Spring 2024

Character Education and its Effects on Athletic Performance

Melissa Brandenburg

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Character Education and its Effects on Athletic Performance

Melissa Brandenburg

Capstone Project: An Action Research Project

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa
Abstract

This action research was driven by the researcher’s current interest in character education for female student-athletes and if the presentation of character education lessons plays a role in player performance. Along with the effects of character education and performance, the researcher also tried to decipher if timing of lesson delivery had an overall impact on the performance of the student-athlete. This quantitative action research took four weeks to complete with presentation of weekly lessons and student-athlete feedback in the form of a Google Form questionnaire. The researcher, a varsity head softball coach, enlisted in the voluntary help of her current athletes to conduct the research. The findings revealed the majority of participants were directly affected by the character education lessons’ message; the timing of the lesson, prior to practice versus competition, was irrelevant as data reported similar results. The action research was conducted to guide future athletic and activity programs in delivery of transformational coaching strategies.

*Keywords: character education, student-athlete, transformational coaching*
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Character Education and its Effects on Athletic Performance

Character education curriculum and lessons are being introduced and embedded into the daily lives of student-athletes and non-athletes with the hopes of increasing overall social emotional wellness for student-athletes and students. Moral decision-making is at the core of a stable and successful society. Often the development of moral decision making and the foundational components of those decisions are learned in schools and through participation in sports (Flynn & LaFrance, 2019). Numerous social emotional and character development programs have shown significant research-based results. For instance, an intervention was integrated with school instruction, so the curriculum was developed in six transversal projects, including other activities (i.e., peer mentoring, individualized tutoring, vocational and professional guidance, internships in a professional environment), which were carried out by a team of previously trained teachers and educators (Fernandez-Martin et al., 2024). Furthermore, several programs exist that promote positive school culture and climate. The emergence of the Teaching Game for Understanding was a reaction to concerns that children in school were (a) paying little attention to appearance, (b) gaining very little knowledge about the game, (c) partially achieving endurance, (d) relying too much on coaches and teachers, and (e) lacking development in understanding (because they only act as spectators) and administrative knowledge (Usra et al., 2023). However, character education and positive school culture and climate cannot simply be added to school curricula or created in isolation with sole reliance on singular programmatic solutions (Sojourner, 2014). Little research has been done to show how character development lessons actually benefit the student-athlete beyond instruction. The problem is the effects of the character education lessons on the performance of the student-athlete is unknown.
The purpose of this action research is to identify whether the timing of a character education lesson has a direct correlation on an athlete’s performance and if the effect of the lesson is different between practices and competitions/games. Given that moral and performance character outcomes are recognized as powerful predictors of college and career success, it stands to reason that character education must develop and measure college and career success with as much intensity as we currently measure grade point average (Davidson, 2014). This action research will present character education lessons at different times in hopes that athletic programs will be able to use the outcomes as a starting point for the implementation of character education lessons in the future.

Research for this inquiry was obtained by both Google Scholar and the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College to obtain scholarly, peer-reviewed journals. All scholarly journals for this action research are dated within the past ten years or 2014-current. The author focused primarily on finding research studies that included character education, character development, motivation, student success, leadership development and values across various age ranges and student-athlete types. The scope of the research also included early intervention for character education in preschool age students along with collegiate level student-athletes. Due to the wide range of ages related to the topic, this gives the researcher a better understanding of character development and the developing child/student.

Timing of character education lessons on athletic performance is based on when it is presented to the student-athlete. The belief is that when student-athletes are presented with lessons on values and morals, which can be directly tied to success by their transformational coach, athletic performance would be affected. Lessons with a focus on integrity, fairness, perseverance and teamwork would benefit the student-athlete and their performance. Athletic
performance would improve or increase because student-athletes are performing right after a character education lesson.

The researcher organized the literature review by key themes related to character education and the student-athlete. The literature review will begin with the importance of embedding character education into a developing students’ day. Next the literature review will cover the characteristics of transformational coaches for the successful delivery of character education lessons to their athletes. The literature review will then focus on the importance of social emotional learning for all students and children, not just the student-athlete. Finally, the literature review will focus on explicit values and morals training for the female student-athlete.
Review of the Literature

