

**TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL ATHLETICS AND THE ACADEMIC
EXPERIENCE: A CASE STUDY OF A RURAL KANSAS HIGH SCHOOL**

A Dissertation by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education with a major in Educational Leadership.

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DEDICATION

To my dad, I miss you everyday. You were my role model and a life-long learner. Your view and fight for life, politics, farming, and raising children was remarkable. Even though your family did not value education, you did your best studying with a flashlight at night to become the man you were. To my mom, you are the most patient, positive, caring, and hard working person I know, thank you for giving up on college for love and for putting my brother Terry and I always first. To my children, who are about grown to adulthood, may your dreams be achieved through the teaching of your grandfathers meaning of life – “raise your children better than you were raised” and that doesn't mean buy them crap they don't need! To Angie, I could not ask for a better person to share life with.

Children are a living message we send to a time we will not see.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated perceptions of how a rural school in Kansas maintained a balance in athletic and academic success. Student engagement was the theoretical framework used to examine what and who influenced students to become involved in a balanced curriculum at school. The three specific areas of investigation were (a) teachers in rural schools view of the role of academics and athletics in a school's overall curriculum, (b) the teacher's description of their beliefs about the importance of academics and athletics, (c) the teachers description of administrator, school, and community member priorities in balancing the athletic and academic experience of students. The data was collected from interviews with 18 research participants in a rural high school unusually successful in academic and athletic programs. The data revealed four themes that impacted from their perspective a student's willingness to engage in the curriculum at school: (1) work ethic taught and modeled from family, staff, and community, (2) strong relationships existed between students and their community because school activities was central to the cultural life in the community, (3) faith and the nuclear families allowed the students and their families to serve others in the community, (4) coaches taught secular values, ethics and morals, they stayed in this rural school district because they were supported by parents and community members. From the findings I concluded that the school culture for this rural school district was rare. A powerful trio existed in this rural Kansas school that seemed to bind everything and everyone together in the school and community that being: sports, family, and faith. Families of faith were believed to support teamwork more than individual success of their child. The collective success of the schools athletics programs gave the community its identity as one big deep-rooted family. Students engaged in school activities because they did not want to be left out of successful things happening in the school.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Many public schools provide a healthy, well-rounded educational experience for students. There are academics and athletics present in most high schools; these two programs can compete with each other for student's time and attention. Supporters of public education believe in order for high schools to have an influence on students' scholarly development and identity, students need a balanced program that provides physical activity, academic, social, and emotional support within a tailored curriculum and cohesively constructed learning environment (McDonald & Farrell, 2012). Students that participate in a wide range of activities are often referred to as well-rounded students (Fullarton, 2002).

Well-rounded high school students are involved in a challenging academic curriculum and are involved in multiple activities (Hersh et al., 2009). Students involved in activities such as art, theatre, dance, band, chorus, and/ or orchestra may gain creative skills and appreciation for the arts (Rabkin & Redmond, 2006). Participation in academic clubs (debate, chess club, math, and language clubs), governance (student council, prom committee, and advisory boards), media (newspaper, yearbook, local and school television), and military (junior ROTC), students may gain social and communication skills while gaining a higher self esteem (Barber, Stone, Hunt, & Eccles, 2005). Well-rounded students acquire personal traits such as strong character, honesty, and moral responsibility; tend to have good manners; are driven by a sense of purpose; and are dedicated to hard work (Bugwadia, 2013). Well-rounded students are engaged when they are involved in their work, persist despite challenges and obstacles, and take visible delight in accomplishing their work (Hay, 2013).

To understand why some students may be engaged while others are not, engagement must be understood that it represents more than motivation. Motivation and engagement are related terms and sometimes are used interchangeably. However, engagement has been found to be more than motivation or more than the desire to succeed in athletic or academics at school (Newmann, 1992). Engagement is the larger concept than motivation, as a teacher can motivate a student to be fully engaged in school academics or activities. This may cause students to engage in certain parts of the curriculum at school as a result of their intrinsic or extrinsic motivation (Brophy, 2013). Extrinsic motivation may come to students from staff members at school, peers, parents, or community members and encourage participation in academics or activities offered as part of the school program. Broadly defined for this study, student engagement refers to the extent to which students are willing to participate in routine school activities by being actively involved in a balanced whole curriculum associated with meaningful educational experiences and activities at school.

Curricular and Extracurricular Involvement

The traditional view of curriculum is one that is synonymous with other descriptors such as course of study and syllabus. Curriculum in the traditional view is a body of subject matter prepared by teachers for the students to learn and is divided into basic education areas such as Math, Science, English, and Social Studies (Houston, 1996). Curriculum may also be considered as a written plan or programs of study outlining what students should be taught (McBrien & Brandt, 1997). Basic education in a traditionalist curriculum places emphasis on educating students in the core subject areas rather than athletic activities or learning that occurs outside of the classroom. Experiences for students in American high schools include not only academic studies but also opportunities to get involved in numerous extracurricular activities.

Extracurricular activities are activities that occur outside of the classroom and usually occur before or after normal school time (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). Extracurricular activities are those supervised by a teacher or coach and engaged in voluntarily by students as opposed to being mandated by school, district, or state regulations. The most strongly emphasized extracurricular activity is sports such as football, baseball, volleyball, basketball, track, swimming, soccer, cheerleading, gymnastics, and hockey. Well-rounded students' physical, social, and emotional development according to the Kansas High School Activities Association (KSHSAA) can be enhanced by participation in extracurricular activities (KSHSAA, 2013).

For this study, I employ the view described by the KSHSAA, they advocate that curricular and extracurricular are curriculum partners (KSHSAA, 2013). This characterization implies that activities are not a separate part of the overall education program but an integral part of it. I view the schools' whole curriculum as every activity and experience both academic and athletic occurring in and out of school.

Academic Accountability

In the past decade public schools have faced increased academic accountability and this has demanded more of the students attention than in the past. Notably through the compliance measures associated with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2002), and its requirement of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and Race to the Top (RTTT) (2011). NCLB expected 100% proficiency by all students in the areas of math and reading by 2014. In response to these accountability mandates issued by federal policy makers, schools have expanded the school curriculum, and implemented high stakes testing (Epstein, 2007, Springer, 2008). Kansas was one of 41 states to apply for Race to the Top (RTTT) grants in 2010. The goals for RTTT are for schools to adopt high standards and assessments; build data systems to track student learning; recruit good

teachers to underperforming schools, math or science classrooms; and turn around or close bad schools. Kansas ranked 29th out of the 41 states in the first round; only the top 15 states were selected as finalists, leaving Kansas without the \$166 million. The Kansas State Board of Education did not reapply for the next round of funds as Kansas lacked important criteria for the grant. Federal grant reviewers claimed Kansas had two major shortcomings: lack of a statewide evaluation system of teachers and principals and no system of tying teacher compensation to student achievement. Contrary to claims that common core standards were mandated in the federal RTTT grant competition, only internationally benchmarked colleges and career ready standards were required.

Kansas College and Career Ready Standards, also known as Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (2010) will be the next phase of academic pressure for Kansas's schools to implement. In 2010, the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) released academic benchmarks in mathematics and English language arts intended to define the knowledge and skills that high school graduates will need to be successful in college and careers. These standards are available to any state as long as schools agree to accept all of the standards and use prescribed assessments to test a students' mastery within three years of implementation. The Common Core State Standards have grade level expectations in math and English K-12 students. College and career ready standards are purportedly not a curriculum; they describe the knowledge and skills students are expected to learn. There are sharp differences of opinion about what the impact of these standards will be. There is emerging evidence of pedagogical pressure relating to what and how to teach, which is where curriculum from state and local levels weigh in. The common core authors estimate that 85% of the total math and English content should be taught from the college and career ready

standards, with the remaining 15% to come from state and local levels (National School Board Association, 2013) . CCSS and NCLB have required schools to focus more of their attention on the achievement in math and English and may lead to narrowing of the curriculum. Another example of pressure that may upset the balance in curriculum is the use of the ACT test by the American College Testing service. The ACT is used as a measure of a student's skill level which is important for gaining access into postsecondary education and includes summative assessments that measure how much students have learned during their elementary and secondary education (American College Testing Service, 2007). The ACT contains four multiple-choice tests: English, mathematics, reading, science, and an optional writing test. College entrance requirements in Kansas force a minimum ACT score of 21.

Students today are routinely pressured to succeed at high stakes testing. Thus, students whose parents have high educational expectations for their children, regardless of social standing, are more likely to have children who have high educational expectations for themselves (Wilson, 2012). Similarly, adolescents' decisions to participate in sports are strongly correlated with parental attitudes and behavior (Scheerder, Vanreusel, Taks, & Renson, 2005). Therefore, students may assign sports a higher priority than academics because of this influence on their decision-making or may prefer sport to academics because of enjoyment, popularity, health or fitness, and may be challenged by a lack of time or family influences.

Researchers generally agree that sport participation is important to adolescents; student involvement in extra curricular activities support the idea that sports play a vital role by placing the athletes in a dominant position in U.S. society (Thompson, 1978). Several studies took a hard look at the personalities of the athlete as an individual bringing to the forefront questions about popularity, enjoyment, academics, social status, and responsibility. What researchers

found is that athleticism of adolescents helped increase their popularity and social status in the community (Shakib, Veliz, Dunbar, & Sabo, 2011; Thompson, 1978). One study found that in general men, contrasted with women, viewed athletics as a way of increasing school attendance, enhancing the competitive spirit, obtaining a high status career, and of attaining social status by moving up the social ladder (Finnan & Meza, 2003).

Participation in Sports: Advantages and Disadvantages

Past research has found that athletic participation in high school sport programs supports students' academic success (Fejgin, 1994; Fredricks et al., 2002; Lumpkin & Favor, 2012; Melnick, Sabo, & Vanfossen, 1992; Rees & Miracle, 1986). Favorable effects such as improved grades, achievement, and motivation have been attributed to keeping students in school and raising their educational aspirations (Din, 2005; Fejgin, 1994). Involvement in sports has also been shown to help students learn about difference, teamwork, adversity, self-confidence, and sportsmanship (Rasmussen, 2000).

In contrast to the research studies that assert the benefits of participation in high school sports, the claimed positive relationship between participation in sports and improved academic outcomes are referenced from correlational studies (Fejgin, 1994; Fredricks et al., 2002; Lumpkin & Favor, 2012; Rasmussen, 2000; Swanson, 2002). These are not experimental or quasi-experimental, thus contributing causality to the studies when perhaps they should not be. Studies have indicated that for the vast majority of the high school students, playing sports did not have any effect on their academic achievements (Din, 2005). Additionally, involvement in competitive sports may be linked to negative socialization and run counter to educational goals (Coakley, 2009; McPherson, 1980). Sport participation may divert the limited amount of time students have available for academic work. Therefore, sport participation may not be related to

higher grades and standardized test scores and has been linked to an increase in school dropout rates (Melnick et al., 1992). In another study by Pano and Markola (2012) the researchers found one of the primary reasons high schools students did not participate in physical exercise or practice sports more regularly was because they said they didn't have time.

Participation in sports demands a substantial time commitment. When a specific sport is in season, student athletes generally spend between 20 and 30 hours per week attending meetings, practices, and playing games at home and away (Simons, Van Rheenen, & Covington, 1999). Depending on the sport program or coach's expectations, even time demands during the off- season can be substantial (Woodruff & Schallert, 2008)

Students and Sports in Rural Communities

Some communities may place more emphasis on building successful school athletic teams than on academically successful students (Richter, 2009). Given the research perspectives on the liabilities associated with athletic participation, it is reasonable to ask if some schools or districts are giving adolescents the impression that athletic success is more important than academic success.

To help understand what motivates students to be engaged in one activity or the other, researchers have studied social, cultural, and environmental factors. They found that these factors provide substantial motivation to students that encourage participation in sports (Edoh, 2012). Motivation for most students may be either intrinsic (inner factors or beliefs) or extrinsic (external factors) (Vallerand, 2001). In consideration of intrinsic motivation, researchers found that secondary students are involved in sports in order to feel good about themselves by having fun on a team or by being around friends (Weiss & Smith, 2002). Being with friends and peers has been found to be an important factor in continued participation (MacPhail, Gorley, & Kirk,

2003). Students who are extrinsically motivated usually are expecting a material reward or have the desire to please others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsically motivated athletes may participate to obtain a gold medal or to be viewed as popular by others. Some may participate because they believe they can be paid to play professional sports in their future, while others may participate to avoid punishment (Vallerand, 2004).

The social aspect of high school sport is of high value to most community members in a rural school because rural schools serve a multifunction role in the community when compared to urban districts (Lyson, 2002). Rural schools often serve as the social, recreational, and cultural foundation of the community (National Education Association, 2009), providing a place to gather for recreational, cultural and civic events (e.g., sports, plays, dances, and political meetings) (Peshkin, 1978).

Local culture is the traditional way of doing things in a community, and those ways are transmitted from generation to generation (Schein, 2004). Community culture for this study is defined as a set of shared values and agreements that individuals or groups have experienced together. Many rural community members believe that successful athletic programs reflect their community's culture and values, thus, encouraging public cooperation and unity (Guest & Schneider, 2003). Because of this cultural expectation of participation, some rural communities may unduly influence and make it difficult for certain students to effectively allocate their time between academics and athletics.

The sociocultural and ecological environments of a rural setting give an advantage to students since they facilitate supportive relationships among school staff, community, and other students. It was to a student's advantage to have a personal relationship with a teacher or coach since it created a social bond, which led to better student performance and motivation in athletics

and academics (Broh, 2002). Personal contact and supportive relations with school personnel resulted in improved student behavior which conformed to the schools expectations, shared attitudes, and beliefs (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Maehr & Buck, 1993). Encouraging school-based relationships between teachers and students gave the students both a sense of belonging (ownership) to the school and of being known (popularity) (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014). These findings are significant since they allowed students to be connected and engaged in the school and community in which they lived.

Rural schools and communities typically share the traits of a sparse population, low property wealth, low socioeconomic status (SES), small student population, geographic isolation, and stronger sense of community (Dunn, Kinney, & Hofferth, 2003). The role the community plays within the educational setting clearly establishes how such involvement is potentially beneficial for teachers, administrators, parents, students, and communities (Sanders, 2003). Cultural norms and community relationships are also linked with helping students to succeed while improving the ambiance of the school.

