has been playing for the Academy for three years. He lives locally with his family.

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Office of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University as well as by the Senior team organization, which runs the Academy. Individual, written consent and verbal assent from participants and their guardians was also provided prior to their participation in the study.

The researcher convened a training session to provide study details and contact information to potential participants. Interested participants were invited to contact the researcher if they intended to participate in the research. Both coach and athlete participants were interviewed on their experience with the Academy at the Academy training facility. Participants were also asked for their permission to be recorded and to use non-identifiable direct quotes from the interviews. The researcher met with the participants individually at their training facility to conduct the interviews. There were no drop-outs and all participants who were recruited participated in the study in its entirety. Therefore, there was no need to exclude any data from the analysis. Recruitment and interviews were continued until a data sufficiency point was reached.

Qualitative Analyses- Grounded Theory Methodology Procedure and Coding

The current study utilized grounded theory methodology as described by Charmaz (2006) to analyze the interviews. According to Charmaz (1990), the researcher approaches individuals within a given context, who are experiencing, or who have experienced, a phenomenon and strives to understand the experience from the participants' perspectives. The researcher then generates a theory that is "grounded" in the participants' experiences. Traditionally, this means that themes and categories reflect the participants' words and emerge directly from the data. However, Kelle (2019) argues for the application of 'theoretical sensitivity,' which is described as the "ability to have theoretical insight into (one's) area of research, combined with an ability to make something of (one's) insights" (Glasser & Strauss, 1967 as cited in Kelle, 2019, p. 73). Kelle (2019) further explains that a grounded theory then typically combines themes that emerge directly from the data with existing theories and models. Existing models are applied to the data to understand the relationships between codes. In the current study, the mindset framework was applied to the data during the Axial stage of coding to

understand the individual differences that emerged regarding the athletes' approaches to the Academy and the codes that they described.

For the current study, participants were recruited in two ways. Athlete participants were recruited during a training session where the researcher provided them with a description of the study and invited them to contact her if they were interested in participating. They were informed that their choice to participate or not would have no bearing on their participation in the Academy. The coach participants were recruited at a meeting with all of the coaches, where they were provided with a written description of the study and were invited to ask any questions. They were invited to contact the researcher if they were interested in participating.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point during the study, and the methods of maintaining confidentiality were explained to participants. All participants were required to sign an informed consent indicating their desire to participate in the study and their understanding of the risks and benefits of participating. The Academy has signing authority for their athletes and provided written consent for the youth, who were not of the age of majority, to participate.

The researcher met with participants individually to conduct the interviews. The interviews were conducted at the Academy training facility prior to a training session. Interviews ranged between 45 minutes and 2 hours depending on how much participants extrapolated on their perspectives. All interviews were audio-recorded. Participants provided their consent to be recorded and for unidentifiable quotes from their interviews to be used in the study write-up.

Grounded theory was used in the data coding process. As described by Charmaz (2006), grounded theory is a methodology comprising several stages of data coding. Through these stages of coding, themes and categories are developed and refined by continually comparing across the data in a flexible way. Thus, several stages of coding were conducted by the researcher. Each stage is explained in detail below.

- a) All recorded interviews were listened to several times to get a general sense of the themes and of the participants' experiences.
- b) Each recording was then transcribed using Dragon Speaking Software.

- c) Transcribed interviews were reviewed for accuracy, meaning the researcher re-listened to every interview another 4 to 6 times while reading the transcriptions to ensure that the transcriptions accurately recorded all speech and speech sounds made during the interview.
- d) Initial codes were created by going through each transcription line by line and creating a code for each line of texts. Some of the lines were not complete sentences but this step ensured that the codes are reflected in the words of the participants and helped to limit researcher bias.
- e) Focus codes were then constructed, where the researcher examined each interview separately and created codes for the themes that emerged. Athlete codes were compared to each other, but not to coach codes, and coach codes were compared to each other, but not to athlete codes, to provide an exhaustive list of codes for each of the groups of participants.
- f) Finally, codes were examined to find commonalities and differences between the two groups as an overarching theory emerged from the data. At this stage, a theoretical framework was applied to the data to understand the relationship between the codes.

Throughout the process, the researcher used memo-writing to reflect on interviews and to formulate and reformulate her theory after every interview and every stage of coding. This also allowed the researcher to monitor and limit the impact of her own subjectivities and biases to ensure that the theory being developed was “grounded” in the participants’ experience.

Member checking, where the theory is presented to the participants, was also used to check whether the theory made sense to participants and reflected their experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By ensuring that the theory is grounded in the individuals’ experiences and providing participants an opportunity to review the interpretation of the interviews, it allowed the participants an opportunity to correct any misinterpretation of the data and further limited researcher bias.

Grounded theory methodology offers a systematic yet flexible approach to collecting and analyzing data. This approach has many advantages. First, using this

approach limits researcher bias and ensures that the emerging theory represents what the research participants' lives are like. It aims to understand a given phenomenon from the participants' perspectives. The theory that emerges is grounded in the participants' experiences, not in preconceived theories. Analytic codes and categories follow the data closely, again limiting researcher bias. Second, the constant comparative method allows the researcher simultaneously to collect and analyze the data. This allows the researcher to identify any gaps in the data and to continue to collect data until a saturation point has been reached.

In Grounded Theory, the researcher constructs a theory as data collection progresses. The saturation point is reached when no new or relevant information emerges with respect to the developing theory (Charmaz, 2014, p. 213). Dey (1999, as cited in Charmaz, 2014, p. 215) argues that grounded theorists have categories that are suggested by the data rather than saturated by it and he suggests that "theoretical sufficiency" is a better approach to sampling. This approach leaves the possibility open that the phenomenon may not be fully described or understood based on the data collected in a particular study. Nelson (2017) provides a critique of the concept of saturation and instead proposes the following five criteria to assess the robustness of the theory: (a) theoretical concepts should be supported by a wide range of evidence drawn from the data; (b) be demonstrably part of a network of inter-connected concepts; (c) demonstrate subtlety; (d) resonate with existing literature; and (e) can be successfully submitted to tests of external validity. The current study utilized the data sufficiency approach and explored Nelson's (2017) depth criteria to assess the robustness of the developing theory. The small sample size in the current study makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions or to assume that the themes and categories that emerged are exhaustive. Despite this limitation, the researcher employed Nelson's depth criteria and determined that the themes and categories that emerged from a careful and thorough examination and analysis of the data are sufficiently suggested by the data.

Using the constructionist paradigm, it is important to acknowledge the biases and subjectivities that the researcher brings to her interpretation of the emergent theory. The goal is to acknowledge and reflect upon how personal experiences may shape interpretations of the data with an aim to ground observations in the participants' experience to maintain as much objectivity as possible.

To improve integrity and fidelity to the subject matter in research methods, the American Psychological Association Publications and Communications Board Working Group on Qualitative Research (Levitt et al., 2018) recommends using perspective management strategies to maintain awareness and transparency about the researcher's personal experiences and beliefs so that she can be aware of how those could have influenced the research process and data analysis and to mitigate that bias. Thus, the process of reflexivity was employed, where the researcher engages in a continuous self-evaluation of their positionality and provides an explicit description and recognition of how those factors may affect the research process and outcome (Berger, 2015). It has further been suggested that researchers need to be explicit about their personal experiences with the studied population and provide a discussion of their personal experiences, their personal biases, and assumptions and describe how these issues were managed through the research process (Morrow, 2005). Thus, the following includes a description of the researcher's background in relation to this topic as well as the strategies used to maintain as much objectivity as possible.

Researcher's Background

The research questions for the current study are deeply personal to me as I have been involved in sport my whole life as an athlete, a coach, and now as a psychologist. I come from a family of athletes: my uncle, dad, brothers, cousins, and I participated in college sports and competed at national levels in our various sports (i.e., swimming, golf, basketball, volleyball, and lacrosse). I was an NCAA, Division I golfer and was named a Second Team All-American athlete following my senior year. My husband and I met through coaching, and he competed at a national level in his sport (water polo) and coached swimming at a national level. Sport is a part of my blood and my identity.

I can recall how strange it was for me when I was completing my M.A. at the University of Chicago, because it was the first time that I was no longer competing in sports and it felt like a part of me was missing. Consequently, I quickly became involved in teaching swimming and then became the assistant coach for a women's university golf team. Thus, I have always worked to maintain my connection to sport even as I progressed past being a high-level, competitive athlete.

Sport has taught me about dedication, goal setting, and striving for excellence. It has taught me about burnout and how to manage the decrease in motivation and drive that can occur when you have achieved all the goals you set for yourself. I have witnessed how sport can be an escape from a difficult home life and how it is an outlet for strong negative emotions, such as anger. It has taught me about camaraderie, team spirit, etiquette, perseverance, and work ethic. It gave me a sense of mastery, which contributed to my confidence and improved my sense of self as being an elite athlete also became a large part of my identity.

I strongly believe in the value of sport and view it as a vehicle for promoting psychosocial growth. At the same time, I have also had negative experiences with sport. While I have had far more good coaches than bad, I have had coaches who tore at my confidence, placed unrealistic expectations on me, and who seemed to work against my progress and denied me opportunities for growth. Yet, even through those negative experiences, I can see that I was able to develop my sense of self and improve my intrinsic motivation by letting go of others' expectations of me, which further increased my confidence and sense of mastery.

Given my strong belief in the value of sport and its psychosocial benefits, I had to ensure that I put my own experiences aside to follow the data by working to understand the experiences of these participants. I can relate to the experiences of both the athletes and the coaches as I have been in both roles. My bias is to see positive growth that comes from a challenge before seeing the negatives or steps backward that sometimes occur. I am a person who views adversity as a challenge rather than a threat, so I tend to view others' experiences through that same lens. I view negative experiences in my life as challenges to be overcome, which I use to help me improve. To protect against that bias, I worked to create questions that specifically addressed both the positive and negative experiences of the participants. I mirrored and reflected back what I heard the participants say to ensure that my interpretations fit with their experience. I also adopted a grounded theory approach that closely follows the participants' words to make sure that themes and theories that emerged followed the data. I further voiced and journaled about my interpretations and biases to maintain transparency and clarity. I used member checking to ensure that the theory that emerged from the data fit the participants'

experiences by giving them an opportunity to reflect and comment on the constructed theory. This was important as it safeguarded against my experience, as the viewer, dominating the interpretation of the participants' experiences.

Quantitative Measures

Emotion Regulation

It is the norm in the literature to utilize self-report questionnaires to assess emotion regulation skill. The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004) is one of the most common measures of emotion regulation (Weinberg & Klonsky, 2009). Research indicates that it is a reliable and valid indicator of emotion regulation among adults (Gratz & Roemer, 2004), and has also demonstrated suitable reliability and validity for use with adolescents (Neumann et al., 2010; Weinberg & Klonsky, 2009).

The DERS (Gratz & Roemer, 2004) is a 36-item, six-scale, self-report instrument used to assess problems in emotion regulation. The DERS provides an overall score as well as six subscale scores: Non-acceptance, Goals, Impulse, Awareness, Strategies, and Clarity. Items are rated on a Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). Total scores range from 36 to 180, where lower scores indicate more effective emotion regulation skill whereas higher scores indicate greater difficulty with emotion regulation. While there are no generally accepted cut-off scores, it has been suggested that overall scores between 80 and 127 are indicative of emotion regulation problems in the clinical range (Haynos et al., 2015).

Mental Health

The current study assessed aspects of psychological functioning among a non-clinical population. Therefore, a self-report mental health instrument was also employed. The Youth Outcomes Questionnaire Self-Report (Y-OQ-2.01) is a 64-item self-report test of psychological functioning for adolescents aged 12 to 19 (Wells et al., 2003). It provides an overall score and six subscales designed to assess behavioural and psychological difficulties. The instrument takes approximately 7 minutes to complete.

Items are presented on a 5-point scale with options including 0 (never) to 4 (almost always). Seven of the items are written and reverse scored to describe elements of healthy behaviour, and are weighted differently, with scores ranging from 2 to -2. Community and clinical sample norms are provided by the test authors (Wells et al., 2003). This instrument yields a total distress score plus subscale scores for the following domains: intrapersonal distress; somatic complaints; interpersonal relations; social problems; and behavioural dysfunction. The YOQ-2.01 total score has demonstrated high internal consistency, excellent validity, and moderately high temporal stability (Ridge et al., 2009). Total scores range from -16 to 240, where lower scores indicate normative, non-clinical aspects of general mental health functioning and scores greater than 47 indicate clinical levels of mental health difficulties.

Procedure

Ethics approval was provided by the Office of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University to ensure that the current study complies with the institution's ethical standards. The researcher was also provided approval to conduct the current study from the program administrators of the Academy. After receiving ethics and program approval, the researcher began selectively recruiting participants through the Academy program, as outlined above. All participants were provided with a consent form detailing what is involved in the study, how the data is stored and used, the confidentiality of their information, and their rights to withdraw their participation at any time. As the athlete participants were all younger than the age of majority (18 years or less), both the child and the child's guardian were provided with the consent form as we required them both to provide written consent in order to participate.

Once consent for participation was provided, interviews with the coach and athlete participants were conducted individually and in person at the Academy training facilities located at the Senior team's training facility in a large west coast, Canadian city. Athlete participants were also administered the two self-report instruments at the time of the interview. As suggested by Creswell (2007), interview protocols were kept short with five open-ended questions (see Appendix C and D for interview templates) and took between 45 minutes and 2 hours. The range in length of the interviews was related to

the individual characteristics of the participants and how much they were elaborative or concise. In general, the athlete interviews were shorter.

The interview templates that were used, include unstructured interview questions that serve as a means to guide the conversation to elucidate the research question: What is the experience of the coaches and athletes involved with the Academy program as it pertains to psychosocial development, and growth? In other words, interviews followed a conversational format, and questions were used as prompts when needed. Interviews were audio-recorded for ease of transcribing and coding. All interviews were recorded, then transcribed, and kept for the duration of the study. Participants were required to provide consent for audio-recording as part of the consent procedure. Data was stored securely in accordance with the College of Psychology of British Columbia Code of Conduct. The information gathered from participants was kept confidential at all times. Electronic versions of the data were stored on the SFU Department of Psychology's secure server and on a secure desktop computer (i.e., password protected, encrypted, anti-virus/malware protected, and located in a locked office in the Robert C. Brown building on the SFU Burnaby campus), and only accessed by Ms. McGinnis. Hard-copy/written documents were stored in a locked filing cabinet accessible by the researcher and research supervisor only. The audio recordings were deleted as soon as possible after the recordings were transcribed and checked for accuracy. To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, all identifying information was removed from the write-up, and participants are referred to using a pseudonym.

The in-depth nature of this type of intensive interview helps to elicit each participant's interpretation of their experience. Upon completion of the interview, participants were encouraged to share any other aspect of their experience that they deemed important. Additionally, following the interview, athlete participants completed two brief questionnaires to evaluate their functioning in two areas: emotion regulation and mental health. This study did not involve any form of deception. All participants were debriefed and given contact information for the researcher in case any questions or concerns arose. Participants were informed that refusal to participate or withdrawing/dropout after agreeing to participate would not have an adverse effect or consequences on the participants, their employment, education, or services. All participants who participated completed the study and, therefore, there was no incomplete data. By participating in this study, participants may have learned new things

about themselves and how they have grown and changed from their experience with the Academy. More broadly, findings from this research will also help to improve knowledge and understanding of the benefits of sports for youth development. This study was deemed “minimal risk,” and no adverse effects were anticipated or reported throughout the study.

Coding

Interview recordings were listened to multiple times before starting the coding process to develop an overall sense of the general themes and tone of the interviews. Recordings were then transcribed using the Dragon Speaking Software. Transcripts were read, re-read, and listened to several more times to ensure that interviews were accurately recorded, including pauses and utterances. Then, the initial round of line-by-line coding was performed. Each line of data was separated and described with an initial code. While not every line was a complete sentence or seemed important, this type of coding was used to help generate ideas that previously escaped the researcher’s attention and to help to ensure that the codes are grounded in the data, thus minimizing researcher bias (Charmaz, 2006). These initial codes were derived directly from the data and were used to explain central themes, provide context, and portray participant viewpoints (Charmaz, 2006). During initial coding, the researcher worked to remain open to exploring whatever theoretical possibilities arose in the data.

Using the constant comparative method, initial codes were then collapsed into broader, higher-level categories (focused codes). Focused codes are developed by comparing data to data. This comparison occurs both within and between participants to find similarities and differences. Specifically, the researcher compared descriptions from earlier to later points within each interview as well as descriptions between and among participants. This phase of coding sorts, synthesizes, and integrates the most frequent and significant initial codes into categories (Charmaz, 2006). For this level of coding, coach and athlete participants were analyzed separately such that coaches’ interviews were compared with other coaches but not with the athlete-participants. Similarly, athletes’ interviews were compared with other athletes but not with the coaches.

Finally, the relationship between the codes was explained. The place of each code in the overall theory was determined both in terms of its relationship to the categories and in terms of contextual factors (axial and theoretical codes) (Charmaz, 1990). This phase of coding specifies the relationship between the codes and categories. At this stage in the coding, the mindset framework was applied to the data to understand and explain the individual differences that emerged regarding the athletes' approaches to the Academy and the codes that they described.

It provides a framework to describe and analyze the studied experience. At this point, comparisons between the coaches' and athletes' coding categories were made. The coding process was conducted by the researcher.

Memo-writing and voicing, a tool to process codes and theoretical categories as they emerge was utilized throughout the coding process and following each interview. The memos allowed the researcher to reflect on ideas, themes, plans for the continued analysis, and provided the researcher with a means to consider emerging theoretical conceptualization (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2006). Member checking was also used once the theory was developed. This allowed participants to read and reflect on the theory and provide feedback about whether or not the theory accurately reflects their experience. This is an important step for limiting researcher bias and ensuring sensitivity and accuracy.

Through the coding, memo-writing, and member checking process, the emerging theory was continually revised until the researcher was satisfied that the depth criteria (Nelson, 2017) were fulfilled, thus determining that the themes and categories that emerged from a careful and thorough examination and analysis of the data are sufficiently suggested by the data and accurately reflects the experience of the coaches and athletes involved with the Academy. As mentioned above, this theory was presented to the coaches and the athletes to check that it does, in fact, reflect their experience. The results of the coding, memo-writing, and member checking process are presented below, along with the theory that emerged from these interviews. The aim of this research is to present a theory, grounded in the coach and athlete participants' experience, that: (a) describes how the coaches and athletes make sense of their experience within the Academy; (b) examines how coaches see their role in facilitating the change and development of youth participating in the Academy; and which further (c) explores how

psychosocial skills are developed by elucidating the aspects of the program that carry significant meaning for the coaches in comparison with the athletes.

This research has important implications for improving our understanding of how to facilitate psychosocial development in elite, adolescent athletes. Furthermore, understanding how to best facilitate psychosocial development will add to the sport psychology literature and may inform sport psychology interventions aimed at improving performance and psychological outcomes in youth athletes.

Mindset

Through the coding process it became apparent that there were differences in how the athletes approached the opportunities and challenges inherent in the Academy. In particular, there were differences in how the athletes described their response to the professional environment and the competition within the team. Some of the athletes described seizing the challenge and using it to increase their motivation and work ethic, while another athlete indicated that he took a step back from that challenge. Some of the athletes described using coach feedback and criticism to grow while for others, this led to a decrease in motivation and enjoyment. Similarly, the coaches described that the athletes who most benefit from the Academy are those with the most hunger and drive, who “grab the opportunity with both hands.” In an attempt to understand these individual differences, I applied a mindset framework because the participants’ descriptions of how they responded to the challenge of the Academy aligned with what Dweck (2017) has identified as growth and fixed mindsets.

