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Research Article

Creating a positive environment in sport and recreation: Insight from qualitative research

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Running Title: Caring climate in sport & exercise

Abstract

This qualitative study explored how a caring climate influences the experiences of current and future exercise leaders. Through focus groups, we explored how these leaders plan to or are currently creating caring climates within their domains. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Dadoose, a thematic coding system, with a structured codebook and hero quotes to highlight key insights. Three major themes emerged: Belonging and Connection; Support, Listening and Accessibility; and Inclusion, Mindfulness and Rapport. Participants emphasized the importance of feeling valued and understood and helped strengthen relationships and foster a more caring environment. They described everyday actions like small talk, collaboration, and one-on-one check-ins as critical attributes for creating a comfortable and psychologically safe environment. Leaders who showed empathy and openness helped athletes feel cared for beyond performance, reinforcing trust and belonging. These findings support existing literature and show how everyday actions and communication contribute to a caring climate. Participants also highlighted strategies such as rotating players for equal participation, encouraging mindfulness, and building rapport through shared experiences. They viewed caring climates as spaces where athletes feel respected, supported, and accepted as whole individuals, not just performers. Overall, this study found that if future sports and exercise leaders use behaviors such as listening, accessibility, and authentic connection, they can build inclusive and supportive environments. By focusing on empathy and intentional communication, leaders can promote confidence, motivation, and a sense of belonging, which are essential for long-term engagement and well-being among all sport participants.

Keywords: belonging, emotional safety, focus groups, inclusion, sport psychology.

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Introduction

Positive Environment in Sports and Recreations

In sports and recreation, a positive environment is particularly important because it can help people build motivation, confidence, and feel supported. Incorporating activities like fun team games or team building exercises is a wonderful way to create a positive environment; team building activities play a significant role in helping groups work together more effectively by building trust and improving overall teamwork (Holg, 2024). This can also help create stronger bonds and relationships. According to Lopez & Martin (2024), coaches support athlete development by offering manageable challenges and providing constructive feedback that enhances both skill and confidence level. This shows that when coaches create an environment where athletes feel supported and pushed just enough, they are more likely to put in more effort and stay more engaged in the activity.

Positive Environment linked to Caring Climate

A positive environment is characterized by bringing trust, respect, and empathy, often referred to as a caring climate (Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010). A caring climate can help many individuals improve, learn, and increase productivity. A caring climate is one where people feel safe because everyone treats each other with respect, trust, and understanding (Delgado-Galindo et al., 2025). When individuals experience a sense of belonging and receive adequate support, such environments are further enhanced, fostering greater cohesion and effectiveness (Brown, 2019). Overall, these results strongly highlight that a caring climate has a major effect on how individuals and groups operate and perform.

Defining the Caring Climate

One key concept emerging from this broader context is that of the caring climate. In sports psychology, a caring climate refers to how much people feel that their environment is safe, supportive, respectful, safe, and focused on their overall personal growth (Newton et al., 2007). According to research by Fry and Gano Overway (2023), when athletes view their environment as caring and supportive, they tend to experience an increase in psychological well-being and social self-esteem. Importantly, a caring climate is not just about winning or being the best, Instead, it's about everyone, supporting each person's growth, and recognizing the effort they put in. Studying the caring climate helps us connect the social, motivational, and emotional parts of being involved in sports.

Caring Climate Scale

Tools like the Caring Climate Scale provide a way to measure participants' perceptions of a caring climate. The survey provides questions about being valued, safe, and welcome by using items that ask participants to rate their agreement on a scale. The Caring Climate Scale is designed to assess how much an environment feels safe, supportive, welcoming, and capable of helping individuals feel valued and respected (Newton et al., 2007). There are many benefits, but they often rely on many recommendations rather than a single model. For example, past scholars suggest concrete strategies for coaches to create this caring climate, such as making participants feel welcome, safe, and respected, and acting kindly (Gano-Overway et al., 2014; Newton et al., 2007). Overall, the caring climate scale helps us understand how athletes feel in many environments but does not tell coaches exactly how to create that exact climate.