Sixty million people live in rural communities throughout the United States and rural communities encompass 95% of the United States land (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Public schools in rural areas educate 12 million students, or nearly 24% of the total enrollment school aged population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

Based on data from the National Federation of State High School Athletic Associations, in 2009 there were approximately 7.5 million high school student athletes in the United States (Widmann, 2009). Kansas is comprised of 105 counties and 77 of these counties (mostly rural) have seen population declines in the past 10 years. In 2011, 468,510 students attended public schools in Kansas. Of these students, over half attended a public school in a rural district and

nearly half of these rural districts enrolled fewer than 535 students (Johnson & Strange, 2009). Students in rural schools have a greater participation in extracurricular activities and have an appreciation for their rural roots (Jimerson, 2006).

There are two official agencies that support high schools engagement and development of well-rounded students in academic and athletic activities in Kansas. Kansas State High School Activity Association (KSHSAA) and the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE). KSHSAA's purpose is to administer programs of interscholastic activities, festivals, clinics, and contests among member schools; elevate standards of good sportsmanship; and encourage the growth of good citizenship not only for high school boys and girls but also of adults and others who come into contact with school activities (KSHSAA, 2013). In the 2008-2009 school year there were approximately 139,349 high school students' (grades 9-12) in Kansas according to data from KSHSAA and KSDE. Of these, 62,297 or 44.7 % were athletes.

Another organization that supports the educational program is the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE). KSDE is organized into two divisions: fiscal administrative services and learning services. Fiscal or school finance distributes state and federal aid to Unified School Districts (USDs), food-service providers, and other educational agencies. The division of learning services works collaboratively to provide leadership for continuous improvement of educational systems to ensure and enhance learning for all Kansas students (Kansas State Department of Education, 2013).

Research Problem

Student engagement refers to a student's willingness, need, desire, and compulsion to participate in activities in school, and be successful in the learning process (Schlechty, 2011). The interaction between teachers and students can influence student engagement by promoting

one type of curricular activity more than another. Depending on students' engagement, teachers may knowingly or unknowingly influence students to favor one activity or another and upset the balance of the curriculum. Students may be intrinsically motivated to participate in an activity because of an internal self-interest or for the satisfaction and enjoyment derived from the academic or athletic event itself.

Students can also be extrinsically motivated where students perform in the activity to please others or achieve other types of rewards outside of the activity itself (Vallerand, 2004). Teachers, peers, school, community, family, and other social, cultural, and educational influences shape how students weigh what are the most important uses of their time in school and out (Fredricks et al., 2011). The combination of these factors can lead students to different value judgments about how much time to devote to keep balance between academics and athletics. Because fewer students attend rural schools and they are often asked to participate in numerous activities, the balance of time and attention required for participation in academics and athletics can be disturbed at rural high schools in Kansas. The pressure being placed on teachers to increase test scores and meet CCSS in academic areas are requiring more student time of the curriculum than in the past. At the same time participation in athletics is also demanding an increasing amount of students' time. This potential for imbalance is distracting and may induce students to prioritize sports and shortchange academics.

Theoretical Framework

Student engagement theory has held the attention of researchers since the 1980's, when student engagement was identified as student involvement (Astin, 1984). Other prior descriptions associated with student engagement were effective teaching and learning, quality of effort, and time on task (Merwin, 1969; Pace, 1980). Current researchers describe student

engagement as “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom which leads to a range of measureable outcomes” (Kuh, Kinzie, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007). Student engagement theory helps to understand the importance of the student–teacher relationship and what drives students to be engaged in all aspects of the curriculum, even the parts they don’t particularly like (Trowler, 2010).

Student engagement will be used in this study to examine teacher perceptions of the school’s cultural influence, and the student’s orientation toward engagement in athletics instead of engagement in academics. By interviewing study participants, I want to understand if teachers feel that effective engagement draws students to the coaches or PE teachers for example as opposed to the English or Science teachers. Further study if students will continue a commitment of time if engagement declines. Because engagement of student’s academic work allows the schools to deliver a well rounded curriculum that leads to intellectual achievement and social competence of the student to graduate high school. Research beyond the importance or benefits of athletics and academics is needed to affirm what happens when the participation in sports displaces student interest in academics.

Consideration of the three dimensions of engagement--behavioral, emotional, and cognitive--helps to understand students’ motivation to participate in academics or curriculum at school (Fredricks et al., 2002). These three dimensions of behavioral, emotional and cognitive are important facets of students’ school experience because of the logical relationship to student achievement and to optimal human development (Marks, 2000).

Behavioral engagement is direct involvement by those who have the habits and skills to typically comply with behavioral norms such as attendance and involvement. Researchers have found that students are more behaviorally engaged and motivated when the teacher provides

students involvement in a learning activity, structure by communicating clear expectations, and autonomy support that allows freedom and latitude in learning activities (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Behavioral engaged students tend to be engaged in the whole school curriculum as they participate in academics and athletics at school. These students are more likely to be persistent and engaged in social activities that require extra time and effort in order to compete well. Teachers recognize that behavioral engaged students typically achieve at a higher levels by observing students' extra effort, persistence on task, and help seeking (Pintrich & Schrauben, 1992).

Emotional engagement relates to the affective reactions an individual may hold during participation in activities. Teachers or peers have a strong influence over a students' feelings of interest, enjoyment, boredom, frustration, or a sense of belonging (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Other research on emotional engagement has found that teachers who cultivate a positive emotional bond with students such as trust are in a position to influence a student's willingness to participate in school academic studies or activities (Finn, 1989). Emotional engagement requires more than simply participation from the students and teachers; it involves an encouraging attitude toward school, and a connection, attachment, and-or bond (Libbey, 2004). So, students that have an emotional attachment with a teacher are more likely to show respect and devote time to that teacher.

Cognitively engaged students have vested beliefs and values in their learning, seek to go beyond what is required by the teacher to be an average scholar, and appreciate the challenge of learning. These students are intrinsically motivated to exert the needed mental effort to accomplish difficult tasks in different subject areas. Unlike behavioral engagement that measures the quantity of a student's effort, cognitive engagement reflects the quality of a

student's effort on a task in either academics or athletics. Students who ask deeper understanding questions; use more complicated vocabulary and language structures; and maintain focus in class discussions, small learning groups, and voluntarily answer questions in class are all signs of a cognitively engaged student (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003).

Research Questions

The purpose of this case study is to examine the perceptions of rural high school teachers with regard to the relationship between school athletics and academics in a well-rounded curriculum. I hope to gain a deeper understanding of what and who influences students to participate in the curriculum. Participants' views about the importance of athletics in a rural school community may provide insights into how and why a rural community places emphasis on athletics and/or academics.

This study addresses three overarching research questions:

1. How do teachers in rural schools view the role of academics and athletics in their school's overall curriculum?
2. How do teachers in rural schools describe their beliefs about the importance of academics and athletics?
3. How do teachers in rural schools describe administrator, school, and community member priorities in balancing the athletic and academic experiences of students?

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Athletics is a topic that has been talked about in the bleachers and on American main streets for decades. The following literature has been collected and reviewed to compare the historical studies of student benefits of sports participation, academics, the influences students have to overcome in public schools: time, family, peers, and community influence. These themes will be reviewed in order to help understanding of student engagement. Research has explored the preferences of the student athletes, community, and parents as it looked at the social context in which they live. This research will help the reader's comprehension concerning the decisions and implications our adolescents face when deciding how to use their time in rural schools in Kansas.

Athletic Participation

Participation in athletics can help introduce healthy living ideas and encourage students to appreciate health, exercise, fitness, and learn about themselves. Athletics has also taught students how to handle adversity, and allows them to experience teamwork and sportsmanship (Rasmussen, 2000). High school athletes have been correlated with access to more educational opportunities for a post secondary education, higher social status, and increased popularity (Swanson, 2002). There is an abundance of research on the positive affects of participating in high school sports and its effect on student academic achievement. According to a Lumpkin and Favor (2012) research study, athletes earned higher scores in school, had higher graduation rates, and were less likely to drop out of school. Additionally, the student athletes scored higher on state assessments, and some areas of the ACT than did non-athletes. Students who are more involved in high school competitive sports have higher grades, a higher self-concept, higher

educational aspirations, higher college enrollment rates, higher internal locus of control, and fewer discipline problems (Fejgin, 1994; Fredricks et al., 2002). Character aspects and outcomes said to be affected include honesty, courage, cooperation, acceptance of authority, social prestige, and opportunities for educational and occupational advancement (Rees & Miracle, 1986). Participation in sports requires an adjustment of discipline for some students to adhere to rigid rules, regulations, and practice times, as well as to the coach's authority. There can be a positive effect on students who lack this kind of discipline structure at home, but live in a community that has high expectations for student behavior and respectfulness. In this case sports can be seen, rather, as a set of social practices and relations structured by the society in which they exist (Whitson, 1986). Additionally, societal basic values of American life seem to stem from competition, determination, fair play, and achievement. It has been argued that team sports, especially high school sports, offer an opportunity for all students – student athletes, cheerleaders, parents, and patrons to congregate and fight for a common goal (Evans, 1986).

Being involved in activities has been shown to increase success in academics because a certain level of academic performance must be maintained in order to participate. Additionally, students who are less attached to the school are less likely to participate in school activities (Hunt, 2005).

Social

When social behavior enters in to the dialog it has been found that extracurricular activities appeal to both academically oriented and socially oriented students, perhaps by offering opportunities to respectively enhance their college prospects and/or social status among their peers (Swanson, 2002). Social status is a research theory that is used to understand the effects of social variables such as those of class, gender, and race on groups of people (Horn,

2006). Adolescents' decision to participate in extra curricular activities can be influenced by several groups. These groups may consist of peers, teachers, community members, parents, and immediate family members. Further probing of these athletes found other reasons to participate such as enjoyment, being good at it, and opportunity to see friends (Fredricks et al., 2002).

Accompanying these findings of being with friends also leads into the subject of popularity.

Researchers found that athletic status was the strongest predictor of popularity (Kennedy, 1995), even though athletes are more likely than non-athletes to report self-perceived popularity (Shakib et al., 2011). Regardless of gender and socio-economic status (SES) athletes (male and female) are perceived to have more popularity by their peers. Researchers in a 1992 study found that gender was an issue: being athletic was the most important criterion for males to be popular, while "being pretty" was the most important criterion for girls to be popular (Chase & Dummer, 1992). Interesting to this is that both boys and girls perceived that sport guarantees males, but not females, popularity (Shakib et al., 2011). The popularity of football players compared to cross country runners and cheerleaders compared to softball players differed (Snyder, MacKillop, Vander, & Humphrey, 1990). Furthermore other research found that sex appropriate and sex inappropriate sports exist for females. Kane (1988), determined the social acceptability of female sport participation was heavily influenced by traditional views of what is considered appropriate feminine behavior. The results of her study suggests that in order to understand the status of the high school female athlete, one must consider not only participation, but also the type of sport in which that participation occurred. Other work indicates that athletic ability has been demonstrated to play a major role in male social dominance (Weisfeld, Muczenski, Weisfeld, & Omark, 1987).

Socioeconomic status or SES is a combined measure of an individual's or families economic and social position relative to others, based on income, education, and occupation (Saifi & Mehmood, 2011). There have been many discussions concerning rural communities SES. The disparity in funding between low income and affluent school districts has stirred much discussion among educators and policymakers. Low funded schools, which generally educate the greatest number of SES minority and low-income students, also tend to have lower test results on standardized exams, lower graduation rates, higher dropout rates, and thus, lower educational achievement than their more affluent counterparts (Jackson, 2011).

Educational Attainment

Educational attainment is best described as the highest level of schooling each student attended and successfully completed. If a student drops out of high school during his or her sophomore year, but successfully completed their freshman year, the educational attainment for that particular student is freshman year or the ninth grade (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013). One study focused on the social class differentials in educational attainment. Children from the more advantaged class backgrounds had higher levels of educational attainment than children from less advantaged class backgrounds (Erikson, Goldthorpe, Jackson, Yaish, & Cox, 2005). Social class also has incurred considerable weight in determining different rates of educational attainment within racial and ethnic groups in suburban public schools. There is a considerable gap between minorities and non-minorities even among highest performing schools located in districts where education is considered excellent. The effects of social class seem to be a considerable predictor in the educational performance of all students. Therefore one must take into account the mediating weight of social class on the different performance rates within the population of students (Pumar & Sitsis, 2012). The

contrasting ecologies of affluence and poverty contribute to disparities between the so-called “haves and have-nots.”

Scholars and Athletes

The roles of scholar and athlete are not necessarily contradictory according to researchers at Bowling Green State University. Both roles provide social “payoffs” in the high school social setting and are important for the development of adolescents. Students should be encouraged an early age to see the value of both roles and supported in the development of these skill clusters (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1992). For all students, if a choice must be made between concentrating on academics or athletics (for economic or intellectual reasons), these researchers suggest the focus should be on academics.

When Pennsylvania grade school students were asked to prioritize what they felt was most important concern in their life right now, the most popular answer was “academic concerns.” Given that academics, popularity, and athletics constitute the major domains of the school context, the grade school and junior high aged students were asked a follow-up question. If you had your choice of being any one of the following right now, which would you choose first? The students overwhelmingly preferred to be “straight A student” in academics versus being “star athletes” or “most popular” (Schulenberg, Asp, & Petersen, 1984). Somewhere along the way these grade school level children were influenced that involvement in sports would enable them to be well-rounded human beings. In contrast, James Coleman researched for a two year period, nine different high schools as a study of “climate of values” and found high school aged students didn't care much about scholastic things; that in all the schools, they cared more for “good looks” and “being an athlete” than they did for “good grades” and “being smart”(Coleman, 1959).