Mindsets are the implicit beliefs that individuals hold about the malleability of specific attributes, such as intelligence and sport skills (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Dweck (2017) described two types of mindsets: entity or fixed mindsets and incremental or growth mindsets. A fixed mindset entails the belief that attributes are relatively stable and not able to be changed. Thus, effort is not valued as a means to improve skills. In contrast, a growth mindset embodies the belief that attributes can be affected and changed. Thus, individuals who hold a fixed mindset believe that their attributes are innate and that there is little that they can do to effect change. This, in turn, leads to decreases in motivation and effort when faced with a setback as well as avoidance of

challenges and feedback (Brady & Alleyne, 2017; Kasimatis et al., 1996). Conversely, an individual who holds a growth mindset will view a setback as an opportunity which, increases motivation and effort (Biddle et al., 2003). Individuals with a growth mindset will consequently seek constructive criticism and embrace, rather than avoid, challenges (Dweck, 2017).

There is a consensus in the literature that mindsets are domain specific, such that someone may have a fixed mindset about speed but a growth mindset about strength. Further, mindsets are considered fluid rather than static. Dweck (2016) clarified that the idea of mindset is not dichotomous: “everyone is actually a mixture of fixed and growth mindsets, and that mixture continually evolves with experience. A “pure” growth mindset doesn’t exist, which we have to acknowledge in order to attain the benefits we seek.” (np) It is further understood that mindsets are amenable to change through instruction (Spray et al., 2006). Fletcher and Sarkar (2016) suggest that a facilitative environment, where there is a high level of challenge in the environment and a high level of coach support, provides the greatest opportunity to develop resilience. Holding a growth mindset has been identified as a factor that leads to greater resilience (Brady & Alleyne, 2017). Additionally, Vella et al. (2014) propose that when coaches focus on effort and persistence, create an appropriately challenging environment, teach the value of failure, and promote learning and high expectations, which closely mirrors creating a mastery-oriented environment as described by Petitpas et al. (2005), they create the optimal scenario for promoting the development of growth mindsets in their athletes.

There is a growing body of research that suggests that having a growth mindset in sport settings is predictive of positive affect, increased self-efficacy, increased enjoyment, improved skill acquisition, improved performance, and increased interest and persistence (Biddle et al., 2003; Jourden, et al., 1991; Kasimatis et al., 1996; Van Yperen & Duda, 1999). Furthermore, Dweck (2017) suggests that adopting a growth mindset about physical ability leads to increases in motivation, commitment to goals, persistence after a setback, openness to criticism and feedback, pursuing challenges, and viewing effort as necessary to gain competency. Similarly, Drew et al., (2019) identified several psychological factors, including determination to succeed, work ethic, intrinsic motivation, mental resilience, and a drive to succeed, that support a successful transition from the junior to senior level. The evidence suggests that mindsets are

malleable and domain specific (Spray et al., 2006). Further, having a growth mindset, compared with a fixed mindset, is associated with improved sport outcomes. Frith and Sykes (2016) argue that achieving one's potential is less likely without a growth mindset. Thus, an athlete's mindset influences how they respond to high challenge situations as well as how successfully they navigate the transition from a community to academy setting. Therefore, an athlete's mindset may explain some of the individual differences observed in athletes' experiences within elite, sport, academy contexts. An individual's mindset likely influences their psychosocial growth in that those with a growth mindset are more likely to seek challenges and respond positively to feedback which would then promote psychosocial growth.

Results

Demographics

Four male athletes participated in this study ranging in age from 15 to 17 years old at the time of the interviews. Two of the athletes were completing their first year in the program, while the other two were completing their third year in the program.

Four male head coaches from the Academy teams participated in the current study. They each had a minimum of five years of coaching experience and an A license, which is the second level of certification in the "Performance Stream" pathway, in Canadian soccer coaching. Their time coaching for the Academy ranged from two to eight years at the time of the interviews.

Quantitative Results

Emotion Regulation

To get an overall sense of how effectively the athletes manage their emotions, the Difficulties with Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS), a 36-item, six-scale, self-report instrument was administered. The DERS provides an overall score as well as six subscale scores: Non-acceptance, Goals, Impulse, Awareness, Strategies, and Clarity. Items are rated on a Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always), where lower scores indicate more developed emotion regulation skill and higher scores indicate greater difficulty with regulating emotions. While there are no

generally accepted cut-off scores, it is suggested that overall scores between 80 and 127 are indicative of emotion regulation problems in the clinical range (Haynos et al., 2015).

Table 1. Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale Summary Scores

Table 1

Scale	Description	Mean	Standard Deviation
Total		72.0	19.71
Non-acceptance	Tendency to have a negative secondary or non accepting reaction to one's own distress	12.25	3.86
Goals	Difficulty concentrating and/or accomplishing tasks when experiencing negative emotions	14.75	5.56
Impulse Control	Difficulty remaining in control of one's behaviour when experiencing negative emotions	10.0	5.35
Awareness	Lack of awareness or inattention to emotional responses	12.0	3.16
Strategies	Flexibility in responding to negative emotions	13.25	3.40
Clarity	The extent to which an individual can accurately identify their emotions.	9.75	3.59

The athletes' mean and standard deviation scores were calculated for the overall score as well as the subscale scores (Table 1). Results suggest that there is variability across the profiles with a range of scores that spans from well below the clinical cut-off ($DERS_{TOTAL}=45$) to above the clinical cut-off ($DERS_{TOTAL}=92$). This was assessed at one time-point, at the end of the program year, so there is no ability to determine whether emotion regulation skill, as measured by the DERS, was predictive of performance in the program, a result of participation in the program, or due to other factors. However, it is important to note that a clinically meaningful difference (above vs. below the cut-off point) in emotion regulation skill was observed between the athletes' profiles.

Mental Health

Additionally, quantitative scores were computed and reported for the Y-OQ 2.01, a 64-item, self-report instrument, to evaluate the athlete's overall psychosocial functioning. The athletes' scores were computed and compared with the clinical cut-off

scores. The means and standard deviations were also calculated for the overall score as well as the subscales for this instrument (Table 2).

Table 2. Youth Outcome Questionnaire Summary Scores

Table 2

ID	Intrapersonal Distress	Somatic	Interpersonal Relations	Social Problems	Behavioral Dysfunction	Critical Items	Total Score
Clinical Cutoff	16	5	4	3	12	5	46
Mean	9.25	4.75	-1.75	2.75	9.25	3.75	28.00
SD	7.04	5.19	3.78	4.43	4.99	2.22	24.94

Results revealed that, on average, the athletes are functioning well in terms of their overall psychosocial functioning. However, a look at the individual level reveals variability across the profiles. Specifically, clinically significant concerns were noted by some of the athletes in the following areas: somatic problems, indicating physical concerns; social problems, indicating behaviours that violate social norms, such as drug/alcohol use and physical aggression; behavioral dysfunction, indicating difficulties with attention, concentration, managing impulses, and frustration tolerance; as well as in the area of critical items, problems requiring clinical intervention. A closer look at the critical items revealed that athletes who rated high on this scale indicated that they sometimes have worries that are hard to get out of their minds and sometimes have excessive energy. These items were discussed with the participants and found to be related to worries about performance and energy around positive performance. It should be noted that physical injuries often occur in sport and may explain the higher somatic score. Variability in the athletes' profiles was notable and again revealed a clinically meaningful difference, where some athletes demonstrated an overall clinical profile indicative of low distress while others scored in the moderate distress range.

Qualitative Results

To provide context to the interviews and the participants' experiences, I will first describe the environment of the Academy, including the physical environment as well as the team culture and the larger Canadian culture within which the program is situated. I will then discuss the athletes' experiences and the coaches' experiences separately before presenting a theory that provides a deeper understanding of how psychosocial

skills develop through sport, which factors are seen as important by the participants, and which factors appear to play the largest role in optimizing that development.

Environment

In terms of the physical environment, the program is located in a large city on the west coast of Canada. The climate is mild and allows for year-round, outdoor practice. However, the winters are grey and rainy, which lowers the team's mood and energy between November and February. As one coach described:

“And then once October starts to roll in November, December, January, February like there's a very difficult time in this program. The weather's terrible, uh it's dark, it's cold, it's wet um the kids are putting in 12- hour days, so you really start to see the dip in the players' motivation level, enthusiasm levels.”

The training facility is shared with a professional Senior team and is located on a university campus, bordered by the Pacific Ocean and mountain ranges to the north.

The Academy is an intensive development program for male youth between the ages of 14 and 19. Players identified by a scout are invited to come for a trial at the Academy facility. Players who live locally are observed during the one-week trial as well as during their time playing in the community. During the recruitment process, the Academy coaches also talk to the players' coaches and parents to get a sense of their character and work ethic. Players coming from outside of the Academy area are typically only viewed by the coaches at the one-week trial. All players who are recruited participate in a week-long trial at the facility, which provides coaches with the opportunity to see the recruited players side-by-side and determine who has the most potential. Players identified as having the most potential are then invited to join the team.

In terms of potential, the coaches listed character, work ethic, openness to feedback, and respect as attributes they look for. They also assess physical characteristics such as the player's physical build, as well as their technical and tactical skills. Jason looks for “who really loves the game” because that drives their work ethic, skill with the ball, and ability to grow. He said that when they scout players, they are looking for “The potential that we see players have and, and what we think if we bring

them into this environment where, where they could go with it.” Ryan further described the characteristics that they are looking for in order to bring athletes into the Academy:

“It’s just natural ability, um not necessarily on the ball, it could be off the ball, um vision and awareness. So, is he one step ahead of the play, two steps ahead of the play? Is he able to bring other players into the play quicker than they might bring him in? Um, you know what are his physical potentials? Um what type of character does he have? That will play a big part in it. I mean that’s probably the most important thing for us character, because ultimately, that’s going to determine how hard they’re going to work, you know, how much effort they’re going to put into their performance, and when we give them information, when we give them feedback, constructive criticism, are they willing to, you know, make the efforts to improve those things that we spoke about.”

Players are continually evaluated throughout their time in the program. At the end of each year, coaches determine whether they see enough potential for the player to continue on in the program or whether they will be released. There is typically a 50% turnover rate, with half of the players continuing on in the program and half of the players being released back to their community teams. Feedback is provided to the players through four formal feedback meetings throughout the year, where coaches provide constructive criticism about their individual strengths and weaknesses. At the last meeting of the year, the coaches will let the players know if they are being released or continuing within the program.

In addition to the formal feedback meetings, players receive constant feedback and direction throughout the year, through discussions with their coaches and playing time (if they perform well, they get more playing time). Players indicated that they are always aware of the possibility of being released and are always competing for playing time with their teammates, which creates a highly competitive environment. As Trent described,

“I think that there's just a lot more pressure here. As well, obviously 'cause they invest a lot of money into us so if we're not performing then they can

just kick, kick us out if they want to. So yeah, I guess it's just that pressure.”

Ethan commented that being in this environment changed his work ethic and attitude towards training: “every day I’m coming here to get better.” He further reported that before, he was playing for fun as opposed to at the Academy: “here you go places.” Dan described how he used that pressure to push himself to improve, “if he's catching up to you, you gotta work harder.”

The Academy practices at the facility used by a professional soccer team. The Academy have their own designated locker rooms as well as access to the same professional facilities (weight room, dining hall, media rooms, training room, and fields) as the Senior team. The athletes attend high school together, which is located a 5-minute walk from their training facility. Access to this professional facility creates a professional environment with greater opportunities and access to services. The athletes characterized this professional environment as “upper,” a “higher level,” with greater access to equipment, nutrition, training, sport psychology as well as to the professional pathway.

The Academy feeds into the professional (Senior) team, and players who excel in the academy program may be selected to play for the team. As such, the culture and instruction received by the Academy follows the values and approach of the Senior team. As a result, there is an expectation that athletes in the program hold themselves to a high standard, in accordance with the Senior team’s set of values, which includes: character, work rate, work ethic, and respect. Ryan described the dynamics of bringing in athletes from diverse backgrounds and incorporating them into the Senior team mentality:

“So it’s trying to blend them together to, you know, become part of the [Senior team mentality] if you like. It comes down to character. That's the first thing that we, we look for, particularly in those players that are, you know, coming from somewhere else.”

Shawn described four values that they work to instill in the players: standards (maintaining a high level of play), competitiveness, team first (sacrificing their needs for the team’s needs), and enjoyment. The coaches further reported that they emphasize

the importance of how the players communicate on and off the field and encourage their players to be respectful off the field and employ proper manners. Jason indicated that he works to help the players understand that what they do off the field is as important as what they do on the field. The culture of the Academy then is very competitive, professional, and has high standards for how players comport themselves on and off the field.

The Academy is a unique and immersive program. In some ways, it parallels playing for a university team as the athletes are immersed in the culture of the Senior team and are expected to perform at a high level as student-athletes. For some, they have to move away from home to attend and, for those who live locally, the facility becomes a “second home.” As one coach put it: “A lot of them leave their families so it has to be almost a second home to them.” Many of the athletes also view the facility that way. As Ethan expressed: “because this is my second year at the facility but like I feel like it's my second home now cause I'm always here.0 just like a really good place to be.” Similar to university athletes, the athletes in the Academy have to balance school work with their practice and travel schedules. There is an expectation that they will put forth a reasonable effort and perform well in school, not just in soccer. As one athlete explained, “you can't be not trying at school and then coming to training.” Thus, there are high expectations regarding work ethic in both soccer and school.

The larger Canadian culture, as defined by the participants, also influences the team dynamics and the values of the players. These athletes come into the program from their community programs, where they were the best players on their team. Coming into the Academy from community teams where every player was the top player, increases the standard they need to meet to get playing time. Shawn described the Canadian sport culture as being “nice” where everyone gets their turn and equal playing time regardless of their performance, so coming into the Academy can be a shock. He stated that,

“At a different level, yeah, I think it has to be everyone just keeps getting equal time, but for what we're trying to produce and things, it can't be. Everyone's going to get opportunities, but yours might be different from someone else's who's grabbed theirs and keeps taking it compared to someone who doesn't.”

Thus, the team itself becomes a subculture where each player is aware of where they stand on the team and that if they want to play and be retained, they need to work harder and perform better than their counterparts. Shawn further related that “those that take those opportunities will start to see more and more. Those that don’t you’ll, it’ll go less and less.” As Ryan said, the team becomes the vehicle to move everyone forward: “Sure! It’s a team sport but, it’s gonna be, you know, one or two individuals that make the progression. So really, we use the team as a vehicle for those one, two, three if we’re really lucky.” In addition to being a nice culture, Canada takes a multi-sport approach to developmental sport, which has pros and cons. As Allan elucidated, it gives kids an opportunity to do a lot of different things, but you don’t see that same level of “life- or-death” passion that you would see in other places:

“Sometimes there’s not that, it’s a bit harsh to say this, but you know the life-or-death passion that’s burning that you get from kids in Europe, in South America, in Africa. The ones that get to that level that you would say are the most passionate here, um they would be a dime a dozen in the UK.”

Thus, the Canadian culture plays an important role in the overall Academy culture.

Taken together, we can see how the environment of the program plays a significant role in the experiences of the athletes and coaches. The environment itself offers opportunities for psychosocial growth by presenting a significant challenge and a big change from previous experiences where players go from being a big fish in a small pond to being at the same level as everyone else on their team. It changes the standard, raises the bar for what they need to achieve and what qualities they need to exhibit to succeed in the program. There is no nice culture at the Academy, so athletes are expected to work hard and perform to earn their playing time and opportunities as opposed to previous experiences where the focus was more on fun. As Ethan said, “I think more opportunity is definitely ‘cause like in [home town] you’re kind of just playing to just have fun or whatever but when you come here you can go places, and you can fulfill like your dreams.” For some athletes, this challenge was embraced and increased their drive to work hard and improve:

“It’s changed me overall. And like my work ethic, and like my attitude towards training every day, and it’s like I know that I’m coming here to get better

rather than like back at [home town], you go there to show up, to have fun, but like here you have a job to do.”

For others, they pushed back against that environment and felt stifled by it. For example, Ivan said,

“You know you’re not here, you’re not playing and kicking it with your family on the weekend or going to a game, you know, just for fun. Here it’s like, it’s like work. You know, everyone here is head down it’s busy, it’s, you know, it’s a job. So, it’s like you don’t really get a lot of fun out of it.”

Interestingly, the athletes reported psychosocial growth regardless of whether they embraced the environment or not. For example, improved communication, work ethic, self-confidence, independence, and a clear sense of self were reported by the athletes, whether they embraced and enjoyed the environment or pushed back against it. However, there was greater skill acquisition, drive, and commitment when the environment was embraced. I will explore the athlete’s experience of the environment in depth below.

Athlete Themes/Codes

Environment. Through the interviews with the athletes, there were a number of themes that emerged as important to their experience regarding the environment. The facility and the program’s atmosphere emerged as key themes, as did the living situation (living at home vs. billeting). There were many similarities in how the athletes described their environment and what they reported as important to their experience. However, there were some key differences in how they responded to that environment, which I will delineate below.

The Facility. The facility itself came up across every interview as unique to this program and important to their experience. All four athletes described the facility as a professional environment that gives them access to more opportunities. The way they responded to that professional environment, however, differed between the individuals.

For some athletes, being in the professional environment was exciting and good. As Trent described it:

“I guess the thing is just how much more professional it is here and like we have, like I said, the psych talks, the nutrition talks, all of that. Like just even having this facility here and being so close to the professionals, like the actual pros here at the club is just so cool, like for me anyway.”

Similarly, Ethan depicted the Academy facility as a one-of-a-kind environment that he values and appreciates:

“Like every day when I look at the facility, it’s like wow!... It’s just like, every day, I’m just like thankful to be here, and like to be able to have all this, like access to this, to have like fields, to have equipment, to have like cleats, to have like nutrition after training, with all these little things, it’s just like, it’s just like the best experience it could be for my age right now.”

He further credited the professional environment as being a factor that helped him improve his communication and the team dynamics. For example, he reported that, “coming here and just being in this professional environment that we’re in, it’s just like being able to have like proper conversations with a coach or something. Before, I was so shy that I wouldn’t start a conversation with anyone.” In addition, he indicated, that moving from a facility where they didn’t have a designated changing room and never knowing where they would be to this facility made the team “more of a family.” He attributed this to seeing teammates every day at school, walking over to training together from school, and having a consistent locker room that was theirs. This marked a change from their previous facility, where they had a different locker room every day and did not know where they would be going when they arrived. He recounted how the team came together after coming to the new facility and portrayed it as an “environment of being like whole.” Dan further described being in the new facility, where the team is always together, as facilitating the bonding experience and improving the team relationships. He said:

“it’s been really good. Like, you get to make a whole of new friends, and you’re always with them so like if you ever need something, you always know they’re going to be there for you. You just kind of form that bond, and you know you can trust them.”

Thus, for some of the athletes, the professional environment was viewed positively and contributed to improved team dynamics and social skills.

However, some viewed that professional environment more negatively. For Ivan, the professional environment turned soccer into a business and made him enjoy the experience less. He described the Academy as being “upper, like a higher level.” Unlike the other three athletes, he found this aspect to be stifling rather than exciting. He reported that the facility makes it more of a business as compared to his previous experiences:

“Like I remember when I was little, just going to the park with all the kids in the neighbourhood and just playing soccer for fun and like setting up our bags, you know? And I think, when I came here, you know, ‘cause I was good, or you know, a good player, I think it just turned into like a business... And then you put all these guys, all the good players from around Canada into this one room, and it's like everyone's tryin' to like strive for something. So yeah, I think I definitely took a step back when I came here, and I just opened my eyes more to like soccer's not everything, you know.”