Connection and Relationships

In Brown and Fry's research study, they found that the fitness members of the club perceived certain items such as behaviours of helping, caring, and interaction (Brown & Fry 2014). These perceived behaviours were measured by using Brown and Fry's 15-item Staff's behaviour scale and 7-item Member's behaviour scale. With that, it has been observed and recorded that having a platonic caring relationship with the client increased the total exercise commitment score (Brown & Fry 2014). This is reflected in the Theory-Driven Meditation Model as it suggests that the perception of staff behaviours would indirectly predict members' experiences through their perceptions of the climate (Brown & Fry 2014).

Accessibility, Inclusion, and Belonging

With increased statistics of participants having some type of disability, cognitive or physical, accessibility, inclusion, and belonging play a big part in one's participation. The basic definition of inclusion in our context is, "Inclusive education has been defined broadly and varied referring to a variety of aspects of inclusion such as access, rights, participation, belonging, and employment, which can create difficulties operationalizing inclusion" (Long 2024). The physical therapist views the elements of a caring climate as more related to education than therapy. However, these elements are still important because coaches teach athletes in a comparable way that teachers instruct students. Long also states that support is important to one's participation and belonging. He suggests, "Service providers need appropriate support and resources, such as training and on-going opportunities to collaborate with other professionals, to design and implement the kinds of intervention programs that foster participation leading to belonging" (Long 2024). Again, while this includes more of a medical

background, this is vital to understand due to the physical therapist's role in patient care—being a leader and health coach in efforts for them to improve their physical state. With all of this in mind, caring climate does not just apply to physical activity instructors, but to other professions that emphasize accessibility, inclusion, and belonging as well.

Mindfulness and Authenticity

With the United States shifting to a more fast-paced economy and society, value in mindfulness and authenticity have increased when one considers participating in a healthy lifestyle. Ms. Cockrell states in her research that, "...The practice of mindfulness can help reduce the anxieties, struggles, and mental flaws which cloud our perception" (Cockrell et al., 2011). Ms. Cockrell highlighted the potential influence of mindfulness on individuals' engagement in activities, particularly through their relationship with perceived confidence and self-efficacy. In a caring climate, a coach or physical activity instructor would encourage others to improve their mindfulness while maintaining authenticity towards the client.

In relation to our research project, it is important to acknowledge gaps in the existing literature, including the lack of research designs that adequately account for initial differences, the absence of control groups to address demographic variations prior to study initiation, and the need for rigorous investigations involving actual children and authentic exercise programs (Newton et al., 2007). In a general sense, this is understandable to have a control group that has not been impacted in any way, shape, or form is difficult to obtain. Accordingly, the purpose of this qualitative research was to explore how participants plan to develop a caring climate for others in their careers as sport health and exercise professionals. The authors hope to bring more discussion and research with the results produced by this study towards caring climate in sport and exercise environments.

Methods

Participants and Recruitment

All activities were approved by the lead author's Institutional Review Board at the time of the study (IRB-FY2026-69). Sixteen participants took part in this study (nine men, seven women, eight current university students, eight non-students). Participants were predominantly White and non-Hispanic, with an average age of approximately 24 years. Individuals included those currently working in sports, health, and exercise fields, those aspiring to work in these fields, and those who had previously worked in these fields (e.g., physical therapists, physical education teachers, strength and conditioning coaches, student athletes). Research team members sent out e-mails to recruit participants.

Recruitment flyers were shared in the instructor's classes, and social media posts by Kinesiology department. Convenience sampling was employed to collect perspectives from individuals with diverse positions and experiences (Golzar, et al., 2022).

Participants were entered into a drawing to win one of twenty-five gift cards as an incentive for participation in this research. Snacks were also provided to make participants feel welcomed and invited. These incentives were funded by the research team's home institution. All participants agreed to participate in this study and were informed they could withdraw from the study at any time without disadvantage. Participants were also provided with contact information from the research team if they had any follow-up questions.