America's schools are busy places. They do much more than provide the basics of a K-12 education for their students. When looking at the societal view of schools, the social theory meanings have a varying view based upon the socio economic status of the community. In communities of poor with schools that have low academic expectations, sports are often viewed as an equal opportunity for success, and student athletes are more likely to be seen as good students. In contrast, upper class communities do not view sports as a viable long-term achievement venue and students involved in non-sport extracurricular activities are more likely to be seen as the good students in these schools and subject to higher academic expectations (Guest & Schneider, 2003).

School Culture

School culture is often difficult to define and even harder to detect. The culture can best be described by the mindset of, "the way we do things around here." Researchers have found that school culture is an invisible, taken for granted, set of the beliefs that give meaning to what stakeholders say and do (Peterson & Deal, 1998) Culture can consist of stable underlying meanings that shape how stakeholders behave and act over time (Vera, 2007). School culture guides, directs, and forms the decisions students make in the school setting or community with identifiable characteristics such as attitudes, beliefs, rituals, symbols, artifacts, and ceremonies (Van der Westhuizen, Mosoge, Swanepoel, & Coetsee, 2005). School culture is an ever-changing reality shaped by relationships and interactions with others based on reflections of the world and life in general (Finnan & Meza, 2003).

In general an organization's culture develops out of interactions among members of a group that have established shared traditions, values, and goals (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988). Community members use these shared values and goals as a pattern for organizational problem

solving over time. Patterns that have worked effectively are accepted and taught within the group and result in correct ways to act in the group in relation to problems acted upon (Schein, 2004).

Colleges and universities can reap a public relations benefit from their athletic culture. Through athletics, they gain support from constituents who would otherwise have little interest in higher education (Goidel & Hamilton, 2006). Personal values can be shaped with help from the most influential stakeholders and access to their value system, goal orientations, and their approval of various processes (Trail & Packianathan, 2002). One study found that students who decide to participate in extracurricular activities enjoy the activity, feel confident at the task, and appreciate the socially supportive environment. They were involved to please other people in their lives, such as their parents and coaches (Fredricks et al., 2002).

Additionally, student participation in extracurricular activities as a youth, is a basic building block for further involvement in various community activities as an adult (Perks, 2007). This finding shows the effect that young athletes have on community involvement, last well into their adulthood. Additionally, this does not lose its positive effect over time no matter how long ago the youth athletic experience took place. Research is supportive of this claim that sport is an arena in which informal social connections are formed and where each encounter is a tiny investment in social capital (Putnam, 2001). Supporter aspirations are that adolescent participation in sports will have a positive impact on community involvement later on. Further research has explored highly competitive sports, such as football and basketball. When compared to recreational sports such as golf, Perks (2007) found that competitive sports could discourage instead of encourage social cohesion and ultimately community involvement. In other words, the mechanism of social capital building based on repeated social interactions might

fail in highly competitive youth sports because of the antagonism competition generates between opponents (Perks, 2007). The same competition that can be a good thing for youth experiences, which may lead to harmony among teammates, also has the potential to be harmful in other relationships, as it excludes some students.

Most members of a team share a common goal - winning! Students, coaches, administrators from across sports and institutions have agreed that striving to win helps to foster community, bringing together even the most diverse individuals (Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morphew, 2001). Almost all parents love their children the same after a win or a loss of a game. Yet it has been observed that parent behavior conveys another type of message. Many young athletes have indicated that conversations with their parents after a game somehow make them feel as if their value as a person was tied to playing time, winning or losing (Brown, 2003). When hundreds of college athletes were asked to reflect back on their parent responses from their days of high school athletics and youth leagues. The overwhelming response they wanted to hear from parents after a competition was simply “I love to watch you play,” in contrast with the worst memory of youth sports, “the ride home” (Henson, 2012).

Parents play an important role in shaping their children's expectations for the future of leisure time sport participation patterns. Researchers found when parents of high school aged children participated in sports, their children, both boys and girls, were more frequently inclined to participate in sport activities. The modeling by parents led to a higher degree of student leisure-time sport involvement, beyond those adolescents whose parents both did not participate in active sports at all. Moreover, the most active are more frequently found among adolescents of whom at least one parent participates in club organized sports activities (Scheerder et al., 2005).

The forms and dynamics of children's physical activity are connected indirectly with larger socialization processes, through which participants learn how to be boys and girls, and learn about the systems of social relations and cultural beliefs that exist in their families, communities, and nation states (Coakley, 2009). This research also attributed organized sports as a parental extension of control over their children and in a setting where the children were gaining important developmental experiences.

Parents are also influential participants in one of the most important decisions in their children's lives: college choice. Parents who did not themselves graduate from college appeared to exert the most direct influence and pressure on their children in making this choice. Parental persuasion is more understated in families where going to college is accepted as a normal part of life (Change, 1986). One explanation for these associations between adolescents and parents behavior is role modeling according to the social learning theory. This model proposes that human beings can learn from observing and modeling the behavior of significant others (Bandura & McClelland, 1977).

Professional Athletics

Research would not be complete in this study without including information for “the fairy tale” for most athletes - professional athletics. These talented athletes in America's sports culture can earn some of the highest salaries in the world. For example, in 2010 – 2011 the average professional basketball player in the National Basketball Association (NBA) made 5.15 million a year in salary. That was easily the highest average salary of the four major sports leagues in the United States. Major League Baseball (MLB) players are the second highest paid at an average salary of \$3.31 million a year. National Hockey League (NHL) players make the third most money of the major sports leagues, with an average salary of 2.4 million a year. Finally, the

most popular sport of all sports leagues in the United States is the National Football League (NFL) where the average player will make a yearly salary of 1.9 million (Dorish, 2011).

The following data was provided by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (2012) and does not share great hope for the average school athlete. An NBA team will eventually draft three in 10,000, or approximately .03 percent of high school senior boys playing interscholastic basketball. A WNBA team will eventually draft one in 5000 or approximately .02 percent of the high school senior girls playing interscholastic basketball. An NFL team will eventually draft eight in 10,000 or approximately .08 percent of the high school senior boys playing interscholastic football. An NHL team will eventually draft about one in 1000 or approximately .10 percent of high school senior boys playing interscholastic ice hockey. An MLB team will eventually draft approximately one in 200 or about .51 percent of high school senior boys playing interscholastic baseball.

Obviously the NCAA made many assumptions and estimations in the process of calculating these figures. Therefore, the reader should not consider these figures to be exact, but instead should view these figures as educated calculations.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative research methods that allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of participants in their natural environment by examining the socio-cultural context of educational issues and phenomena (Stake, 2010). Qualitative research study techniques were used in order to follow appropriate protocol for observations and interviews. The use of qualitative research methods provided the opportunity for me to understand a particular social situation, event, role, group, or interaction (Creswell, 2012). There are four key methods of qualitative research: grounded theory ethnography, phenomenology, and case studies (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Phenomenological studies search for the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience (Sandelowski, 2000). Ethnographic studies look for the cultural characteristics of a group of people or culture (Goulding, 2005). Grounded theory research looks to explain how or why something operates as it does through the process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Case study research explores the characteristics of single or multiple cases and draws conclusions about the participants within a setting (Eisenhardt, 1989; Merriam, 2009).

Identified case studies can be intrinsic, instrumental, or collective (Stake, 1995). An instrumental case study was used to provide insight and refine the theory for this study of student engagement. The specific case of Paducah High School was looked at in depth, scrutinized, detailed, and aided in my pursuit of the external interest. Therefore, brought out hidden details from the viewpoint of the participants by using multiple sources of data. This approach allowed myself to employ a single, instrumental case study design, which gathered and analyzed the data from multiple research participants in one rural school setting.

The case of this instrumental case study was of secondary interest for the study. The phenomenon studied was how this rural school produced students successful in athletics and academics at the same time. The foundational question for the case study research was a study of the characteristics of this place that developed well-rounded students.

Since teachers typically have knowledge about the curriculum of a school and culture of the school and community, I explored how they perceived student participation of a well rounded child, their view of the role of sports and academics in the school and community, and the their view of whom influenced the balance of the well rounded students. This study has provided an astute analysis of why rural high school students engage in academics and athletics, and helps school leaders understand what motivated and who influenced students to be engaged in all facets of the school.

Research Context

In 2012-2013, Kansas had 286 school districts and 1,300 schools (Kansas State Department of Education, 2013). Of these, 354 were senior high schools and KSHSAA members (KSHSAA, 2014). In order to select an appropriate research setting, I explored the KSHSAA website and the many links to sport related articles in Kansas found there. This search led me to discover a rating system developed by Catch iT Kansas, a subsidiary of a Kansas television station KWCH located in Wichita, Kansas. Catch iT Kansas awarded points to the top eight team-finishers at the State Championships in every sport for the 2012-2013 school year. Eight points went to the champion, seven to the runner up, six to the third place team and so on, down to one point for eight place in state tournament play. For the second time in four years, the Paducah Beavers (pseudonym) were awarded the honor of an All-Sports award winner. The Beavers' first award was in the 2010-2011 school year (Mendez, 2013).

Paducah is a rural school that participates in one of the six categories in the KSHSAA classification system for senior high schools in Kansas. The largest classification is class 6A, which consists of 32 high schools and an enrollment range of 2258 to 1357 students in grades 9-12. The second largest in Kansas is class 5A with 32 schools and an enrollment range of 1136 to 737 students. Class 4A has an enrollment range of 734-251, 3A ranges from 249-156, while 2A ranges from 154-100. Each of these classifications comprises 64 schools as compared to only 32 schools for the larger classes. Class 1A has an enrollment range of 99-20 and has 97 high schools in its classification range (KSHSAA, 2014).

Paducah High School is one of two high schools in the McCracken County school district. McCracken County is a rural school district located in the eastern half of the state. The County has an overall population of slightly less than 36,000 people and Paducah is located 10 miles south of Germantown that is the county seat and has a population of nearly 25,000. It was believed by research participants that parents and patrons that are not involved in agriculture mostly commute to Germantown for employment. According to the (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010); the median household income for Paducah's population is \$34,643. Surprisingly only 5.1% of the males were divorced compared to Kansas data of 9.2% and, 12.1% of the females were divorced compared to 10.9% for Kansas. These statistics were confirmed by many of the research participants in the study, as they believed two parent families in Paducah supported their students. The educational attainment level of the population was 6.0% Masters, professional or doctoral degree, 7.5% obtained a masters degree, 27.9 attended some college, and 42.6% graduated High School. The district land mass is located in the southern half of McCracken County and encompassed 295 square miles. This is considered an average size school district in Kansas. There are three rural towns in this district; they are Paducah, St.

George and Chattanooga. With populations of 504, 500, and 276 respectively, these small towns were described as being friendly, with a warm atmosphere. The people were described as honest, hard working people that are family centered and are strong with their faith. A number of churches and organizations provide community service projects for it's population. The district brochure describes these communities as caring and giving. A place in where school functions and activities are actively supported.

The district serves approximately 531 K-12 students with over 59% classified as economically disadvantaged. The ethnic composition of McCracken County is 94% White, 3% Hispanic, and 3% other (Kansas State Department of Education, 2012). The school district consisted of four attendance centers. Two of the attendance centers were Elementary schools that housed grades Kindergarten through the sixth grade. The other two attendance centers, one of which was Paducah housed grades seven through twelve.

The McCracken County school system offers a variety of activities for students. Activities include: band, basketball, cheerleading, choir, cross country, Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), football, forensics, golf, scholars bowl, student government, Technology Student Association (TSA), track, and volleyball. Participation in extracurricular activities at Paducah High is very high with more than 90% of the students participating in at least one activity. The high school competes in the McCracken County League and in 2012-2013 was crowned state champions in girl's volleyball, girl's basketball, and girls and boys track. That same year the girl's volleyball team won state, was second place in girl's basketball, and qualified for the state track meet. The boy's golf team received a second place finish in state, while the players on the football team made it to the state quarterfinals. In addition the Paducah male athletes qualified for state in cross-country, basketball, and track. Students at Paducah

High School were not only competitive in athletics at the league, regional, and state levels, they also excelled in their academic studies.

Paducah High School has a one-to-one laptop initiative for all students and used a curriculum aligned with the Kansas State Standards. According to state assessment scores for 2012-2013, Paducah high school received standard of excellence awards at the building level in reading and math. Additionally, they received the Governor's achievement award and were recognized as a Kansas school of character. Paducah High School has strong booster clubs who not only promoted activities, but also supported the academic experience. This was usually in the form of monetary funds created by fundraisers.

Research Participants

The focus of my research concentrated on the perceptions of rural high school teachers with regard to the relationship between school athletics and the academic experience. More specifically, I explored the phenomenon of what teachers perceived as the driving force of students to be engaged in all aspects of the curriculum in a rural high school setting. I used purposeful sampling to find and select eligible interview participants for this study since this approach allowed me to gain the most information from this particular group (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling required myself to determine specific selection criteria (Merriam, 2009). The attributes for my study were teachers in a rural high school from a school unusually successful in academic and athletic programs. Since Paducah High School meet these criteria, I contacted administrators from McCracken County to provide information concerning the purposely chosen participants and to set up interviews. I interviewed the entire teaching staff that worked with students in grades 9-12. This consisted of 17 interviews from different disciplines of the school curriculum and resulted in a heterogeneous sample of data from

participants. To generate knowledge and meaning from research participant's experiences and ideas, I used a constructivist paradigm to encourage conversations relevant to the study. In describing the participant's views of reality my approach has stressed pluralism over objectivity because of the different views by participants of the study. To enhance the findings, I asked each of the interviewees for suggestions of other research participants, also called snowball sampling, that might add to the study (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2011). Because of snowballing, I added an additional interview with a Rule 10 coach. A Rule 10 coach is a person hired by written agreement from a local school board in Kansas in order to coach in a district where they are not a certified employee of the school district. Research participants identified him because of his history of work and influence with the school (now retired). In total I interviewed 18 research participants with the breakdown of the staff members as follows: Seven teachers were interviewed from the core academic areas of English, Math, Science, and Social Studies. Four teachers in the vocational areas: Industrial arts, newspaper/yearbook, Business, and Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS). Four teachers in elective areas were included: Physical Education (PE), Band/Music, weights, and current events. The counselor, librarian, and Rule 10 coach completed the research participant pool. The gender difference of the research participants was 10 females and 8 males. Sixteen of the 18 interviewed were involved in some form of extracurricular duty. Seventeen of those interviewed had children, and all of those that had children, shared that their children participated in extra curricular activities. Eight of the 18 research participants have taught in the district for less than 10 years, three have 10 to 20 years of experience in the district, while seven have over 20 years of experience in the rural school district. Seventeen of the staff members interviewed believed the district has lived up to their expectations while one staff member said they did not have any expectations when they started

teaching. Six of the 18 research participants had other family members that also work in the district. The interviews were conducted in order to gain a saturation of data for the research analysis of this study. Data saturation was accomplished when themes emerged and a point of redundancy was reached.