Importance Of Embedding Character Education Into A Developing Child’s Mind/Day

Research provides insight on why character education is essential in connection to developing the minds of children. For instance, Oppenheimer et al.’s (2014) study on character education focused on the strengths of 70 middle school students (32 male students and 38 female students) from an urban middle school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 2014. The mixed-method research took place over a three-month period. Interventions were conducted during one-hour sessions across five days with a follow-up three months later. During the intervention, students participated in the Character Strengths Program (2014), a curriculum developed by Positive Psychology which explores character strengths and aims to improve the current strengths adolescent aged children display. Sessions concluded the lesson by asking students to identify three good things that happened to them in the past day and reflect on them. Students identified their strengths and learned key character terms (e.g., hope, perseverance, etc.). Teachers were provided background information regarding positive psychology and character development along with intervention specifics and were asked to monitor behavior and assist students when needed. EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being and VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth were given to all youth participants. EPOCH measures characteristics that might foster well-being and physical health in adulthood as well as intra and interpersonal competencies. The VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth measures personality character strengths. Both the EPOCH and VIA provide insightful information about a student/youth’s character. Upon conclusion of the study, Oppenheimer et al. (2014) found an overall increase in well-being. When intervention was eliminated, the student’s responses in the three-month follow up did not stay elevated. Therefore, in order for the intervention to have a lasting effect on their
well-being it seemed to require additional attention and continued practice. The findings suggest the teaching of character strengths is directly related to an increase in student well-being. Well-being is directly linked to various areas of positive outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, student engagement, enjoyment and behavior).

Most recently, Usra et al. (2023) performed a study looking to increase critical thinking through the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) learning model. This study sought to understand learning outcomes for junior high students. Thirty-two seventh grade students at Palembang State Junior High School in Indonesia participated in the study. The application of the TGfU learning model was implemented in the classroom by their instructors. The Teaching Games for Understanding learning model uses game-focus, game appreciation, tactical awareness, decision making, skill execution and performance in the classroom for the development of skills, in this case, critical thinking ability. It is a step by step procedural model for teachers so students can become skilled in critical thinking skills. It develops new ways of thinking to master new things or improve new skills. The learning process was evaluated by using the Formative Evaluation Class (FCE) while critical thinking skills were measured by using a critical thinking test instrument in physical education courses. A pre and post-test was used to evaluate the effectiveness of play. Usra et al. (2023) found that critical thinking significantly increased when the TGfU learning model was applied. The TGfU is a student-centered model that will help teachers, students, parents and educational specialists implement transformational education through physical activity. Similar to the study by Oppenheimer et al. (2014), student-centered implementation with a focus on character and critical thinking suggest a direct correlation between critical thinking skills and well-being (Usra et al., 2023).
Hoedel & Lee (2018) explored embedding character education into a student’s day and the effects of such. Nineteen members of the Delphi Panel in North Carolina High Schools presented teachers with a complete Character Development and Leadership program (CD&L) curriculum over the course of eighteen months. The Character development and leadership programming/curriculum focused on character development and leadership skills deemed important and necessary. Teachers were asked to embed the CD&L into the school day of high school students. Participant attendance, suspensions, and grade point average were collected. Intervention and control groups were randomly assigned. The intervention (i.e., CD & L curriculum) was implemented in one ninth grade, semester-long class. Hoedel & Lee (2018) found the group participating in the CD&L Curriculum increased attendance average, improved GPA from 2.1 to 2.6 and experienced only one in-school suspension during the semester. The students who did not participate in the intervention decreased average GPA from 2.4 to 2.3 however, assessment score averages increased. Student participants reported they engaged in less antisocial and risky behaviors in their schools and communities and felt more optimistic about graduating from high school and attending college. Like Usra et al. (2023), Hoedel & Lee (2018) found character education embedded into a student’s day has a positive effect on overall success for the student.

Researcher Bronikowska et al. (2020) conducted a study to determine the impact of participation in sporting activities and the level of moral competence in young adolescents. Participants in the study included 827 male and female student-athletes of various ages (45.4% male, 54.6% female) using Lind’s Moral Competence Test (MCL). The study took place in the Wielkopolska region of Poland and involved mixed-method research. Participants were presented with the MCL and were asked to confront two moral dilemmas and agree or
disagree with the statements presented to them in thirty (30) minute sessions. The Moral Competence Test (MCT) makes a participant's moral-democratic competence visible. Statistical tools were used only to translate the visible information into a score (the C-score, from 0 to 100) which allows researchers to study the nature, relevance, and teachability of moral-democratic competence (Lind, n.d.). Participants responded using a nine-point Likert-type scale from -4 (totally disagree) to +4 (totally agree). Each story had 12 statements with six being in favor of the behavior and six against the behavior. All statements correlated to one of the six stages of moral development. Their involvement in sport was also asked (no involvement, amateur, and professional). The conclusion of Bronikowska et al. (2020) study states there was no interaction between modes of involvement in sport and Lind’s Moral Competence Test when comparing adolescents; both boys and girls. MCT is not correlated with number of years of training in either mode of involvement (amateur/professional) nor type of sports. The findings of Bronikowska et al. (2020) suggest the type of sport and level of engagement do not modify the ways it affects moral competence in student-athletes. While it is important to implement character education within the school day for children, it is also important to include character education into the lives of student-athletes and their coaches.

