

Exploration of Teamwork, Leadership, Self-Confidence, and Identity Within High School Female Athletes

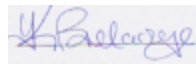
Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Major at Clark University

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Abstract

This research project was conducted during April 2022 at the Abby Kelley Foster Charter School, a K-12 school system in Worcester, Massachusetts. The goal of the project was to explore the topics of self-confidence, leadership, identity, and teamwork with the high school softball team at Abby Kelley. I used reflective questions to investigate the female athletes' thoughts and perspectives about teamwork and how it is accomplished, what makes a good leader and the qualities they may possess, and the importance of self-confidence within athletics. My findings can be useful for future coaches who want to be involved with female athletic teams and how these topics can affect the way an athlete performs on the field.

Introduction

I started my athletic career playing baseball at the age of 8. I was one of a few females playing in the entire little league when I started. As the years went on, I eventually became the only female in my age division. Once I reached the age of 11, I moved up into the higher division, due to my age. Before the coach even saw me play, being a female signaled an assumption that I wasn't as good as the male players on my team. Throughout many seasons with different coaches, I faced many instances of inequality due to my gender.

There were many games where I was batting at the bottom of the order, if I was even in the lineup at all. If I miraculously ended up playing in the field, I was playing in right field. In little league terms, playing right field meant you were horrible, but due to league rules, coaches had to play each player on the roster for a minimum of 3 innings each game. So for many games, I was in right field for 3 innings as in his eyes, there wasn't a chance I could play as hard or as well as the boys.

In those same games, when I would get on base due to the pitcher not throwing any strikes, causing me to get walked or getting a hit, the second I stopped at any base, my coach would immediately call time out and get a male on the team to run the bases for me. He had no confidence in my base running abilities, this was again due to the recurring theme that I could not run as fast or as smart as the boys on the bases. Not only did players on my team notice the coach repeatedly had male players on the team run the bases for me, but other teams and parents noticed it as well. No matter what players did to change the coach's opinion, it still continued to happen, as he made no efforts to change his coaching style.

I, along with many others, view baseball as a male sport. Females have the similar sport, softball, being modified for female athletes with similar rules and fields despite a few changes. Due to the fact that my own was not affiliated with a softball organization, my options were limited. I was forced to either play in the baseball little league or leave my town to find a softball league I could participate in. Many girls would play in the lower divisions as they played when

they were little, and as time went on, many of the girls would quit or transition to softball. These baseball coaches for the higher division teams rarely dealt with girls or rarely saw them play. It makes total sense as I see baseball as a male dominated sport and that I assume male coaches know how to coach male players better than female players.

Another aspect that impacted my experience was the age of my coach and his patriarchal beliefs and values. I assume he had the belief that men were the breadwinners while women stayed home and cooked, cleaned, and took care of the family. He also did not have any daughters, he only had sons, making it understandable that he would have trouble coaching a young female player without having any experience dealing with any female children of his own. I didn't agree with this sentiment, but I had to learn to accept it. He also presumably never had the opportunity to learn from female players' experiences with him as a coach and continued his coaching style without any adjustments.

Based on my own experience and my reading of the world, many female athletes have experienced gender inequality in sports. There are a variety of reasons that might account for this. Some towns do not have the female version of a sport resulting in females having to play on male teams with male coaches. Male coaches treat female athletes differently due to the lack of knowledge of how to coach female athletes. Some schools give more funding to male sports in terms of equipment, uniforms, and fielding conditions. My high school softball team didn't have a softball field to play on; instead the only option we had was to play on a baseball little league field. The baseball team had a brand new field built because they wanted to move it 20 feet forward away from the new school that was built. The baseball team also had many different nets and screens to hit into whereas the softball team had to borrow whatever nets the little league left behind at the field. Gender inequality is enforced by schools by not providing equal funding and equal access to resources to the women's teams.

Based on my own experience, younger female athletes feel inferior when they experience gender inequality in sports. In many instances, they walk away from sports entirely. Gender inequality is a tough thing to experience at a young age, especially when you don't understand why it's happening. I mainly hung out with the boys and played predominantly male sports when

I was younger. Since there was no female softball little league in my town, playing in a female league required leaving town as my town didn't have enough players to support an entire league. Gender inequality has been something that has fascinated yet bothered me as young female athletes are facing gender inequality at such a young age.

Baseball for me at a young age was an outlet, but bad coaches pushed me away from the sport. Bad coaches are considered bad coaches by making decisions that negatively affect the team, they don't listen to players' concerns, or overall have poor team management. Every time I went to a game, I thought things would be different, but unfortunately, each game I still left the field in tears. Many parents tried to make changes to make my experience better by talking to the coach about his actions, talking to league directors, and having other coaches call out his actions, but nothing seemed to help. Each game felt the same, consisting of batting last, if I was in the line up at all, and playing right field for 3 innings as that was the minimum requirement for each player to play each game. Talking to the coach led nowhere, the same empty excuse of trying to improve a random aspect of my game would come up in each conversation. I was never given a chance to prove what I could do, all based (in my view) on my gender and the coach's low expectations based on gender stereotypes or prejudice.

A main identity of mine is being a softball player. Many people at Clark are aware of my involvement with the softball team and many would describe me as an athlete. Softball is a huge part of my life and many of the connections and friendships I have made have been through softball. Softball has gotten me to where I am today and has shaped who I am as a person. I have learned many valuable skills, for example, being able to work with people of many different backgrounds, being able to effectively communicate with people, and utilizing skills I have in a

large team setting. I was also able to discover my identity through softball. Many people when describing me mention the fact I play softball, making it a main identity in terms of how others see me.

Addressing the issue of gender inequality in sports is a difficult challenge, but by coaching softball teams, I want to inspire female athletes to push themselves to be the best softball player they can be. I want to demonstrate that the phrase “you throw like a girl” can be seen as a compliment rather than an insult to females. I’ve wanted to coach softball for as long as I could remember, a major part of this thought was due to poor baseball coaches I have had prior to switching to softball. I don’t want female athletes to face the gender inequality I faced at such a young age. I believe that no athlete, regardless of gender or skill level, should ever face this inequality ever. Coaching will be able to combine the skills I have learned as an athlete and the lived experiences of playing to inspire and coach the next generation of future female athletes.