Data Collection

The technique used to gather data for my study was semi-structured, open-ended interviews that asked the study participants predetermined questions that were developed prior to the interview (Creswell, 2007). Interview questions are included in Appendix B. The semi-structured interviews allowed exploration of the relevant topics to my research. Asking open-ended questions allowed interviewees to be open in their thoughts and ideas and expand on answers beyond the interview questions. I was consistent by asking the same detailed questions to all research participants I interviewed. Probing question's were utilized to follow up and clarify interviews was used in this study in order to obtain unique information or interpretations held by the person being interviewed (Stake, 2010). During the interviews with teachers I observed and documented their reactions to the interview questions by taking notes. The collection of quality information from interviewees was critical in addressing the research questions for the study. Interviews lasted from approximately 20 - 60 minutes and were audio-recorded. For the recording I used two devices: an iPhone and a audio recorder to ensure the participants perceptions were captured fully and accurately. Ultimately these recordings served as the record of the interview and were transcribed, and analyzed for common themes. Because face to face semi structured interviews were the primary source for the data collection of this study (Merriam, 2009), the interview protocol was explained to all participants and a consent form was explained and signed before interviews began (See Appendix A for consent form). I

traveled to the school district and conducted the interviews in the participant's classrooms where they were more relaxed and comfortable. Traveling to the school district allowed for a better understanding of the school facility, community, businesses, family homes, and places of worship that participants visited about during the interviews.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved examining, tabulating, reviewing, categorizing, and organization of the data in a case study (Creswell, 2009). I started the data analysis with reviewing the notes I had collected from the individual interviews and listening to the recordings of the interview. Next, the interviews were transcribed from the recordings and sent by email to the research participants for accuracy, this is also called member checking. After feedback from the research participants I began the process of unitizing the interview data into thematic categories based on the codes that were relevant to the study topic and were useful in the analysis process (Lapan et al., 2011). The search for patterns required several passes of examination through the transcriptions in order to search for repetitions in the data. From this constant comparison of the interview data, codes were constantly compared with new data. I then sorted these codes into categories that contained the research questions. This process allowed all the data to be continually analyzed for comparison or verification of the connecting themes. The identification of themes and patterns in order to break the data down into manageable categories are termed as coding or chunking of information (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) .

Research Quality

The trustworthiness of the study was my responsibility since I was the sole researcher. I used several practices to enhance the validity and reliability of the study. These practices included note taking and semi structured interviews following an interview protocol as a means

to ensure quality of this research study by asking the same detailed questions to all research participants. Note taking allowed for a better recollection of the interview participants comments during the transcription process. To increase the accuracy of the study, I used member checking after the interviews to decrease the likelihood of my positionality influencing the write up of the findings (Merriam, 2009). Member checking was the technique used to review data with the study participants involved in the interviews. I sent the transcription via email to all study participants after the interviews to ask if it accurately described our interview and gave them the opportunity to provide clarification or other feedback.

Data collection will continue until themes emerge and a point of redundancy is reached.

Ethics and Confidentiality

By gaining insight a representative sample of participants from a small rural school in Kansas will provide the data for this study. Participants of the study were awarded full confidentiality and anonymity of their thoughts and opinions revealed from their interviews and may either confirm or disconfirm the theory of student engagement being used for this study (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). During the study I used ethical considerations of (a) consent forms for all study participants prior to the interview session (Maxwell, 2013); (b) full disclosure of the purpose of the study; (c) take necessary precaution to provide anonymity for all research participants.

Location anonymity was difficult because of the required citations for APA 6 guidelines and the unique study. Pseudonyms were used to hide the identity of the school district and high school.

Researcher's Positionality

My position as researcher in this study was grounded in the belief system I have constructed during my 25 years as a professional educator and administrator in mostly rural Kansas public school systems. During this time as a building level administrator, I repeatedly

defend coaches to unsupportive parents and to boards of education. My largest concern over athletics occurred when I was superintendent in a rural school district. For several years we spent little time (as little as 15 minutes per year) discussing teacher tenure and performance. However, we would spend months on renewing or offering contracts to coaches. Because I have served as an advocate for children who simply wanted to participate and do their best to outraged parents and community members who believed the coaches were terrible. I have observed parents at their worst as they expressed their anger by screaming, yelling, and becoming physical with the staff members at the school. I have listened while patrons and parents complained in the bleachers, barbershops, and Main Street. Being an administrator for almost fourteen years, I have witnessed first hand the amount of time it takes for students to be involved in school activities while trying to please others, specifically parents, peers, and community members.

I played and coached several sports at the high school level and played college basketball at a Division One institution. During high school, I was a student raised below the poverty level by two supportive parents whose highest educational level was a high school diploma. My lived experiences have been centered in a rural setting, specifically an agricultural community. According to Creswell (2009), a researcher's own personal training and experiences influence their approach. Because of this I selected participants I had no prior experiences with and had not met before. No personal information was shared about the research participants prior to the interview and an approved protocol was followed.

Personally, I enjoyed meeting these outstanding staff members and learned a great deal about their perceptions, community, and beliefs, so conducting personal interviews to participants face to face was a pleasant process for me. Because I have years of professional experience working in schools that struggled to be successful in athletics, and because my

educational disposition leads me to respond favorably toward students who participate in school sports, I chose this study that examined the relationship of academics and athletics in a rural high school with a reputation for being competitive in sports at the state championship level.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter describes how teachers perceived the athletic and academic experience in a rural high school in Kansas. These findings are derived from 18 individual interviews conducted with the entire teaching staff at a rural high school. The school was chosen as a research site because it had a reputation for being successful in academics and athletics. The majority of the staff members claimed students were involved in academics and extracurricular activities because of the values learned from their rural environment. The findings address the three overarching questions guiding this study and are organized according to major themes that emerged from analysis of the data.

Major Themes

Data analysis identified four significant findings:

- Work ethic taught and modeled from family, staff, and community members had a major impact on students' desire to work hard in the academic and athletic programs.
- Community cohesion coming together around school activities was central to the cultural life in the community.
- Faith-based and family values allowed students to see their parents in service to the community and encouraged students to be service oriented as well.
- Wise elders were ultimately responsible for the teaching of secular values, ethics, and morals that facilitated success and stability for students, parents, and community.

Work Ethic

Teachers described the parents and families of the Paducah community as possessing a strong work ethic. Many of the teachers gave credit to the parents for the development of their

children's ability and willingness to work hard. Participants noted that parents often obtained some form of postsecondary education and many held college degrees. Some parents commuted to nearby cities for employment while a number of others worked in the agricultural industry. A research participant who grew up 10 miles from Paducah stated, "Many of the parents are college graduates and hold prestigious careers. We have accountants, nurses, and others in the medical field, and many more areas for such a small town. Farming and ranching, here, are big also." The staff members I interviewed spoke of receiving parental support for their classroom teaching and coaching of extracurricular activities. One research interviewee shared his view of parental support and work ethic:

Parents support the programs, they support their kids working hard, and I do believe our kids know how to work hard. They see mom and dad going to work every day. They've been taught work habits, and I think that's why our kids do well in academics, and they do well on the football field and basketball court, because they've been taught how to work. You can't just have the desire to be something; you have to work at it.

Another participant shared, "Our students have watched parents and grandparents work hard. I think that high expectations have been set at home and our parents want their students to do extremely well in everything." Over half the teachers interviewed credited parents for teaching their children the value of work. The families of most students were described as solid families that encouraged their children to the point of being a little pushy. One participant said, "The parents here have high standards. We have great kids in our building because we have good parents that expect good things." One of the veteran teachers claimed, "You can't make any of this success happen if you're not getting parental support. Parents not only have high expectations for their kids but for our programs at school." Another participant explained that

the successful families she deals with regularly choose to return home after college because of the support they receive from community, family, and the school. “I think it comes down to support, the majority of parents and their families grew up here and their relatives went to school here.” She believed many parents went to college and returned home to raise their children the same way they were raised. The parents were described as having high expectations for their student’s academic work and some had informed the coaches that if their son or daughter dropped below a 75% or a “C” average, they would withdraw their child from athletics. An interviewee claimed this parental expectation of good grades “sticks with most students because students want to play in athletics.” Another participant observed that parents had every expectation that their children would do well academically and athletically. “They tell their students, ‘You need to learn to do this. Listen to your teacher and/or coach.’ And I really think because of this our success has a lot more to do with parents.”

The view of hard work modeled after students’ families and community also entailed an expectation to participate in sports. Hard work and an expectation of participation in sport brought to the surface a belief in the Paducah community’s ethos of “work hard and play hard”. One interviewee shared, “That work ethic that comes from home turns into how they perform on the sports field or classroom.” Because coaches, community, and parents promoted hard work to the students of Paducah, one participant believed Paducah to be a place that “gets things done”. Another participant shared, “whether we’re walking on the field, basketball court, volleyball court, or participating in state assessment tests – we’re going to win.” A teacher who also coached athletics stated, “There is no doubt work ethic plays a huge role in our school success.” A vocational teacher shared,

Every year the kids want to carry on the tradition here, they've bought into the programs. I feel that the coaches in this school establish sports teams as a family and that kids want to be a part of it. We never have had the issue of kids not wanting to come to practice. For example, if it's a school break, almost all of the kids are going to be at practice. Like Christmas break, they're going to be at every single practice. I just think they have a good work ethic, it's the tradition, they watch the pattern of how you have to work for something, and I think it goes back to families; a lot of family support.

Work ethic was credited for Paducah's success in both academics and athletics. Observed one interviewee, "I would say one of the things that helps us be successful in the academics and athletics is the kids usually have a pretty good work ethic." Another participant noted, "Paducah has always carried a reputation of being strong in both areas. I would say on the academic level we do vary with the student body that we're given and the resources that we are provided within the district." Another teacher presented something of a contrasting view: "There's some [students] that just give up on the athletic field and don't give in the academic classroom, and there's others they go the other way. But for the most part work ethic translates back and forth."

Many participants believed the community expectation of hard work contributed to successful, winning athletic teams in school. One interviewee shared the view of a winning attitude in the community:

In some communities they get to where winning is cool, but losing is not that bad. Paducah has been able to stay away from that way of thinking [that losing is not that bad]. So even on those years where we have a little bit of a down year, [less talent in academics or athletics] and the community might have seen it as a down year, our kids never want to be that class or group that wasn't very good. This motivates those groups

of kids that maybe aren't as talented to work harder and achieve in our less talented years.

Students successful in academic studies and athletics were viewed to be one and the same. One participant stated, "It's all the same kids, when you look at your roster of all the teams, your star athletes are most of your star students as well." Sixteen of the 18 research participants agreed with this statement about student athletes. One research participant who disagreed stated, "I can't say they are one and the same anymore. It used to be that way in my day, everybody that did athletics and almost everyone did, were your higher achievers. I don't think it is that way anymore." A second participant who also disagreed succinctly explained the distinction this way: "Jocks hang out with the jocks, and fine arts students hangout with fine arts students."

Seven participants believed that athletes were held in higher regard (impression of being more popular, holding higher grades, having higher educational aspirations, with fewer discipline problems) at Paducah High School, while 10 participants argued that rather than being held in higher regard, athletics just enjoyed more community exposure. One participant stayed neutral on this topic. For a number of participants, it was important I not misconstrue the comparison they were making: "Athletes simply have more recognition, but are not held in a higher regard at school" they said. Commented another participant, "When our students are playing sports, they are in the limelight and are viewed by some as movie stars. Similar to an actor or actress being seen on the TV screen, people tend to remember them more." Another participant added, "Almost all of our students participate in some type of athletic sport. So I don't believe for example, the football quarterback is held in any higher regard as a student that might be in the band."

Contrary to these perspectives, one interviewee had a different understanding of the same dynamic. He firmly believed that student athletes were held in higher regard than students who did not participate in sports. According to his view of the situation,

Without a doubt athletes are held in a higher regard. I believe that is true in any school, where athletics are successful. If we weren't very good, to be held in a high regard wouldn't be at all important. But since we are successful, I know it sounds kind of egotistical, but in all our athletics--from volleyball, cross-country, basketball, football, track, and golf--we succeed in all of them. So I think, yes, athletes are held in a higher regard.

Tradition

Participants credited the community for its dedication and support of their school. Eleven of the 18 research participants referenced tradition 35 times in the study. A participant stated, "If you look at our district logo, tradition is one of the words and excellence is another, and pride is the third piece of our expectation." The school staff, parents, and family were perceived as the major influences contributing to the tradition of student academic success at Paducah High School while community and coaches received credit for the tradition of athletic success. The tradition of successful academic programs and winning sports teams was attributed to hard work. A veteran teacher said: "Since we have a really strong tradition, I know that's a cliché, but I just think the kids want to be a part of this. They watched it, they've seen it, and their parents talk about it, as some of their parents went to school here also." This same interviewee claimed the students had a lot of supporters who pushed and encouraged them to participate and "keep the tradition alive." Keeping the tradition alive referred to her belief that work habits and

participation in sports would best prepare her son for adulthood and life experiences post high school.

Most teachers believed the community expected academics and athletics to play an equal role in providing a balance of opportunities at which students could excel. Said one participant, “I think both play an important role in the school, and probably any small school, when the community support students at activities, students feel like they are a part of something successful and want to do well.” A coach offered his view:

I think we are an athletic school first and academic second. But with saying that I don't look at it like academics are as important to the kids because I think our athletic success actually leads to our academic success because we build up a persona that we want to be good in everything we do. I think the more success you have on the athletic fields, it's a whole lot easier for a kid to come to school the next day and engage in class conversations when you have a positive night the night before. If you're getting beat down on the athletic fields, to come to school the next day and everybody's hanging their head and not feeling so good about themselves academically, I think it becomes more difficult.”