**Characteristics Of A Transformational Coach For Character Education Lesson Delivery.**

Stewart et al. (2023) explored the characteristics of coaching with a Northern Rocky Mountain Region University’s Preservice Coaching Education Students (PCES) (1,464 freshman and sophomores) participated in a quantitative study. Over 21 academic semesters, Stewart et al. (2023) introduced coaching-related characteristics to PCES and had them complete an in-class activity which focused on the ability to teach, being fair with players, being honest with players, sportsmanship, winning, player-coach relationship, group dynamics,
accountability, communication and motivation. Via questionnaire, students ranked the characteristics most preferred to least preferred and ranked the most important characteristics as the ability to teach, being fair and honest/equal, and sportsmanship. Stewart et al. (2023) found coach educators should be good teachers first and context specialists second while also focusing on individual context of the sport program goals and how success is defined. While the study by Stewart et al. (2023) provides useful information, they suggest examining potential and current coaches’ skills and objectives along with how it relates to administration, parent and athlete objectives and goals.

Character development through coaching education was similarly researched by Power and Seroczynski (2015). More specifically, they aimed to conclude whether youth sport coaches can effectively be prepared to become character educators and if there is a place for character education in today’s competitive sports environment. Nineteen coaches and 341 players from 10 boys and girls basketball teams were selected at random from a Midwest public middle school program and participated in the mixed-method study. Coaches participated in a three-hour clinic focusing on character education and were provided an instructional manual and lesson plans. Following their training, coaches participated in weekly discussions with their teams for a period of eight weeks. Prior to and following the weekly discussions, athletes shared their experiences as participants on previous teams. Coaches also provided input to Power and Seroczynski (2015) describing how they understood their role as moral educators and how committed they were to the role they were given. Boys team coaches reported their teams handled losing games better at the end of the season than previous seasons. They also reported they are more likely to encourage their players to help injured opponents and give positive/constructive feedback while being less likely to criticize a player. Boys team coaches
also stated discussions were mostly helpful at building overall character knowledge of their players. On the other hand, Power and Seroczynski (2015) found female team coaches showed gains from previous years in losing appropriately but showed a decline in equitable playing time and constructive feedback. Girls coaches saw little improvement in behavior and were more likely to refrain from congratulating an opponent and were more likely to show frustration in a teammate. Players experienced more positive interactions with their coaches and were perceived as being less negative. Overall, character education in youth sports has positive outcomes, according to Power & Seroczynski (2015).

A study focusing on the importance of coaching workshops related to character education and transformational coaching was conducted by Hummell et al. (2023) in Ontario, Canada. In this mixed-method study taking place over eight months, there were 54 volunteer youth sport coach participants. Coaches engaged in a four-hour Transformational Coaching Workshop (TCW), and were asked to apply their new knowledge seven days after the training. Participants completed a sport-adapted capability, opportunity, motivation for behavior (COM-B) questionnaire pre- and post-intervention. More specifically, it measured 13 items for coaches’ perceptions of their physical capability, 13 items of psychological capability, 13 items for opportunity, and 13 items for motivation to perform the 11 transformational coaching behaviors (for a review of these behaviors). Responses fell on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree); thus, higher scores reflect higher perceptions of physical capability, psychological capability, opportunity, and motivation to use transformational coaching behaviors. Hummel et al. (2023) found coaches believed they had more opportunities to demonstrate transformational coaching behaviors after participating in the TCW because coaches are more willing to apply the learned material if they believe they have more chances to
do so (Hummel et al. 2023). However, the change in perception of motivation was changed slightly but not significantly as other studies have shown youth coaches tend to use youth sport as a means of motivating youth in a positive manner (Hummel et al. 2023). Overall, Hummel and team believe behavior theory change can help sports science researchers better understand factors that influence coaches’ behaviors.