His experience at the Academy was that the professional environment turned soccer into a business, which took the enjoyment out of it for him. In his previous experiences, there was a casualness about everyone arriving in their cars and playing for enjoyment rather than having professional, designated locker rooms and facilities. In Ivan's words, “It was like we just all came in our cars and just kicked it on the fields, you know? It wasn't like we were in a building and getting ready in our change rooms.” Despite taking a step back from the environment of the program, he conceded that he experienced growth nonetheless *because* of the environment: “I think I've gotten like more voice. Like some of the teammates I've been able to connect to on different levels and just be the helpful, helpful team member and be a good guy to talk to.” Ivan further reported that coming into this environment and leaving his family was challenging and also fruitful. He described how it led to a lot of growth:

“Yeah, it's really difficult. But it's like, it's very difficult, but it's also very like -it's a good thing for me, I think to grow independent. You know, ‘cause

you don't really change unless you're in environments that are, that you're not used to. You know what I mean? Then you really grow, and you become who you are, and you find passion and other things, you know?"

Thus, all four athletes acknowledged the facility as playing a central role in their experiences at the Academy. However, there was variability in their interpretations of the facility and how they responded to being there; some viewed it positively, while others did not. Interestingly, the athletes reported that the professional facility fostered their psychosocial growth regardless of whether they responded positively or negatively to the environment.

The Atmosphere. The atmosphere of the program was another key theme that emerged in relation to the environment. While there were commonalities in their experiences of the atmosphere, the athletes' responses to the atmosphere were variable. In general, the athletes described a competitive and pressure-filled atmosphere. They described always knowing, in the back of their minds, that they could be released if they do not meet the coach's standards. While there was a consensus that this atmosphere increased work ethic, there were individual differences that emerged regarding whether the competition was seen as a challenge and embraced or seen as a threat and pushed back against.

For the athletes that embraced the competitive atmosphere as a challenge, there was a resulting increase in their work ethic and drive. Trent explained that the atmosphere:

"Made me work harder, 'cause we do a lot of running here and so if you don't put in a shift then you're not going to get anything out of it, which kind of translates into school as well because the school here is really hard as well. So if you don't work, then you don't get a good grade."

Thus, he described that the environment led to an improved work ethic in both soccer and school, and he attributed that improvement to the pressure of the program. Dan's experience mirrored that: "if he's catching up to you, you gotta work even harder to be like that. So then that value's also helped me in school, for example." He further stated that the coaches value work ethic in both soccer and school: "I feel that they [coaches] value like good grades, and if not good grades just good work ethic in school so you

can't be not trying at school and then coming to training." Ethan also seized the opportunity to improve: He said that "you have to work really hard to like maintain a position on the team." He described rising to the challenge because he realized that he really likes the soccer life and wants to continue doing it for as long as he can. He explained that the competition has improved his clarity regarding his focus and goals:

"Cause we're always fighting, so if I want to like start, that means I have to compete against all the other wingers to like make sure that I can... It's changed me overall and like my work ethic and like my attitude towards training every day, and it's like I know that I'm coming here to get better rather than [before] you go there to show up, to have fun, but like here, you have a job to do."

Ethan's experience of the atmosphere made him more independent and driven. He observed that now he's taking charge of his own improvement, which has made him more confident, which in turn has helped him be more outgoing.

For Trent, the level of play is less competitive than in his previous experiences because he used to play with adults as opposed to same-age peers. He admitted becoming a bit complacent when he first joined the team because of that. However, he went on to explain that the competition between teammates "is good as well, because like obviously it builds character." He further clarified that for him, character meant having a good sense of humour and being more resilient. Trent described feeling a lot of pressure to perform: "they invest a lot of money into us, so if we're not performing, they can just kick us out." Overall, Trent appeared to embrace that pressure. He used it to improve and described how it has made him more resilient:

"I had my meeting a couple weeks ago, and um they told me that-cause I, I really like dribbling- and um so sometimes I'll dribble too much. And then two weeks ago, at my meeting, they told me if I don't take less touches on the ball, then they'll kick me out, so obviously, I tried not to do that as much... I guess that builds that kind of resilience."

Thus, some of the athletes spoke to how the pressure and competitiveness motivated them, which led to improved work ethic in soccer and translated to

increased work ethic at school as well. They further revealed how the competitiveness and pressure helped develop greater resilience.

In contrast, while Ivan indicated that he developed more resilience, more voice, and more peace in his sense of self, he pushed back against that competitive environment and stated, “I kind of took a step back from it [the pressure].” He reported that for other players on the team, “it’s like life or death, you know? Soccer is everything to them.” He found this to be “very unhealthy” because it was competitive all the time, on the field and off the field. He described that the players were fighting and swearing at each other all of the time. He felt that the competitive environment is something that the program needs to improve. He stated:

“I think that there is one thing to make it better or one thing that needed to improve, I think just to be like, maybe just like the coaches, like to make it more like a friendly environment like for like players. I think, like a lot of us are still like young and growing and just like kids, still teenagers, you know?”

He felt that a friendlier environment would make it easier for the team to come together and build positive relationships versus the conflict and fighting that he experienced. He described some benefits to that competitive atmosphere. He reported that it made him more resilient and helped him develop more of a voice: “the soccer scene, it’s very competitive, you know, so it’s like you gotta grow like a thick skin... you gotta be really resilient.” For him, observing that, for his teammates, soccer is “life and death” provided him a different perspective and helped him to realize what he wanted: it “opened my eyes more to like soccer’s not everything... If you want to be a soccer player, it’s all you are... that’s all you can really put your time and energy towards every single day.” Ivan reported that that realization, that he does not want to live that soccer lifestyle, and being in the atmosphere of the Academy led him to deepen his sense of self and develop peace. He reported that “I think that peace comes from, I think just being, just being me, you know, like not trying to be somebody else I think.” It was clear that although he did not enjoy the competitive nature of the program and he pushed back against the soccer lifestyle, he reported growth from it: He described becoming more resilient, more vocal, and surer of himself. However, from his perspective, he felt that he would have grown more with a friendlier environment because he took a step back from the pressure inherent in the Academy.

Living Situation. In addition to the facility and the atmosphere of the program, the players living situation emerged as a key theme that impacted their experience with the Academy. Players in the Academy either live at home with their families and commute to the program or live with host families if they are from outside of the region. Some local players take public transit for over an hour to get to school and the training facility. Others live close by and do not have a long commute. The living situations fostered psychosocial growth for the athletes in a number of areas: increased independence, improved sense of self, increased dedication, and improved self-knowledge resulting from their experiences.

When a player is recruited from outside of the region, there is an added layer of adjustment to their experience. They are required to move to a large, west-coast city from their homes, and they are placed with a host family. It is a significant adjustment for these players as they come to an unfamiliar city to live with an unfamiliar family, who may be culturally dissimilar to their own families, to participate in a new, intense, and challenging program. Thus, there can be a huge cultural adjustment to the city, the program, and the living situation. It was hard for Ivan to be away from his family, confiding that they were very close. He said, “it was hard to leave and be away from your family, you know? But I think it’s like a sacrifice that a lot of people have to make, you know, like especially in football.” He reported having many mixed emotions about the move because he was very excited to come to the program, “it was like a dream come true.” Still, it meant having to be away from his home and family, whom he reported were very important to him. He described his billet family as very different from his own family, which he felt was both positive and negative. He described his billet situation as very quiet:

“I think it’s really mellow, which I like, but also don’t like. ‘Cause I come from a family where it’s always loud in the house and cooking and everything... So it’s really quiet, it’s like a house to myself. You walk in, it’s dead quiet, you know, and it’s like dinner’s ready, pick it up, eat it on the table by yourself, and then you go back to your room, and then you wake up the next day and go to school.”

Whereas with his own family, he described that “we all sit down at the end of the day and eat a meal, that’s very like sacred, you know, that we’re all together.” He described this

experience as being a really difficult but a good thing for him because it's helped him to become more independent: "I think just being in an environment where I'm alone or away from family, that alone helped me grow and just be more independent."

Additionally, he surmised that that independence led him to further develop his sense of self and finding his passion. He said, "you know, 'cause you don't really change unless you're in environments that are, that you're not used to... then you really grow and you become who you are, and you find passion and other things, you know?" It appeared that Ivan embraced the challenge inherent in living with a billet family that was culturally very different from his own. He described how it challenged him, made him grow, and helped him become more independent and, consequently, surer of himself and his values.

Athletes who live locally undergo an arguably smaller adjustment. However, there are challenges inherent in their living situations that also foster psychosocial growth. For example, some of the athletes were able to remain living at home but had long commutes to and from the school and training facility every day. This created some challenges for the athletes in terms of their ability to stay connected with their families and balance their school, soccer, and home lives. For example, Ethan described feeling a disconnect with his family because of his heavy school and soccer schedule:

"I am living at home, but I'm up at six in the morning, and then I get back at seven, and then either one parent's working, one's not... so there's like I'm enjoying what I'm doing, but you can kind of feel a disconnect between the family, so that's why like every weekend we try to like have family dinner or whatever to try to make sure we're still together."

For him, that experience has increased his dedication, and he observed a similar trend with his teammates. He said that "all the kids who like wake up super early in the morning to come to school, they're the ones that like really show dedication... I would say I'm pretty dedicated." Interestingly, he viewed the challenge of commuting and having to be up early as an indicator of higher motivation compared with the athletes who live nearby and do not have the added challenge of long commutes to and from practice.

For Trent, he moved to the region with his family from abroad. He lives close to the facility with his family but also had a significant cultural adjustment from moving to Canada from abroad. He expressed that moving to the region has been quite different. He saw everything as much bigger here and that required an adjustment as well as the weather. Overall, he appeared excited about the different environment and about having access to the facility rather than challenged by it. Trent reported that:

“I used to live [abroad], so that was obviously, obviously a lot, a lot different cause it's way smaller. And like obviously here... it's like way bigger. And yeah, I guess like the facility itself is like so, so much of a step up for me. Because like I'm just used to um like a, like a just some changing room and then just playing after so yeah this is really cool! It kind of sucks, though, because we came in when it was winter, and so it was just raining all the time so, but otherwise yeah, it's really cool.”

He reported close and supportive relationships with his family. Because he was living locally, his parents were able to be more involved in the program. For example, he indicated that his mom comes to every game to cheer him on and that she could attend his feedback meetings with him. He reported that:

“They [parents] do everything for me to improve. Like my dad takes videos of me and everything, playing just to like make videos for scouts and just to see how I can improve and all that. My mom's just always at the games cheering on.”

Thus, Trent's living situation facilitated his experience and allowed him to have more family support than other athletes.

There was significant variability in the athletes' living situations, such that each athlete described different experiences and challenges. The athletes' described responding to the challenges inherent in their living situation in a way that promoted growth through developing greater independence, confidence, sense of self, and motivation.

The challenges inherent in the environment of the Academy come from the competitive and pressure-filled atmosphere of the program as well as access to the

facility and family support as determined by the athlete's living situations. This challenge marked a significant change from previous experiences for all of the athletes and created opportunities for growth for the athletes, which they reported fostered greater development of communication, confidence, resilience, independence, sense of self, work ethic, and dedication.

Relationships. Relationships with coaches, teammates, and parents were central themes, which emerged as important in promoting psychosocial growth for the athletes. Positive relationships were described as close, supportive, and honest, while negative experiences were characterized as less personal, professional, and like a boss. The more positive relationships tended to have a greater impact in terms of promoting psychosocial growth, and there were individual differences in terms of how each athlete experienced these relationships. I will discuss in depth the athlete's experiences of their relationships with their coaches, teammates, and families, as well as the effect this had on their psychosocial development below.

Coach Relationships. All athletes noted the relationship with their coaches as very important to their experience in the Academy and their previous athletic experiences. In fact, it emerged as a central factor in determining the value they placed on their experience. As would be expected when discussing human relationships, there was a lot of variability in how the athletes experienced their coach/player relationships in the Academy.

Psychosocial growth was facilitated when the athlete reported positive experiences with their coach. Ethan described positive relationships with his Academy coaches. He indicated that his relationships with his coaches were open, honest, supportive, and loving relationships with constant communication going on. For him, that honest feedback was helpful in always knowing where he stood, knowing what he was doing well, and what he needed to improve on. For example, he viewed his coaches as open and approachable and demonstrated an appreciation for his relationship with them:

"They're always like super open. If you have any questions, you can go up and ask them. And they're completely honest with you, so if like you're not playing well, they'll tell you that, and they'll tell you what to improve on so you can play well. So, I think it's just like, it's a really good

system between coaches to players 'cause like there's always communication going on. Like you always know where you're at, and that's with like having the player evaluation meetings. That's also really helpful because they can like, they can tell you what they see in you. So if like you have potential, they'll tell you that and then, like I said, if you have something to improve on, they'll tell you that so you can improve and get better."

He stated that he thinks that the fact that he is "coachable" has been one of the factors that has allowed him to be successful in the program because he will take the feedback and apply it. He observed that the open and honest communication style could be positive or negative depending on the person:

"Cause if you take it and you use it to improve yourself, then it's a good thing. But if you use it or you take it, and then it like knocks you down and makes you like feel bad about yourself, then you're not gonna like play to your highest potential, and it's gonna be stuck in the back of your head."

He related that being able to see his coaches every day fostered closeness in those relationships. His prior relationships with coaches were not as close because he didn't see them as often, and he said that, "you only like know him just for like being a coach, but like here, you know them for like being a friend." Similarly, Dan reported positive relationships with the coaches. He identified the relationships with his coaches and the medical staff as having the greatest impact on him during his time in the Academy:

"The coaches have been awesome as well. Like just taking you through everything, trying to teach you new things every day, and just trying to be positive as much as they can. But also, when you need that extra push, they're there to give it to you."

Dan further described highly valuing his relationship with the med staff. He reported that he has a lot of respect for the amount of time the med staff invest and for the knowledge they have shared with him:

"Uh, for example like the amount of time that our med staff puts in when we go on trips and stuff like, they're there putting our food, then they're grabbing

our food, then they're taking care of us, they're there making sure we're all healthy."

Dan indicated that the medical staff were supportive and helpful when he was injured: "whenever I get injured, they've always like helped out a lot and given me the best advice they can, and I just try and follow it."

The literature describes that a process-oriented mentality is a positive coach characteristic that promotes psychosocial growth, while outcome-oriented approaches hinder psychosocial growth. From the athletes' perspective, the Academy has embraced a process-oriented approach with a heavy emphasis on work ethic. For some athletes, this had a positive impact that improved their work ethic while, for another, this was seen as negative. Dan's impression was that the coaches place the greatest value on work ethic: "hard work. A lot of them preach that lots. They always want that from their players." Similarly, Ethan said, "they like really value work ethic cause that's something that's like internal... the amount of work you put in is the amount you'll get out of it." He further explained that the coaches place more value on work ethic than on outcome: "If you're not playing well, then like that happens, everyone has their bad days. But the only thing you can control is how hard you work, so all they ask is just you give your hundred percent all the time." Trent recalled that the coaches emphasize "mentality," which he described as work ethic and putting in the hours, that you need to be successful. Trent explained, "they talk about mentality a lot, like if you don't have mentality then you can't go far in the game." Ivan agreed that the coaches place value on work ethic, but he interpreted this negatively as it took the fun out of it for him: "Here it's like, it's like work. You know, everyone is head down, it's busy, it's you know, it's a job. So, it's like, you don't really get a lot of fun out of it."

The players' mindsets (growth vs. fixed) and how they respond to constructive criticism and challenge seem to determine how they interpret the same characteristics in their coaches. For Trent and Ivan, the relationships felt less close and more professional than their previous experiences. Ivan did not feel like his Academy coaches were invested in him as a person. He said, "I think they're just like a business. I think they're here to develop us and to make us soccer players." He compared the relationship with his Academy coaches to that of a boss, whereas he had more personal relationships with his previous coaches, which he valued. He said, "we shared more like moments

together or like had more laughs, stuff like that. You know? It's not like it was always so business, strict." His account was in stark contrast to Ethan's description of his relationship with his coaches as, "we're all like friends and family." Trent described the relationships with his previous coaches as being really close as opposed to his relationships with the Academy coaches, which he described as "it's a lot more professional so not as close, I guess." He further indicated that the coaches' expectations are that you will be respectful and responsive to feedback: "Uh just don't talk back to the coaches (laughs) listen to what they say, and yeah, that's pretty much it, just listen and apply it." He regarded the impact of his Academy coaches as resulting in more tactical growth than personal growth. While he preferred the greater personal connection that he felt with his previous coaches, he attributed the difference in relationships as likely being due to the length of time he'd known his current coaches (only six months) versus his previous coach (five years). He said, "it's not as personal as it was [previously], but that's probably because I haven't been here for as long as some of the other players." While all of the players reported that they value the relationship with their coaches, individual differences and disparities in their time in the program seemed to determine the closeness and interpretation of those relationships. When the players interpreted the relationships positively, they tended to embrace the coaches' values, such as work ethic. Whereas, when the relationship was seen as negative, these values were resisted and seen as negative.

Team Relationships. Team relationships were discussed by all of the athletes as an important part of their experience with the Academy. Given the competitive and professional environment, the team dynamics were complicated. The athletes reported some arguing and swearing between team members and the sense of always fighting for their spot. This was positive and part of increasing the drive to improve for three of the players while, for one, it was a negative symptom of the competitive environment that made making meaningful connections with teammates difficult.

The competitive environment, where players were always competing within the team for playing time, led to some conflict on the field. Trent reported, "sometimes we get into fights," but he considered this as positive because it builds character. For Ethan, competition amongst teammates was limited to their time on the field, and he reported close relationships with his teammates off the field:

“There’s a lot of competition with the team too ‘cause like you’re always fighting for a spot to play. But it’s like all, on the field. It’s completely different than like when you’re like out and about. Like you’re all good friends, but like when you’re on the field, it’s business.”

This competition has helped him to increase his drive and motivation, and he said that it has enabled him to: “keep your mind focused on what you want.”

Three of the players expressed strong and positive relationships with their peers. Ethan described the team as being “the whole.” He continued that being part of that ‘whole’ makes him feel better about himself, “‘cause you know if something’s maybe not going right at home or with your family, you can always come here, and you have, like your best friends to back you up and support you no matter what.” Off the field, Trent described close relationships with his teammates: “we’re all mates and stuff... everyone’s friends.” Dan intimated that being “really close with most of my teammates.” He reported that he works to motivate them and to be a role model for the younger kids. He described that there are some players on the team who are threatened by another player trying to take their position and that that can lead to some conflict: “they’re just gonna like, absolutely hate them, like ‘you’re not coming to take my spot.’ While others will encourage the younger players and try to help them out or give them tips and advice... It depends on the personality.” Thus, he believes that whether the players have positive and encouraging relationships with their teammates is dependent on how they view that competition. Those who use the competition as motivation to improve are able to be encouraging and mentor their teammates, while those who feel threatened by the competition have more negative relationships with their teammates.

For Ivan, the competitive environment made it harder to create positive relationships. He said that:

“Well, I think for me personally, I think it's hard to like have good relationships all the time. You know, with everybody because not everybody sees eye to eye. But I think, I think everybody has that like one friend, you know, that they can talk to and stuff like that...Some of the relationships were not the best, and there can be a lot of fighting or like swearing at each other.”

He explained that this dynamic led him to develop a thick skin and a bad attitude: “like a bad attitude, like an attitude like I’m gonna fight you in the locker room or something like that.” Ivan’s account of the team dynamic was disparate from the other participants in that he reported that the fighting and swearing extended off the field. In contrast, the other players described the conflict as being limited to the competitive environment on the field, and they admitted being good friends off the field. It’s unclear why his experience of this was so different. However, it could be related to him coming into the program from outside of the region. He described the different groups of players that stuck together based on where they were from: the “people from Edmonton hang around with each other. Or the people from Ottawa hang out with each other.” He clarified that this had the effect of making them more separate from each other. He indicated that their head coach was angry because they were not coming together as a team. Ivan felt that the team dynamics needed to change for them to come together:

“We’re not coming together as a team... We always argue on the field and off the field, so I think that’s one of the things that need to change for us to come, to become a team, yeah more like a brotherhood.”