With regard to the role of athletics in the school, an interviewee commented: “Athletics keeps our kids busy and goal oriented, the success they're able to feel either on an individual level or associated with a team brings increased in value to their lives.” Four participants believed the community placed greater emphasis on sports. Another teacher echoed his colleague and wished that the community wasn't so wrapped up in athletics. Though he shared, “I have always been a strong believer that the participation in athletics has played a far more positive role in these young people's lives, seldom have I seen it be a negative.”

Staff members believed that the community was the major influence in maintaining a successful sports tradition. One interviewee who grew up in Paducah claimed that even at a young age, she knew that, “If you're going to go to Paducah you're going to play sports, and you're going to do your best.” A veteran teacher that also coached believed the community viewed academic success as important although it was not as visible as athletics. He stated, “It's hard to fit 1,000 people from the community into our building to cheer on state assessments.”

The teachers and coaches shared their views of the impact that work habits of families and community members have had on the students of Paducah. One participant claimed, “These kids are set at a high standard I believe, and I also feel that students know they are expected to continue the tradition of participation.” Students understood that being involved in numerous activities in a rural school did not allow them to neglect their academic responsibilities.

Observed one participant,

Our kids have an added pressure to balance time, while their coaches are supportive, our good athletes, many of them are straight A students, or A and B students anyway, appear like students don't have a hard time balancing responsibilities if it's based on their grades, but there is that struggle of completing homework when you're never at home because you're participating in activities, so many of them bring their homework to school and do it during other classes. Our kids understand that just because you're in sports and you missed English doesn't mean you don't have to make it up.

Most teachers believed the school strived to maintain a balance of work requirements for the busy students in their rural school. Some teachers believed students were the lucky recipients of grade inflation because teachers understood how busy the students were keeping up with their different activities. One teacher shared, “I think a lot of times we give student's credit for the

amount of involvement it takes to make this place work. So sometimes I think there's the idea that they're doing everything, and they're into everything.” Participants believed students who maintained strong academic records in high school continued to do well in post secondary pursuits and education. One interviewee noted, “I would say that the kids who have maintained strong academic records continue to do well in postsecondary pursuits. Some students are not able to maintain the GPA they received in their past experience of high school.”

High expectations were placed on teachers and coaches to carry on the tradition of successful grade cards as well as posting winning scores on the scoreboard. A veteran coach of 37 years with a record of more wins than losses believed parents and the community had already established a winning tradition long before he started coaching at the school. He shared, “My first year we placed third at state, my second year we won a state championship. So I got off to a good start for a number of reasons; student’s that possessed strong work ethic was one of them.” Early success in his program continued a winning mentality in the Paducah community that has been in place for over three decades. He added, “I think the general attitude in this community, especially today, is the more you win, the more losing hurts.” A different coach and teacher shared his experience with his team’s determined attitude: “I’ve never seen one of my teams just give up; students constantly battle and work until the whistle blows to stop.”

Interviewees revealed that the community is a little spoiled from years of athletic success. Spectators who take winning for granted may not bother attending the opening round of games at state tournaments. Instead, they wait until the weekend for the championship round because that's where they expect the Paducah students to be playing.

Excellence

Excellence was a buzzword used in the Paducah school district logo to convey an expectation of student achievement that was close to perfection in both academics and athletics. One participant thought students who grew up with the expectation of excellence in a rural community were, “Ready to become part of the community’s legacy.” As she explained in more detail,

Living in a rural community rich in success makes it easier for our kids to have school buy-in and participate. I worried that if we moved our family to a larger community, and our kids suffered through too many years of being the underdog on the totem pole, we would see them struggle in the classroom, or maybe we would have more behavior issues. Maybe the new school would not be as strong in academics, and that worried me. Teacher’s expectation of success for the students ran deeper than mere participation in sports. The faculty expected academic excellence in state assessments, participation in school activities such as forensics, and held high expectations of high school graduation and being prepared for postsecondary career or college experiences. One contributor of the study shared,

It's not about winning a football game or a basketball game for our students, its participation. Let's get them educated and allow them to do something post high school and be successful with a college education and get a good job.

Students involved in academics and athletics were believed to have advantages with regard to social skills, popularity, grades, sportsmanship, and teamwork. Study participants related various personal experiences and shared their views about the significance of having winning athletic teams and the impact these teams had on student and staff morale around the school. Observed one teacher, “I think that athletics and academics help with the atmosphere in our

school.” Teachers believed winning exerted a positive influence on how students and staff treated each other.

Pride

Many participants felt that academics and athletics carried equal weight in the school district. One participant described the school as, “The heart of a small town or small community.” Explained another participant, “They’re both equally important in our school because we have so much pride and we do so well in our sports, but we also have pride because so many of our students do well in academics.”

Part of the high school students’ pride came from mentorship of other students. Research participants shared that high school students served as role models to the “young eyes” at the elementary school. At least a dozen high school students at Paducah High had the opportunity each day to mentor elementary-age students. The high school students helped elementary school students with reading and math or helped the classroom teacher with whatever task they were working on. The mentor program was perceived as providing positive role models for the elementary students and valuable mentorship skills for the high school students. The mentor program was highly esteemed; it was referenced 21 times by 16 research participants over the course of the study. An important component of the mentoring program was having high school students work one-on-one teaching character to elementary students. One participant declared, “When the high school students work with the elementary students, they create a bond that is going to stay with the elementary student throughout their school career, and it stays with the high school kid, too.” With regard to the mentor-mentee relationship, one teacher thought younger children idealized their older peers:

I think they look up to the older kids, not celebrity status, but role models for sure. I mean even when the high school students come by to shake the hands of kids, as they are getting ready to leave for state or something like that, it pretty much makes those younger kids' day. This gives them something to look forward to so when they get to that age they will start making things happen as well.

Another participant offered up a different insight: "They see the football players walking to practice, or the cross-country runners going to practice, or the volleyball girls lacing up their shoes. Our younger kids are watching that and they can't wait to be a part of it." Many participants agreed that younger students watching and working with the older students was a major factor contributing to academic success in Paducah's schools. Several participants shared an observation expressed by a high school math teacher who served as the junior-high basketball and track coach: "Those elementary kids see the older kids on a day-to-day basis so when they come to a game and see their mentor playing they want to be that person." This participant believed Paducah's mentor model was unique for a small rural school and community. He continued, "While other schools are trying to keep the young and old students separate, we are trying to push them closer together." Another participant echoed support for his colleague's observation, "We're not afraid to mesh. Some schools are kind of afraid to have their high school, junior high, and elementary all together. But our kids are constantly all together helping each other, and I think it makes our older kids more accountable." Another teacher shared a personal story about the impact the mentor program had on his grandchildren:

I was trying to make this point to some of our high school kids one day about how younger kids view them, and how the younger kids see them in their perspective is very different. We got one kid on our team, on our boys' high school team, the Jones kid we

will call him. My two grandkids are out in the driveway and I hear one of them say, 'Let's play some one-on-one. I am LeBron James [an NBA superstar].' And here's the little one who says, 'Okay, I am Joe Jones [a Paducah High School student].' I'm like what? Of all of the great basketball players that play college and professional basketball, my grandson chose to model a high school kid from Paducah. That's how the elementary students look upon our high school kids. One of my favorite pictures is a picture of my summer camp, where a lot of my high school players were helping out all of these little kids in the gym. My players took a picture and titled it, 'And the beat goes on.' It really is our young kids learning to be and learning to have the same successes as our older kids do.

The general feeling was that the mentor program helped both the elementary and high school students. Explained one teacher, "If you put that bubble kid over there and give him responsibilities to be somebody for kids to look up to and to treat kids in the way that they learn respect, it's successful both ways." A final participant had this to say: "The younger kids just adore their mentors, and they may not even be athletes. It doesn't matter. If a mentor pays attention to them they just think of themselves as being wonderful." The mentor program was instrumental in starting-up a scholarship fund for high school students who went on to be teachers. An interviewee stated, "The older kids remember some of the assignments from when they were in grade school. This allows them to see what it's like to be a teacher and help out kids." The interviewees concurred that the mentor program provided an opportunity for the older kids to show their school pride by working with the younger students.

Eligibility

Participants believed students were proud of their athletic accomplishments and remained conscientious about their academic grades because they wanted to stay eligible to play on the athletic teams. Paducah had an eligibility policy that student athletes must abide by. This policy stipulated that students had to pass all classes before being allowed to participate in sports. One participant shared,

Students have to stay eligible to participate in athletics because we have an eligibility policy that requires them to do well in the classroom first. I tell my kids, if they are not good in the classroom they are not good for me out on the football field.

The high school principal runs a weekly list of students who are failing one class or more and notifies the student if she or he is failing. When a student is failing a class, she may practice with the team but not play in any school related activities. One participant shared, “Most kids get it fixed after the first day, sometimes not. We had a big piece of our football team not be able to play the last three or four games because of the eligibility policy.” Another participant added,

Because of the student’s motivation for sports, which we don’t always like to be the prime motivator, the eligibility policy motivates some students through their academics, and I think that’s very important. Students know that they are counted on and if they are on that eligibility list it’s a big deal because they don’t want to let others down. So typically they do whatever they can do to get off that list, or never get on the list, it’s very important to them. So if that’s what it takes to keep their grades up, you know if sports are the motivator to keep their grades up, then that’s a good thing. Because we have so many students involved in sports I think it goes hand in hand, the eligibility policy keeps the student focused on all their grades.

Other participants believed the Paducah community placed high value on the eligibility policy governing athletics. He shared, “The community expects academic excellence mainly to keep the students eligible to play in athletics.” In the end, the eligibility policy was viewed by many as one way of maintaining a healthy balance between academics and athletics in the high school.

Student Influences

Participants had mixed beliefs concerning who exerted the major influence on students to work hard in academics and athletics. Sixteen participants shared traditional views of peers, family, teachers, faith, and self-motivation as possible influences in a student’s decision to participate. However, the perspective of a coach differed markedly from the views expressed by the other participants: “I believe the primary motivation for our students to participate in an activity at school comes from our students not wanting to be on the outside of things that are successful.” He continued, “It is easy to get kids to come join something that's doing well, but it's hard with today's kids, because nobody wants to sign up and be a part of something that's not successful.” Because of this, the coach showed admiration for other coaches in the state, “who attempted to turn around unsuccessful, typically losing programs.” Aside from this explanation, he shared the typical responses that motivation had to come from the teachers, coaches, community, and parents. There was also a belief that community norms prompted students to participate. A male teacher commented, “I think this rural community will push kids that may not want to do a certain sport, or may not want to be involved.” This teacher shared a story of a student who did not want to participate in track but participated because of his employers sway on the student. The student was described as a very good athlete who worked after school and on weekends for a local rancher. The rancher convinced and encouraged the student that track

was something he needed to be a part of. The student went out for the team largely because of the community member's influence.

A junior-high coach felt influences in the Paducah community other than adults also pushed students to participate in sports. He claimed,

It's just a little bit of peer pressure. Usually it begins with one student telling their friends that he is playing on a particular sports team, then his friends join in because they want to play on that team too, now everyone wants to play. The final phase of this chain reaction is that one student over there saying, I better play too, just because I want to be a part of that group.

The coach also believed that after this cycle happened the first year, it was much easier to get students involved the next year and in years after that. Another participant confirmed the coach's observations: "When you have a lot of success in academics and athletics, people want to be a part of that success." This interviewee shared that when students received recognition from the community, parents, or peers for playing on a winning team or being successful in academics, other students wanted to be a part of that success. Some students did not mind whether they got to play. The coach described a class of 30 students in which "thirteen out of 15 boys in that grade played because they wanted to be a part of the success with their peers." Still another participant described his past experiences in other schools where students were unsuccessful in athletics. He remembered students reluctant to play if they suspected they were going to lose. The result of this attitude was a number of students who elected not to participate in any school activities. The coach noticed that few community members showed up for games in schools that lacked for players and had losing records. "The sad thing is, if your parents don't show up and support you at the games, why would you want to go out, other than play for

yourself?” Coach strongly felt that students wanted their parents to support them at games, win or lose. In the absence of support from home and family, some students turned to their teachers for support and motivation. The study participants agreed that because students wanted to share in Paducah’s athletic success, low student participation was a non-issue.

Community Cohesion

Community cohesion has been explained in other rural studies as a mechanism for young people to maintain strong relationships with those of all ages in their community (Shuayb, Sharp, Judkins, & Hetherington, 2009). Sports can play a positive role in community regeneration and is a useful tool for building community networks. As previous studies have suggested (Atherley, 2006), I found community relationships in Paducah to play an important role in building social and political trust and increasing social engagement. Sports and other school activities provided important opportunities for Paducah residents to come together and celebrate their community ties.

School activities were described as the local entertainment because college and professional sport venues were geographically distant from the community. Kansas City, for instance, home to professional baseball, football, and soccer teams, was over two hours away. Study participants believed that most community members followed the local high school students to games and events because it provided them quality social time with friends and family. One interviewee remarked that sporting events served the community as their “opportunity for inexpensive outside entertainment.” Another stated, “It’s hard to imagine our community without the combined academic and athletic success of the school. Our community does not want any other type of entertainment.” Several participants reported that on any given night of the week, a significant portion of Paducah’s community members were at the school

cheering on the children. To underscore the points being made, a staff member chimed, “Because that’s what the community does here in Paducah--support the school and students.”

Most research participants joked and smiled as they struggled to describe the community makeup. One participant said, “It's strange and sometimes you joke about it, but it’s almost like a big family.” She continued:

Other towns joke about it, then you get here and you realize that in some way, they really are all kind of related, and they have these huge families, and these families have 6 to 10 kids, or whatever, but they're all still here, or they came back to raise their children and it’s just a deep-rooted family oriented community.