Finally, Ettekal et al.’s (2018) qualitative study showed the perspective athletic directors have regarding character education through Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA). Participants included four athletic directors (two men and two women) with at least five years of experience as the athletic director in Boston area high schools. Athletic directors were interviewed regarding their experience with the PCA programming (e.g. What do you think about character development through sport? Do you value PCA’s mission? How did you implement PCA in your school? And, did you perceive any changes among your coaches and athletes by participating in PCA programming?). As part of this longitudinal examination of youth athletes’ character attributes, athletic directors were provided PCA programming (a nonprofit organization focused on promoting character through sport) to embed and implement within their athletic programs. All athletic directors had positive beliefs about character development and rated it important and part of sport. Ettekal et al. (2018) found that for PCA to work and be delivered effectively, flexibility in implementation is necessary, along with providing choice in the possibilities associated with the PCA curriculum. Ettekal et al. (2018) recommend continued research on character education with intentional effort in incorporating character education into sport.
Importance Of Social Emotional Learning For All Aged Children.

Ashdown & Bernard (2012) focused on explicit instruction of social emotional learning skills in young children. In their ten-week, mixed-method study in Melbourne, Australia, Ashdown and Bernard (2012) focused on teachers who received training in the “You Can Do It!” (YCDI) curriculum for social emotional learning. The lessons were designed to teach young children confidence, persistence, organization and emotional resilience. The educational program consisted of lessons using explicit, direct instruction drawn from the YCDI Early Childhood Curriculum taught three times a week, and supported by a variety of additional social and emotional teaching practices (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). As part of the data collection, four pre-kindergarten and first-grade teachers completed the ACER Well-Being Survey and the Social Skills Rating System Teacher Form for each student in their class along with reporting their reading levels. The ACER Well-Being survey measures the overall well-being of students to help make informed decisions about students while the Social Skills Rating System-teacher form (SSRS-T) helps teachers and educational professionals identify social skills students currently display or lack. Ashdown & Bernard (2012) found explicit social-emotional learning embedded into early-education was beneficial to students in their levels of positive social-emotional well-being. Students displayed greater gains overall socially and emotionally when compared to their same aged peers. Ashdown & Bernard (2012) found an area of further examination would be to test if the benefits of the specific program (YCDI) would be maintained long term.

Fernandez-Martin et al. (2024) conducted a study to determine the impact of Itinerario+ on improving social emotional learning for students at risk of social isolation. According to Fernandez-Martin et al. (2024), Itinerario+ is “an intervention aimed at improving the different
areas of competence of the social and emotional learning model (i.e., self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision-making)” (p. 303). Participants in the study included 140 first year students at the Basic Vocational Education and Training Programs (BVETP) in Madrid, Spain. In one year, teachers at the BVETP were responsible for implementation of Itinerario+ through project-based learning, service-learning and cooperative learning. Itinerario+ was integrated into the school day and instruction. Participation in Itinerario+ was found to have a positive and significant impact for pupils presented with the material in their classes. The effectiveness of Itinerario+ increased the level of social-emotional skills in students at risk of social exclusion, supporting the exposure to character education and social skills continues to be beneficial at various ages.

Flynn & LaFrance (2019) focused their study on the effectiveness of workshops given to secondary-level athletes. Using the Rudd-Stoll-Beller-Hahm (RSBH) Value Judgement Inventory, Flynn & LaFrance (2019) sought to discern the impact of strategic intervention workshops focusing on moral knowing. The RSBH measures social and moral character within a sport. 115, ninth-grade students participated in a Triple-Impact Competitor Workshop with a focus on moral development of athletes. Information was given to the students on effort, learning/improvement and bouncing back from mistakes along with a growth mindset. Flynn and LaFrance (2019) used various instruments for data collection (i.e. Google Forms) for the RSBH focusing on honesty, responsibility and justice. Because the RSBH relies on the participants to self-identify with questions; consistency checks were aimed to ensure the participant was fully engaged and providing honest answers.[HH14] Flynn & LaFrance (2019) found explicit instruction can facilitate positive developmental outcomes. However, educators often underestimate the complexity of interactions between development in students’ social and
moral understandings and their applications in social contexts, according to Flynn & LaFrance (2019). The findings also suggest the need for further research with a larger sampling size along with a longitudinal study of students who participated in the study to measure the impact over time.