This thesis originally started as a project to combat gender inequality, and how coaching can affect gender inequity within sports for female athletes. I realized that gender inequality was a difficult topic to do research on and it wasn’t an experience that every single female athlete has experienced. I also realized within my praxis project, 4 major concepts kept reappearing. These ideas that I wanted to focus on were teamwork, leadership, self-confidence, and identity. These concepts seemed extremely important as they appeared during my research time and time again, and I felt it was better to focus on these concepts rather than to focus on gender inequality. I had a decent understanding of these concepts coming into the project, and I wanted to see how other female athletes understood and interpreted them. Although it was harder to do research on some

of these concepts, I felt it was necessary to address them and explore them further with high school athletes, which led to the shift in my project.

Coaching and teaching in my eyes are the same. Both use similar skills of being able to convey knowledge in a way that other people can understand. Both also have a passion for creating change and inspiring future generations. I knew I wanted to be a coach before I knew I wanted to be an educator. My coaching style would utilize my experience with different coaches along with coaching techniques from previous coaches that I felt worked best for me. My techniques would change as I got more experience coaching through feedback from the players on my team. The main idea behind my coaching would be empowerment, showing these young girls that they are capable of doing anything as long as they put in the time and the effort to achieve their goals. This philosophy can also be applied to teaching as well. Every player and every student is different and techniques are going to have to be adapted to ensure that every student or every player can succeed both on the field and the classroom.

Athletics are a way for people to connect and create strong relationships while also learning skills necessary to play the sport. Sports are also an outlet to relieve the stress of the outside world. Sports for children are a fun way to make friends and learn skills, different from the friendships and skills learned inside the classroom. Athletics are for everyone regardless of gender, race, and sexual orientation, but people are still judged based on their gender.

My praxis site is the Abby Kelley Charter School and my project is working with the high school softball team. My research project is exploring the topics of teamwork, leadership, self-confidence, and identity through high school female athletes, specific to the sport of softball. I hope to learn from the girls as developing female athletes and as a future coach, through

reflective writing and assisting during practices. I hope this research project helps coaches be able to support their athletes in terms of team building, leadership, and a sense of self-confidence around being a female athlete -- opportunities I never had as a girl growing up. My project is focused on the athletes on the Abby Kelley high school softball team, specifically my research focuses on understanding what the girls think about teamwork, self-confidence, leadership, and what female athletes they look up to. The questions guiding my research are as follows:

1. What do the girls say that is evidence of teamwork?
2. What do the girls say that is evidence of self-confidence?
3. What do the girls say that is evidence of leadership?
4. Who do the girls look up to as female athletes?

My goal is to investigate how the softball team athletes feel about the different qualities of teamwork, leadership, self-confidence, and their own identity in relation to who they look up to as athletes. I want to learn how other female athletes, who have a different athletic path than I did, feel about these concepts and how they utilize them within their sport and their team. Based on my own experience, and research on gender equity in sports, there is a notable lack of opportunities for young girls to develop sports skills and also a positive sense of themselves as female athletes.

Ethnographic Background

The Abby Kelley Charter School is a K-12 school that is split into 3 different sub-campuses, elementary (K-3), middle (4-7), and high school (8-12). The entire campus, among 3 different buildings, holds about 1,400 students. Abby Kelley is a school that is predominately students of color, who come from low-income families, and are either English

Language Learners or English is not their first language. The student body is composed of 54.6% Black students, 20.5% Hispanic students, and 16% White students, meaning for every 4 students at Abby Kelley, 3 students are students of color. 68.9% of students that attend Abby Kelley are considered low-income students and 48.6% are considered “economically disadvantaged”. The gender percentage is 54.4% of students are female-identifying and 45.6% of students are male-identifying. For 67.7% of students, English is not their first language and for 15.5% of students, they are English Language Learners. (Department of Education, 2022). I will be specifically working with the high school building, even more specifically, female identifying students a part of the high school varsity softball team. The age group I am working with consists of female-identifying students in grades 9 to 12.

The high school softball team consists of 17 female identifying students and 2 coaches, one being the head coach, who controls the main operations of the team, and the other one being the assistant coach, who helps out where needed. Of the 17 members of the high school team, 14 of the 17 are students of color, making it that there are 3 students on the team who are not students of color. The team is run by two coaches, one being the head coach, who is female identifying, and the assistant coach who is also female identifying.

These two coaches are both not coaches of color, meaning they do not identify with the majority of the students racial identity. The head coach described the team as a “JV team that is playing at the varsity level”. In my opinion, I assumed it was due to skill level and experience. Some of the girls on the team have no experience playing softball, meaning this is their first year playing, while some have a little bit of experience playing softball at the varsity level, as they have been on the team for at least 1 year.

Usually varsity teams have players who have been playing for a decent amount of time and have more advanced skills. Players who have never played before would normally be on JV, where they would start building up their skills to eventually make it on to the varsity team. This suggests to me that there isn't much of a demand for softball at Abby Kelley, due to the large varsity team and lack of a JV team. I felt it was important to state the racial majority of the players and the coaches to see how they compare to the overall demographics of Abby Kelley. Most of the players on the team identify with the racial identity of the majority of the student population, while 3 of the players and the 2 coaches identify with the racial identity of the minority of the student population.

My Role

For my praxis project, I was an observer and assistant to the head coach when needed. I started attending practices in April 2022, I didn't know the coach or the girls when I first started attending. I was only able to attend 3 practice sessions, these practices occurred on Wednesdays due to my class and game schedule. The dates of the sections that I was able to attend were April 6th, 2022, April 13th, 2022, and April 27th, 2022, each practice session was an hour and a half. As I went to each practice, the girls and coach felt more comfortable with me. I first started as an observer. At the first practice, I stood with the coach during practice and just watched how things operated and how the girls played. Then my role then shifted to an assistant. I made a comment to the coach about a skill a player could fix to make her perform better. She told me that if there is anything I could fix with any of the players, to just go ahead and do it, as she trusted my opinions and skills since I am a collegiate softball player.