Another participant shared her view of the centrality of family life in Paducah: “When you look at the majority of the families here, they grew up here; their relatives went to school here. So I think it comes down to support of the entire family.” Staff members believed family and the community participation in athletics promoted a sense of belonging. One teacher who graduated from Paducah shared her view of traditional strong-knit family support of students in the Paducah community: “My son ran a track meet last week, and not only were his dad and I there, but his grandpa and grandma on both sides, aunts and uncles were there watching him, his grandpa's sister was even there watching.” Sporting events were reverently attended and observed by community members according to one interviewee who shared this view of community encouragement: “Community members come out and support the kids even if they don't know any of the students or their families. I think they just enjoy seeing our young people excel and compete while they socialize with their friends.” The school provided the place for rural community members to gather and enjoy the regeneration of the community in which they lived. Paducah’s keen interest in sports was almost like a faith as community members would go

to the games and support the children without knowing the child participating, just wanted to be a part of the community's most treasured activity – that of sport.

In addition to sports, faith activities also contributed to the community's cohesion. A veteran teacher expressed her view of the cohesiveness in the community regardless of which church community's members attended, "It's not like because we're catholic we're better than you, or whatever, it's like we're all just one big group, we're all on the same team. It's not like we're against each other." Another participant echoed the ability of the community to work together at church gatherings: "Even if you're not Catholic, a lot of people in our community attend the Catholic church gatherings. They have a big barbecue, they have festivals, and it brings people together, it ties us all together a little bit." Many staff members shared that there was an overlap between sports-based activities and faith based activities that were practically synonymous. A teacher who grew up in Paducah shared:

When you bring in the Catholic Church to where they are with each other every Saturday night--their fellow students, their family members, their church, which is all their family. Then to their Sunday activities that they're doing with the church, to those people that are at the sporting events, and it's just really like an extended family.

Faith, family, and sports seemed to provide the opportunities for the community to come together and celebrate their most valued possession's, the children.

Faith and the Nuclear Family

Faith surfaced early in the interviews as one of the dominant influences in the Paducah community. Faith defined for this study was the strong belief in God or in the traditional doctrines of a religion. Faith, church, and religion were referenced 37 times by 11 different sources. One participant disclosed,

We're predominantly Christian; I think religion plays a huge role in both academics and athletics. It's hard, I think, to examine how much faith plays a role in the big picture.

Because it's generally more of a private thing, but it's there - I know it's there. My kids attended the K-6 Catholic school and faith kind of combined their school experience with their athletic experience.

The Paducah community, in addition to having its own public elementary school, also had a Catholic elementary school for grades kindergarten through sixth. The school closed in 2013 when enrollment dropped to around 30 students. One participant stated, "It's tough to keep a building like that open because of the low enrollment and building costs, but I talked to some parents, their kids are over here now, and it's been a smooth transition." Many participants believed a majority of their students attended the Catholic Church. One interviewee said, "Probably half of our population is Catholic, I'm guessing. I'm a firm believer that our Catholic Church plays a big part and is a big influence in this community." Another said, "Catholics here are a pretty large majority. I know it's over 50% and there are other branches of different religions here in town, but it's definitely the Catholic Community that sets precedence for a majority of the community." This participant believed when the Catholic elementary school closed, a few of those students traveled 10 miles to Germantown (pseudonym) in order to attend the Catholic school there. He followed up by saying, "We lost some kids, but the transition has been peaceful for the most part. Getting students over here in the public school system has helped us in academic and athletic aspects, so it was a good addition for us."

One of the participants viewed the Catholic Church as beneficial for the students for not only the teaching of religion, but for the teaching of morals, service to the community, discipline, and respect. Another participant shared, "I think that the disciplines and cohesiveness and so on

that comes with a Christian background is very helpful. I have always said that I probably have better kids and better parents than most people do.” He smiled and went on to say, “They still want their kid and the best four others to play, but they’re good people.” In addition to the Catholic Church there was a non-denominational Christian Church and Methodist Church that had a strong impact in the students’ lives because of the after school youth programs. One participant stated, “The Christian in me believes that one of our pluses here is that we have such strong churches. I believe it’s really natural to teach our kids about hard-work and character, and how to treat one another.”

Having students with Christian-based roots and receiving a religious-based curriculum in the Catholic elementary school was also credited for the student leaders in the high school. “I definitely think the leaders of this high school went through the Catholic elementary school, but I’m not saying it’s that way all the time.” A lot of children go to multiple youth groups associated with the churches. One participant shared, “My daughter spends a week at Bible School at the Catholic Church every year, then goes to Bible School at the Methodist Church in the summertime for a week.”

Other participants also shared the belief of Paducah's strong faith. Observed one participant about the extent to which faith was actively woven into the fabric of children’s lives:

We have three very strong churches: the Catholic Church that also had a K-6 parochial school that was opened in 1925 and the other two churches that provide afterschool programs for our youth. They always have been a big part of our families’ lives.

Another participant credited the churches with teaching the students “commitment, dedication, and giving of yourself to make something better for somebody else. I think the hard work part,

the commitment, the service, undoubtedly.” One research participant was curious to see if that culture changed in the future because of the closing of the parochial school.

I don't think we will see fallout immediately, but I do think several years from now we will see an impact. Partly because, there was a lot of service component involved in the Catholic school. There was a lot of focus on selflessness and charity, the golden rule, the Ten Commandments. I mean it is the teaching that we treat others the way we want to be treated, there's a way God does this – I think when those kids come into our system, and if you went back and examined who the class officers were, who the student body leaders, and organizational clubs' leaders were and who was the most active in the building, and in the classroom, they're going to be led by and large by Catholic school students. And I worry about that because our kids will not be getting that experience. The church has lost a lot of members. I think the culture in this school could change because of it.

Other participants were not convinced that closing the Catholic school would have an impact on the school culture. Said one skeptic, “If anything, it’s a positive [closure of the Catholic school]. You know, trying to split resources in a district our size is tough. Putting all those resources in one place allows us to provide better opportunities for our students.”

Credit was given to area churches and parents for the modeling community service to the students. One participant shared he beliefs of the parents’ ability to model morals, service, and volunteerism to their children. “I think that's where a lot of our school kids learned service by watching their parents volunteer to paint playground equipment and cleaning around the school. Students have to contribute to be successful.” Interviewees believed that students who viewed

their parents and family's willingness to serve others also become servants to the school and community.

Nuclear Families of Faith

Many research participants shared their views of nuclear families in Paducah. One participant stated their perception, "Couples stay together pretty well here. A lot of the parents that aren't together come from the surrounding communities and are parents of out-of-district students, more than the Paducah school district." Another participant added, "Many of the kids who have had two parent families, also have a strong religious background, possess a very strong religious belief system, and that's tradition too."

Participants believed that Paducah was different from other rural schools because of the existence of the nuclear family. One participant shared, "I would say 75% of our sophomore class is in the nuclear type of family. It's a blend: mom, dad, and some siblings" he observed. These two-parent families were described as being active in church, school, community, and their children's lives. These families were usually large and many included grandparents, aunts, and uncles living in the Paducah community. Several research participants reflected about the implications of having multiple generations in the community and school. These parent alumni now have their kids in school. As another participant stated, "I would have to say that we do benefit from the homogeneous nature of our community". One participant explained it this way: "most of the students' parents went here, or have been in this area, and so their children know the kind of tradition we've had. The older our students get, the more they want to be a part of it."

Students were believed to benefit from seeing their older siblings' experience before them. Many participants shared that Paducah contained large families who competed with one

another. One teacher who graduated from Paducah shared her family experience when she was in school:

It's kind of like, you know, although I was the first of seven kids, the brother who was fourth down the chain, who had to follow four class valedictorians, understood what the family expectation was. It is on the wall, and when you struggle the least little bit, you feel like a failure and that's a lot of pressure sometimes.

Finally, another participant contributed this observation: “So many of these kids that come from large families are always working to measure up to their older brothers and sisters and that's some of the history that has been established around here.”

Wise Elders

Paducah is fortunate to possess quality coaches who have worked for the school district for an extended time. The football coach had worked there for 21 years and his team's highest honor was state runner up. The volleyball coach worked in the district for 19 years and won two state titles. The cross-country coach had won 5 state titles during his 24-year tenure in the district. The boys' basketball coach worked in the district for 21 years and received state runner-up. The girls' basketball coach won 3 state titles over a span of 37 years. In 24 years, the track coach managed to snag 3 state titles. The golf team was state champion last year and the program had been in existence for 7 years with the same head coach. The assistant coaches had been there for an extended time also, and many of these coaches worked with the junior high students as well. The assistant football, basketball, and track coach have worked for the district 20 years. The assistant girls' basketball coach was in her 17th year.

Many research participants compared themselves with other school districts in the state and considered the longevity of their staff unique. One participant stated, “We are blessed with

some really good coaches, and they have been here for a lot of years. I think it helps us when we have quality coaches that are here for the right purpose--kids.” Another interviewee echoed this by sharing, “We have stability in our coaches. If you look at our staff,” he said smiling, “love them or hate them, they have won a lot of games and events and I think that’s due to their consistency.” Similar to the situation in the high school, I was told about longevity of coaches in the junior high. The junior- high volleyball coach worked for the district 17 years while the junior-high football coach had been employed for 18 1/2 years. The junior-high boys’ basketball coach had been in the district for 16 years and doubled as the junior high track coach. Finally, the junior high girls’ basketball coach had also been the head coach for the girls’ high school team for 37 years; early in his career he taught at the elementary school. He shared the challenge of working two programs at the junior high and high school level and what a typical week during basketball season looked like for him:

Monday I would hold a high school practice, and send the junior high kids on with the assistant coach in a bus, I would get done with high school practice and jump in the car and arrive after missing part of the junior high B game, typically I would be in time for the varsity game. On Tuesday, it flips; I would hurry through a junior high practice, and rush to get to the high school game. Wednesday, typically there were no games because of church. Thursday and Friday was the same kind of schedule as Monday and Tuesday.

Teachers also shared coaching responsibilities in Paducah. One participant explained, “All of the coaches are part of the faculty, and coaching is kind of a bonus.” Of the school’s athletic success, a fine arts teacher said, “The consistency of our successful programs is a result of keeping our coaches here for longer than a couple of years and making coaching a revolving door.” When I probed this response to better understand what the participant meant, I was told,

“Our ability to hold coaches here for many years is a large portion of what makes this school great. This allowed our coaches to be here long enough to build a program.” Many participants gave credit to the school district administrators and Board of Education for coaches’ longevity because of the level of support they provided. A high school coach stated, “The Board of Education and administrators give us what we need to be successful: the facilities, finances, and support. If a parent gets in their ear and starts complaining, they seem to support us.” A core academic teacher who did not coach, shared these thoughts:

I think the Board of Education and Administrators through goal setting and constant promotion of our mission and vision share the message that we are an educational institution first. Part of our well-rounded experience here includes many opportunities, whether it is through athletics, organizational involvement, community service, or growing and supporting the whole child. I feel the board of education and administrators communicate the well-roundedness vision very well. I think that it's promoted even through our teacher evaluation system.

Another research participant replied that supportive administration was directly linked to the willingness of staff members to stay at Paducah. From her perspective, this was a major factor in the school’s success: “Longevity has something to do with our success because I know when these coaches build a program, they do things so purposefully, and they know students capabilities and encourage students to work on areas they are weak in.”

One of the coaches went on at length about this topic. She described her view of longevity this way: “In a small school teacher turnover of one or two people a year can add to a high percentage of staff leaving.” She expressed mixed feelings about the length of time a coach spent in a program. “One of the disadvantages in a small school is when there is a personality

conflict, if a student sees that this is the coach they will have for the next six years, they might quit trying,” she said. She had another concern as well: “If a kid’s not good in one sport, and you’re coaching multiple sports, sometimes this happens whether you realize it or not, coaches may predetermine that student’s ability level in all sports that they coach.” She recalled students who were not very good their freshman year but through a combination of hard work and maturity ended-up being an outstanding athletes. She cautioned, “As coaches we have to be careful that we don’t pigeonhole a kid and write him off too soon when you’re in a small school.” This teacher/ coach also believed there were advantages of having longevity in the coaching staff from year to year and season to season. She shared,

I think that you have consistency in what you’re doing. The kids see what it takes and they generally understand where they need to improve. They feel very comfortable at transitioning from one athletic season to another, and they’re probably glad they don’t have to work for so many different personalities.”

A veteran teacher and coach viewed the coaches at Paducah as professional, sharing, dedicated, and hard working. “I would put our coaching staff against any coaching staff in the state, big or small schools” he said. Another participant shared, “The teachers do a great job of motivating in the classroom, administration want kids to do well, kids have a great attitude so in the big picture we have a very unique situation here at Paducah.” The veteran coach considered by colleagues to be the building leader for teachers and coaches as well as an icon for the school added this observation to the conversation:

I admire coaches that have the goal to climb the ladder and go on to a bigger school, a 5A or 6A. For me I think the challenges are certainly there in a school of our size 1A or 2A school. One big challenge is that you don't get to find the kids that fit your program, you

have to adjust your program to fit the kids that you have. I think it takes a big ego to uproot your family for a \$3500 job so you can say you're a coach of a big school. On that part I have no regrets at all. The other part of that is that I coach in the setting that fits me. I think I coach the kind of kids that fit me and I've never pretended that we could have that same kind of success just anywhere that I went. I think I'm a good fit and I'm really where I belong.

The theme of longevity evoked an unusual number of passionate and articulate responses. Another coach had this to add: "All of our coaches have been lifetime people here. Some schools flip-flop their coaches or philosophies every two or three years, we have people in positions that have knowledge in areas that are amongst the best in the state." He believed that students and parents liked the stability of knowing the coach and their expectations year after year. "Kids from other schools sometimes do not participate because of the coaching turnover, it's hard for them to commit to a program that doesn't have consistent expectations and relationships." A different coach noted,

People always ask me, 'Why do you stay at Paducah?' [I tell them] it always comes back to the same thing--it's the kids we have, the community and parents behind that, and it's our staff and our administrators providing support. I think it is a great sale all the way around to keep quality staff members in our building and that helps us stay successful.