For Ivan, the “team” aspect or connectedness was missing. He felt this on and off the field and attributed it to the competitive atmosphere, being from different places, and being male. Ivan felt that being in a group of males increased the competitive nature:

“Within the team, yeah, there's a lot of competitiveness. I think yeah, like, I think especially with guys, guys can be guys all the time, you know. In high school or like say, say you have a group of guys in high school, put them on a team it's going to be stuff coming up all the time in the locker rooms and, yeah, so it's very competitive.”

His description of the team dynamics and lack of closeness was not limited to his experience in the Academy. For example, he stated that even in his previous experiences, “it [the brotherhood] was missing. Like just soccer teams and guys, it's just like so competitive, always.” Ivan’s experience of the team dynamics was quite different from what was reported by other athletes. It is notable that all of the athletes referenced the competitiveness and the in-fighting on the field. For some of the athletes, their experience off the field was supportive and close, while for Ivan, the animosity extended

off of the field too. He attributed some of that difference to coming to the Academy from out of the region, but it is unclear why the reports were so varied.

Family Relationships. The athletes all assessed their relationships with their families positively. Descriptions of family relationships included: supportive, open, very close, comfortable, and really good. Athletes described that their family values included: everyone does their part, not a lot of slacking, time together, unity, respect, dignity, caring, and always being there for each other.

The athletes all saw their families as facilitating their experience and supporting them to improve and move towards their goals. For the three athletes who lived locally, their families watched some of their games and attended the performance meetings with their coaches. For example, Trent described his parents as being very supportive and involved in his soccer career:

“Well, like obviously my parents are real supportive and like they do whatever they can for me to improve in football. And sometimes they do put pressure on me, but it's not bad pressure. Like I, I play at my best when I am pressured to, or like challenged. But yeah, I don't, there's not that much pressure at home... They're really involved. They do, they do everything for me to improve. Like my dad takes videos of me and everything playing just to like make videos for scouts and just to see how I can improve and all that. My mom's just always at the games cheering on, so, yeah.”

He went on to say that if he had not been playing well, his parents would give him constructive criticism, which he appreciated and found helpful.

Ethan also described his parents as very supportive of him and his soccer career. He indicated that his mom enjoys coming to the player evaluation meetings because it gives her a good indication of his progress and performance:

“She can see like where I'm at. Because like from my point of view whenever I come home and she asked how training is, I'll be like “oh it was good,” or whatever and if it wasn't I say it wasn't. But then with like the coaches' point of view, she can like, they're gonna straight up tell her like how I'm doing.”

Ethan reported that because he has a long commute and is out of the house from 6 am until 7 pm, he feels a disconnect growing with his family. He indicated that “you can kind of feel a disconnect between the family or whatever, so that's why like every weekend we try to like have family dinner or whatever to try to make sure we're still together.” Thus, his family prioritizes that time together on weekends and, because he lives locally, he is able to get that family connection when he is not traveling for soccer. Ethan indicated that one way that his parents show support is financially:

“They're [parents] super supportive like of every decision I make. They're like- cause we're not like, we don't have the most money, so like whenever we have a trip that's like, out to, like we went to Sweden and Holland and those are both like three grand each and the parents or like the family's paying for it. And like, they just straight up asked me is like, 'do you want to go to this?' and then I'd say 'yes,' and then they're like 'k then you're going.' And like they'll pay for it, and then I like try to help pay it back 'cause I want to do, like my part, but they're super supportive in everything I do.”

Similarly, Dan regarded his relationship with his family as close and supportive.

“I'm very close with my parents like I'm comfortable telling them what's going on in my life. And they're always like supporting me. Like they'll help me with whatever I need. And I have a good relationship with my brother like we'll always go to the field together and play soccer.”

Ivan also felt very close and supportive relationships with his family. He explained that it was difficult to be away from his family during his time in the program. Therefore, there was an added adjustment for him, not only to the nature and environment of the Academy, but also to living with a billet family that is culturally very different from his own. He considered his parents as very supportive and open, and indicated that they are very close, “It's like we know, kind of like what's going on, or I know what's going on with them, they know what's going on with me, so it's good, it's like a friendship.” He indicated that, back home, there was always family around and that they shared meals at the end of the day, which was a sacred time for their family. He described that, as a family, they value unity, being on the same page, doing their parts, sharing meals, and Christianity.

While he conceded that being away from his family helped him grow, he also indicated that it was hard, and he had to grow a thick skin when dealing with the difficult team dynamics:

“When you're at home, you can just like go home, you know, and talk to your, talk to your family. When it's here, it's like it's everywhere. You know, you, I just go to my billet house, and I go to my room, and there's nobody there, you know. So it's, it's yeah, grow a thick skin.”

Ivan had to develop more independence in dealing with challenges because he did not have in-person access to his family during his time in the Academy. He described this as a helpful challenge because he developed some coping skills to deal with difficult situations and as a negative challenge because he described developing a “bad attitude” and a thick skin.

While all four athletes attested to positive, close, and supportive relationships with their parents and their families, the proximity to that support during their time in the Academy impacted their experience. Specifically, those who were able to remain living at home were able to have more parent involvement in the program, and they reported that their parents were able to support them with the challenges that arose for them during their time at the Academy. Conversely, Ivan reported that he had to develop skills to cope with those challenges on his own because his family, although supportive, was not as involved or as available to support him because of his living situation.

Psychosocial growth. All four athletes described areas of growth that they credited to their experience in the academy. The areas where the athletes observed the greatest growth were improved: work ethic, communication, self-confidence, skill acquisition, and sense of self. Regardless of whether the athletes found the environment, the program, and the relationships positive or not, they reported growth. Using Danish and Nellen's (2015) model, the current study showed improvement for all of the athletes in the following areas: behavioural attributes (e.g., effective communication with peers or adults); cognitive attributes (e.g., effective decision making, improved resilience); interpersonal attributes (e.g., being assertive, developing leadership skills); and intrapersonal attributes (e.g., effective goal setting, increased work ethic) (Danish & Nellen, 2015; Danish, Taylor, Hodge, & Heke, 2004). However, in the

areas of physical attributes (e.g., throwing, kicking, running), those who developed positive relationships with their teammates and coaches saw more significant improvement in these areas as evidenced by their playing time and retention in or release from the program.

Making sense of individual differences. Through the interview process, it became clear that the key themes that contributed to the athletes' experience of the program were shared. In other words, the themes that were identified by the athletes as important to their experience were consistent among the athletes across the interviews. However, there were individual differences in how the athletes interpreted and responded to those same themes which, in turn, shaped their experiences of the program. Specifically, while all four athletes described the program environment as competitive and professional, they reported different responses to that environment. There was also variability in how the athletes perceived their relationships with their coaches and teammates, and consequently, there were differences in how much value they placed on those relationships.

Speaking to the athletes' responses to the environment, three of the four athletes indicated that they used the competitiveness of the environment to push them forward, motivate them, and increase their drive and work ethic. For example, Dan reported that "if he's [teammate's] catching up to you, you gotta work harder." Ethan described that the environment increased his drive to improve and helped him develop "more hunger." Similarly, Trent described that the competitive environment increased his work ethic. Ivan's response to the environment was quite different from the other three. He took a step back from the intensity. He felt that the environment forced him to develop a "bad attitude," which he further detailed as an aggressive attitude that made him feel a desire to "fight" his teammates and develop a thick skin. However, he reported that the experience in the program helped him become more resilient and increase his work ethic. Still, he resisted the idea of the "soccer lifestyle" and the professional atmosphere and repeatedly stated, "it's work."

The variability in the relationships was particularly notable. For example, Ethan described his relationship with his coaches as a "loving relationship." In contrast, on the opposite end of the spectrum, Ivan experienced the relationships as "like a boss," and he

stated, “I don't think they're invested in us as people. No, I don't think so. I think they're just like a business.”

Similarly, the descriptions of the relationships with teammates ranged from “like a family” to “disjointed” and “not the best relationships.” It is notable that individuals in the same environment with the same people had very disparate interpretations of their experiences. It begs the question, how do we interpret these differences?

To answer this, we take a closer look at the individuals and how they themselves are different. There appear to be two key differences that determined how the athletes interpreted their experience: the athlete's mindset, specifically whether they exhibited a growth vs. fixed mindset; and the athlete's living situation (with parents vs. billeting).

Speaking to the athletes' mindsets, the coding process revealed that some athletes demonstrate more of a growth mindset while others lean towards a more fixed mindset. The literature indicates that having a growth mindset is positively associated with pursuing competence through increased work ethic (Dweck 2006; Dweck & Leggett, 1988), employing effective emotion regulation strategies in response to failure (Potgieter & Steyn, 2010), providing persistent effort on difficult tasks (Hong et al., 1999), increased enjoyment of and longevity in the sport (Gardner et al., 2017), and increased resilience and motivation, which protects against the negative effects of adversity and/or failure (Wang, et al., 1997 as cited in Albert et al., 2021). Thus, the mindsets exhibited by the athletes may help to explain the individual differences in how they perceived the environment and relationships in the academy. Specifically, descriptions of using the competition amongst athletes to increase their drive and hunger compared with “taking a step back” from the intensity of the competition distinguishes between the athletes in terms of having a growth or fixed mindset. For example, those with a growth mindset tend to embrace challenges and find lessons and inspiration from the success of others, whereas those with a fixed mindset tend to avoid challenges and feel threatened by others' successes. Similarly, those athletes who embraced coach feedback as constructive criticism and used it to improve demonstrated a growth mindset, whereas athletes who ignored feedback demonstrated a fixed mindset. Further, the athletes revealed different perceptions about their coaches' value on work ethic compared with outcome and performance. For example, Trent described that the coaches understand that everyone has bad days and that the coaches are not upset by a bad day, but that

they demand that you give your maximum effort every time you take the field. This reflects a belief that effort and process are valued over the outcome, which is an approach that has been linked to improved self-esteem, competence, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation (Albert et al., 2021). However, Ivan felt that his coaches were not invested in him as a person and only valued his soccer abilities, which is reflective of an ego-involving sport environment (Albert et al., 2021) and has been associated with lower motivation, being extrinsically motivated, sport drop-out, and avoidance (Albert et al., 2021). Thus, the athletes' mindset, as revealed by their approach to competition and how they responded to the challenges of the program, and their perception of the academy as task-oriented vs. ego-oriented, may explain some of the individual differences in the athletes' experiences.

The literature has demonstrated that an individual's mindset is context-specific and that someone who has more of a growth mindset in one context may be more oriented towards a fixed mindset in another (Dweck et al., 1995). Ivan demonstrated a fixed mindset regarding his view of soccer skill and performance. However, when he discussed his personal growth outside of the soccer world, he displayed more of a growth mindset as he expressed growing and learning from challenges and developing more peace in himself.

The athletes' living situations impacted how much of an adjustment it was for them to attend the Academy. While all of the athletes reported that the program was different from their previous athletic experiences in regard to the intensity, the level of play, the expectations for performance, and the overall competitiveness of the program, for those who remained living at home, their adjustment was limited to acclimating to the Academy program. At the same time, those coming from out of the region had to adjust to a new living situation, a new city, and the Academy program. The athletes' living situations and cultural adjustment were thus other factors that may explain individual differences among athletes' experiences in the academy. Specifically, for the athlete who was billeted, there was an added adjustment to a different home culture in addition to the adjustment to the Academy. While he described some positive features to his living experience while in the Academy, Ivan generally described the transition to living with his billet family as a difficult one. He indicated that he liked that it was quieter and "more mellow," and he felt that it was part of his growth and ability to develop peace in himself.

However, he reported that he felt lonely and that one of the negative aspects of the academy was having to adjust to living with another family.

“Hm, cons, being away from family, uh friends, um different, totally different house. That's, that's a big thing too like different food, different everything. You know, it's like, like here it's a lot, it's a lot different food here. It's like, I've been eating like breakfast and dinner the same since I came here. Literally, literally, it's like literally the same. It never changes. So I think it's like hard, it's like adjusting, you know?”

He further described that he had to grow a thick skin and become more resilient because he had no family support or outlet when he was upset or experiencing challenges at the Academy. By contrast, the other athletes reported that their parents were able to be supportive of and involved in their experience at the Academy. While they described the challenges of fitting in time with their families, they were nonetheless able to connect on weekends, have their parents at their games, and be involved in their feedback meetings. However, there was no need for them to adjust to a whole new culture and home life, only the adjustment of being involved in the Academy.

Coach Themes/Codes

Culture. Through the interviews with the coaches, there were a number of themes, in regard to culture, that emerged as important to their experience with the Academy that affected their role in fostering psychosocial growth. Specifically, coaches' reports indicated that culture was a limiting factor that influenced the magnitude of their impact on the athletes. The larger Canadian culture, within which the Academy is situated, emerged as an important theme, as did the athlete's family of origin (e.g., where they came from, their family life, and family values). Additionally, the coaches discussed the effect of the current era and cell phone culture as being important to their experience as coaches. They indicated that cell phone prevalence has increased and has had a negative effect on the athletes' communication, focus, attention span, and insight and, thus, negatively impacts their psychosocial growth. These cultural factors were described as pre-existing conditions that shaped how the coaches viewed their role in the Academy and affected how much impact they felt they had on the players. Given

the coaches' perceptions that effective communication and relationship building was essential to their coaching effectiveness and given that cultural factors, which are largely outside of the coaches' control, affected their ability to engage in effective communication with the players, culture consequently impacted their coaching effectiveness. The coaches' reports were broadly consistent regarding the importance of culture and what role it plays in the development of psychosocial growth. However, there was some variability in terms of which aspects of culture the coaches identified as important. I will discuss the coaches' experiences of the culture in depth below.

Canadian Culture. The Academy is situated in a large western Canadian city. The Academy athletes are recruited from local communities as well as communities from across Canada, within the Senior team's recruiting territory. The program then, is situated within a Canadian context, which emerged as critical to players' psychosocial development, both before and after entering the Academy. Canadian culture, as defined by the coaches, affected how they approach their role. Specifically, the coaches described Canadian culture as a "nice" culture where, in youth sports, the value is placed on having equal playing time and an equal number of turns. Thus, in the community programs, the focus is on equality rather than performance, and there is no emphasis on *earning* opportunities. The academy's focus, conversely, is on performance and the need to *earn* playing time. Therefore, there is an adjustment and learning curve for the athletes entering the academy.

One coach described a shift that needs to occur in terms of the athletes' mentality if they want to get to the professional level: "Canadian mentality, everyone is such nice people here. Everyone's so, like, 'kay everyone have a turn.' Well, at some point, they have to; if that's what they ultimately want to do, they're gonna have to be selfish." He went on to describe how in the Academy, everyone is offered opportunities, but that they have to keep earning those opportunities:

"Listen, everyone will get a fair chance to start. Those that take those opportunities will start to see more and more. Those that don't, you'll, it'll go less and less. So, you just gotta take your opportunities. I've always believed in giving everyone the opportunity, everyone deserves the chance to it, but you have to then deserve it after, like keep earning it."

Thus, in the Academy, the emphasis is placed on *earning* a spot, which marks a change compared to Canadian community programs, where equal playing time is the norm. There is a resulting adjustment for the athletes entering the Academy and a need for the coaches to foster the need to work hard and perform to earn playing time. Shawn described that he front-loads the athlete's experience with constant communication about the expectations of the Academy, which he has found prevents issues, such as athletes wondering why they do not have more playing time, down the road. He stated that: "constant communication at the start helps set the stage."

Another element of Canadian culture that the coaches referenced was the base level of soccer knowledge in Canada compared to other countries. The coaches described that the base level of soccer knowledge is relatively low compared to other countries, such as European and African countries. Therefore, the level of coaching in the Canadian community programs can be inconsistent and at a lower level. One of the coaches of the younger age groups indicated that "I get them brand-new fresh into here, so we get a variance of what they know, how they've been taught, then trying to bring it all together." Thus, the variability of instruction that the athletes receive prior to entering the Academy shapes the work that the coaches have to do with them. Allan described how different the Canadian culture is concerning soccer knowledge compared to his experiences in England:

"When I first come to Canada, ten years ago, there was a lot of hockey parents there teaching soccer. And I'm like, 'wow! Like this is a million miles away from what I've been used to.' Everybody in England knows football. Every parent watches football there. Their baseline knowledge is considerably higher than a baseline knowledge here. Um, cause you're in that environment, so then it was more of, I want to pass this information on. And you get some really nice compliments, 'ah like we've never had this, it's, you know, this is like special.' And I'm like, to me, this is normal, this is what you should know about the game."

The learning curve, then, for the athletes entering the Academy, can be substantial. The players' previous experiences in community programs impact their starting point when they enter the Academy. In other words, the quality of instruction they have previously received shapes the coaches' approach and affects their season plans and goals.

Another factor that emerged as important was the multi-sport orientation in Canada, where playing and having access to a multitude of sports rather than specializing in one is valued. This approach plays a role in the athletes' level of passion and drive for their sport. For example, Allan described:

“In North America, you know it's baseball, it's lacrosse, it's hockey. I mean, here it's kayaking, it's BMX-ing, it's skiing, and snowboarding. Like there's so many different things to do, um, so you grow up with a multisport mentality and not overly passionate about one. And I'm not saying that one's bet, better than the other ...but I think then sometimes there's not that, it's a bit harsh to say this, but you know the life-or-death passion that's burning that you get from kids in Europe, in South America, in Africa.”

Contrasted with other countries where soccer is “life or death,” in Canada, the athletes with the highest level of passion are comparable to the average soccer player in other places. As Allan described, “The ones that get to that level that you would say are the most passionate *here*, um, they would be a dime a dozen in the UK. So, they wouldn't be any different, any special, they wouldn't be any more hungry about it.” He went on to describe that that high level of drive, passion, and determination is present at every level of the game in the UK, compared to in Canada where only the players who are “the one” demonstrate that level of passion. The coaches highlighted the importance of hunger and passion and described it as a determinant of success. Thus, the Canadian culture and the multi-sport mentality play a role in the players' success as it affects their level of drive and early skill acquisition.

The “nice” culture in Canada, paired with the multi-sport mentality and the lack of general soccer knowledge, creates an atmosphere where the athletes, on average, demonstrate less passion and drive than soccer players in other places. This, then, shapes the coaches' approach and affects the culture of the Academy. Specifically, the coaches described the need to be creative and adapt their style to each athlete's unique needs. Further, they have to work to create an environment of excellence by creating a situation where the players are brought into the team dynamic, with an expectation that they will earn their opportunities and that if players want to continue in the academy, they have to step up to that challenge.

Family of Origin/Home Life. The athletes' families of origin and their experiences prior to joining the Academy emerged as a limiting factor in how the coaches felt that they could execute their role. For example, in discussions of the individual factors that made athletes stand out, many of the coaches referenced the athletes' drive, passion, and mental toughness as factors that separated those who were able to seize the opportunity from those who did not. Therefore, the athletes' home lives were a factor that could promote psychosocial growth and positive engagement in the program or impede that. There was a consensus that although the coaches had a role in bringing out athletes' drive and passion, the athletes came in with those characteristics already present or not. This was particularly the case because the athletes enter the academy as teenagers. As Shawn indicated, many of these characteristics are formed in early childhood. He described how families play a huge role in the early development of those skills.

“Because we get them at 13, 14, 15. If you got them at five-six, okay, maybe I would have a different opinion on it. But I think a lot of it is learned in their early childhood development and how they're brought up. I think moms and dads have a huge influence on their outlook, work ethic. No matter where they come from, I think they can teach them some of those, and when we get them, we can drag it out of them, and then normally they go on and have some form of success.”

Thus, in his experience, the athletes enter the Academy with these core values and traits in place. The coaches' role then, is to bring that out of them. But if the athletes do not already have that base, the coaches indicated their impact is limited.