I then started helping out more during practice. I ran a hitting station when the practice was inside, throwing front toss to any player who wanted to go hit in the cage. During that practice, I was making adjustments to players' swings where I thought an improvement could be made. Unfortunately, during the last practice I attended, my thumb was broken so I couldn't help too much. I was able to help one of the catchers fix their stance, so it was a little more comfortable and so she could move better when down in a squat. As each practice went on, I was able to help out more and more where I saw it fit best. The players got to know me better as each practice went on and knew whenever I was coming to practice, I was asking them questions, and then helping out during practice. I could tell they were getting to know me better as they would ask me what positions I played, asking about what I was studying at Clark, and even mentioned that they saw a post about me for Clark's senior day game. They just started talking to me more often as each practice went on, so I could tell they felt more comfortable talking to me and having me at their practices.

Positionality and Identity

I felt like I was both an insider and an outsider, depending on the session I attended. For the first session, I felt like an outsider, as no one on the team knew who I was and they were not expecting someone else to be at their practice. I also felt like an outsider since I was a white, college athlete, and the majority of the team was high school students, and mostly students of color. I did feel like an insider since I am a college softball player who was once a high school softball player. I was able to relate to them as we all had a common interest in softball and enjoyed playing the sport. Being able to pass on skills as an older softball player to a younger softball player made me feel like an insider as well.

The head coach was excited to have me come to the practices and once I got to know people on the team, the players got excited for me to come to the practices as well. They would talk to me as soon as I got to practice, ask me if I was asking them questions again, and they would walk me through what they were doing for warm ups. They wanted to tell me anything that was going on during the practices or things that happened during school as I was someone who was close in age with them.

As I attended each practice, I shifted from feeling like an outsider to an insider, as the players and coaches became more comfortable letting me into their space and letting me help out where needed. I felt like an insider when I would talk to a few of the players, asking about where they may be going to college or what drills they would be running at practice. I also helped run a hitting station one practice by throwing front toss to anyone that wanted to hit in the cage. During that practice, or any practice I was able to help out, I felt like an insider.

The players on the team saw me, and still respected me as a coach, even though I did not have the official title of a “coach”. They still took any suggestions I gave them as seriously as if a coach gave them that suggestion. I knew they treated my suggestions seriously because they would try it out during practice, tell me how they felt about the suggestion, and then they would practice it to feel more comfortable with the new adjustment. A couple players told me that the suggestion I gave them worked really well for them and that they were glad I gave them that suggestion. The coach even advised me that if I saw anything I could fix and make corrections for, that I had the green light to do so. It gave me a little taste into what coaching was like, without the added stress of fully running a practice and operating a team. I have never had any experience coaching.

My Identity as an Athlete

I've been the only female to show up to different baseball events as a child. I could tell from the look on the coaches faces that they weren't quite sure why I was there and why I wasn't playing softball. I've been in the position knowing that people thought I was inferior to the boys because of my gender. An idea of how I would perform was perceived when I walked through the door, before I could even touch a baseball. I've also been at practices where I was one of the more experienced players on the team, I've also been on baseball teams where I felt I was far behind other players and felt the need to try and outperform them to show them I was at the same level as them, even when I was nowhere near their skill level.

An identity of mine that resonates with me strongly is being a student athlete. Ever since I started playing sports at the age of 5, this is an identity that has evolved through the different sports I have played. Being in high school and playing on multiple sports teams made me truly understand and inhabit that identity. Constantly being surrounded by my teammates from many different teams and dedicating years of my life to sports made the identity something that has always been a constant in my life. The identity continued to grow stronger and resonate more when I committed to play softball at Clark and has only grown stronger since I started playing collegiate level softball. Being a student athlete is a major identity for me as that has been an identity that has been with me since I was 5 years old and I'm 22 years old now, a grand total of 17 years with this identity.

Being a student athlete affects the way I interact with others. I tend to usually interact and associate with the other student athletes as it is a shared identity and something everybody can

relate to. In conversation, performance in games, practices, or statistics get brought up and are usually thoroughly talked about. As a student athlete, that seems normal to me and happens in most of my conversations with other student athletes. When I meet new people for the first time, it usually does not take long for them to know that I am a student athlete as it usually comes up in conversation at some point or I am wearing Clark softball apparel. I wear Clark softball apparel around campus and I am on the executive board for Student Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC), making it well known across campus that I am a student athlete.

Conceptual Framework

Some lenses that are guiding my investigation are teamwork, leadership, identity, and self-confidence. There is overlap between my research questions and my framework as the terms I used in my research questions are also the terms I am using to help guide my research. I will be using my own definitions for these concepts, based on my lived experience, and analyzing the girls' responses in light of these definitions. I will be analyzing responses from the participants and looking for key phrases that are outlined within my conceptual framework. These key phrases I will be coding and analyzing within my findings section. The reflection questions have the terms in both my research questions and conceptual framework within them, allowing me to gather the thoughts, opinions, and definitions of the terms from the athletes to see how they compare with the definitions I constructed for my research project.

I identified these concepts as they are the most common qualities and in my experience, the most heavily emphasized within athletics. It is difficult to be a successful athlete on a team with other successful athletes without these qualities. These concepts can be applied to athletes of all ages, and all sports. When it comes to team sports, teamwork, and leadership are heavily

discussed between the athletes on the team, and from the coaches on the team. Self-confidence comes within, and a goal that many people on my team say before games is to stay up, and to stay confident. I thought these concepts had a lot of importance within athletics and became the reason I wanted to focus on them.

These definitions have been defined by my own team here at Clark University. We use these definitions to hold ourselves accountable both on and off the field so that we may be a successful team. These concepts are major concepts that are fueling the research in my praxis project.

Concept	Constructed Definition
Teamwork	Effectively being able to communicate and display skills together as a cohesive group to be able to accomplish the larger goal, being a successful group of athletes. Being able to lift each other up when you are down at a low and being able to celebrate with each other when you are up at a high.
Leadership	Being able to take initiative and take control when needed but also respecting the coaches and other players on the team.
Self-Confidence	Believing in yourself as an athlete with immense skills and being able to be a successful athlete on the field and encouraging yourself when things are going bad.
Identity	Understanding your own identity as a person, and who you relate and associate yourself with based on your own race and background.