Exploring social identity theory and the ‘black sheep effect’ among college student-athletes and non-athletes was explored by Howley et al., (2014). The mixed-method study was conducted at a large Southwestern University with 245 participants. Of the participants, 174 were non-athletes 71 were student-athletes. Participants were each given a packet with eight brief scenarios. Within each scenario, participants were exposed to a level of aggression and athletic context depicted within the scenarios (e.g. 1. low aggression-low athletic context, 2. low aggression-high athletic context, 3. high aggression-low athletic context, 4. high aggression-high athletic context). Participants read and evaluated each scenario. They were also asked to rate their attitudes towards the main character of the scenarios following the incident summary of the various scenarios. Using a seven-point Likert scale (1 strongly agree to 7 strongly disagree), participants rated the dependent variable (i.e. scenario) as it related to their attitude. The independent variable in this study was the individual’s own athletic status, the main character’s (of each scenario) group membership, and the aggression/context combination on the six scenarios. Howley et al., (2014) found that although both student and non-student-athlete participants assigned higher punishment for a main character described as an athlete, there was a systematic difference in the overall level of punishment assigned by the two groups. Athletes tended to assign less punishment and indicate more willingness to work with the main character compared to the non-athletes. Howley et al., (2014) mentioned it is possible that student-athletes’ experiences with sports, teammates, and competitions may lead athletes to be more
willing to accept mistakes and work with others despite differences. Furthermore, the research did not conclusively result in support for either Social Identity Theory (SIT) or the Black Sheep Effect (BSE). It can be concluded that college student social identity is associated with their role outside of the classroom. Social identity in female student-athletes is as important as building and maintaining values and morals outside of the classroom.

**Explicit Values And Morals Training For Female Student-Athletes.**

Research by Malloy et al., (2023), focused on authentic leadership and its effects on athletic outcomes. In their mixed-method research, 129 student-athletes studying sports-science were presented with an experimental vignette model. This model portrayed an imaginary coach with a general description: “this coach, like most typical coaches, is mostly concerned with the team meeting targets and rewards athletes for showing personal progress.” The 129 students were split into three condition groups: high, low, and neutral. In the high authentic leadership condition, the coach was described as manifesting high authentic leadership using keywords such as “frequently” before referring to specific authentic leadership behaviors. In the low authentic leadership condition, they used keywords such as “rarely” or “does not display” before the description of authentic leadership behaviors. Malloy et al., (2023) asked participants to complete questionnaires following a series of presentations concerning the imaginary coach description. The presentations were based on manipulation, trust, enjoyment and commitment, cheating and aggression, along with anticipated guilt. Malloy et al., (2023) found authentic leadership in sport is positively related to trust, enjoyment, and commitment. The study results refer to authentic leadership rather than to actual coaching and, all experiences were hypothetical. When a coach manifests attributes of an authentic leader, trust in the coach, enjoyment and commitment to compete for this type of coach are likely to be enhanced. A coach
displaying characteristics of a non-authentic leader could potentially diminish trust, enjoyment, and commitment. The findings of Malloy et al., (2023) suggest authentic leadership can promote positive character education traits in student-athletes.

Similar to Malloy et al’s 2023 study, a 2016 values-based study by Koonteck et al., sought to implement a morals and values training program into sport and retrieve the perspectives of those who implemented the program. Thirty-eight physical education teachers and coaches in Singapore were presented with the Physical Education and Sport (PES) curriculum to implement and embed into their daily lessons, which focused on character education and values/morals. Students and athletes of the participating teachers/coaches engaged in in-depth interviews. Teachers and Coaches were interviewed following implementation of PES. Interview transcripts were analyzed using a thematic analysis utilizing the data and the research questions to determine how successful implementing PES was for both groups (teachers and students). Koonteck et al., (2016) found the teachers and coaches believed the training and program helped increase their overall teaching of values, teachers were implementing purposefully designed activities, while coaches facilitated the transfer of values. The students and athletes believed they were able to transfer the values they learned into other areas of their lives and environments.

Similar to the Koonteck et al., (2016) study regarding moral and value training, Ozbeck & Nalbant (2021) conducted a study focusing on the Moral-Decision Making Scale in Northern Cyprus, Turkey. Participants in the study included 405 student-athletes between the ages of 15 and 18 with a larger group being male student-athletes (298:107). Student-athletes participated in the Attitudes to Moral Decision-Making Scale in Youth Sports Questionnaire (AMDYSQ-2). The AMDYSQ-2 is made up of 15 items with sub-dimensions like embracing cheating,
embracing gamesmanship and maintaining fair play. Three of the items on the scale have positive connotations whereas twelve items on the scale have negative connotations. Higher points on the AMDYSQ-2 represent a positive moral decision-making attitude, lower points a negative moral decision-making attitude. Groups of two were tested with the t-test, and groups of more than two items were tested using one-way analysis of variance. Upon conclusion of the study, researchers found the moral decision-making attitudes of student athletes were seen to differ based on gender, type of sports and the status of being a certified athlete. Ozbek & Nalbant (2021) also found students must be sensitized in order to prevent unsportsmanlike behavior on the playfield, which is a place for young athletes to exhibit their skills and abilities. Unsportsmanlike behavior must be accentuated to young athletes during sports competitions, and it must be emphasized that respecting athletic values and obeying the rules of the game are more important than winning, and that they must avoid negative behaviors, such as cheating and gamesmanship. Ozbeck & Nalbant (2021) also suggested cross-cultural research should continue to be done on moral decision-making of high school student-athletes from various cultures for more data pertaining to the moral decision-making model. It is evident, according to Ozbeck & Nalbant (2021) that moral decision-making is embraced differently between male and female athletes.