Ryan indicated that the athletes' experiences before coming into the program affect their communication skills and how well they are able to connect: “Whatever's happened before they came here, you know, potentially affects their social skills and how they interact with the staff, how they interact with the players.” He further alleged that this impacts how much of an effect he feels he can have with that player. Ryan identified his ability to communicate and build a personal relationship as an important factor in his impact on the athlete and their development. Thus, when it is more difficult to communicate, due to the athletes' previous experiences, he felt he had less impact:

“They’re maybe not as easy to tap into, maybe not as easy to, you know, find common ground as far as conversation or communication. Probably have to work a little bit harder with them but there’s a good chance that I’ll have, maybe, a little less impact.”

Similarly, Jason indicated that when athletes have a difficult situation at home, this impacts their capability to engage with the program and coaches:

“I’ve worked with a player that um, that just... doesn’t have the best situation at home, and uh sometimes you can see the body language and the energy off in training, and you can take that the wrong way and think that they’re not motivated or not excited. But it’s not that they’re not motivated; it’s that they’ve got other issues that they don’t quite know how to deal with. And they don’t know how to deal with that and still continue to um, you know come with the right mentality to train.”

The athletes’ home lives and previous experiences, therefore, impact their ability to communicate and connect with their coaches which, in turn, influences the coaches’ effectiveness. Jason indicated that he becomes “almost obsessed” with connecting with and understanding the player because “you’re not going to maximize the time that you have to develop them unless you really and truly understand them and connect.” The athlete’s home life and how it affects their ability to communicate then, plays a role in how he views his ability to relate to and coach the player. He indicated that when that connection and communication is not strong, the players do not progress as well, and thus growth is limited.

Another aspect of the athletes’ relationships with their parents that emerged was the level of parental involvement in the program. Allan described the shift that has occurred, where parents have become very involved in their children’s activities, which has led to a change in his coaching role. He indicated that parents now want a say in the coach’s decision-making process. He described that he has to have conversations with parents and include them in discussions about his coaching decisions. He expressed some frustration with parents wanting to tell him how to do his job: “if you pay somebody for a service, you wouldn’t stand over them and start telling them how to do their job.” For Allan, this has expanded his coaching role and necessitated adaptation. Previously,

he was able to direct his focus only on coaching the athletes, whereas he now has to “coach” the parents to some extent as well: “Parents want to sit down and have a chat of ‘why my kids not playing’ and, you know, ‘we’re not happy,’ and they go, ‘they should get more minutes,’ and so on.” He observed that this is an aspect of coaching that has changed a lot and is something that he has had to adjust to. It affects the team dynamic as there is a certain level of entitlement that results from parents who always believe their child should be playing more and who are “pushy” and outcome-focused. He indicated that some relentless parents demand so much of the coaches’ time, which takes some of the focus away from the actual coaching aspect—planning practices, executing skills, and communicating with the players.

Therefore, the athletes’ family lives play a big role in their psychosocial development and affect how well the coaches are able to connect with them and promote their psychosocial growth through the Academy. For example, when parents instill positive communication skills and focus on process, work ethic, and enjoyment, as opposed to outcome, this enhances the coaches’ ability to work with the player. On the other hand, a stressful home life with demanding parents who are outcome-focused can impede the coaches’ ability to work with that player.

Cell Phone Culture. The current “cell-phone culture” also emerged as an important factor in the coaches’ experience. In particular, the coaches mentioned the impact that cell phones have on the athletes’ communication, attention, focus, and team dynamics. Specifically, Ryan indicated that he has observed that the athletes sometimes have difficulties with communication:

“It’s affecting them socially, so there’s less conversations. We often joke, so if I give an instruction on the field and they don’t necessarily pick up on the instruction right away, I’ll say: ‘Well, I’ll text it to you.’ So that’s just, that’s their way of communicating.”

The coaches further observed that the amount of banter has diminished in the last 5 to 10 years. Ryan commented that cell phone use has led to a lot of changes and is part of the decrease in observed banter:

“When I first came into the [academy], you could walk into a change room and, although pretty much every kid had a cell phone, you didn’t really see it. Um, there would be what we call banter, which is like jokes and laughs, and there’d be loud music. I can walk in there, on two o’clock, pretty much every day now, and there’ll be 17 kids in the change-room looking at their phone. And there’s almost, you could hear a pin drop. It’s not every day, but it’s pretty close. So that’s something that, you know, we’re looking at internally to try to fix and change, but I mean, that’s for me, one of the biggest differences.”

Thus, cell phones have had the impact of decreasing communication and affecting team dynamics. Banter was seen as a vital part of the player experience by the coaches and as unique to soccer. Allan stated that the locker room is a sacred place, where the athletes can have conversations that they may not be able to have elsewhere: “In the locker room there’s, there’s a, you know, sacred place where you can have those conversations. The humour, the wit is very unique in this sport. We also use the term banter it’s, it’s very unique to football.” Thus, with banter decreasing due to cell phone use, there is an aspect of that sacred, locker room dynamic that is lost. All four coaches indicated that the cell phone culture is something that they are looking to address as coaches and as an organization. However, they were not yet sure what the full impact of that is or how to fully address it.

The coaches also indicated that they have observed a change in the athletes’ ability to focus and maintain attention as well as their level of self-awareness, which they attribute to cell phone use. Jason indicated that the use of technology has had a big impact on the athletes’ focus and concentration:

“The young players are always gonna have so much energy, but I can see a real lack of focus and concentration at times. I can see also um young players or kids coming in and, you know, instead of just going and grabbing the ball and picking it up and starting to play with it and figure it out, they almost are waiting to be told what to do.”

He suggested that a large part of that lack of focus and attention comes from watching highlight reels rather than sitting down to focus on a whole game:

“You’d watch a full game on TV, and you’d be sitting there focused on it, and studying players, and studying the game and teams. And now it’s like a highlight video on Instagram, or a 45-second clip on Instagram, or fifty or a hundred 45-second clips on Instagram instead of watching a 90-minute game.”

Allan further reported that he has seen a diminished level of insight on the athletes’ part:

“The self-reflection and I guess reality check is gone. And how can you blame these kids? The world they live in is a virtual reality world. It’s, it’s a fake world like, you and I are in the room, um if that was two 15-year-olds they would both be on their phones Instagramming something. You know, ‘hashtag this,’ having a great time with, you know, Charlotte, but they’ve never said two words.”

This lack of insight impacts their ability to be honest and vulnerable about their performance as well. Allan described that it makes it challenging to have frank and tough conversations with the players because their level of self-reflection has diminished, and thus they do not see their performance the same way the coaches do. According to Allan, the players appear unable to give an honest reflection of their performance and that they tend to present things more positively than they actually are. For example, Allan said that he will ask a player to reflect on his day’s performance and that the player will respond that he thinks he played very well that day. At the same time, the coaches’ perception is very different, and they do not feel that his performance that day was very good. Thus, there is a gap or a distortion between the player’s perception and the coaches’, which Allan attributes, in part, to the fake reality they live in on social media.

The coaches admitted that they have had to adapt their coaching style and methods to address some of these attentional concerns. The coaches have had to implement limits on cell phone use. For example, Jason indicated that he does not allow cell phones in common areas when they travel, “I don’t want to see them, they’re not allowed at breakfast, not allowed at lunch, not allowed at dinner or on the bus.” He further indicated that he sees cell phones affecting the players’ focus and energy:

“If they’re on their phones, they don’t speak, and their heads are kind of down. Even from a body language perspective and an energy

perspective, I think it takes a lot of their energy and their body language is poor. If they've been on their phones for 45 minutes with their head down and their shoulders kind of inverted and then they come out to train and play it's-you, they're still kind of coming out of that kind of shell that they were in. That kind of, it takes them a while."

This has a considerable impact on the athletes' performance in games and practice. Jason described that he has had to develop a different style of warm-ups to engage the players and snap them out of their "shells:"

"So, um when the players come from the locker room or, you know, come from school from their phones, and they come to the field to warm up, um it's a real quick warm-up transition, a lot of interaction, talking, speaking, and getting them completely engaged and focused. If they come from the locker room and training into a very, just the same consistent [environment], I, I feel like you, they don't break out of that world that they were trapped in on their phone."

The use of cell phones was observed to limit player communication, decrease their attention and focus, decrease self-reflection and insight, and lead to the players being "closed-off." As a result, the coaches have adapted their coaching style to meet this new and emerging cultural shift. The coaches interpreted this as an ongoing, evolving process as they are not yet sure of the full impact that cell phones are having. The coaches further noted that it is something that they are attempting to address from an organizational standpoint.

Senior team Organization Culture. The culture of the Academy is heavily influenced and directed by the Senior team organization. The goal of the Academy is to recruit top youth players from across Canada and train them in a program similar to that of the Senior team with the goal of ultimately having them play for the professional team. Therefore, the Senior team organization dictates a style of play and the developmental pathway that they want to see the coaches implement. The S team culture emerged as a key theme that the other themes were subsumed under. The team culture created the environment where each coach brought their personal experience and philosophy and modified them into the organizational direction. Therefore, the team culture and the

direction from the organization on how the program should be run was a key theme that directed how the coaches executed their role. I will discuss the team values and environment and its impact on the coaches' experience of the Academy in-depth below. This will be followed by a discussion of the other important coach themes (coaches' individual philosophies and experiences as well as the individual characteristics of the players), which were influenced by the team values and environment.

Team Values. The Senior team organization sets the values and direction for the Academy. This direction starts during the recruitment process, even before the athletes join the Academy. First, the recruitment officer identifies athletes from across their territory who have the most physical and emotional potential. Potential is defined as technical and tactical skill, physical build, continued growth and improvement over time, and character. Next, athletes are monitored for a couple of years before joining the program, and the recruiter looks for continued growth and improvement in performance. Next, recruited athletes are brought in for a trial, where they are run through a battery of assessments while the coaches compare them in a side-by-side scenario. The coaches identified the following values as important within the organization: work rate, mentality/mental toughness, professional demeanor, honesty, communication, and character. According to the coaches, character was the most important of these characteristics as it dictates the others:

“I mean that’s probably the most important thing for us, character, because ultimately, that’s going to determine how hard they’re going to work, you know, how much effort they’re going to put into their performance, and when we give them information, when we give them feedback, constructive criticism, are they willing to, you know, make the efforts to improve those things that we spoke about.”

The coaches described that they look for the athletes' character by observing their passion, drive, and love for the game. Jason reported that the players with that level of character and drive are the ones who will get the most out of the game:

“The one that comes in that, um, that takes the opportunity completely. Completely has a, has a goal and has, has their own kind of plan, and is

extremely motivated and does, doesn't take anything for granted, and knows where they want to go with their game. I think that's the, that's the player that'll get the most out of the program.”

The athlete's character appears to be the driving force behind the other essential characteristics. The player's character is further evidenced in their work ethic, which was another critical value that came up across the interviews with coaches and athletes. As Allan stated:

“It's about the work ethic. It's a really important one, you know, the selflessness, um putting the team's needs before you. Um, you know, typically that type of player has the communication traits, leadership qualities, um are prepared to be responsible for the group's good or bad or indifferent moments. You know, they don't shirk, they rise to it, and they try to pull other people through with them.”

In addition to the athlete's performance, their character and work ethic are evaluated to determine whether they are recruited into the program and advanced into the higher levels of the Academy or released back to their community teams. Thus, the organization and coaches place high importance on how the athletes comport themselves, how hard they are willing to work, and whether they are able to rise to the challenges inherent in competing at a high level. These characteristics were identified as critical factors that determine an athlete's success in the program and are heavily emphasized by the coaches.

The organization sets expectations on how the athletes will comport themselves both on and off the field. Shawn indicated that it is essential that the athletes have that drive and hunger on the field and that they carry themselves professionally and respectfully off the field: “Making sure they still conduct themselves, they're professional off... when they come out, you're respectful. You've gotta have good manners, you've gotta do all the, like the key things, you gotta take care of yourself.” Jason further indicated that he works to help players to understand that, “what they do off the field is just as, just as much, or more important than what they do in training, and on the field.” Additionally, Allan highlighted the importance of teammates respecting each other: “you

can, not like somebody from a personal standpoint but the moment you cross the white line, the respect level has to be there.” There is an expectation that the players will comport themselves respectfully and professionally even off the field, as they always represent the Senior team’s values.

Shawn expressed that the Senior team organization sets a mental focus for each week that the coaches need to incorporate into their practices. He further delineated that the four key themes that are important for his age group are: standards, enjoyment, competitiveness, and team-first:

“We use standards is one of them, enjoyment is one, competitiveness, and team-first is the major ones we hit. So, team first, obviously learning to sacrifice themselves, standards is making sure they can just keep the same level all the time, competitive and enjoyment obviously speak for themselves.”

When the athletes come in from their various community programs with different previous experiences, it is the coaches’ job then, to meld them together into a cohesive group that follows the Senior team’s values. The coaches explained that the Senior team dictates the kinds of drills that they want to see and the style of play that they expect. Thus, the environment is co-created by the direction of the Senior team in combination with how the coaches bring those values to life with the players. Therefore, the Senior team’s values set the direction of the Academy and create the foundation that the coaches build upon.

Academy Environment. The vision of the Senior team heavily influences the Academy environment. The fact that the Academy shares the same facility and has access to Senior team members also has an important influence on setting the tone and atmosphere of the Academy. The Academy environment was a key theme mentioned by all of the coaches as very important to their experience. The team dynamic and environment appear to be co-created by the Senior team and the Academy coaches such that the Senior team sets the direction and expectations, and the coaches then apply that to create the environment that aligns with their personal philosophy.

The Senior team sets the environment foundation because, at its core, the Academy is a recruitment base for the Senior team. Therefore, the environment is highly competitive

because the stakes are very high as the players are in constant competition with one another to maintain their place on the team and to hopefully move up to the next level, with the ultimate goal of playing professionally. This level of competitiveness is much more intense than their previous experiences where they were each the top player on their respective teams, and the depth of the field was much less developed than in the Academy (i.e., there were fewer players at their level). Therefore, the level of play is considerably higher, and the expectation that players must earn their playing time and earn their continued participation in the program creates a dynamic where the athletes are in constant competition with each other. This dynamic creates accountability where players need to earn and keep earning their playing time: “it’s giving them that opportunity when they do deserve it and then making way for somebody else at another time.” Thus, there is never a time through the program where the players can coast. There is a constant need to improve and work hard, which the coaches saw as critical to the players’ growth. The coaches indicated that they see the competitive atmosphere as part of what leads to growth and improvement: “He’ll improve. Just being in that environment with other players that are, you know, probably better than him, or at least as good as him.” Jason indicated that increasing work ethic and constantly working towards improvement leads to the development of confidence and mastery in the athletes: “To be more confident you just have to put in more work, and then you put in more work, and your confidence goes up. And then it gets challenged again, and it’s just a constant battle.” According to the coaches it is their role to impart to the athletes that the way through a challenge is to put in more work. And since work ethic is always under their control, it leads to the development of confidence and mastery.

The coaches all referenced the program’s competitive nature as important to their experience and concurred that a lot of their work is around finding the balance of keeping it as competitive as possible and still keeping it fun. Ryan shared that one of his goals is to “build as competitive a training environment as possible that everybody feels like they’re contributing to.” He further explained that because many of the players arrive at the Academy from outside of the region, it is essential that the Academy becomes like a “second home to them.” He stated that he works to create an environment that “they want to come to every day... if the environment’s the right place for the player, then I think the player’s probably gonna develop a little bit quicker.” He expressed the opinion that building strong, open interpersonal relationships with the players is one way that he

creates that environment. Similarly, Jason observed that the team environment is inherently competitive and gets more so as the players move up through the program, so he works to take the pressure off of the players and get them to play with freedom and enjoyment:

“I try to take the pressure off of them and let them express themselves and enjoy it a little bit more... You can push yourself, and challenge yourself, and train incredibly hard, and have that, but also make sure that, just to make sure that they enjoy it.”

Allan further suggested that it is a big commitment for the players who join the Academy because the time investment is significant: they are traveling every other weekend while needing to keep up with their school and home commitments. He indicated that he uses banter and sarcastic humour to lighten the mood and keep it fun because “if you’ve enjoyed it, you’ve typically worked harder at it, and when you work harder at something, you typically enjoy more success at it.” Allan further indicated that with the players in this environment, “the extrinsic motivation is really quite minimal,” indicating that the players are highly motivated and driven and do not need the added pressure or motivation from their coaches. Instead, the coaches then try to make the mood lighter and more fun to encourage enjoyment and focus on the process, which facilitates camaraderie and positive team dynamics, which in turn leads to greater psychosocial growth and improved performance. The coaches described working to create an environment that aligns with a mastery-oriented environment where effort and process are emphasized, balancing the inherent high-challenge, outcome focus of the Academy’s competitive environment.

Additionally, the full Academy aspect of the program, where there is access to nutrition, professional training staff, tutors, and sport psychology, is also an important aspect of the program that sets it apart from other programs. Ryan stated that,

“There’s improvement. And a lot of that, again, comes down to the environment, working with those players every day, working with the staff every day, getting a little bit more in our environment than they would maybe get in the community.”

In addition to more services, the coaches and players have access to the Senior team coaches and players, which is a considerable part of their experience. Ryan expressed that the Senior team manager is always open to having the Academy staff observe and participate in his practices and training sessions, which yields learning and growth: “It gives you confidence. So, if you're working with the Senior team on a regular basis and then you're spending time obviously in your own environment, uh it just, it builds confidence um, and it's helped me for sure.” He observed that the environment is ripe for learning opportunities for him as a coach and that it has given him more and better technical and tactical tools to work with his players. He believed that having access to the professional players is a valuable tool that he can use to help motivate the Academy players and provide them with some perspective. Thus, when players are feeling down, apathetic, or are experiencing a crisis of confidence, he will bring in a Senior team player to talk to him:

“If said player is, you know, getting out of touch with reality, we may have a first team player speak with him and spend a little bit of time with him, and sort of help bring him back down to earth. ‘Cause, we can say what we like, but the player might not always listen to us. If we can give them actual, first-hand experience from a Senior player who's been in his shoes 5 to 10 years ago, it has an unbelievable, um it has an unbelievable effect.”

Thus, the Academy program provides this very rich environment with access to professional services and professional players, creating opportunities for growth and learning for coaches and players alike.

Another aspect of the environment that was seen by the coaches as important to their experience was the amount of contact time they get with the players. Coaches reported that they have more contact time with the players than they would get in the community programs, which allows them to have a more significant impact. The players all attend school together, near the training facility, and the Academy collaborates with the high school so that the players can finish their school day earlier than typical and have more time to devote to soccer. Additionally, they receive physical education credits for their soccer training. Therefore, the players have practice between 2 pm and 5 pm

daily. Ryan explained how the amount of time they have with the players increases their potential to impact the players and promote that growth.

“So, contact time is so important. Um, it just means that you know, we’re able to have that much more of an influence on the players and have that much more hopeful, hopefully, impact on ‘em, so I would say that kind of sets us apart.”

Shawn further explained how, in comparison to community programs, they have a much higher intensity and volume of time with the players, which promotes psychosocial growth: “Just, you got more time, more resources, more volume of things that can just assist in helping build all of them compared to out in the community.”

The Academy environment is unique and offers its athletes more access to resources, more contact time with coaches, and a highly competitive environment which necessitates a constant striving on the athletes’ part and constant vigilance in terms of their work ethic. As a result, the environment was a key theme that promoted psychosocial growth, and there was consensus from the coaches that this is a positive and unique aspect of the program.