Youth female athletes are vulnerable, and as coaches, we not only need to teach them teamwork and leadership, they need to be taught how to empower and have self-confidence for

themselves as female athletes. Female athletes need to be able to be there for their teammates, but they also need to be there for themselves. An athlete's passion and love for a game is what pushes them to be a next level competitor. Teamwork can help empower and lift each other up when playing sports. These ideas specifically relate to the concepts of teamwork, leadership, and self-confidence. These ideas will be used in my coding as these ideas are outlined in my definitions above of teamwork, leadership, and self-confidence. I will be analyzing teamwork through the reflective questions "how is teamwork accomplished?" and "what is your definition of teamwork?". I will also be analyzing leadership through the reflective questions "what are some characteristics of leadership?" and "what makes a good leader?".

Something largely rooted within teamwork is the unspoken skill of communication. Teams need to be able to effectively communicate with each other because softball is a sport largely based on communication as the softball can be hit anywhere and the situation can change almost instantly. Everyone in the field needs to be aware of where the play could be, and depending on where the ball is hit, what positions need to throw the ball to what base. Without communication, it is hard to work together to be successful on the field. Communication is not only important on the field, but off the field as well. Communication helps teams create good team dynamics, and allows people to be accountable for themselves on and off the field. This skill is not only vital for teammates but coaches as well, as they need to be able to communicate with their players during the games, during practices, and outside of sports. Working together as a team means being able to communicate effectively with each other. I will be looking for communication through the reflection questions about teamwork, specifically "how is teamwork accomplished?" and "what is your definition of teamwork?".

In my personal experience, self-confidence is a large aspect of being an athlete, especially being a female athlete. Based on my experience, I've seen coaching have a large impact on a female athlete's self-confidence, especially in relation to coaching style. As an aspiring coach, I want to understand how student athletes feel about coaching style in terms of their own self-confidence in a softball setting. I've had many bad coaches growing up that have made me want to walk away from sports many times. These coaches made it known who their favorites were and treated other players differently than their favorites. That coaching style is detrimental for many player's confidence and overall happiness when playing a sport. I have experienced this type of coaching style many times and it destroyed my confidence as a female athlete. As a future softball coach, I want all players to feel confident and proud to be a female athlete. I will be analyzing the importance of self-confidence through the reflection question "how important is self-confidence in sports?" I am trying to understand how the female athletes on the team value self-confidence when they are playing their sport and how it affects the way they play on the field.

Identity plays a large role in who you are as a person and who you look up to as an athlete. Identity can determine who you look up to, as people usually associate and look up to people who are similar to them. Many people when looking up to an athlete aspire to be like them and want to play exactly like them, fueling their passion for the sport. Looking up to a female athlete that has the same racial identity as you shows that people similar to you can play at the next level, inspiring those just starting their athletic careers and for those currently competing in their athletic careers. I will be analyzing who these players look up to by asking the question "who are some female athletes you look up to?", and seeing if who they look up to has

any correlation with their own racial identity as a person. Athletic skill is a large part of an athlete's career but having confidence, positive self-image, and team-building skills are another large part as well.

Literature Review

When researching for my literature review, I hoped to find more information about how female athletes are experiencing inequality within their sports, and how they have overcome it. I approached finding the literature through jstor searches and looking through news outlets, like the New York Times, to find anything recent about gender inequity in athletics. I used the words teamwork, leadership, self-confidence, inequalities, and athletics as search terms on jstor. I found a few sources about wage gaps and how the media portrays these female athletes. Most of the articles I found pertained to the media and how they portray the athletes as we live in a media heavy society. I didn't find anything relevant to how the athletes are battling gender inequality and how it affects them. I don't think I used great search terms when searching for data as it limited my data search. In a lot of the articles I found, the use of the words teamwork and leadership applied to work related teams rather than sports teams. When searching for the terms "high school" and "softball", it didn't have any articles related to the specific topics I was searching for. The articles either spoke about injuries, or life after playing softball, nothing quite related to my research project. I thought the wage gaps and media portrayal of athletes was relevant, but after collecting data, it was not as relevant as I originally thought.

In my experience, I've seen gender inequality at all levels. Even here at Clark University, gender inequality in sports exists. As someone who has experienced gender inequality in the sporting world, this is an issue that is not only extremely important to me, but also fascinated me

at the same time. The texts focused more on the media portrayal and the impacts of media on gender inequality in sports rather than focusing on the roots of gender inequality in sports.

Many of the articles were either outside the United States, which isn't useful as sports in the United States are different from sports internationally due to the different sports offered or cultural differences. The differences make it difficult to analyze it for the type of research I am doing. According to the 2020 Summer Olympic Games, only 6 countries entered softball teams of 15 athletes to compete against each other. Since I am focusing more on softball, which is predominantly played in the United States, sticking to research about sports in the United States is more beneficial.

A more recent article from the N.Y Times came out during the 2020 March Madness Tournament where players from the female tournament were posting about the inequities in gym equipment, arenas, and food service. This caught the attention of many female athletes over social media who became enraged with anger about the situation. A change.org petition was started to gain equal access to everything that the men's teams have had access to for the duration of the tournament.

A quote that almost enraged me from a N.Y Times article discussing the tournament was "the N.C.A.A. had a gap in spending of about \$35 million. The report acknowledged that "gender equity does not require equal budgets," but it said that the perception that men's basketball is "highly profitable and therefore worthy of increased investment has cultivated a culture within the N.C.A.A. in which men's basketball is not required to abide by many of the same budgetary constraints as women's basketball." (Blinder, 2021). The NCAA is a large college corporation that profits off its athletes every sport season. All sports should have access

to an equal budget, sporting goods and equipment is not cheap. It doesn't matter the sport, the budget should be based on the needs of the team rather than the popularity of the team, ensuring that teams are getting the proper equipment they need without any inequalities.

An interesting article that I found was the impact of the media on gender inequality within sport. This still demonstrates that there is gender inequality in sports but through a media lens, which is a little different than what my research is focusing on. This is still important to see how the media can persuade younger female athletes into thinking they are inferior to their male counterparts.