Staff Encouragement of Student Participation

Staff members encouraged students to participate in the school's curriculum. Fifteen of the 18 research participants said they encouraged students to be involved in both academic and athletic programs at Paducah High School. During the interviews, teachers frequently referenced their expectation of participation in both academics and athletics. A long time teacher and coach

shared, “A lot of traits that you learn here at this school, kids carry on throughout the rest of their lives. Being respectful, disciplined, and on time are some of those traits.” From the early grades, students were expected to become involved in something extra in school. Students in the fifth grade were encouraged to become involved when they entered junior high so they were not left out. As one research participant stated, “Kids don't like to be left out.” The term “left out” for this participant referred to not participating in an extracurricular activity and missing the fun of participation and working as a team member with their classmates. Beginning in sixth grade, students were prepped for what lay ahead in their junior-high years: the process of selecting classes, character education, and the eligibility policy for those who would be involved in extracurricular activities. Most of the participants encouraged students to participate in an activity in a one-on-one setting versus a group setting. Explained one participant,

We really try hard to get kids to be a part of everything, and maybe that's a small school thing, but we want them to be in the band, we want them to participate in the play, and we want them to play in athletics. The same kids do a lot of different things. During a basketball game, we have basketball players - play in the band at halftime. We hold the academic part of it important; I found that if a kid has trouble in the classroom, they usually have trouble at practice too. So we want kids to do well because I think that being successful at something, at anything, carries over into other activities as well.

A vocational teacher remarked on her approach to student participation, “I would like my students to not only do well in the classroom but do well outside the classroom. I want them to be involved in something.” This teacher did not believe students had to be athletes to be involved in an athletic extracurricular activity. On the contrary, she explained, “We have numerous students who film, work as managers, and are as important to the team in our small

school as the person who gets to start, or be what other people may consider the star of our team.” She believed any number of students participated and benefited from involvement on sports teams even though they did not fill traditional athletic roles on the team.

Other participants described their methods for encouraging students to get involved at school. “I always encourage kids to participate, it keeps them busy and forces students to organize their time, and I think that's an essential skill,” said one teacher. A core classroom teacher confided, “I'm not very good at the athletic thing. I try to encourage them to do academics and I try to keep up on what they do athletically so I can offer encouragement and let them know I care.” She claimed an open demonstration of caring was essential, especially for, “students that don't do well in my class.” One of the high school coaches, who also worked with the junior high, encouraged students to participate as early as the seventh grade. She commented on the social consequences of exclusion:

Especially at the junior high level when the kids get left out of social activities if they are not involved. On game day in junior high it's crazy, it's wild, it's special, and if a kid doesn't participate, they feel left out when everyone else gets on the bus and goes to participate or cheer on the athletic teams. I tell the kids we don't care what skill level you have, in junior high we just want them to come out, get involved and get better every day. A core curriculum teacher who did not coach felt equally responsible toward students as teachers who did: “I'm not as active trying to encourage students into athletics; I tend to focus more on their academics. I think it's really good they're in athletics and I cheer them on, so they know I'm proud of them.” Many teachers believed the relationships they forged from athletic activities carried over to academic work in the classroom. A teacher-coach shared, “The more athletes I

have on my team the more I get to interact with them in class, and vice versa. This allows for a better rapport, than a classroom teacher that doesn't see them on the athletic field.”

A few staff members expressed a more materialistic purpose for encouraging students to participate in activities--so students could add these experiences to their resumes. One teacher instructed her students, “The more you have been involved in activities and high school, the better it looks on resumes and letters of recommendation for college and jobs in the future.” The development of well-rounded students usually requires participation in more than one type of activity. A fine arts teacher encouraged students who were in the band to also play football and basketball. Although he encouraged students to participate in multiple activities, he did not pressure students to pick one activity instead of another. In his judgment, each was important in its own way. To prevent students from worrying about grades, he “put a blank in the grade book, so it doesn't help them, and it doesn't hurt them, but kind of encourages them that it's okay to be involved in more than one thing.”

Many of the high school staff members also worked with junior high and elementary school students during the day. There was a general belief that a school's athletic success benefited from having high school coaches' work with elementary-aged children. The early interventions with students were believed to initiate consistent expectations and discipline while having fun in elementary school. Academic expectations were also high at Paducah High School. One teacher told a story of when her son received a down slip [a teacher notice of academic concern to parents] from another teacher for receiving a 96% in a particular class. When the parent asked, “How can my son who has a 96% which is an A get a down slip?” the response from the teacher was, “He should have 110% my class. He can do better, I just want to keep on top of him.”

Staff members were proud of the number of students from Paducah High School who were listed on the McCracken County all-league academic team. These students were recognized for academic excellence during the league basketball tournament. To be selected for the all- league academic team, students had to be on the honor roll at their representative schools. Paducah typically had more students on the academic team than any other school in the league. The scholars bowl team and forensics team placed well in league and state competitions every year. The scholars bowl was a Kansas High School Activities Association (KSHSAA) competition that tested a student’s academic knowledge in the areas of world language, social studies, language arts, mathematics, science, health, and fine arts. Forensics was another KSHSAA endorsed activity that provided opportunities for students to compete in speech and debate tournaments. Paducah had been the league champion in forensics for the past 16 years.

Teaching Students Adult-Like Behavior

Paducah High School had four major expectations for student behavior. The first expectation was respect. Respect entailed treating others the way students expected to be treated, taking care of personal and school property, and using good manners and kind words at all times. One interviewee said that when students leave for competitions or activities, the teacher always has “the talk” with students on the bus, “Remember we are from Paducah, so act like you’re from Paducah.” Staff members wanted residents of their community and residents of the places they traveled to say, “Those kids from Paducah are pretty great.” The perceptions of parents, students, patrons, and staff members in their own community and communities they visited were important to the staff members because they believed students should model adult-like behavior, self control, and responsibility.

The second expectation was responsibility. This included being on time, being prepared to give your best effort on assignments, and behaving safely (physically and verbally) by owning your own mistakes. One research participant explained this as holding students responsible for their own behavior. “They can own it or blame it,” he remarked, and it was evident from other comments that the teachers expected students to own their own behaviors. Another participant discussed the importance of having consistent expectations for students in regard to academics and athletics at school: “They know that when we get back from a game and they got a test the next day, they're going to have to do the test.”

The third expectation required students to be trustworthy. This meant telling the truth in all situations, doing the right thing when no one was watching, and making good choices. Several research participants observed that the school had not had major discipline issues in years. One participant stated, “Like in the last three years, I would say that there might have been one or two in-school suspensions but there's never been an out-of-school suspension.” Then the participant chuckled and mentioned a female student who worked as a teacher's aide. She went to the teachers’ lounge to grade papers and while there and unmonitored, could not resist eating a donut that was lying on the teacher’s table. “That was our big discipline problem for the year; a girl that copped a donut from the teachers’ lounge.”

The fourth expectation was for students to be service minded. Students were expected to put others first, to think and act in a generous manner, and help others without expecting something in return. For example one participant shared, “our students through different school projects have helped the elderly paint their house or mow and clean up yards. Students have cleaned up the park and road ditches. We sponsor multiple food drives for local charities too.” Another shared, “students that are of Catholic faith are expected to sing at funerals of the

congregation and work the church festival.” One interviewee shared, “that as a staff we encourage kids to understand that in the adult world it’s just not about you and students need to participate in something at school to entertain our community.” A long time coach talked about how he taught students to work as a team. In over 1,200 games spanning 37 years, his players had only one technical foul called on them. “My kids know that that's the single most selfish thing you can do [receive a technical foul] because it's always about you. When a player gets a technical foul, it is never about the team. Ever!” Students in all facets of their daily lives were encouraged to think of others more than themselves.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of high school teachers working in the rural community of Paducah, Kansas with regard to the relationship between school athletics and academics in a well-rounded curriculum. The Paducah school system had a well-rounded curriculum that included student participation in academics and an expectation that students would participate in some other kind of extracurricular activity at school: athletics, band, manager of athletic teams, forensics, etc. Through the perceptions of 18 teachers, I explored the phenomenon of what teachers perceived as the driving force of this rural high school that produced a successful balance of athletics and academics. The foundational question for the case study research was to study the characteristics of a high school reputed to develop well-rounded students. The teachers at Paducah High School shared knowledge about the curriculum of the school and the culture of the community, allowing me to develop a deeper understanding of what and who influenced students to participate in the curriculum. Participants' views about the importance of athletics in the Paducah school community provided insights into how and why a rural community might place emphasis on athletics and academics that supports a balanced curriculum.

The interactions between teachers and students may influence student engagement by promoting one type of curricular activity more than another, such as the teacher-coach at Paducah who influenced students to participate in sports so he could build a rapport and have more in common with his students outside of the classroom. Teachers knowingly or unknowingly influenced students to favor one activity or another and upset the balance between

academic and athletic participation in the school curriculum. Because teachers in Paducah supported and promoted a balance of student participation in academics and athletics in the school curriculum, the findings from this qualitative study enabled me to answer three overarching research questions stated in Chapter One:

1. How do teachers and rural schools view the role of academics and athletics in the school's overall curriculum?
2. How do teachers and rural schools describe their beliefs about the importance of academics and athletics?
3. How do teachers and rural schools describe administrator, school, and community member priority in balancing the athletic and academic experiences of students?

The Paducah Culture is Rare

Coming together around school activities is central to the cultural life of the community. The cohesion of the community is remarkable because of the overwhelming support for the school and its activities. Sporting events are strongly supported whether patrons have a student playing or not. Sports are the most affordable entertainment around and patrons support the school and family members who have students playing, sometimes without even knowing the child. Sports nourish a school culture described by participants as a culture of excellence and pride. Because of Paducah's athletic success, teachers believe winning sports teams are one factor that creates an environment where there is increased optimism, trust, teamwork, and belief in one another.

Families and community members place an enormous amount of pressure on students to be successful and this pressure is a significant part of the school culture. Study participants believe that family and church teach the children that pleasing others and providing service to the

community are important and intrinsic happiness should come from the satisfaction of helping others. Students of larger families (mostly Catholic) are expected to play on a team because their siblings played and there is a continuing tradition in Paducah to participate in sports.

Participation has snowballed into strong winning sports teams for Paducah High School and the community.

In communities without winning teams, participants believed that parents and community members tended to blame the principals, athletic directors, coaches, and even boards of education for the failures. Moreover, in school districts with unsuccessful sport teams, there may be even more emphasis on winning, resulting in student participation in a single sport, often outside of the school district, instead of being involved in a balance of activities at school. It is poor practice in rural communities and high schools to pressure children to practice year round for success in one sport or ignore academic studies to better themselves as athletes. Students should not be pressured to deviate from academic studies in order to have winning teams.

The culture of the school and community supports students working together as a team at Paducah High School. Especially in athletics, collective success of the school shapes its identity and reputation. Many of the students participate in team sports and play on a team under the banner of the high school. There are only a few students at Paducah who do not directly participate in school sports. Students who do not directly participate in a sport are involved in a supporting role such as team manager, cheerleading, band, or involvement in some other school activity.

Another aspect of the high school culture is an expectation to participate and work hard in all facets of school life. The work ethic is modeled for students by family, staff, and community members and is thought to have a major influence on students' desire to engage in

their rural school athletic and academic programs. Participants articulated the differing roles each of these stakeholders play in the school's culture that contribute to the overall success of academics and athletics in Paducah.

The school staff is proud of their athletes' accomplishments and considers student-athletes to be an integral part of the community's legacy. I observed trophy case after trophy case of state championship plaques and trophies displayed in the hallways and offices. Participants believe that when opposing teams compete against Paducah, they are aware of the school's reputation for winning and working together. As a result, opposing teams may feel intimidated by Paducah's traditions and are prepared to have a tough time winning. Most staff members who have taught and coached in other school districts prior to working in Paducah believe that when students are part of an unsuccessful sports team, the number of participants in that sport decreases year after year along with the community's support.

Staff members, teachers, and coaches are ultimately responsible for the teaching of secular values, ethics, and morals that facilitate success and stability in the sports programs at the high school. The secular values, ethics, and morals include teaching the importance of work, sportsmanship, teamwork, selflessness, and service. Throughout the study, coaches shared the belief that their most important role is to help students prepare and overcome setbacks, handle adversity, and understand how to cope with a loss. To accomplish this, students were taught to do their very best and if this was not enough for a victory, they were taught how to accept defeat and courteously congratulate and shake an opposing team member's hand who succeeded where they did not.

Behaviorally Engaged Students

Children were encouraged and pushed to the highest level possible as the teachers established consistent athletic programs because of the families' trust and support of the school to challenge and discipline their children. The occupational stability of coaches is a major factor in Paducah's athletic success and is believed to benefit the children of Paducah. All of the coaches of major sports have coached in the district for 19 years or more. The veteran teachers who led the staff at Paducah played an important role in encouraging students to remain balanced in a well-rounded curriculum by participating in both academics and athletics.

The school administration and Paducah Board of Education preferred students to become involved in some kind of extracurricular activity at school. These leaders believed that participation in a school activity boosted school pride and camaraderie between students. Interviewees shared the belief that participation in extracurricular activities helped build student relationships outside of the classroom and usually resulted in greater respect for one another.

The coaches told students, "In life, you're going to lose more than you win, even if you practice hard at it." Coaches did not overemphasize winning; instead, they asked students to concentrate on the educational objectives of a well-rounded curriculum and to participate in all facets of the educational program. Players in Paducah don't need to look at the scoreboard to know if they won or not, that information comes from the coach in the locker room after the game. Most of the 12 coaches in the research study believed winning was not about defeating the other team. Instead, winning was measured by the achievement of goals set by the team at the beginning of the season. Continuous improvement from game to game and playing well usually allowed student athletes to achieve their goals by season's end.

Emotionally Engaged Students

The children were engaged emotionally by caring staff members, members of their church, and through the schools mentorship program. Students were graciously praised by the high school counselor for the care the high school students exhibited toward their peers at school. High school students were especially service-minded to the younger students and elderly patrons of the school district. Participants observed this service-mindedness when high school students were involved as role models in the mentorship program for elementary students. The school's mentorship program allowed high school students an opportunity to serve "teacher like" to younger students in the district, helping them with reading skills and just being there as a friend. Teachers described how the younger students watched the high school athletes with pride and hoped to follow in the footsteps of these role models. The one-on-one connection between high school and elementary students was a distinctive characteristic of Paducah since many Kansas schools, rural and otherwise, do not usually mix these student populations.