Focus Group Design and Rationale for Focus Group

This study employed three semi-structured groups as a qualitative data collection method. The first group comprised eight participants, the second group comprised five, and the third group comprised three. Group assignments were based on participant schedules, with participants having backgrounds related to sports, exercise, and health mixed together. Reasons why the groups were divided into three were to facilitate smooth discussion and ensure each person had sufficient time to speak. Each session lasted approximately 20 to 40 minutes and was conducted at research team's home institution. To enhance visibility among participants and encourage open discussion, seating was arranged in a circle. Prior to conducting these sessions, the research team completed pilot interviews in class to practice focus group facilitation, which helped strengthen methodological rigor given the novice status of the team within the research domain (Malmqvist et al., 2019).

Focus groups were adopted as a primary data collection method because participants complement each other's opinions, enabling the discovery of commonalities and differences that are difficult to uncover through individual interviews. Previous research indicates this method is effective for exploring themes such as caregiving experiences, organizational support, and psychological safety (Bates & McShan, 2025).

Procedure

This study facilitated discussions using a semi-structured focus group guide containing eight open-ended questions. The analysis employed deductive qualitative analysis grounded in the caring climate framework (Newton et al., 2007). The guide included introduction, questions, discussion, and closing. The facilitator asked probing questions as needed to assist participants in elaborating on their experiences and feelings. Assistant facilitator assisted facilitator to have smooth discussion. Note-

takers observed participants' non-verbal expression during interviews for getting additional analysing resources. Audio recorder recorded all sessions and made minutes using Microsoft Word automatic transcription feature (Microsoft Corporation et al., 2024). The same questions were used across all three groups to ensure consistency and reliability. Questions were asked by same order in all the sessions. The list of questions is presented as Appendix A.

Data Collection and Analysis

The roles outlined in the procedure remained unchanged to minimize potential bias. All focus group sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent. Note-takers documented participants' gestures and facial expressions to supplement the recorded data. The data was stored on a university-encrypted cloud service. Only the research team could access the cloud. Following this framework, participants' statements were systematically coded and organized into themes and subthemes (Dedoose, 2023). Dedoose was used to visualize and explore thirty pages of transcribed data and audio recordings.

Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

The research team consists of seven members, comprising four men and three women who are majoring in Kinesiology in a master's level program. The mentor of the research team edited the manuscript and helped the rest of the research team learn about the process of qualitative research. This composition minimizes the influence of gender-based biases, and since the research team's background and participants' background is similar, it would be easier to understand participants' opinion. Consistency was ensured by asking the same questions in all sessions. Separating facilitation and observation roles also enhanced process transparency. The interviewer maintained a neutral stance throughout, minimizing influence on participants to ensure reflexivity. Additionally, the group's mentor contributed by editing the manuscript and guiding the team through the qualitative research process, providing essential support for developing methodological rigor.

Results

Participants described several helpful behaviours underlying a positive sport and exercise environment as they reflected on how they plan to or currently do create a caring climate. Overarchingly, the participants described important aspects of this environment to include the importance of being seen, feeling safe and supported, and having a level of connectedness to create a caring climate. Notably, all these themes were consistently discussed throughout interviews and focused on how they help the participants create the desired environment. Themes included:

belonging and connection with the subthemes: comfort, understanding, supportive guidance and a psychologically safe environment; support, listening, and accessibility; and inclusion, mindfulness, and rapport.

Belonging and Connection

Participant responses described the theme of belonging and connection as they discussed how they strive to create a caring sport and exercise environment. Creating the sense of belonging and connection deepens the relationship with the athlete or client. This also revealed the subthemes of comfort, understanding, supportive guidance, and psychologically safe environment. One participant recalls the quality of this theme by saying the following, “My high school coaches were particularly good with one-on-one check ins. How are you doing? Do you want to succeed?... What are you struggling in?” The previous quote is an example of how asking the athlete about how things are going in both the sport and exercise environment and their personal life increases the connectedness for the individual. Participants described connection as developing through consistent communication, collaboration, and shared experiences that strengthen relationships. Ten of our participants stated the importance of everyday interactions in building relationships, like “Talking to your coworkers at lunch” and “Building connections outside of it [sport and exercise environment] like increase the small talk.” Others mentioned collaboration as an avenue connect with each other. To further this point, one participant stated, “Communicating with different organizations and facilities and try to collaborate together, making connections.” All together, these responses showed that genuine connection and belonging is formed when individuals take time to engage with one another beyond formal roles or structured activities.