Finally, Gray et al., (2023) explored and examined the influence of grit on female student-athlete’s burnout and well-being. 174 female collegiate student-athletes competing at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), Division one institutions, participated in Gray et al (2023)’s mixed-method study. Each participant completed a 44-item questionnaire covering demographic information, athlete burnout, well-being and grit. For athlete burnout- participants took part in the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ). ABQ consisted of 15 items evaluating
emotional/physical exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment and sport devaluation. A 5-point Likert scale was used to answer (almost never 1 to almost always 5). Well-being was measured using Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) which is 14 items assessing subjective and psychological well-being with a 5-point Likert scale (none of the time 1 to all of the time 5). Grit was measured with the short version of the Grit Scale (GS-S) which consists of 8 total items divided into two grit constructs. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (very much like me 1 to not at all like me 5). Data analysis was performed entering scores from each questionnaire using the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS). Along with calculations, regression analysis was done to examine the relationship between athlete burnout and well-being as well as the relationship between grit and the three constraints. Gray et al., (2023) concluded grit as a significant predictor, explaining 14.7% of the variance in well-being. The construct perseverance of effort was found to have the primary influence on well-being. Those who scored higher on grit also reported having better overall well-being. These findings add value to the understanding of grit and its influence, as previous literature on grit and well-being is limited within the athletic population.
Methodology

Research Questions

This action research on character education and its effects on athletic performance aimed to define how character education affects the overall performance of female student-athletes. The researcher was also curious to discover if timing of lessons is more beneficial before a practice versus a game or competition or does it have no effect on overall performance.

Participants

Action research took place over a four-week period with 44 members of a high school softball program who were presented a character education lesson by the varsity head softball coach. Participants were recruited from the current high school softball program of which the researcher is the Head Varsity Coach. All student-athletes in the program were asked if they would like to participate in the study which correlates with their character education lessons they are provided on a weekly basis. Participation was solely voluntary. Interested participants’ parents/guardians were asked to complete a permission form to participate as the athletes are minors or they have not completed high school if they are 18 years old.

Independent and Dependent Variables

Using character education lessons from Dr. Troy Urdahl’s book, *Chasing Influence*, weekly lessons for current season coaching staff of athletics and activity programs were provided. Character education lessons were given prior to a practice or game for a total of two practices and one game. The character education lessons were the independent variables whereas the effects on performance for each student-athlete was the dependent variable in this action
research. Dependent variable data was collected up to an hour following a practice or competition on the same day a character education lesson was presented to the participants via an anonymous Google Form submission. Participating student-athletes answered the following questions each time they logged into the Google Form: 1) Name and date, 2) How participant felt coming into their practice or game using a five-point Likert scale, 3) Name of Character education lesson, 4) What is the main message of the lesson?, 5) Rate the lesson’s effects on their performance with five-point Likert scale, and 6) How they feel following their practice or game using a five-point Likert scale.

The entire action research, including data collection and analysis, took four-weeks with an additional two days to review the data collected. Following completion, the researcher reviewed the data collected to help answer the action research questions, reviewing responses by participants and drew a conclusion.

**Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

Although the research posed minimal risk to the participants and was completed in an educational setting and done following outlined expectations of the athletic department, approval from the Institutional Review Board was still obtained. Due to participants being current high school student-athletes and considered minors, informed consent was obtained from parents and guardians for participation. Confidential data through Google Forms collected from participating student-athletes is stored in a folder on the researcher’s personal computer along with permissions from parents/guardians of those participating.
Data Collection

Weekly character education lessons were presented to student-athlete participants. Following each lesson, a Google Form was used to collect data for analysis. Student-athlete participants were asked to complete the Google Form within an hour of completion of their activity type (i.e., practice or competition). Although reminded following completion, some student-athletes participated the following day. Throughout the four weeks, three different lessons were used with various character/moral messages. Each lesson was obtained using Dr. Troy Urdahl’s book and corresponding workbooks, *Chasing Influence*. The lessons presented were: 1) Life’s Wake-Up, 2) The Marigold Effect, and 3) Giving a Hand. Life’s Wake-Up Call (2023) discusses bouncing back from a set-back and accepting the path chosen for you as a person. Sometimes life presents adversity in various ways and methods; how we bounce back or use that for growth is up to each of us individually. The Marigold Effect (2023) discussed marigolds as flowers and how they contribute to other plants around them, ultimately helping them thrive in their environment whereas the walnut tree is essentially poisonous to those around it. Do we want to be known as ‘marigolds’ or ‘walnut trees’ in our teams? Finally, Giving a Hand (2023) speaks about adversity from more of a diversity lens. Giving a hand to those around us who may not have a voice as powerful as their teammate or those who are poorly represented; how do we want people to view us when we continue to struggle for equality? Although the researcher was familiar with the lessons, the discussions following each lesson were different among the levels of the team (i.e. Varsity, Junior Varsity and B-Squad).

Each participant was asked the following questions in their Google Form: 1) Name and date, 2) How participant felt coming into their practice or game using a five-point Likert scale, 3)
Name of Character education lesson, 4) What is the main message of the lesson?, 5) Rate the lesson’s effects on their performance with five-point Likert scale, and 6) How they feel following their practice or game using a five-point Likert scale. A paper/pencil version of the questionnaire was made available for those who may not have access to an electronic device to participate. None of the eligible participants chose the paper/pencil route.

Findings

Data Analysis

Over the course of four weeks, 38 student-athletes within a high school softball program participated in character education lessons as part of their high school’s transformational coaching initiative. Each athletic season (Fall, Winter and Spring), coaches within the St. Anthony Village School District are required to lead their teams in lessons with the idea that transformational coaching helps mold better people, not just student-athletes. Each lesson focuses on a message or moral which can be directly tied to their specific sport or activity. Character education lessons are not sport specific nor do they contain athletic related topics; they are focused on values, morals and character traits. Following each lesson, coaches and advisors are asked to lead their teams in discussions and reflection of the lesson, how the lesson can be connected to their specific sport or activity then used as a reference for future situations in which a student-athlete or participant may face adversity within their activity.

Prior to this action research, the researcher assumed character education lessons changed each student-athlete in a positive manner immediately and execution of lessons could be done any day of the week, regardless of whether or not there was a practice or game. Participation in the research was strictly voluntary within the softball program, however, informed consent was given by parents/guardians of each student-athlete. An action research debriefing form was
presented to the parents/guardians of the participants following the completion of their student-athlete’s participation.

At the completion of each practice or competition, on days in which the researcher presented a character education lesson, participants were asked to complete a post-practice/game Google Form as a means of reflection directly related to the lesson presented. In order for the researcher’s preconceived biases to be put aside, the Google Form asked participants to rate how they felt prior to practice/competition following a character education lesson. The researcher used Likert-derived data as ordinal, and the researcher was able to summarize the data collected into a simple visual representation. Figure 1 accurately shows student-athlete responses for how an athlete felt prior to their practice or competition on days in which they were presented a character education lesson, using a 5-Point Likert Scale rating. Figure 2 displays how the same student-athletes felt following participation in the character education lesson after their practice or game.

Figure 1.

How student-athletes felt prior to practice/game
Figure 2

*How student-athletes felt following practice or a game and on a day in which they were presented a character education lesson.*

Student-athletes demonstrated overall self-image improvement following a practice or game as zero athletes reported ‘very poor/poor’ image at completion of the activity. Growth is displayed in the categories of ‘fair’, ‘good’ and ‘very good’ among those who chose to participate.

When asked if the character education lesson and the message of the lesson directly affected their performance in practice or competition, Figure 3 accurately displays the responses from the participating athletes. Choices for responses regarding lessons affecting outcome were: agree, disagree, strongly agree and undecided. Each student-athlete used their own method of self-reflection to accurately show whether or not the lesson affected their outcome and performance. Of the reporting student-athletes, 61.4% responded by saying the character
education lesson they were presented directly affected their overall performance in practice or competition the same day. Four and a half percent strongly agreed the lesson the researcher presented to them affected their performance while 25% were undecided.