Coach Philosophy. The coaches’ personal coaching philosophies emerged as a key theme that determines which characteristics they emphasize and model for their players, which in turn fosters psychosocial growth. Unsurprisingly, the coaches interviewed, who are all part of the same Academy, share a lot of similar ideas regarding their role as a coach and how they impart their values to the players. Further, the coaches’ philosophies were couched within the Senior team values, such that the Senior team sets the direction and foundation, and the coaches then bring their personal experience, knowledge, and philosophy into that environment. All of the coaches described holding a player-centered approach, meaning that they emphasize the players’ development as a whole person, not just their athletic/soccer abilities and that they emphasize the process (i.e., mastering a new skill, work ethic, communication) over the outcome of a game. Within that player-centered model, the key themes that emerged were: interpersonal relationships, process-oriented, striving for full potential, and holistic approach, which I will discuss in-depth below.

Interpersonal relationship. A core component that all of the coaches mentioned as important within the player-centered model of coaching is building strong interpersonal relationships with each individual athlete. The coaches referenced the need to get to know their players well to maximize their impact on them and get the most out of their abilities. Ryan explained that he spends as much time as possible with the players away from the field to get to know them on a personal level and to build a strong, trusting relationship. He stressed the importance of building that trust: “if there’s a strong trust and there’s a strong respect between the two of us, that player’s probably gonna do a little bit more for me.” Ryan further emphasized the importance of demonstrating empathy towards his players. He reported that he believes that showing empathy gets more out of them: “the best word would probably be empathy... you can at least show empathy towards that player. It probably will get 1 or 2 % more out of them.” Similarly, Jason suggested that his first task when the players join the Academy is to get to know them. He shared that he wants to know about them, “what makes them tick,” what their families are like, and where they want to go in soccer. Knowing his players helps him to understand how to motivate the players to perform their best. Jason further reported that when there is not a strong interpersonal connection that the athletes tend to struggle in the environment:

“I’ve never had a situation where they’ve [athletes] done extremely well, and I hadn’t had a really good connection and understood them. Usually, it’s the other way, I’m struggling to get a good connection or have a better understanding for the player, and they’re struggling as well in the environment, and it becomes difficult for both, I think.”

Having a close and trusting relationship with the players was seen by the coaches as the core component that determined how effectively they could work with the players and how much of an impact they were able to have. When asked about the importance of building that personal relationship, Shawn reported that, “I think it’s the biggest thing! And I think your ability to communicate to affect someone is the, the biggest part of that and that’s how they’ll [coaches] get the most out of them [players].” All of the Academy coaches reported that they prioritize relationship building with the athletes and felt that without a strong relationship between coach and player, that the players will likely struggle and not get the most out of their time in the Academy.

Process-oriented. Another important aspect of the player-centered approach that emerged was prioritizing the players' development over the team's performance. For example, Shawn described how he would "sacrifice the win" to get a player to improve on a particular skill, such as developing their non-dominant foot accuracy:

"It could be a technique; it could be that somebody has to fail. You're a defender, and we're working on a certain aspect of your, but you're getting beat 5-6 times. Well, 'kay we lose the game, but you've grown from that. So it could be that. It could be somebody potentially playing out of position to get them to learn how to use their non-dominant foot, so it could be a right-footed player playing on the left-hand side, and rather than getting crosses in, he kicks it off the end line. So, I'll sacrifice the outcome for the process if that makes sense."

Additionally, the coaches place a strong emphasis on work ethic. Shawn reported that he often tells his players, "How much effort we put in will match the outcome you guys get." He further elucidated that when the players are unhappy with the outcome of a match, he will focus on what things they need to work harder on or what skills need improving. He indicated that every mistake becomes a teaching opportunity. Jason explained that he often talks to his players about work ethic and how much work it takes to get to the level that they aspire to: "I'm constantly trying to get them to understand the amount of work that it takes. And then the confidence, the confidence that you have to keep even when it gets so difficult." Thus, the Academy coaches model a process-focused attitude where improvement and outcome are always related back to work ethic and skill development.

The coaches also emphasize having fun and enjoying the process. The focus on enjoyment was an important factor identified by the coaches, and there was a consensus that enjoying the process leads to an increased work ethic and more success. Allan expressed that he fosters an entertaining, attacking style of soccer, which he believes promotes enjoyment and success:

"I love the attacking style of the game. I love, I think it's an entertainment; some people play this game to win, and it's always been about an entertainment and a style for me ... it's the process to the game, and I

want people to enjoy watching my teams, I want players to enjoy playing on my teams and ultimately, for me, I want to, I want to enjoy watching my team.”

He went on to describe that when players enjoy what they're doing, they typically work harder, which leads to greater success. He thus places the focus on the process, on the enjoyment factor, which ultimately leads to the desired outcome more often than not. Jason also emphasized the importance of teaching athletes to enjoy what they are doing and illustrated how he tries to take some of the pressure off of them so that they can play with freedom and enjoyment: “I try to take the pressure off of them and let them express themselves, and enjoy it a little bit more, and play with a little bit more freedom and smile.” Thus, the coaches hold a process-oriented approach where they focus on developing the players' skills, instilling a strong work ethic, and enjoying the process.

Striving for full potential. Throughout the coach interviews, the coaches stated that they work to help bring out the athletes' passion and drive to work towards reaching their full potential. Full potential was seen as an individual, subjective standard such that each athlete's full potential is unique to them. Thus, within the player-centered model, through developing those close, interpersonal relationships, the coaches work to understand the athletes, their motivation for playing, and their ultimate goals in the sport so that they can guide that development. As Jason described:

“Just always challenging and wanting players and people to kinda, you know, see, see if they can just strive towards full potential. You know, wanting to work towards full potential and set goals and, and go after them... Yeah, so I enjoy, I enjoy getting to know, getting to know people, getting to know the players, working with them and, and really focusing on what- where they want to go and just trying to help, help with that.”

Through the discussions with the coaches, there was a common thread where the coaches expressed working to bring out the players' passion and support them in moving towards their goals. Allan explained that his main goal is to help players find their passion, whether in soccer or elsewhere. Thus, it is again a very player-centered approach in that the goal is to instill in the athletes a sense of confidence, drive, and

passion in whatever *they* choose. When asked how he saw his role as a coach, Allan explained that his main goal is to help each individual find their passion:

“The main statement I would say is to help them find their passion. Um, and my passion is football, and so I think everybody’s passion should be football, but I know it’s not. I’ve also, I had a female player a few years ago, she, she came to me like in tears, she’s like ‘I wanna, I wanna pursue volleyball.’ She was a multisport kid, and she was obviously really nervous to tell me. And I’m like, “listen, what have I taught you? Follow your passion! If your passion was football and you dived into it, brilliant, but if I’ve given you the tools for you to develop your passion for volleyball, it’s the same thing for me. I don’t understand that because I don’t have a passion for volleyball, but if you’re as passionate about volleyball as I am about football, then that’s also, I’ve done my job.” And that’s something removing you from the sport itself, but of course, I would want all kids to go into football, but you gotta find your passion in life. That’s the bigger picture stuff. And if you find your passion again, you’ll enjoy it, you’ll work harder, you’ll be successful with it.”

Again, the coaches personalize their approach to the players as they work to help them meet their full potential by focusing on work ethic. Allan identified that you will put more work in and achieve better results if you find that passion. Shawn explained that he personalizes feedback and matches different approaches to each player to motivate them, from having direct conversations with honest feedback to using lots of encouragement, depending on the player’s personality and what they need from the coach. He indicated that “the quicker you can figure out what makes people tick, the more success you have.” A big part of the coaches’ role, then is to motivate their players so that they can maximize their potential. As indicated, this comes from knowing the player and developing that close and personal relationship. As Jason illustrated, once you know the player, you can teach them how to set appropriate goals and work towards them: “I hope I’ve helped players to realize their full potential or even just have a better understanding of striving and setting goals and going towards their full potential.”

Holistic approach. Within the player-centered model, another key theme that the coaches identified was having a holistic approach, such that they believe that it is

their role to develop the whole person, not just develop them as a soccer player. The coaches expressed the opinion that who the players are as people is more important to them than how they play. Thus, they use soccer as a way to teach life skills that bring out the best in their players. As Jason explained, he teaches his players that how they are in every aspect of their lives is as important as how they are on the pitch:

“They all want to be professional, or they all want to play at the highest level that they can um. It's just really bringing them to be more aware and more mindful of who they are and what they do in every aspect. So how they are with their family, how they are with their friends, the people they work with, at school, whatever it is. Um, all those little things that they do and all the little interactions that they have has a direct effect on what they're gonna do and who they're going to be in the, in the game.”

The coaches illustrated how they use soccer to teach life skills to the players. For example, they talked about how they teach good communication skills and focus on building strong team dynamics because they see these skills as important to success in whatever the players do in their lives. Allan indicated that he “really wanted to help players, um, use football in a way to be successful on the pitch but also deal with life's troubles off the pitch.” Shawn explained that he uses moments from games and practices where a challenge emerged to teach a lesson. For example, he described how he has worked on helping players to communicate effectively and to deliver their message in the best way:

“That's a big thing I've been on them this year is ‘that's great information, but you sound like you're crying and complaining. What response did you get? Oh, he didn't do it, probably because you didn't deliver it the correct way.’”

When asked how he defined success, Shawn explained that it's his goal to help foster contributing members of society who are able to take the life skills they've learned through sport to be resilient and successful in whatever they do:

“If anyone I coach is a well-functioning member of society, whether that takes them in sports, whether that takes them in the job factor, they're a well-functioning member of society and learned life skills to deal with whatever is thrown at them...because really as much as we like to say

that everyone's going to be out there with the First team, not everyone is. So again, how can we make good humans, good people that function, have success in whatever they end up doing, you know, and come back with an enjoyment or they come back and see you in 10 years and have a smile? Then I know, I know that's successful."

Overall, the coaches reported that they prioritize the player's development as a person and that they use soccer to teach life skills, such as communication, teamwork, and goal setting. The coaches defined success as the players using these life skills to successfully navigate challenges in their lives, to develop resilience, and to succeed in whatever they choose to do. This definition of success mirrors Danish and Nellen's (2015) definition of life skills with the common goal of transferring skills gained through sport to being successful in other settings and throughout their lives.

The Academy coaches profess a player-centered approach, which emphasizes developing strong, interpersonal relationships with the players, working to have a good understanding of their players, and focusing on the process and the player's development over the outcome. This approach fits very much into a mastery-oriented model (Petipas et al., 2005) where work ethic and development are prioritized over the outcome.

Coaches' Personal Experience. Through the interviews with the coaches, it became apparent that the coaches' philosophies have evolved over time, such that as they have had different opportunities within the Academy and in other settings, they have developed the confidence to do what works best for them and have continued to develop their coaching style. Ryan explained how he felt that he needed to be harsh and more authoritarian when he first started coaching. He indicated that, through experience, he has found the method that works best for him:

"I felt like I maybe needed to be a little more of um an authoritarian because I didn't have a huge professional background to fall back on. I still was young in terms of my coaching experience and felt like I had to be a little bit more um of a sterner type of leader. Whereas, I think I've softened up a lot through experience and just finding, you know, what works best for me."

Thus, for Ryan, his philosophy has developed through his own experience, which was also mirrored by the other coaches. Additionally, Shawn highlighted the importance of experiencing as many things as possible and always being open to new experiences. He indicated that he has developed his own style and learned the need for effective communication skills from watching other coaches. He reported: “And I watch people who do these lovely sessions, and everything’s thought out, and they’ve got tactics and ideas, but they cannot relate to the people, it has zero effect.” Jason stated that his philosophy has developed from studying and learning from his mentors and always being curious. He further elucidated that he had more of a player mentality when he first started coaching, which he described as “selfish” and “results-oriented.” He explained that his philosophy is “constantly evolving” and is now much more geared towards development rather than outcome. The coaches reported that there is a constant need for growth and development and that because the sport is constantly changing, they also need to constantly adapt their approach and their methods.

Another important theme that emerged was how the coaches’ experience as players guided their philosophy and the aspects of coaching that they emphasized. The coaches referenced their playing experience and explained how their philosophy as coaches is largely in response to what they were missing in their playing experience. Interestingly, the coaches described how not reaching the level they wanted was part of their motivation and passion for coaching. As Jason described:

“My biggest motivation in coaching is, is I don’t, I didn’t come anywhere close to what I wanted to do as a player... I’m in no way uh satisfied with what I did as a player, so I think that’s by far my biggest motivation as a coach.”

He identified that, as a player, he did not have enough trust in himself and that he listened to others' opinions over his own. The mistakes he made in his career drive him to pass on to his players how important their work ethic is to build confidence.

“I took ideas and opinions from too many other people, and I just didn’t really trust myself enough. I didn’t have enough confidence in myself to kind of push through when things got really difficult. Um yeah, yeah, I think that’s the biggest one. Which I, which I, now I’m always, you know, I

constantly tell the young players is, I'm trying to get them, I'm constantly trying to get them to understand the amount of work that it takes, and then the, the confidence, the confidence that you have to keep even when it gets so difficult. Um, but then understand that to be more confident, you just have to put in more work, and then you put in more work, and your confidence goes up."

Thus, Jason's personal experiences had a huge impact on how he coaches and what he emphasizes for his players. Similarly, Allan shared that getting the "heartbreaking news" that he was not going to be signed to a professional contract instilled in him a "burning desire to help." He described how he took all of the good things from each coach and ignored all of the bad things and that that has informed his personal coaching philosophy and style. One of his passions for coaching comes from wanting to pass his knowledge on and to help give his players a different experience and outcome from the one he had:

"From my own experiences between like the age of 14, 15, 16, 17, probably um it gave me a burning desire to want to help. Um, and I guess from my own experiences, try and change the future for somebody else through those experiences, you know... Like there's so many different routes you can go that's come from football, basically from being an athlete. So just giving that advice to people and then if you're lucky enough to make it, then you've kind of gone beyond me. So now it's your own journey, and the only advice I can give you is just life experiences after that. Um, but yeah, that's kind of always been my passion, and it's grown over the years."

Allan's experiences as a player, both positive and negative, motivated him to want to coach and pass on the lessons that he learned. He further reported that his "bigger picture goal" is to be able to improve soccer knowledge and grow the sport in North America: He revealed that he wants to pass on the knowledge he has, which will then be passed on to future generations to ultimately have a larger impact on soccer in North America.

Similarly, Shawn detailed how he uses his personal experiences to inform his coaching. For example, Shawn explained that because he came close to making it

professionally, he knows what it takes, and he knows where he made mistakes, so he wants to make sure that none of his players repeat his mistakes.

“I never made it professionally. I came close but didn’t make it... so I knew what I was good enough at, knew what I wasn’t good enough at, you know. I want to make sure that nobody has the same, you know, flaws or, or the same things that aren’t going. So, I know what it takes to kind of get there. ‘Kay, I didn’t make it myself. I knew what was missing and the other bits to add in, so I think that’s really helped in terms of working with young players. Ok, this is really what’s -what’s key and what’s needed to get there. We’ve gotta master, you know, certain key things.”

He went on to define that those “key things” are teaching a good mastery of the ball as well as how to be tactically savvy and aware. Shawn described how he emphasizes an assertive style with the ball, such that he teaches the players how to create space for themselves and how to open up a play, particularly when other players are playing a bit “dirty.”

Thus, the coaches’ personal experiences as players play a significant role in their approach to coaching. The coaches shared how they took what they felt was lacking in their experience and made sure that that was emphasized in their own coaching. Furthermore, it was one of the key motivators for the coaches. They explained that the impact of not making it to the professional level was to create a desire to pass on their knowledge and prevent their players from making the same mistakes that they did.

Athlete Characteristics. Throughout the interviews with the coaches, it was clear that there are specific characteristics that the athletes possess that the coaches viewed as determinants of success. Unsurprisingly, the coaches referenced natural ability and physical potential in terms of height, strength, and speed potentials. However, the core themes that they emphasized were mental traits that reflect a growth mindset and included: character, work ethic, drive, hunger, having intrinsic motivation, curiosity, being receptive to feedback, being open to criticism, being insightful, honestly evaluating weaknesses, taking the opportunity with both hands, and not taking anything for granted. The coaches shared that the athletes who get the most out of the Academy and who are

the most successful are intrinsically motivated and thus driven to succeed. As the motivation is intrinsic, they are process-focused and are playing because it is what they love to do. Jason indicated that the players who stand out the most to him are the ones with the most desire, hunger, and drive and who don't take anything for granted. He further explained that they need to love what they are doing because that drives all of the daily habits that create success.

“You have to absolutely love it, uh and love what you're doing, and be so curious, and so excited to see what you can do with something, and then, and then you work with that to coach that. I don't think you can, I don't know, I don't think you can teach someone to love what they're doing. ... If they don't have that real love for it and the desire and the drive, or even just the love to improve and learn about the game, then I don't know; it doesn't quite translate.”

He further revealed how that love drives the players' skill because the players who love the sport are apt to spend the most time with the ball and therefore develop the necessary qualities with the ball. Jason described this as an innate skill that the athletes come in with or not. He did not think that this was something that could be coached or taught but rather harnessed when it is present. Shawn also mirrored this sentiment. He highlighted that those who get the most out of the environment are intrinsically motivated and have a different mentality than other players.

“You can just tell they're, they're driven, they're on a different level. I've had players that, you know, you've got all the technique in the world and can do anything, but there's something missing. I'm saying that like there's something different from them to someone who's not as naturally gifted as them but, you know, has, is obsessed with things, is such a competitor, so determined not to fail that, those are the ones that jump out, those are the ones that normally end up really making it.”

He further detailed that those intrinsically motivated players are able to recognize their own weaknesses, are more open to criticism, and demonstrate the most substantial work ethic. He described that there is no obstacle that intrinsically motivated players cannot overcome. In comparison, he explained that extrinsically motivated players who

are motivated by fame are “not willing to do everything to get there.” Thus, that intrinsic motivation drives work ethic, a constant striving for learning and improvement, an openness to feedback, and insight into their own strengths and weaknesses. Those players, then, are those who demonstrate a growth mindset and see an obstacle as a challenge versus a threat. He mirrored Jason’s views that this cannot be taught, at least not at this age. He indicated that he thought that if they were working with younger players in the development stage, there might be more opportunity to impact their mindset at that level.

Similarly, Allan observed that the “difference makers” are the players who can do something different and are the ones that tend to make it. He felt that the key traits that make those players stand apart are their high work rate and ability to truly give their best effort. Additionally, he identified the ability to adapt to each new environment as paramount to success:

“Look, this is the here and now. You play for another coach, there’ll be different rules. Another club, there’ll be different rules. But again, that ability to adapt to each environment will be a big part in your future as a player, as a person.”

He also indicated that how players view mistakes differentiates those who will have the most success from those who will not be as successful. He explained that some players are terrified of making a mistake and focus on the fact that they will not get signed if they make one, while others enjoy the process and accept the outcome. He emphasized the importance of playing with freedom, focusing on the process, and letting the outcome be what it will.

Overall, the coaches described that the individual characteristics that separate the most successful players from the others are: having an intrinsic motivation, which leads to greater work ethic, more honest evaluations of their abilities, openness to feedback, and a mindset that allows them to take the opportunity with both hands and not take anything for granted. The coaches were unsure if that could be taught, but they certainly recognized its importance for success.

Theory

The results from the athlete interviews brought forth a number of themes that can be understood within the following framework: whether or not the athletes fully embrace the opportunity, being in that competitive, professional environment creates a challenge that forces athletes to improve their life skills, specifically their communication, confidence, work ethic, drive, and sense of self through the physical environment, relationships, and culture. A mindset framework was applied to the athletes' descriptions of their approach to the Academy. Whether they reflected a growth or a fixed mindset emerged as a critical factor that determines whether the environment is fully embraced or not. Specifically, whether the athletes were open to or defensive about receiving feedback, whether they viewed competition as a challenge or a threat, how they interpreted coach feedback, and how they experienced and interpreted the relationships in the Academy were some of the areas where individual differences were observed.