Comfort

The subtheme of comfort emerged from discussion as another avenue to foster belonging and connection. Participants strived to emphasize the importance of creating an environment where they feel a state of physical ease and freedom from constraint. One participant described the ideal approach to creating a comfortable environment as follows:

See where they are at [clients, athlete, staff, etc.] and where they are comfortable being at, so that we can build from there... talking to them and getting to know them during their sessions. So, it is not just like I [the coach] am telling you to do something... building a connection with them.”

Creating comfort in the environment goes a long way to open more routes for communication, leading to a more meaningful and beneficial relationship for the parties involved. Another participant, who is pursuing a career in physical therapy, shared the following about creating a caring climate, “I want my patient to feel comfortable in that setting. So, letting them know that they can tell me when something is too difficult.” This is one example of when a sports and exercise leader can effectively foster comfort in their practice through communication. These quotes all show that feeling at ease and opening the pathway of communication with the sport and exercise leader makes clients and athletes feel comforted.

Twelve of our sixteen participants also highlighted that their level of comfort were heightened when the coach showed they cared for them even when they are not the star player, and if the coach cared for them as a person, not just an athlete. “...Making sure that they feel cared for, even if they’re not having their best day.” This participant highlights that it is important to show you care for them as a person, regardless of their performance in the environment, to make them feel comfortable, and in turn, increase their sense of belonging. Overall, the impact that caring for the person is an important attribute for a sport and exercise leader to adopt in creating a comfortable environment.

Understanding

Participants described helpful behaviours in fostering a caring climate involves showing understanding. This subtheme highlights that demonstrating empathy and emotional awareness was a key part of how participants showed care. Put simply, one of our participants summarizes understanding as, “The art of noticing, even when I’m off the slightest.” The consensus from participants of this subtheme of understanding seems to be centred around the idea that knowing someone, to understand them. One participant said “showing that you care about them outside of being an athlete” was necessary for creating a caring climate. Several participants agreed with the statement either verbally or with a head nod. “Be receptive of how you react to certain things... they need encouragement, or if they need acts of services.” This quote highlights the need for the sports and exercise leader to understand the personality of a person to treat them in a way they are receptive to, to enhance their experience. This subtheme shows that a sports and exercise leader needs to know someone on a more personal level so they can understand if someone is having a difficult day or understand how to best communicate with someone to make them feel cared for in their situation.

Supportive guidance

Participants described the importance of offering encouragement, advice, and responsive feedback to meet individual needs. They describe this supportive guidance as “positive reinforcement” and “always there to support... regardless of how the sport went.” One detail discussed was “being noticed at practice and giving critiques and saying when you do good, when you do bad.” This has to do with noticing the individual as someone with potential, giving them both support and guidance to help them improve. This was highlighted as an important behaviour for sports and exercise leaders to possess. A participant suggests a practical application for a leader to use would look like, “Give me feedback on how you are feeling at all points throughout the session if there is anything you want to change, and giving them opportunities to make change or choices.” This encompasses the whole behaviour of seeing a person, guiding the person, and having that desire to make them better in an encouraging and uplifting way. Overall, understanding a person deepens the relationship and this quality is necessary for creating a caring climate.

Psychologically safe environment

Several of our participants highlighted the importance of feeling safe. In a psychologically safe environment, individuals feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of negative consequences such as embarrassment, rejection, or punishment. Some ways discussed to avoid these fears of negative consequences were, from one participant. “Letting them [the athlete] know that they can tell me when something is too difficult.” Another participant shared this: “letting everybody know that I am here for them, whether it is in the sport or exercise.” The consensus when asked how they will plan to accept people as sport and exercise leaders was “creating a safe, comfortable environment.” This opens communication and develops the relationship that several refer to as feeling cared for. Overall, discussion from the participants reflects on the lengths that leaders can reach to show others that they care for them and make them feel psychologically safe. This allows sports and exercise leaders to deepen their relationship with athletes and/or clients, and in turn be more successful in making them feel like they belong and connected within the group.