**Figure 3**

*The Character Education Lesson Directly Affected Performance*

To conclude, data collected by those who voluntarily participated in reflection shows a direct correlation between a character education lesson (Life’s Wake-Up, The Marigold Effect and Giving a Hand) and the overall outcome of their performance in practice or a competition. Although data was collected asking participants to reflect on their overall self-image or self-esteem prior to and following performance, the data does not necessarily show a direct correlation to the lessons presented.
Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

The action research study on character education and athletic performance did in fact show a direct correlation/connection between the lessons and a student-athlete’s performance. Although all eligible student-athletes in the softball program did not equally participate in reflections following lessons, accurate data was collected to show a large majority of those participants felt their performance was affected by the lesson presented to them prior to practice or a game. The number of student-athlete participants who reflected on their self-image on the Likert 5-Point Scale also showed growth as none of the participants said they felt ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’ following practice or competition.

The findings from this action research impact student-athletes and material presented to them. It also supports transformational coaching when the overall goal of transformational coaching is to teach student-athletes more than the sport or activity they are learning. The overall goal of transformational coaching, according to Dr. Troy Urdahl, is, molding better people not just athletes (2024). When student-athletes, some of a high school’s strongest voices, are presented with lessons or discussions focusing on values, morals, and character traits, they are learning lessons which can be used in various facets of life, not just their sport. Student-athletes who are coached by transactional coaches are not presented with such material, as transactional coaches are focused only on the outcome of the competition and not necessarily the student-athlete as a whole. In contrast, the transformational coach is coaching the athlete as a whole, not just the sport aspect of their person.
Limitations of the Study

This study presented a number of limitations as it progressed. Although all 38 registered student-athletes were provided informed consent permission slips, 22 athletes returned the forms resulting in a little more than half being able to safely participate in the reflections following lessons. It is possible a different outcome could have been achieved if more student-athletes returned their permission slips to the researcher. Participants were asked to complete the reflection within an hour of completion of their activity, practice or competition. Although athletes were reminded, some responded the following morning or even a full day later. The researcher provided multiple modalities to access the questionnaire (QR code with direct link, access via softball team website, paper/pencil if needed) but still experienced a smaller number of participants than anticipated. As the study progressed, presenting lessons became a bit of a challenge as the softball program moved their primary location for practices from the gymnasium to outdoors due to favorable weather conditions. Although originally planned to include whether presentation prior to a practice or a game was more efficient, the researcher was not able to successfully distinguish whether or not it mattered. Finally, time became a limitation of the study. Originally, the researcher wanted to present four lessons to their student-athletes but due to the school calendar and planned vacations, they were only able to present three lessons.

Further Study

The findings in this action research presented the overall effect character education lessons have on student-athletes along with their self-image prior to and following each lesson. Future qualitative research should be conducted to include discussion responses student-athletes
present when engaging in the lessons. Research can be done to identify interest in the subject matter. Results of such a study could help identify whether or not this particular group of student-athletes can directly identify with the subject matter.

Another future study to consider is including male student-athletes in a sport concurrent with softball, i.e. baseball. Such a study can show whether or not male student-athletes would have the same outcome as far as the effect of a character education lesson has on their performance. Although the sports are different and focus on solely male or solely female athletes, there are many similarities which can be identified. Data collection can be done anonymously without identifying if the athlete is a male or female participant through the use of Google Forms and a similar questionnaire.

Finally, a future study can be done comparing and contrasting the effects of student-athletes (male and female) to those who may participate in a co-curricular activity (theater, math team, speech team, knowledge bowl, etc.) as they are also presented the character education lessons. The information gained from such a comparison can be useful for planning purposes for participants, Dr. Troy Urdahl, the author of *Chasing Influence*, and coaches or advisors of the activities. As the coaches and advisors are continuously working towards transformational coaching, it would be helpful to know whether or not the lessons being presented have a similar effect on the participant.

By conducting this future research, it will not only add depth to the research done within this action research but it will help with continued implementation statewide in Minnesota as more and more schools turn to transformational coaching as a focus as per the Minnesota State High School League and their overall goals of why coaches coach. By presenting lessons and
collecting more data, the Minnesota State High School League, along with their stakeholders, can work towards transformational coaching being natural rather than learned.

**Conclusion**

This action research looked to answer whether or not the timing of character education lessons has a direct effect or correlation to the performance of softball student-athletes. The study shows a large portion of those who participated were directly affected by the lesson presented to them prior to a practice or competition. Although more research can be done with larger groups of students, the small group which was used for this study on lessons in values, morals, and character traits can attribute some or most of their successes to the lessons they discussed and reflected upon.
References