A quote from this article that stuck out greatly to me was "female athletes are still considered inferior to male athletes and that compared to male athletes there is still an obsession with the body of female athletes rather than on her athletic skills. This inequality within sport will continue to exist until the media re-examines its portrayal of female athletes." (Trolan, 2013, p. 215). People are able to follow their favorite professional athletes on social media without ever meeting them or being in their presence. People can follow athletes that live thousands of miles away and be able to support them by watching their games. This is great for male athletes, but for female athletes, there is little to no coverage about their stats or games. Female athletes don't have as much popularity as male athletes and the media can be something to blame because of this. They make it seem like female athletes are inferior to male athletes, putting an inequality on female athletics.

Having an athlete look up to someone who is similar in identity will inspire and motivate that younger athlete, knowing that people like them can play and compete at the next level. This helps with confidence and can give an athlete someone they can relate to, who is accomplished

within their sport. Younger female athletes can't find other female athletes they share identities with because they aren't as well known and televised as male athletes are. This can destroy the confidence a young athlete can have because they're aren't as many female athletes as there are male athletes. Based on my own experience, having someone to look up to that is similar to you can push you to be a better athlete as one aspires to be similar to the athlete they look up to. This relates to my last research question of "who do the girls look up to?". This idea helps me see if there is a correlation between the athletes the participants stated they look up to, and their own racial identity as an athlete. I will be looking for connections between racial identity and the specific sport these athletes participate in.

Another article demonstrates the wage gap between men's and women's professional sports. Just the opportunities alone to play professional sports is significantly less than the opportunities for men to play professional sports. With less opportunities, the female athletes are then severely underpaid as well with lesser facilities and lesser opponents to play. From an article from Adelphi University, a table displays that for professional basketball, men make \$8,321,937 per year while women only make \$75,181. Also displayed baseball and softball players, which displayed the largest gap among the sports listed. Baseball players made \$4,031,549 per year, while softball players only made \$6,000 a year (Adelphi University, 2021).

More time and money is invested into men's professional leagues and sports than into professional leagues and sports for women. Women's professional sports are scarce and when there is a professional league for women, there isn't much of a fan base besides families of the athletes and younger fans looking up to their idol. My findings contradict that there isn't much of a fan base for professional female athletes. All the participants shared the answers of Simone

Biles and Rachael Garcia, both athletes of color who are well known within their sports. These athletes are females, who are successful in their sports, and role models for younger athletes to look up to, especially the participants who shared they look up to these athletes.

There are many contributors to gender inequality including media lens, masculinity v. femininity, the wage gap and budget issues, and major college tournaments have shown evidence and reinforced gender inequality. Although there has been change over the years, it is still an underlying issue in most sports today that requires more change to try to completely eliminate the biases. The goal of my literature review was to draw on gender inequities faced by female athletes. I found how the media portrays female athletes, and the wage gaps experienced by professional female athletes. I wanted to draw on and challenge what the female athletic experience is like and what it entails. I thought this would help when it came to my research project. It provided insight but not much information that directly helped me. I would have needed literature about female athletes and their opinions about teamwork, leadership, self-confidence, and identity. The literature would also need to show their thoughts on the value and impact these concepts have within athletics, specifically, female athletics.

Methodology and Methods

In the practice sessions I utilized survey research methods in order to collect data. Survey research methods were best to use for my research questions since they are reliant on the responses of the participants. My research questions involve what the girls are saying in terms of the different concepts of my praxis project. Their voices and opinions fueled my research and their answers were recorded through written reflections provided at each practice session I attended. Survey research allows me to see what the participants are thinking, in relation to the

questions I am asking regarding specific topics inclusive to my research project. My research is survey based, as it helps me to understand the girls' understandings about the terms teamwork, leadership and its importance, and self-confidence.

Data Collection/Data Sources

The research took place during the high school softball team's practices through different writing assignments completed at the beginning of each practice session. By attending the high school team's practices, it helped me learn new teaching skills from the coach and broaden my love for coaching even further. I was only able to attend 3 practice sessions, these practices occurred on Wednesdays due to my class schedule. The dates of the sections that I was able to attend were April 6th, 2022, April 13th, 2022, and April 27th, 2022.

At the beginning of each practice session, the participants were given a writing prompt to answer. Each prompt contained 2 reflective questions. All the players were given 10-15 minutes, or however long they needed, to answer the questions. The questions were simple to understand, while at the same time, complex enough to make the participants think and reflect on their past athletic experiences. The questions addressed the main concepts associated with my praxis project along with different themes under the main concepts. When explaining the questions I tried to relate them to the team, so that the questions could be relatable to the athletes. When asking "how is teamwork accomplished?", for example, I told the students to think about what their team does in order to accomplish teamwork.

Whenever possible, I tried to steer the questions to make them about their team in order to make them easier to answer or provide them a lens to think with. In most instances, students did not have any questions for me as they understood the questions, meaning they either

understood the question from the start or through my clarification statement after the question. Each practice session, the team was asked two questions on a piece of paper, for each session I could make. I was only able to attend 3 practice sessions, these practices occurred on Wednesdays due to my availability. The writing assignments were de-identified so that the data remained anonymous and the only person who knew who wrote what response was me. The questions that were asked to the athletes are as follows.

1. What is your definition of teamwork?
2. How is teamwork accomplished?
3. How important is confidence in sports?
4. What makes a good leader?
5. What are some characteristics of leadership?
6. Who are some female athletes you look up to?

The answers to these questions demonstrate the girls' understanding of these concepts and how they can implement them into their sport. Although the participant group is small, the answers from the group are valuable as they are opinions from female athletes currently playing in their sport. Their responses help the coaches and other female athletes understand how female athletes view these concepts and how they are needed in practices and games in order for these players, that are on a team with other players, to be successful on the field, both as an individual and as a collective team. I don't think their responses are collective for the team as there were only 4 participants. I think the group is too small to represent the team, all the female athletes, and the entire school.

The questions were answered at the practice so that every participant answered the questions. I didn't want them to feel like they had to do homework or possibly forgot to answer the questions and return them to me in time for practice. The only answers that were used for research were those who consented to being in the study. All their answers were confidential within my research and had "participant #" written on the top of the writing assignment sheet. The data collection was done through weekly prompts provided by me to reflect on different aspects of being a female athlete and self-confidence. The data collection was done at the field where the practices were being held.