Support, Listening, and Accessibility

The theme of support emerged from discussion among participants. It was spoken of in accordance with care and safety, as another measure that plays a large factor in creating a caring climate as a sport and exercise leader. When discussing the need to be a supportive sport and exercise leader, several of our participants described achieving this as listening and being accessible to athletes, clients, or coworkers. One participant tells us that support involves, “Just being there no matter what is [going

on]. Just trying to support them as best I can.” Simply put, being there and being someone for the people to turn to for anything is how the participants viewed support and its role in creating the ideal caring environment. Participants described being accessible as, “an open-door policy with the coach” and listening is, “creating a connection with them, whether that be talking to them or doing exercises with them.” These are just a couple of examples of what participants discussed as ways they have seen successful listening and accessibility of a leader that enhanced their caring climate. Overall, the participants felt that it is important for leaders to “express that you’re open to people coming to you and being able to talk to you.” The quote shows that giving people this accessibility to you as a leader to open time for communication and talking about things outside of the realm of sport and exercise. “Being attentive and listening to what they have to say,” was a quote that is the overarching consensus of breaking down barriers and opening a relationship with athletes, clients, and coworkers in sport and exercise. This helps sports and exercise leaders be able to support those they work with, through being accessible and listening.

Inclusion, Mindfulness, and Rapport

Participants frequently described the importance of inclusion, mindfulness, and rapport as part of a caring sport and exercise environment. Inclusion was collectively discussed as fair treatment, shared opportunities, and ensuring that all participants felt they were valued, no matter their skill level. Many of our participants mentioned that “giving everybody fair treatment” and “no special treatment, being inclusive” were necessary behaviours for coaches and leaders. Several of our participants also emphasized the importance of rotating or substituting people to ensure equal participation, explaining that “cycling people in and out instead of just keeping the starters in” allows for everyone to have an opportunity to gain experience and contribute to the team. Participants described how team bonding, group activities, and open communication helped people feel more comfortable and connected to others. Some participants suggested “Activities and competitions that would bring that group together to help build more of a family, so you’re talking to people that you wouldn’t usually talk to”, “Ice breakers, team bonding, things like that can really get people out of their comfort zone” and “Coaches taking the time and effort to teach someone like me that has zero experience with the sport.” Participants also mentioned collaborating with teammates outside of sports, like “Ask people to form study groups, and that’s a good way to not only work on your schoolwork but also get to know through that.” Overall, participants emphasized that inclusion was noticed when leaders and peers created inclusive spaces where everyone felt recognized, supported, and part of a group. This sense of inclusion contributed to stronger connections and a more caring environment within sport and exercise.

Participants talked about mindfulness as an important part of a caring environment. Mindfulness is the quality or state of being conscious or aware of something or someone. They described mindfulness as the ability to remain open, understanding, and present with others in sport and exercise settings. Many of them discussed that being mindful involves treating other people with acceptance and empathy, while staying fair and aware of their own biases. One participant said, “don’t judge, listen to people and you should be accepting,” and another noted the importance of “being open and honest and direct about the task at hand whether it’s taking care of the patient or teaching someone to support.” Participants emphasized that when coaches or other leaders demonstrate openness and emotional awareness, it helps others feel comfortable, supported, and more connected. Mindfulness was shown in participants’ emphasis on being genuine, transparent, and nonjudgmental. This can be described as embracing others as they are while being emotionally available to yourself. Multiple participants said, “don’t judge, listen to people and you should be accepting” and “Giving that reassurance that who you are as a person is going to be accepted.” Some described the importance of removing bias, “Eliminate your own personal opinions about your athletes.” Mindfulness was seen through openness and honesty, like one participant who said, Furthermore, participants stated that being transparent and direct about tasks, “Being open and honest and direct about the task at hand...” helps to generate genuine communication, making athletes and clients feel more included and connected to the leader. Overall, responses suggested that authenticity is a key component in creating mindful and caring sports and exercise environments.