Students were believed to have increased admiration for the teachers and staff who supported them in their athletic and academic programs. Students showed more respect and were more excited about school because of faculty interest in them outside of the classroom. The relationship built between students and teachers was believed to influence positively how the students and staff treated each other.

Cognitively Engaged Students

The students had ownership of athletics and academics in their school, faith, and service to others. Study participants believed that students with a strong desire to master the school curriculum were more teachable and coachable. Students were eager to go beyond simply learning in the classroom, on the field, or on the court; they wanted to be the best at whatever

they did. Participants gave much of the credit for student interest in this level of perfection to the parents who modeled Paducah's generational traits of high expectations, excellence, pride, and tradition.

Paducah High School created opportunities for student participation where they could excel individually or collectively as part of a team. A student's ability to excel on two levels allowed individuals to contribute toward academics and athletics and served as a collective whole for the success of school and community. Students felt they were a part of something bigger than a school or community--that of a deep-rooted family.

By working together as a team and supporting one another, students gained confidence in their will because of the influence of their teammates and coaches. I found the development of initiative, work ethic, and goal setting to be an important part of a student's development to be competitive and successful in a sport. "Work hard, play hard" was a phrase shared by the teachers that expressed the ideal academic and life balance for Paducah students.

In Paducah There Exists A Powerful Trio!

The final section of this chapter addresses the implications of three powerful areas (a triumvirate of sorts) found to bind everything and everyone together in the Paducah community: sports, family, and faith. These three elements are not found in every rural community or rural school that is successful in engaging students in academics and athletics. My interpretations of the unique aspects and success of this rural school district provide information for districts struggling to get students engaged in a well-rounded curriculum.

Sports

Sports provided a forum for the community to engage in social activities and the opportunity for students to build and maintain relationships with older adults in the community.

A major influence encouraging students to participate in sports was Paducah's tradition and pride in supporting sports. Community members expected students to participate and maintain good grades in order to stay eligible for sport competition. Pleasing others and participating in service projects in the school and community were considered more important than self-interests. Paducah students were encouraged to develop an awareness about serving others and part of this recognition was providing enjoyable sporting events for the community to watch.

Rural schools typically offer sports as an extracurricular activity at school. Participation in sports allows students to experience hard work, teamwork, competition, and popularity in schools and communities throughout Kansas. Paducah students intrinsically valued the competition associated with sports. Sport participation provided a higher social status for athletes since peers and school personnel perceived athletes as more popular and better students in both athletic and academic endeavors. Coaches believed one reason for the high participation rate in sports was because of student interest in pleasing others. Students not only wanted individual athletic success for themselves but success for the school and community. High school students often served others as a way of saying "thank you" for the support they received at ballgames and other school activities. Sport success created a chain reaction in which more students wanted to be with their peers to carry on the winning traditions.

The students who participated in sports were subjected to more rules and responsibilities than students who did not play. Participation in sports was no excuse for students to be inattentive to their academic studies; teachers expected students to be prepared for class every day and for tests, even when scheduled on the day after ballgames. Because Paducah's eligibility policy demanded a higher standard of classroom performance than the standard required by Kansas, students who participated in sports were thought to work harder in the

classroom than non-athletes in order to be eligible to participate in athletics. The Kansas State High School Activities Association eligibility requirements allow students to fail no more than two classes per semester. Students who fail two or more classes are ineligible to participate in sports for the following semester (Kansas State High School Activities Association, 2014). According to the staff members I interviewed, the eligibility policy was the major policy delivering a central message to students--that students must pass all of their core academic classes before they will be allowed to play sports. In Paducah, the school ran a weekly list of students failing one or more classes and notified a student if she or he was on the list. Students failing a class were allowed to practice with the team but not play in any school related activities until they pulled up their grades and were passing all of their classes. Paducah students understood that if you wanted to participate in sports, you first had to excel in the classroom.

Any school wishing to enjoy the level of athletic success enjoyed by Paducah should try to change their sports culture. Four of the research participants who taught and coached in other districts prior to Paducah explained that the other districts they worked for tried professional speakers, little-league athletic programs for elementary aged students, new coaches, and parent education, all with little change in their sports culture. Participants believed that when coaches focused on winning instead of having fun and pushed students to participate at too young an age, the desire to participate in high school sports was diminished.

Paducah's coaches believed their youth league coaches taught fundamentals to the elementary aged students and did not concentrate on just winning games. In the communities I have been associated with, I have heard differing opinions concerning the development of young children. One community believed in a competitive tackle football program for fourth- through sixth-grade students. Another community played flag football with this age group, emphasizing

fun and encouraging every child to learn fundamentals and continue with sports in high school. Many of the students in the competitive league became burned out or quit playing entirely because they were convinced they were not good enough to participate in high school. It was my observation in these communities that students who played flag football had a higher participation rate in high school compared to those who played in the competitive league.

Decades of cooperation between Paducah schools, community, and families means that elementary students are involved and developed in the youth sports program that emphasizes fundamental skills and fun. The natural sequence for high school sports in Paducah begins with youth sports programs emphasizing fundamentals and fun and gradually evolves into more organized, competitive team sport. Once elementary-age students reach high school, there is a high expectation for sport participation. I believe this natural progression from fundamentals and fun to more competitive play and high expectations provides students in Paducah the life they embrace today, a life based on tradition, excellence, and pride.

Young people in this rural area want to make proud and maintain relationships with people of all ages. The method found to best accomplish this is participation and success in sports. Sporting events are an opportunity for the community to celebrate what it stands for, believes in, and strives to accomplish every day. The bottom line is that sports are a highly desirable activity for students that deserve community-wide support for the contribution they make to the development of well-rounded students. However, citizens and child advocates who support coaches, administration, and school district efforts must also insist that a child's academic pursuits take precedence over development of the student athlete.

Family

The families of Paducah are large, multi-generational families, many of whom are Paducah High School alumni. The high expectation for academic and athletic success has been handed down through the generations. In order to keep the tradition going, parents believed that strong work habits and participation in sports would best prepare their children for adulthood and life experiences after high school. Although many Paducah graduates have gone to college on scholarships for sports, band, and academics, no graduates have made it to the professional level in sports. Study participants believed families in Paducah maintain realistic expectations of their children's ability and professional interest in sports. Among the teachers interviewed, none felt a student's parents held any expectation that their child would go on to play professional sports.

Parents held children accountable to their academic studies and were credited for teaching children the value of hard work and service to the community. Parents expected their children to participate in sports and adamantly supported the coaches and teachers at the high school. Extended networks of aunts, uncles, and grandparents provided positive support by attending games and events of students involved in sports. Participants emphasized the importance of familial support by noting it was something families routinely did in Paducah.

Family support notwithstanding, there was competition even within families between brothers and sisters in academics and athletics. Competition exerted pressure on younger students to achieve at the level of older siblings. Parents wanted their younger children to measure up to the level of success of their elder brothers and sisters and carry on the family name in a positive light. Future research can inquire into the extent to which students experience pressure from older siblings because obviously, not every student can be above average in sports or academics. Based on the findings in this study, older siblings served as role models for

younger siblings, practice companions for athletics, and tutors for academic work. Although every family is different, families with an overbearing older child may neglect the needs of younger children and undermine the effects of this support, particularly when brothers and sisters both provided support. Interestingly, a lack of discipline problems at the high school was widely interpreted as a compliment to the child-rearing practices of local families. There were some years when no child received an in-school or out-of-school suspension.

Research participants found it meaningful that a large majority of the students grew up in nuclear families. Anecdotal comments provided by the research participants described two-parent families as being active in church, school, community, and their children's lives. Parents received credit for staying married and being supportive of the school. Some attributed the low divorce rate in the Paducah community to the faith and family involvement provided by married couples.

Faith

Faith played a prominent role in the Paducah community and high school. Faith was instrumental in allowing students a chance to learn religious values and about service to the community. Teachers associated faith with the community's ability to work together and support student activities at the school. Parents modeled community service to their children at church activities. Many participants believed this was why high school students were willing to be mentors and role models to younger students in Paducah. The majority of families in Paducah attended the Catholic Church. Many participants believed the Catholic Church wielded the major influence over students and families in the Paducah community. The nondenominational Christian church and Methodist Church also had a strong impact on molding a student's desire to

be service oriented to the community. Overall, the different churches worked in harmony with each other and actively supported students in their school activities.

Participants estimated over half the student body consisted of students who attended the Catholic Church. In the past, many of the Catholic students attended the Catholic K-6 elementary school. This school recently closed because of budget shortfalls. The curriculum at the Catholic grade school was not part of my research but several participants pointed out that in addition to faith, the school taught morals, service, commitment, discipline, and respect. Because of these teachings, Catholic grade school students went on to become school leaders who possessed remarkable characteristics of teamwork and sharing.

I found faith to be a dominant part of the school and community culture and believe this is unusual for communities in Kansas. Parents not only transmit faith values to their children but also model their faith through service and volunteerism in the community. Parents incorporate faith into the daily lives of their children because they see faith as integral to raising a well-rounded child. Catholic students are expected to regularly attend Mass and receive Jesus in Holy Communion. Frequent confession (weekly if possible) is believed to renew a child's good desires and give them hope and strength.

The incorporation of faith into a child's daily life creates a fine line for public schools to walk. While much of the country adheres to the concept of separation of church and state, Paducah teachers and students appear to be more receptive to and accepting of spiritual guidance than other rural schools. Based on my own life experience, rural culture seems tolerant of a broad definition of God as long as He (or His followers) does not try to impose their values on the larger society. Religious beliefs in this country are diverse and conflict may quickly arise when the beliefs of one group call into question the beliefs of another group. Study participants

were of the opinion that a majority of the children in Paducah were immersed in and influenced by their parent's and community's faith. Regardless of the religious denomination, churches, Bible studies, and after-school youth programs welcomed students of all faiths into the churches. This bonding experience gave students a sense of togetherness and provided additional knowledge about one another's faith, something that also inspired students to be service minded.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Individual Interview Consent Form

Teacher Perceptions of School Athletics on the Academic Experience: A Case Study of a Rural Kansas District.



*Department of Counseling, Educational Leadership, Educational and School Psychology
PO Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142*

Purpose: You are invited to participate in a study to gain insight into the perceptions of rural high school teachers with regard to the relationship between school athletics and academics in a well-rounded curriculum.

Participant Selection: You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your employment with Southern Lyon USD 252 and your status as a teacher and/or connection with the academic and athletic programs. There will be approximately 17 interviews from the teaching staff at Olpe High school.

Explanation of Procedures: As a participant you will be asked to be interactively involved in an individual interview conducted by me. The interview will consist of 10 open-ended questions to seek the perception of the relationship between school athletics and the academic experience in the Southern Lyon County school district USD 252. The individual interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will take place at a time and place convenient for you. You may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview if clarification of your responses is needed or if additional questions arise that are pertinent to this study. With your permission, I would like to audio record our interview so an accurate transcript can be created which will facilitate data analysis and assist me in reporting accurate findings. A transcript of your responses in the interview will be made available to you to ensure accuracy and to allow you an opportunity for additional feedback.

Discomfort/Risks: There are no risks, discomforts, or inconveniences expected from any of the individuals participating in the individual interviews conducted in this study. You may skip a question(s) or stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable.

Benefits: This study will provide teachers with a deeper understanding of school culture and their influence on student curricular choices and engagement. The research will also assist educational administrators and researchers in understanding teacher perceptions of the role of sports in school and the need for a balanced curriculum that contains both academics and athletics.

Confidentiality: Any identifiable information obtained in this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Raw data will be maintained in a secure location, and no identifying information will be used in the final dissertation or subsequent

publications. Digital audio recordings will be secured in a password protected file on my computer and deleted at the conclusion of the study. No one other than my advisor at Wichita State University and myself will have access to the raw data.

Refusal/Withdrawal: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University or myself. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Contact: If you have any questions about this study, contact Royce Powelson, 785.418.5020 (home phone) or 913.795.2247 (office phone), email powelsonr@gmail.com or Dr. Eric Freeman 316.978.5696 (office phone), or email eric.freeman@wichita.edu. If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research and Technology Transfer at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007 at 316.978.3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have voluntarily decided to participate. Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.

Signature of Subject

Date

Print Name

Title or Area of Representation

Signature of Witness

Date

Appendix B: Individual Interview Protocol

Hello, my name is Royce Powelson and I represent Wichita State University as a doctoral student from the department of Educational Leadership. I appreciate your willingness to assist me in my research for my dissertation. This study is to gain insight from rural high school teachers with regard to the relationship between school athletics and academics in a well-rounded curriculum. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your employment with Southern Lyon USD 252 and your status as a teacher and/or connection with the athletic programs. Please keep in mind this study is seeking your perception of the school's influence toward a students engagement in athletics or academics.

Before we begin, I would like to share a few procedures for our conversation. Although we will be on a first name basis, no names will be used when I report the results of this session. You can be assured of complete confidentiality. I would like to audio record our conversation with two different devices for response clarity as I review our conversation and device assurance towards an accurate analysis of data when reporting the findings of this study. I will be taking notes during the interview. I assure this audio recording will be destroyed after the completion of this study. This interview session will last approximately 60 minutes. Again, thank you for your participation.

Start recording: Please tell me your name, title (teach and coach), and years of experience in education and this district?

Individual Interview Questions:

1. Do you have any family members that also work here? If you have children; do they participate in any extra curricular activities? What brought you to a rural setting? Has working in this district lived up to your expectations?
2. What roles do academics and athletics play in this school?
3. Do the successful academic students socialize or (hang out) with athletically orientated students?
4. Are student athletes held in a higher regard than non-athletes in this school?
5. As a teacher do you make an effort to encourage students to participate in both academic and athletic curriculums?
6. What motivates or influences students to participate in academic and/or athletic extracurricular activities?
7. How does the board of education, school administrators, and community promote a well-rounded experience for students?
8. How is it that Olpe High School consistently fields winning sports teams year after year?

9. I have noticed that Olpe HS has also done well in academics. How is it that a rural high school is able to mount winning sports teams and win honors in academics?

10. Is there anything you wish to add that would help in this study?