Approach to Data Analysis

In terms of approaching the data I collected, I coded the answers based on commonalities and repeated answers between the participants' answers, and interesting answers that surprised me as they weren't expected answers. Answers that were expected were answers that aligned with my definitions constructed in my conceptual framework. For example, I coded "Simone Biles" and "Rachael Garcia" for female athletes the participants look up to, as each participant listed one or both of their names in their response. Unexpected answers were answers that were similar to the terms outlined in my definitions but worded differently. For example, I coded "team etiquette" as an unexpected answer for teamwork, as it was a different way to express collaboration.

I started by going through the participant's responses and looking for expected responses based on my conceptual framework. I coded the expected answers based on frequency in the participant's responses. I then went through the responses and looked for answers I deemed surprising and different from my framework. I organized my data based on the reflection

question that was being asked to the athletes, and then by the specific participants to explore their individual answer. I considered themes as codes that appeared frequently throughout the responses and were linked to my conceptual framework. I found themes that emerged from the data through the athletes' answers, and I thought these themes were important as they were seen in each participant's answers, in some instances worded differently but the same underlying theme was emerging. For example, the code “together” was a main theme for teamwork, as each participant listed the word together in some form in their responses.

I had limitations when it came to approaching the data. I only had 4 consenting participants for the entire team, making it limited for whose answers I could look at and use within my paper. I was also only able to attend 3 practice sessions because of my schedule and the coach's practice schedule for the team, limiting the amount of data I could have collected from the team. I only asked 2 questions a session due to the amount of time the team had to practice. They only had an hour and a half each day to practice and they would usually have either Thursday or Friday off depending on the week. Since I didn't know the girls too well, their team was bigger than your average high school team, and I couldn't attend their practices often, it didn't help me understand their answers better and I had to analyze data based on the answers given rather than thinking about who answered the question and what led them to make that answer.

Data Tables

Listed below are all the responses gathered from consenting participants. Each response is a direct quote from their answer to each question. From my data set, I want to see how the

athletes interpret the concepts and how they can implement them into their practices and games, to be able to play successfully against other teams.

Question 1: What is your definition of teamwork?	
Participant #1	“Teamwork is when everybody combines their skills to support each other.”
Participant #2	“Working together and not thinking you're better than anyone.”
Participant #3	“Teamwork is having good sportsmanship and working together as a team.”
Participant #4	“Everyone is confident and can communicate well with others. Even if (illegible) is a loss, there are no bad feelings towards others and can also improve together.”

Question 2: How is teamwork accomplished?	
Participant #1	“Teamwork is accomplished when everybody comes together and listens to their ideas. Everyone is considered equally important”
Participant #2	“Patience and working together.”
Participant #3	“By being optimistic and being open and having good team etiquette.”
Participant #4	“Teamwork is accomplished through communication and also commitment.”

Question 3: How important is confidence in sports?	
Participant #1	“Confidence is very important in sports. If you doubt your abilities, then you end up limiting how far you can go. Confidence helps you expand your skills.”
Participant #2	“Very because you need to believe you can do

	it to be able to.”
Participant #3	“Confidence is very important because it relates to motivation and how you play. Also confidence helps the team as well.”
Participant #4	Confidence is super important. I believe that having confidence can mean better performance in sports.”

Question 4: What makes a good leader?	
Participant #1	“A good leader is able to understand their teammates. They make decisions with everybody in mind. They make everyone feel welcome and feel useful. Everybody is considered equal by them. They are confident, decisive, quick thinking, and can handle a crisis. People look up to them.”
Participant #2	“Someone who doesn’t think they are better than others.”
Participant #3	“A good leader is someone who can take criticism and can lead their team to success. Also a good leader is strategic and capable to use team strength and weaknesses.”
Participant #4	“A good leader is someone who supports their teammates but also can be knowledgeable and give instructions in sports as well.”

Question 5: What are some characteristics of leadership?	
Participant #1	“Honest, selfless, not impulsive, responsible, loyal, trustworthy, confident, intelligent, welcoming.”
Participant #2	“Kindness, calmness, everyone gets included.”
Participant #4	“Perseverance, courage, dignity, respect.”

Question 6: Who are some female athletes you look up to?	
Participant #1	“Simone Biles, Serena Williams, Misty Copeland, Rachael Garcia, Patricia Zhou, Coco Gauff, Sunisa Lee.”
Participant #2	“My older cousin and Rachael Garcia.”
Participant #4	“College athletes, Rachael Garcia, Simone Biles.”

Findings

The finding section is going to be broken up into 4 sections, one about teamwork, leadership, self-confidence, and identity. There are comments from the participants that integrate multiple concepts from my research, as for example, self-confidence was mentioned as an important aspect of teamwork. Each section corresponds with one of the research questions guiding my praxis project. I will then go in depth and analyze the answers from the participants and look for commonalities or anything interesting thoughts as well. Each response from the participants is a direct quote from the reflection sheets I collected at the end of each practice. Each participant as well is consenting for me to use their answer for data analysis. There were only 4 consenting participants, and during my last session, one of the participants was absent from practice, resulting in only 3 responses for reflective questions 5 and 6.

Teamwork

A common code that kept reappearing within teamwork involves the term “together”. Everyone responded that teamwork involves combining skills, working together, and improving together. An interesting aspect that was brought up by participant #3 in response to reflection question #2 was team etiquette, which hadn’t been brought up by any other participant. Team

etiquette and team dynamics are extremely important when it comes to teamwork along with sportsmanship. Many of the participants brought up supporting each other and, specifically participant #2 mentioned not thinking you're better than anyone else. Participant #2 also mentioned that everyone is considered equally important in a team environment. I found this interesting as it looks at both teamwork from an individual standpoint and from a team standpoint. Both vantage points are needed to have a solid foundation for teamwork to be accomplished. For teams to work together, they need to be able to believe in each other and be able to pick each other up, while also being able to work together effectively to reach a common goal.