The athletes who were open to feedback, viewed competition as a challenge, incorporated and embraced feedback, and reported positive relationships with their teammates and coaches demonstrated a growth mindset. Consequently, they reported more positive experiences in the Academy and reported greater psychosocial growth. From the coaches' perspectives, these same growth characteristics were identified as determinants of success. The athlete's intrinsic motivation was described as a core trait that led to improved work ethic, openness to feedback, and rising to the challenge. The coaches were unsure if these traits could be taught, but they indicated that when they see those core traits, they are able to harness them to maximize the athletes' potential and growth. The coaches questioned whether these traits are developed earlier in the players' development or if they can be taught. They suggested that the athletes' parents likely play a significant role in developing these characteristics.

Additionally, the fit of the home environment (billet vs. living locally) and the family dynamics were themes that affected the psychosocial growth of the athletes and their interpretations of their experiences. For example, Ivan had the added adjustment of acclimatizing to a billet environment that was very different from his home environment. His living situation created an additional challenge for him. It limited his resources in terms of having supportive people around him that he could rely on when he was coping with challenges in the Academy. The other three players that were interviewed were

living at home with their families and described their parents' support and involvement as helpful for them. Ivan's billet family was quite different, culturally, from his own family, and it is unclear from the present study if matching the athlete to a more culturally similar host family would change that dynamic or not.

Speaking to psychosocial growth, it was evident that being in the Academy environment facilitated the development of specific life skills. However, the environment alone was not sufficient in promoting all life skills. Using Danish and Nellen's (2015) model, the current study showed improvement for all of the athletes in the following areas: behavioural attributes (e.g., effective communication with peers or adults); cognitive attributes (e.g., effective decision making); interpersonal attributes (e.g., being assertive); and intrapersonal attributes (e.g., effective goal setting) (Danish & Nellen, 2015; Danish, Taylor, Hodge, & Heke, 2004). However, in the areas of physical attributes (e.g., throwing, kicking, running), it is conceivable that those who embraced the environment, demonstrated a growth mindset, and developed positive relationships with their teammates and coaches saw greater improvement in these areas as evidenced by their playing time and retention in or release from the program. Using the 4 C's (competence, confidence, connection, and character; Côté & Gilbert, 2009) framework, again we see improvement across the board in all areas. However, greater improvement was found in the area of competence (physical performance) for those who seized the opportunity and who developed positive relationships.

The results from the coach interviews revealed a number of key themes that suggest that the coaches' impact on facilitating psychosocial growth can be understood within the following framework: The Academy environment creates the foundation from which the coaches apply their personal coaching philosophies, which is driven from their personal experiences as athletes, and which places a great emphasis on developing strong interpersonal relationship with the athletes. The coaches identified a number of cultural and individual factors that are largely outside of their control, which play an important role in the magnitude of their impact on the athletes. For example, the key themes of being immersed in the Canadian culture, the athletes' family environment or pre-Academy life, and the cell phone culture emerged as limiting factors that affected the coaches' ability to connect with athletes and the scope of work they were able to undertake. Additionally, there were a number of individual characteristics that the coaches identified as determinants of success and which they indicated are largely pre-

existing when the athletes enter the Academy. These characteristics included the athletes' motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic) which drives their openness to feedback, their level of work ethic, how they respond to challenges, and whether they fully embrace everything that the Academy has to offer or not. Given these pre-existing conditions, the coaches' impact is limited to the environment that they create within the Academy and is largely dependent on their ability to form a strong relationship with each athlete.

Altogether, the coaches presented a mastery model approach to coaching where they heavily emphasize the developmental aspects of the sport and a process-oriented focus. Within that process-focused model, the athletes' work ethic was identified as something that is completely under the athletes' control, is paramount to success, and is heavily stressed and tied to the outcome: "What you put in is what you'll get out," which models a growth mindset. The coaches also emphasized that work ethic is the way through challenging times and yields increased confidence, which again reflects that growth mindset. The coaches identified understanding each athlete and developing a strong relationship with each athlete as foundational to their ability to work effectively with them. The coaches indicated that they work to get to know the athletes on and off the field and strive to understand what motivates them so that they can tailor their coaching style to each individual, which reflects the player-centered approach that all of the coaches identified as the core to their coaching philosophy.

The Academy environment was a key theme in the coaches' experience as it provided the foundation for their ability to work. Specifically, the coaches referenced the access to facilities, the Senior team values, the competitive environment, and the contact time as important factors that are directed by the Senior team and incorporated into their coaching style and philosophy. Within that environment, the coaches differed slightly in terms of what aspects they emphasized. While all of the coaches identified that relationship-building is the most critical factor to success, they each emphasized different elements in their coaching. For example, the coaches explained how their motivation to coach came from wanting to pass on what they learned from their own experiences, and they revealed how their methods were shaped by what was missing in their own experiences. For example, Jason emphasizes how much work it takes to be successful because he believed that he gave up too early and did not have that support from his coaches in his playing career. Shawn indicated that he wants to make sure that no one makes the same mistakes that he did and he tries to instill an assertive style of

play. Overall, the Academy coaches described their personal philosophies as player-centered, with the majority of their focus on relationship building, skill development, and increasing work ethic. The approach that the coaches depicted reflects a mastery-oriented environment as described by Petipas et al. (2005), which also reflects the optimal growth mindset model proposed by Vella et al. (2014).

Member Checking

Consistent with the grounded theory approach, the above theory was presented to all of the participants to provide them with an opportunity to reflect on the theory and provide feedback about whether it accurately captured their experience with the Academy. Two coach participants and one athlete participant provided feedback on the theory. All three participants reflected that the theory accurately represented their feedback. One coach shared that it was enjoyable to re-read his transcript, “Wow - I really enjoyed reading through all of this... Really interesting to go back on my thoughts and views in this interview, I still see coaching the same way!” The athlete who responded felt that the theory captured his experience and he expressed curiosity over how his answers might have changed since the time of the interview. Overall, the feedback from the participants adds credibility to the findings and interpretations of the data as they indicated that it accurately represented their experiences.

Discussion

Consistent with previous research, the findings from the current study revealed that the Academy environment created the foundations to promote psychosocial growth. Using Bean et al’s. (2018) model, the Academy appears to effectively structure the sport context to: create an environment where athletes feel safe to take risks and learn from mistakes; facilitate positive relationships, although the degree to which this was true varied based on individual characteristics of the athletes; discuss life skills (e.g., “what you put in is what you get out,” “what you do off the field is as important as on the field”); and provide opportunities to practice life skills through goal setting, modeling and practicing effective communication, and mirroring. According to the coach interviews, there is some discussion of the transfer of life skills. However, there did not appear to be opportunities to practice transferring life skills. Thus, the Academy environment exemplifies a number of the levels identified by Bean et al. (2018) and is conducive to

promoting PYD by creating a mastery-oriented environment. While there is some explicit teaching regarding the transfer of life skills, the primary focus of the Academy is on creating a facilitative environment and modeling life skills in the pursuit of athletic excellence. Promotion and transfer of PYD may be improved by increasing the discussion of how life skills can be transferred and by providing opportunities to practice the transfer of life skills. However, the current study suggests that implicit learning of PYD occurs when the environment is structured appropriately to facilitate it.

In addition to creating a facilitative, mastery-oriented environment, the Academy environment provides clear direction on their values along with tangible supports to promote those values, such as a study room, which was an important contextual element identified by Rongen et al. (2021) as conducive to PYD. The current study supported Miller and Kerr's (2002) description that there is something about the sports arena that provides an environment where "adolescents are awake, alive, and open to developmental experiences in a way that is less common in other parts of their daily lives" (p. 175). The experiences of both the athletes and the coaches supported this view. The athletes indicated that being in the Academy environment created a challenge, which led to improved communication skills, increased self-confidence, increased self-knowledge, and increased work ethic. The coaches described that the Academy environment provides more contact time, which allows them to have a greater impact. They further identified that a big part of their role is to create an environment that is like a second home to the athletes where they can work incredibly hard while also maintaining a high level of enjoyment. Athletes and coaches alike attributed much of the experienced psychosocial growth to being in the Academy environment. Consistent with previous research, the results of the current study emphasized the importance of the environment in the promotion and transfer of life skills (e.g., Camiré & Kendellen, 2016; Camiré and Trudel, 2010; Chinkov & Holt, 2016). Specifically, the physical environment and access to services were seen as important as was the mastery-oriented nature of the environment. The current study emphasized that creating a mastery-oriented environment with tangible supports, in addition to the organization's culture and coaches' philosophy, were related to psychosocial growth. However, the *perception* of the environment was more related to enjoyment of the program and performance outcomes rather than PYD and PYD transfer.

Consistent with Chinkov and Holt's (2016) findings, the current study supported the argument that life skills can be implicitly learned if the learning environment is conducive to that. For example, the athletes reported that they experienced growth in terms of their communication skills, self-knowledge, confidence, and work ethic just by being in the Academy environment. The athletes referenced the highly competitive environment of the Academy as important to their experience. Interestingly, some of the athletes reported that they used that environment to increase their motivation and work ethic, demonstrating a growth mindset as described by Dweck (2017). In contrast, another athlete revealed that it caused him to take a step back, which is indicative of a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2017). The athletes' reported that the environment itself led to psychosocial growth regardless of whether they perceived the environment as mastery-oriented or ego-oriented; whether they perceived their coaches as supportive and process focused or outcome-focused; whether or not they experienced close peer relationships; and whether they responded to the demands of the program by increasing work ethic and motivation or whether they took a step back. These findings were also in line with Rongen et al.'s (2021) research that demonstrated implicit life skill development and transfer by all of the interviewed players. Specifically, Rongen et al. (2021) found that professional soccer players in the United Kingdom reported that involvement in their respective academies readied them for life beyond soccer through the development of intra and interpersonal skills. Thus, the current study reinforced the view that implicit learning and transfer of life skills occurs when a player is immersed in a high challenge, mastery-oriented environment.

The current study then does not support previous literature that suggests that psychosocial developmental changes rely on positive or negative relationships with peers, coaches, and parents (e.g., Gould & Carson, 2008; Holt et al., 2009). While the athletes reported that their experience in the Academy was more positive overall when they perceived positive relationships with their coaches and teammates, this did not predict psychosocial growth as all athletes reported psychosocial growth regardless of how they perceived those relationships. This finding was in line with Rongen et al.'s (2021) research, which demonstrated that all players reported PYD. However, they also found that when players experienced the environment as warm and caring they exhibited improved PYD outcomes. Thus, consistent with the current study, the quality of the

relationships is not predictive of psychosocial growth, but it is an important factor in enhancing psychosocial growth.

Interestingly, the coaches all emphasized the need to have a strong relationship with the athletes to get the most out of them. They further indicated that development is impeded when there is not a strong connection between coach and player. The current study suggests that having a strong coach-player relationship has a significant impact on the athlete's sport performance, such that those who reported strong relationships with their coaches had more playing time and were retained in the program. However, the coach-player relationship did not dictate psychosocial growth in other domains. For example, all the athletes reported psychosocial growth just from being in the Academy's high-challenge environment. Specifically, athletes reported that the high demands of the Academy, the need to have conversations with their coaches and teammates without parental support, and the knowledge that they can be released if they do not meet performance standards, forced them to develop improved interpersonal and intrapersonal skills such as improved communication, increased work ethic, and a greater sense of self. This suggests that creating a high-challenge and high support facilitative environment, as described by Fletcher and Sarkar (2016), is critical to PYD and that positive coach-athlete relationship enhances PYD and performance outcomes.

Previous research suggests that creating a task-oriented or mastery environment, where the focus is on effort and self-improvement as opposed to an outcome-focused environment, where the focus is on winning, is conducive to psychosocial growth (Petipas et al., 2005). Bean et al. (2018) extended those findings and suggest an implicit/explicit spectrum where the likelihood of psychosocial growth and life skill development and transfer increases as the coaching becomes more explicit. However, they posit that creating a positive climate with a task-oriented focus can be sufficient to encourage positive youth development. The current study supported this finding as the environment described by the coaches exemplifies a mastery-oriented environment. The coaches embodied a process-oriented focus where their emphasis is on skill development, work ethic, playing style, and personal development (e.g., being respectful, communicating clearly). It was notable, however, that not all of the athletes perceived their coaches or the Academy environment as process-oriented. For example, Ivan indicated that the coaches were not interested in him as a person and that their focus was on the outcome and on weeding out the best players from the rest. Other

athletes reported that their coaches valued work ethic and explained how the focus was always on improvement and work ethic. Thus, while the coaches depicted a mastery approach, not all of the athletes perceived it that way. However, the athletes reported psychosocial growth regardless of how they interpreted the environment. Interestingly, consistent with Drew et al.'s (2019) finding that negative perceptions of a transition lead to unsuccessful transitions, the athlete who perceived the environment as more outcome-focused had a more negative experience in the Academy and was released from the program. Despite having a more negative experience of the environment, improved intrapersonal and interpersonal attributes, as identified by Danish and Nellen (2015), were evidenced by his description of his improved communication skills and stronger sense of self. Furthermore, he expressed wanting to be more than just a soccer player and rejecting the "life or death" attitude of his teammates, which was indicative of identity exploration (Marcia, 1966) and intrapersonal growth. The current study supports the idea that a mastery-oriented environment promotes psychosocial growth, even when it is not interpreted that way by the athlete(s). However, it points to enhanced psychosocial growth, improved performance, and greater enjoyment when the environment is perceived as growth oriented.

An exploration of individual differences in how the athletes responded to the high-challenge environment of the Academy revealed differences in the athletes' mindset, which impacted how they responded to and interpreted their environment. Specifically, those athletes who exhibited a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017) described seizing the challenge of the Academy environment and using it to increase their motivation and work ethic. As well, consistent with previous findings, they interpreted their environment as growth-oriented, were receptive to feedback, and used setbacks as opportunities to improve (Dweck, 2017). Exhibiting a fixed mindset led to taking a step back from the highly competitive environment, not being receptive to feedback, and viewing the environment as performance/outcome-focused (Dweck, 2017). From the coaches' perspective, they observed greater levels of intrinsic motivation, drive, passion, enjoyment, and work ethic, which are characteristics of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017), in the most successful athletes. They were unsure whether these characteristics could be taught at the age they were coaching, if they were innate, or acquired at a younger age. The coaches agreed, however, that when they develop a strong, interpersonal

relationship with the athletes, they are able to bring out more of those characteristics, which leads to greater life skill development and improved athletic performance.

The current study then, supported the theory that having a growth mindset leads to a more positive experience, greater enjoyment, improved skill acquisition, improved performance, increased persistence, and increased work ethic (Biddle et al., 2003; Jourden, Bandura, & Banfield, 1991; Kasimitis et al., 1996; Van Yperen & Duda, 1999). It is unclear from the current research if the athletes' mindsets were affected by the Academy environment and the coach relationships or not as the coaches and athletes were interviewed at a single time point. While the Academy environment reflects the facilitative environment with a high level of challenge, high levels of support, focus on development and work ethic, and uses setbacks as learning opportunities (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2016; Vella et al., 2014), based on the current findings it is difficult to say whether there was any change in terms of the athletes' mindsets through their involvement in the Academy.

The current research has clinically significant implications for coaches, athletes, and sport psychologists. The current findings suggest that creating a mastery-oriented, facilitative environment is conducive to psychosocial growth and that that growth may be implicitly learned and does not need to be explicitly taught. Thus, coaches should emphasize work ethic, technical, tactical, and emotional development and embrace setbacks as opportunities. Based on the current research, it follows that an athlete's mindset should be assessed before, during, and following involvement in an athletic program such as the Academy. Additionally, coaches and athletes alike should be trained to foster a growth mindset. Research has indicated that mindsets are malleable and can be affected through training (Spray et al., 2006). For example, cognitive re-framing is an effective tool to embrace mistakes and setbacks as learning opportunities. Borrowing from Marlatt and Gordon's (1985) relapse prevention model, in sport, setbacks should be viewed as an indicator of which areas require focus and improved preparation. Shifting the focus towards using setbacks as opportunities for growth decreases the likelihood that mistakes are interpreted as personal failing or weakness and leads to greater engagement and motivation (Marlatt & Gordon, 1985).

In the current study, the athletes' mindset affected how they interpreted their environment and how they responded to the high-challenge situation of the Academy.

Thus, an athletes' mindset should be evaluated, and those in coach and support roles should promote the development of a growth mindset. A growth mindset can be encouraged through the emphasis of work ethic as the thing that is in the athletes' control and as the main determinant of their success. Furthermore, coaches should focus on the process as opposed to the outcome. For example, the emphasis should be placed on personal improvement and skill development rather than on "winning the game." Additionally, when setting goals there should be an emphasis placed on performance versus outcome goals. Performance goals focus on skills that are largely in the players' control and that affect how they perform. For example, performance goals include applying technical and tactical skills, rebounding after a mistake, managing emotions, maintaining focus and level of play throughout a game. Of course, in competitive environments, the outcome matters and should not be ignored. However, encouraging athletes to focus their attention on the things that are in their control, such as how they prepare for practice and games, what attitude they bring to the field, how they respond to mistakes in a game, and how they manage their emotions will lead to greater feelings of competency and mastery, greater enjoyment, and improved resiliency in the face of setbacks, which will, in turn, lead to improvements in performance. This study provides useful information for implementing sport psychology strategies and interventions within Canada in regard to better understanding and facilitating psychosocial development and growth in their youth athletes.

Additionally, the quantitative results revealed some variability in terms of the athletes' emotion regulation skills and mental health. As this was assessed at only one time point, the current study was unable to determine if the variability was pre-existing to the athlete's involvement in the Academy, a result of participation in the Academy, or due to other factors. Effective emotion regulation skill has been shown to facilitate performance in elite sport (Taylor & Collins, 2019), facilitate successful transition from a junior to senior level (Drew et al., 2019), and differentiate athletes who are selected for advancement from those who are not (Taylor & Collins, 2019). Elite athletes have typically demonstrated superior emotion regulation skill when compared to their non-athlete counterparts (Bell, 2015). It is interesting, then, that the current study demonstrated some variability in this area. The athletes' scores on the two quantitative measures reflected difficulties with emotion regulation and mental health in the clinically significant range for some of the athletes. In contrast, others demonstrated effective

emotion regulation skill and positive mental health outcomes. This is an important factor that sport psychologists should assess, monitor, and address if clinically significant concerns are revealed. This is a particularly relevant discussion given the current climate, where athletes are becoming more vocal about their mental health and are demanding that sport programs and their coaches are responsive to their needs. In Canada, there is increasing evidence that high-performance athletes experience mental health concerns and that there are a number of barriers that limit access to support (Van Slingerland et al., 2019). Historically, mental health conditions have been underestimated in athletic populations (Schinke et al., 2018) and recent data indicates that rates of mental illness are comparable between athlete and non-athlete populations (Rice et al., 2016). Traditionally, sport culture has valued mental toughness and, thus, psychological distress was stigmatized and perceived as weakness (Bissett, 2020). It is clear that elite athletes experience unique challenges resulting from being in high pressure arenas where their performance is publicly judged and criticized. Thus, it is important that athletes are provided with resources to address their mental health concerns. Specifically, it is recommended that organizations have standardized screening protocols that regularly assess athlete's mental health, which would increase identification of mental health concerns, reduce stigma, and reduce the need for athletes to self-identify (Durand-Bush & Van Slingerland, 2021). Furthermore, it is important that coaches are sensitive to their athletes' mental health needs and create a supportive environment. Specifically, it is recommended that coaches receive psychoeducation regarding mental health in order to develop mental health literacy and facilitate early intervention by referring athletes in need of mental health support (Schinke et al., 2018). A collaborative and mastery-oriented environment also supports positive mental health outcomes.

Strengths and Considerations

The current study's methods and design have a number of strengths and weaknesses. One strength of the current research is that it addressed some of the gaps in the literature regarding the development of psychosocial skills through sport. Specifically, there is debate in the field in terms of whether psychosocial skills need to be explicitly taught or if they can be implicitly learned. There is also a dearth of research that has examined how psychosocial skills are developed and transferred between contexts. The qualitative method employed in this study, in which in-depth interviews

were conducted, is conducive to exploring new areas such as how coaches teach and develop life skills in their athletes (Gould & Carson, 2008). The data that emerged in the current study has illuminated some of the processes through which life skills are developed. It has highlighted the role that mindset plays in psychosocial skill development and supported previous research regarding the role of the environment in promoting psychosocial development (Bean et al., 2018; Camiré and Kendellen, 2016; Camiré and Trudel, 2010; Chinkov & Holt, 2016; Petitpas et al., 2005; Rongen, 2021). The current study somewhat refuted the importance of the relationships with coaches, parents, and peers in psychosocial development.

The current research supported previous findings that indicate that creating a mastery-oriented environment leads to greater psychosocial growth (e.g., Bean et al., 2018; Drew et al., 2019; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Henrikson & Stambulova, 2017; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Petitpas et al., 2005; Rongen et al., 2021; Watson, 2011) and that this growth can be implicitly learned if the environment is receptive to it (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). However, there were individual differences in the athletes' interpretations of the environment, which reflected their different mindsets. Because athletes were interviewed at a single timepoint and their mindsets were not explicitly evaluated, rather it emerged as important from their report, it is unclear from the current research if the athletes' mindsets were affected by the environment and their relationship with their coach or not. Future research should explore whether being in the Academy environment, or a similar elite athlete development program, affects an athlete's mindset by promoting a growth or fixed mindset or if that is something that is developed at a younger age. Additionally, there was clinically significant variability in the scores on the quantitative measures such that some of the athletes scored above and below the clinical cut-off points, indicating that some of the athletes had clinically significant difficulty with emotion regulation and overall mental health. It would be interesting to explore whether these scores are predictive of the athletes' experiences in the Academy, a result of their experiences in the Academy, or independent of their experiences in the Academy. Future research should examine whether an athletes' emotion regulation skill and overall mental health are predictive of performance and mindsets in elite athletes.

As the current study focused on a specific Academy and environment, there was limited variability in the coaches' approaches and philosophies. Thus, their experiences may not be generalizable to coaches in other settings or other sports. Future research

should explore how coaches in other settings and other sports experience their role in promoting psychosocial growth. Similarly, all the athletes who were interviewed participated in the same Academy and were exposed to the same environment, peers, and coaches. While this provided a useful comparison when exploring individual differences of their experience, it limits the ability to generalize to other athletes in other settings. Future research should explore how athletes in other settings interpret their experiences.

Another limitation of the current study was that it looked at the experiences of a very homogenous group in terms of age and gender of the athletes. All of the athletes were males and participated in the U-17 group, ranging in age from 15 to 17 years old. It would be interesting to explore how psychosocial growth and mindsets are impacted at younger ages. It would be useful to further examine the coaches' suggestions that mindsets and the core traits of intrinsic motivation, drive, and passion are developed and taught at an early age. Future research should examine what role parents play in developing these characteristics and whether they can be taught at younger ages or if these are more innate, fixed traits. Future research should also explore how female, and LGBT2Q elite athletes interpret their experiences regarding psychosocial growth through sport.

Future Directions

A number of recommendations for future research have been suggested throughout this discussion. The results of the current study suggest that further exploration into the experience of elite athletes and coaches regarding the development of psychosocial skills through sport is warranted. Future research may expand upon the current study design in a number of ways. Specifically, future research should explore the role of emotion regulation skill and mental health on psychosocial development in a more in-depth way. The current study used the quantitative instruments to provide a snapshot of emotion regulation skill and mental health functioning. Future researchers may want to utilize a mixed-method design to examine larger samples of elite athletes and to explore the relationship between emotion regulation skill, mental health, psychosocial skill development, and participation in elite sports. Specifically, future research should assess emotion regulation and mental health at various time points throughout the season to elucidate the role it plays in psychosocial skill development.

There is a dearth of research that examines psychosocial skill development in female athletes as well as in the LGBT2Q community. Future research should address this gap and explore how the experiences of female and LGBT2Q athletes and coaches may be similar or disparate regarding the development of psychosocial skill through sport. Additionally, it would be useful for future research to examine how an athlete's developmental stage may impact their ability to acquire and transfer life skills through sport. Specifically, it has been suggested that younger individuals are not able to implicitly acquire and transfer life skills between settings (Allen et al., 2015). Thus, researchers may wish to take a longitudinal approach to expand on the current study and follow athletes through multiple developmental stages.

The previous discussion offers a number of suggestions regarding clinical implications that may be useful to elite athletic organizations as well as to their coaching and support staff. Organizations, such as the Academy that are working with elite youth athletes, should consider implementing some screening and monitoring processes to assess players' mental health (Durand-Bush & Van Slingerland, 2021; Schinke et al., 2018). The Academy, or similar organizations, may consider implementing specific referral processes for their athletes to facilitate access to psychological clinics and mental health training (Durand-Bush & Van Slingerland, 2021). To do so effectively, requires that coaches and staff first develop mental health literacy by engaging in psychoeducational training (Durand-Bush & Van Slingerland, 2021; Schinke et al., 2018). Recent research suggests that problematic cell phone use negatively affects athlete performance and mental health (Ong et al., 2022). It is recommended that the Academy, or similar organizations, implement educational programs that promotes healthy cell phone use and builds awareness around effects of problematic cell phone use (Ong et al., 2022). Mindfulness based interventions have been shown to promote well-being, enhance performance, and to protect against stress (Bell, 2015; Schinke et al., 2018) and should be incorporated into academy settings. It would be helpful for youth coming from out of the region to be referred to a peer-based support group or to be connected with a senior mentor in the program to facilitate their transition into the organization. Research suggests that connecting athletes with a senior athlete mentor facilitates talent development and the transition from the junior to senior level (Bruner et al., 2008; Schinke et al., 2018).

Conclusions

Previous studies that have explored the development of psychosocial skills through sport, have not considered *how* those skills are developed and transferred between settings, nor have they explored the greater contextual factors that may affect athletes' and coaches' experiences of psychosocial growth. Elite, youth athletes, are a unique population with specific demands and stresses on them as they are required, at a young age, to learn how to employ effective time management skills to balance their sport, school, and life responsibilities. They are also required to manage stressors that are unique to being a student-athlete, such as managing school and practice schedules as well as frequently being in the spotlight. These unique challenges create greater opportunities for individuals to develop life skills, such as communication skills, goal setting, emotion regulation, persistence in the face of adversity, and improved work ethic (e.g., Camiré and Kendellen, 2016; Camiré and Trudel, 2010; Chinkov & Holt, 2016). However, the extant research also indicates that these challenges places higher demands on athletes, which can lead to psychological distress (Larson et al., 2006; Markser, 2011; Purcell, 2020).

The current study revealed that the high-challenge, mastery-oriented environment of a program such as the Academy leads to psychosocial growth and development regardless of how the athletes interpret the environment. However, those who reported positive relationships with their coaches and peers also reported greater psychosocial growth and improved performance as evidenced by their retention in the Academy. The current study suggests that creating a mastery-oriented or facilitative environment is critical to the promotion of PYD. Further, while positive coach and peer relationships were important to enjoyment of and engagement in the Academy and led to improved performance, PYD occurred regardless of how the relationships were interpreted. Thus, the current study suggests that the role of the environment is more important than the coach-athlete relationships in the promotion of PYD. However, I would argue that it is difficult to separate the role of the environment from that of the coach as the coach plays a pivotal role in creating that mastery-oriented environment.

The current study further revealed that an athlete's mindset differentiated between those who were the most successful in the program, performance-wise and that employing a growth mindset enhanced PYD. From the coach's perspective, those with a

growth mindset demonstrated the greatest amounts of intrinsic motivation and drive, which led to improved work ethic and receptiveness to feedback. Athletes who demonstrated a primarily growth-oriented mindset, were able to seize the opportunity and embrace the high-challenge environment of the Academy. These athletes demonstrated more growth in the physical domain and described their experience more positively overall. However, all athletes regardless of their mindset reported psychosocial growth.

In sum, to maximize an athlete's psychosocial development, athletic organizations, coaches, and support staff should assess athletes' mindsets, emotion regulation skill, and overall mental health. Further, athletic organizations should employ strategies that promote a growth mindset, such as prioritizing process and skill development over results, embracing mistakes as learning opportunities, creating high-challenge and high-support environments, and emphasizing work ethic as a determinant of success, to increase the effectiveness of their programming and to encourage greater psychosocial growth.

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Appendix A.

Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale

Source: Gratz, K. L. & Roemer, L. (2004). Multidimensional assessment of emotion regulation and dysregulation: Development, factor structure, and initial validation of the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*, 26, 41-54.

Response categories:

- 1 Almost never (0-10%)
- 2 Sometimes (11-35%)
- 3 About half the time (36-65%)
- 4 Most of the time (66 – 90%)
- 5 Almost always (91-100%)

- 1. I am clear about my feelings.
- 2. I pay attention to how I feel.
- 3. I experience my emotions as overwhelming and out of control.
- 4. I have no idea how I am feeling.
- 5. I have difficulty making sense out of my feelings.
- 6. I am attentive to my feelings.
- 7. I know exactly how I am feeling.
- 8. I care about what I am feeling.
- 9. I am confused about how I feel.
- 10. When I'm upset, I acknowledge my emotions.
- 11. When I'm upset, I become angry with myself for feeling that way.
- 12. When I'm upset, I become embarrassed for feeling that way.

13. When I'm upset, I have difficulty getting work done.
14. When I'm upset, I become out of control.
15. When I'm upset, I believe that I will remain that way for a long time.
16. When I'm upset, I believe that I'll end up feeling very depressed.
17. When I'm upset, I believe that my feelings are valid and important.
18. When I'm upset, I have difficulty focusing on other things.
19. When I'm upset, I feel out of control.
20. When I'm upset, I can still get things done.
21. When I'm upset, I feel ashamed with myself for feeling that way.
22. When I'm upset, I know that I can find a way to eventually feel better.
23. When I'm upset, I feel like I am weak.
24. When I'm upset, I feel like I can remain in control of my behaviors.
25. When I'm upset, I feel guilty for feeling that way.
26. When I'm upset, I have difficulty concentrating.
27. When I'm upset, I have difficulty controlling my behaviors.
28. When I'm upset, I believe there is nothing I can do to make myself feel better.
29. When I'm upset, I become irritated with myself for feeling that way.
30. When I'm upset, I start to feel very bad about myself.
31. When I'm upset, I believe that wallowing in it is all I can do.
32. When I'm upset, I lose control over my behaviors.
33. When I'm upset, I have difficulty thinking about anything else.
34. When I'm upset, I take time to figure out what I'm really feeling.
35. When I'm upset, it takes me a long time to feel better.
36. When I'm upset, my emotions feel overwhelming.

Appendix B.

Youth Outcome Questionnaire

Youth Outcome Questionnaire (Y-OQ® 2.01)

Name _____ Date _____

Never or Almost Never Rarely Sometimes Frequently Almost Always or Always

PURPOSE: The Y-OQ® 2.01 is designed to describe a wide range of troublesome situations, behaviors, and moods that are common to adolescents. You may discover that some of the items do not apply to your current situation. If so, please do not leave these items blank but check the "Never or almost never" category. When you begin to complete the Y-OQ® 2.01 you will see that you can easily make yourself look as healthy or unhealthy as you wish. Please do not do that. If you are as accurate as possible it is more likely that you will be able to receive the help that you are seeking.

DIRECTIONS:

- Read each statement carefully
- Decide how true this statement is during the past 7 days.
- Completely fill the circle that most accurately describes the past week.
- Fill in only one answer for each statement and erase unwanted marks clearly.

Developed by
Gawain Wells, Ph.D.,
Gary M. Burlingame, Ph.D. and
Michael J. Lambert, Ph.D.

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- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I want to be alone more than other children of the same age..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2. I have headaches or feel dizzy..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 3. I don't participate in activities that used to be fun..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 4. I argue or speak rudely to others..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 5. I have more fears than other my age..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 6. I cut classes or skip school altogether..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 7. I cooperate with rules and expectations of adults..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 8. I have a hard time finishing assignments, or I do.....
them carelessly | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 9. I complain about things that are unfair | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 10. I have trouble with constipation or diarrhea..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 11. I have physical fights (hitting, kicking, biting, or scratching.....
with my family or others my age. | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 12. I worry and can't get thoughts out of my mind..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 13. I steal or lie..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 14. I have a hard time sitting still (or I have too much energy)..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 15. I feel anxious or nervous..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 16. I talk with others in a friendly way..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 17. I am tense and easily startled (jumpy)..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 18. I have trouble with wetting or messing my pants or bed..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 19. I physically fight with adults..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 20. I see, hear, or believe in things that are not real..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 21. I have hurt myself on purpose (for example cut, scratched.....
or attempted suicide) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 22. I use alcohol or drugs..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 23. I am disorganized (or I can't seem to get organized)..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 24. I enjoy my relationships with family and friends..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 25. I am sad or unhappy..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 26. I have pain or weakness in muscles or joints..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 27. I have a hard time trusting friends.....
family members, or other adults. | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 28. I think that others are trying to hurt me even.....
when they are not | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 29. I have threatened to, or have run away from home..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 30. My emotions are strong and change quickly..... | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Youth Outcome Questionnaire (Y-OQ® 2.01)

Name _____ Date _____

Never or Almost Never Rarely Sometimes Frequently Almost Always or Always

PURPOSE: The Y-OQ® 2.01 is designed to describe a wide range of troublesome situations, behaviors, and moods that are common to adolescents. You may discover that some of the items do not apply to your current situation. If so, please do not leave these items blank but check the "Never or almost never" category. When you begin to complete the Y-OQ® 2.01 you will see that you can easily make yourself look as healthy or unhealthy as you wish. Please do not do that. If you are as accurate as possible it is more likely that you will be able to receive the help that you are seeking.

DIRECTIONS:

- Read each statement carefully
- Decide how true this statement is during the past 7 days.
- Completely fill the circle that most accurately describes the past week.
- Fill in only one answer for each statement and erase unwanted marks clearly.

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31. I break rules, laws, or don't meet others' expectations on purpose.....	0	0	0	0	0
32. I am happy with myself.....	0	0	0	0	0
33. I pout, cry, or feel sorry for myself more than others my age.....	0	0	0	0	0
34. I withdraw from my family and friends.....	0	0	0	0	0
35. My stomach hurts or I feel sick more..... than others my age.	0	0	0	0	0
36. I don't have friends or keep friends very long.....	0	0	0	0	0
37. My parents or guardians don't approve of my friends.....	0	0	0	0	0
38. I think I can hear other people's thoughts..... or they can hear mine	0	0	0	0	0
39. I am involved in sexual behavior that my family..... would not approve of	0	0	0	0	0
40. I have a hard time waiting for my turn in activities or conversations....	0	0	0	0	0
41. I think about suicide or feel..... I would be better off dead	0	0	0	0	0
42. I have nightmares, trouble getting to sleep oversleeping, or waking up from sleep too early	0	0	0	0	0
43. I complain about or question rules, expectations..... or responsibilities	0	0	0	0	0
44. I have times of unusual happiness or excessive energy.....	0	0	0	0	0
45. I'm generally okay with frustration or boredom	0	0	0	0	0
46. I am afraid I am going crazy.....	0	0	0	0	0
47. I feel guilty when I do something wrong.....	0	0	0	0	0
48. I demand a lot from others or I am pushy.....	0	0	0	0	0
49. I feel irritated.....	0	0	0	0	0
50. I throw-up or feel sick to my stomach more than others my age.....	0	0	0	0	0
51. I get angry enough to threaten others.....	0	0	0	0	0
52. I get into trouble when bored.....	0	0	0	0	0
53. I'm hopeful and optimistic.....	0	0	0	0	0
54. Muscles in my face, arms..... or body twitch or jerk	0	0	0	0	0
55. I destroy property on purpose.....	0	0	0	0	0
56. I have a hard time concentrating, thinking clearly, or..... sticking to tasks	0	0	0	0	0
57. I get down on myself and blame myself for things that go wrong.....	0	0	0	0	0
58. I have lost a lot of weight without being sick.....	0	0	0	0	0
59. I act without thinking and don't worry about what will happen.....	0	0	0	0	0
60. I am calm.....	0	0	0	0	0
61. I don't forgive myself for things I've done wrong.....	0	0	0	0	0
62. I don't have much energy.....	0	0	0	0	0
63. I feel like I don't have any friends, or that..... no one likes me	0	0	0	0	0
64. I get frustrated or upset easily and give up.....	0	0	0	0	0

Appendix C.

Interview Protocol- Coaches

- 1. Tell me about your coaching philosophy and how that has developed**
 - a. What is your experience with coaching?
 - b. How long have you been coaching? How about with ACADEMY
 - c. What do you see as your personal strengths and weaknesses as a coach?
 - d. How do you plan on continuing to develop as a coach?
 - e. What characteristics do you feel make a great coach?
 - f. Can you describe a coach who has had the greatest impact on you as an athlete or coach?
- 2. Describe the impact that your involvement in sport has had on your own life**
 - a. As an athlete?
 - b. As a coach?
 - c. How have you developed as a coach since coming to ACADEMY?
- 3. Describe the changes you've seen in the athletes you've coached and how you feel you contributed to that?**
 - a. Can you give me examples?
 - b. Looking back, are there any athletes that you worked with that stand out in your mind?
 - c. What makes them stand out?
 - d. Looking back over all of the cohorts you worked with, were there certain athletes or whole cohorts that, you felt, benefitted more from the ACADEMY than others?
 - e. What do you think made them benefit more? Were there certain personality characteristics that those who really benefitted had in common?
 - f. In what areas did you see improvements/changes?
 - g. Were there certain athletes/cohorts who did not seem to benefit at all or as much as others?

- h. Why do you think they didn't benefit as much as others? Were there certain personality characteristics that those who didn't benefit had in common?
 - i. How do you see your role in their growth and development through the program?
- 4. Describe the selection and advancement processes for these athletes?**
- a. In what areas are they evaluated?
 - b. Describe the 'type' of athlete that you feel excels the most when advanced to the next level.
 - c. What characteristic(s) do you see in your athletes that you feel best predicts success at the professional level?
- 5. After having these experiences, what advice would you give to someone just starting out in coaching? What about at this, elite level?**
- 6. Is there anything else you think I should know to understand your experience with ACADEMY better?**

Appendix D.

Interview Protocol- Youth Participants

- 1. Tell me about where you come from and how you came to be a part of ACADEMY**
 - a. Tell me about your relationship with your parents/caregivers
 - b. Tell me about your life before you came to ACADEMY
 - c. What things were important in your household?
 - d. Describe your homelife. Where are your parents from? What things do they value?
- 2. Tell me what kind of influence/impact ACADEMY has had on you?**
 - a. How has ACADEMY changed/influenced your approach to sports (specifically soccer), school, health, your community and your relationships (friends, peers, parents, siblings, teachers, etc.)?
 - b. Can you give me examples?
 - c. What positive changes, if any, have occurred in your life since becoming involved with ACADEMY?
 - d. What negative changes, if any, have occurred in your life since becoming involved with ACADEMY?
 - e. Could you describe the most important lessons you learned through your experience with ACADEMY?
 - f. How has the experience here been different from your previous athletic experience?
- 3. Describe the impact your ACADEMY coaches have had on you?**
 - a. Can you give me examples?
 - b. How was this relationship different from other relationships in your life (with parents, friends, teachers, other coaches, etc.)?
 - c. Were there any coaches that had a particular impact on you? Why those coaches?
- 4. Describe how you feel you have changed/grown/developed since coming to the ACADEMY**
 - a. What activities/experiences stand out as important to you? Why?

- b. Have other people (parents, friends, coaches) observed any changes in you? Give examples.
- 5. **Is there anything else you think I should know to understand your experience with the ACADEMY better?**