Participant #3 brought up the idea of sportsmanship and confidence, both ideas that were not a part of my definition of teamwork. I thought it was interesting that confidence was introduced within the responses of teamwork, as self-confidence was a different concept being explored in my research project. This participant took the idea of confidence and applied it to a team viewpoint rather than an individual viewpoint. Sportsmanship was brought up, along with the notion that there's no bad feelings toward each other, which can be seen as a part of sportsmanship. Sportsmanship can also be seen as lifting each other up, or supporting each other, which was outlined in my definition of teamwork. Sportsmanship was not specifically stated in my definition, but was an interesting aspect that participant #3 dictated as important.

In terms of how to accomplish teamwork there were a variety of answers. Some said it was working together, some said it was being open to other people's ideas, and others said it was being optimistic and being a good teammate. An interesting response given by one of the participants was that everyone listens to each other's ideas. This relates to my conceptual

framework of teamwork as listening to each other's ideas is a form of communication.

Communication involves being able to talk to each other but it involves listening to each other as well. Another idea brought up by participant #4 was commitment, being committed to the sport but your team as well shows you want to be there and you want to support your teammates. Each individual brings something unique to the team and brings unique ideas that may lead a team to victory. Each person on the team has a different viewpoint and being able to listen and possibly utilize their viewpoint can possibly make a team successful. This is related to having patience, a point mentioned by participant #4 and that everyone is considered equally important, an idea mentioned by participant #1. I expected that the participants would emphasize and would reiterate the point of working together and making sure that everyone's thoughts and opinions were heard.

In light of my conceptual framework, I used the words "cohesion" and "collaboration" to define the word teamwork, which was the lens I was exploring the idea of teamwork through. "Cohesion", "collaboration" and "together" have a family resemblance in terms of their meaning. Cohesion can come in the form of communicating together and working together, as seen in the participants' answers. Collaboration is being able to come together and work towards a common end goal. Cohesion and collaboration are both very similar as they both involve coming together and working together. The theme of "cohesion" appeared throughout the participants' answers, directly correlating to my conceptual framework of teamwork.

The theme I kept seeing emerging from the data set between reflection questions 1 and 2, was the phrase "together". I wasn't surprised the word "together" kept appearing as the word team means together, a team can also be seen as a cohesive group of athletes. A statement heard

often within sports starting from when someone is a first time athlete, all the way to college is, “there’s no I in team”. The answers from the data set show that these athletes understand that statement and know that being a team means coming together as a cohesive group to achieve a common goal, being successful. My findings from the data set emphasize the idea that if a team can’t work together effectively, they can’t perform effectively, and that players need to work together.

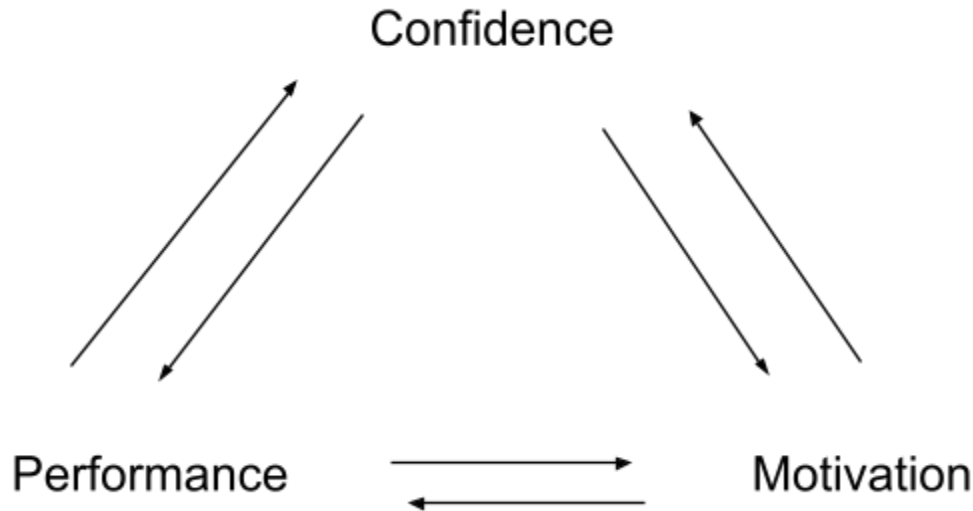
Self-Confidence

For the question about confidence and how important it is in sports many of the participants answer that it’s extremely important. One participant answered that you need to believe in yourself in order to be confident, which I found extremely interesting. Confidence is an internal aspect of sports, confidence can only be built up by yourself. Coaches can’t teach you how to be confident, but they can help build your skills up in order to make you feel more confident. Confidence comes from within and athletes know what they need to do in order to feel confident when they play. This can look different from athlete to athlete as everyone is unique in how they make themselves feel confident.

In light of my conceptual framework, I viewed self-confidence as being able to believe in yourself as an athlete, and being able to motivate yourself to perform at the next level on the field. Many of the participants stated that being able to believe in yourself is extremely important. One of the participants answered that if you doubt your abilities you’ll limit how far you’ll be able to go. The participant suggests through their response that without confidence and motivation, you won’t be able to perform well, which is not only letting yourself down, it lets the team down as well.

Participant #4 stated that confidence is important, participant #3 says it's very important, and participant #1 says it's super important. Participant #3 links the concept of confidence with motivation, and participant #4 links performance with confidence. This shows to me that confidence in sports is linked with performance and being able to push yourself to be a better athlete. The participants suggest that without confidence, they would not be able to perform well and wouldn't be able to motivate themselves or others to be better athletes.

The image below is how I interpreted the participant's answer, in a visual sense. I see the arrows going in two directions with "causal" force, as I see that confidence builds motivation, motivation leads to better performance, and better performance leads to more confidence. The diagram can also move in the opposite direction, as I see confidence leading to better performance, which leads to more motivation to build more confidence.



Leadership

When asking what makes a good leader there were many responses and many great qualities that they decided made a good leader. An interesting answer was confidence in that a leader needs to be confident. Confidence has been seen in participants' responses across all the reflection questions in the project, which I find interesting, as it demonstrates the importance of confidence in all the concepts I explored in this research project.

An idea brought up by participant #2, that appears in both teamwork and leadership, not thinking they are better than others. I coded the ideas of "welcoming" and "supportive of teammates" as these ideas appeared in multiple responses recorded by the participants. Leaders need to be able to control their team, while also keeping them in mind when making decisions, as their decisions affect the entire team. I found these responses interesting as a leader on a team is usually voted upon or chosen by the coaches which means that the team thought this was someone that would be able to see their strengths and weaknesses and be humble when it comes to their skills.

Two new ideas introduced by participants #1 and #3 is the notions of being able to "handle a crisis" and "being able to take criticism". Not everything in sports is always successful and sometimes failure can happen. Leaders need to be able to avert a crisis if it is happening, find a solution if a crisis is currently happening, and support the team after a crisis is over. Leaders also need to take criticism because no athlete is perfect and everyone makes mistakes. Criticism can come from teammates looking for the leaders to make improvements in how they lead the team, and it can come from the coaches in ways to improve as a leader on the field

during practices and games. People look up to leaders in times of success and times of failure for advice, guidance, and criticism to be able to improve and succeed as a team.

I didn't get specific about what type of leader they should be thinking about when they were answering the question. I left it up to them to think about who they think of as a leader and what qualities this person may possess. Leaders can be anywhere, and I felt it was best to not limit their lens of what type of leader to think about. The participants thought about leaders in a peer lens. Based on the reflective responses from the participants, it seems they were thinking about the idea of team captains and seniors on the team as leaders. It brings an interesting point that leadership comes with age, the older someone is, the better leader someone may be. On most teams, the leaders tend to be someone who is an upperclassman and someone who has been on the team for a decent amount of time.

When I asked about the characteristics of leadership I got many different responses. Some included being selfless, responsible, having courage, being intelligent, being welcoming, and that everyone gets included. Other qualities also included being loyal and being calm as well. A theme I saw emerge from the data set is that a leader is someone who is responsible. In light of my conceptual framework, I viewed leadership as someone who can take control, but still be respectful. Being responsible is a balance between control and respect, keeping in mind that their decisions affect the whole team, as the team looks to them to make decisions. A leader respects their team, and a team needs to respect their leader. The data set emphasized the point that leaders are people who need to be responsible for their team, and need to be able to make decisions that affect the whole team, while still being considerate of everyone on the team.

Identity

I asked all the students, “who is a female athlete you look up to?” and 2 athletes were mentioned by all the participants. These athletes were Simone Biles and Rachael Garcia, both who are not only female athletes, but athletes of color. Rachael Garcia is a former softball pitcher and first baseman from UCLA, who graduated in 2021. Simone Biles is an olympic gymnast for team USA, who formerly competed for LSU before competing for team USA. I found these responses interesting that these athletes were the athletes they look up to since all the participants are students of color.

In light of my conceptual framework, I wanted to see if the female athletes the participants looked up to had any correlation to their own identity. All the athletes had a common answer of Simone Biles and Rachael Garcia, who are both younger athletes of color. Especially Rachael Garcia, who is a softball player of color, relates most to the athletes on the softball team. This finding supports my framework that there was a correlation between who the participants look up to as female athletes, and their own personal identity.

Limitations and Implications

My findings relate to my research question as I was able to see what the girls think about self-confidence, leadership, teamwork. I was also able to see how the participant’s racial identities related to the athletes they look up to. Their answers confirmed what I was looking for when creating my research questions. I found that through the participants' responses that teamwork involves communication and cohesion, leaders are people who think about the team they are making decisions for and that they need to be responsible, and that self-confidence is important in sports as athletes need to believe in themselves to succeed. I also found that players

look up to female athletes who share similar identities to them. They all relate to the key concepts I originally started to think about as they matched with my definitions I brainstormed at the beginning of this project.

I don't think this work has a lot of significance to others due to the amount of participants and the limited amount of sessions I was able to attend. This project can be significant for the softball coaches at Abby Kelley, since they know the athletes and would be able to utilize their thoughts and opinions to make their team dynamic stronger, but the consenting participant group size limited how much data I was able to use. I would like to learn more about what other female athletes think about leadership, teamwork, identity, and self confidence, in terms of their sports. If I was able to have more consenting participants and be able to attend more practices, I think my work would have more significance. If I could do this project again, I would expand my participants to different sports so that I may be able to see how other female athletes feel about self-confidence, leadership, and teamwork.

Conclusion/Significance

I wanted to end my thesis a little differently than most choose to end it. I want to finish this off with a letter to current and future coaches, along with current and future teachers, as they can find this work useful to use in a sports environment or in a classroom. I will be taking this work into my future classroom and onto the softball field when I become a coach.

Dear Coaches and Educators,

These topics are important, not only on the field, but in the classroom as well. As a current athlete and a future teacher, I have seen these concepts appear in both of these settings.

These topics are difficult to teach, and sometimes difficult to view, as in the case of self-confidence, but they are impactful. Self-confidence isn't something that can be taught, it's something that the student or athlete needs to gain themselves. Only the student or the athlete knows how to judge their own self-confidence and they know what they need to do in order to feel confident. Although this can't be taught, teachers and coaches can help students build up, understand the role of, and the impact self-confidence it has in the classroom and on the field. Coaches and teachers can play an active and intentional role when it comes to building up confidence. Coaches and teachers can build the idea that mistakes are something people can grow from and learn lessons from to improve in many different areas.

Identity is another concept that can't be taught, it needs to be discovered by the student as it is another internal aspect. Students and athletes know themselves best and can judge their self-confidence and identity better than anyone else. Some of these concepts can't be taught, but still have a great significance, and this is something I cannot stress enough. The significance comes from the diagram displaying the relationship between self-confidence, motivation, and performance, linked in the findings of self-confidence. This diagram shows that all these concepts are interanimate with each other.

From this project and the participants within the project, I learned the values and opinions of teamwork, leadership, and self-confidence from other female athletes perspectives. As a future educator, I will eventually have my own classroom that I will need to lead, along with students who look up to me. All the decisions I make within the classroom will have an effect on my students, just like a leader on the field. A classroom is also like a team, everyone needs to work together to be able to fully understand a concept. The ideas of cohesion, collaboration, and

communication present themselves on the field and in the classroom. Learning is not an easy task, and it cannot be accomplished without the help of fellow classmates and teachers. These girls have made me realize that a classroom is similar to a team, a teacher can be seen as a leader, and the students are a team, all working together to reach a common goal, to be successful learners.

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