Rapport was seen from participants focusing on mutual understanding, shared experiences, and meaningful dialogue. Participants described rapport as finding common ground and showing openness to others’ perspectives, which helped build trust and comfort. One participant stated, “Try to find common ground, be open to what they say and remember them and make them feel really special.” Participants also said that maintaining small talk and showing a genuine interest in others supported building strong relationships and an improved collaboration with others. One person said, “Having small talks with them, getting to know them, who they really are and building that relationship and keep growing.” Overall, rapport is an outcome that derives from communication and mutual respect, which allows people to feel valued and connected within their sport and exercise environments. Altogether, inclusion, mindfulness, and rapport build from one another and increase the quality of the relationship between a sports and exercise leader and the people they work with. All these attributes are deemed helpful to the sport and exercise leader as they seek to create a caring climate for athletes, participants, and clients in their careers.

Discussion

The aims of this research were to investigate characteristics of sport and exercise leaders in current and future positions to identify as essential for creating a caring environment. During our interviews, participants highlighted several notable observations. Themes from this research are Belonging and Connection; Support, Listening and Accessibility; and Inclusion, Mindfulness and Rapport. The subthemes that are associated with the themes are comfort, understanding, supportive guidance, and a psychologically safe environment. A major contribution to the literature that this research study provides is its focus on the intentions of future leaders rather than solely examining the experiences of past athletes. The study shifts its emphasis from reflection to intention which contributes to the development of the field. The new leaders have started to consider methods for implementing empathy and inclusive communication practices in their professional work. The execution of these strategies may result in higher client and athlete appreciation, which may enhance their dedication to exercise and sports activities.

Previous research emphasizes the importance of fostering caring climates for enhancing motivation, inclusion, and personal growth. However, there has been comparatively less attention on the specific strategies leaders employ to create such environments. This study addresses that gap by examining the actions and behaviours sport leaders currently use or intend to use to cultivate a caring climate. One notable approach involved leaders engaging in conversations with players and clients about non-sport-related topics while actively listening, which generated feelings of being seen and supported among participants. This finding aligns with prior research on college athletes, where genuine communication from coaches contributed to athletes feeling cared for on a personal level (Schools et al. 2020). Similarly, Gano-Overway et al. (2023) reported that situational and personal factors can either enable or impede their efforts to foster caring climates, such as time, resources, culture, and individual leader dispositions. The participants in this study mentioned that being accepted by others gave them a sense of belonging to the group. This connects closely to Long's (2024) idea that inclusion and belonging are essential if people are going to do more than just "get by"; they need to be able to thrive and flourish in their environments. Leaders in caring sport environments need to maintain ongoing interest in athletes' personal lives which reach beyond their athletic achievements, according to the research.

The leader in exercise and sport is clearly essential to overall experience. Leaders who established protected areas and open dialogue channels enabled participants to experience support and motivation and stronger group connections. This aligns with the 3 + 1 C model (Jowett et al., 2016),

which emphasizes closeness, commitment, and mutual understanding between coaches and athletes as foundational for positive relationships. Furthermore, this model complements the COMPASS model (Rhind et al., 2010), which highlights openness and support as essential components for maintaining strong interpersonal bonds. These theoretical models reinforce the behaviors observed in our study, demonstrating that intentional communication and relationship-building strategies are central to fostering caring climates. Interestingly, Xu et al. (2025) found that personality traits, such as extraversion, can affect how athletes see a caring and supportive climate. Together, these findings illustrate why leader behaviors and athlete dispositions must be considered jointly when creating environments that promote belonging and psychological safety.

Implications

The research findings deliver critical information, which may be valuable to leaders in the sports and exercise fields. One implication is that when training future leaders such as trainers, therapists, and exercise instructors, that training should consider including teachings related to the importance of creating a caring climate. Past research has highlighted that environments which provide care and inclusiveness create better athlete well-being and stronger commitment (Hogue et al. 2017; Gano-Overway et al. 2023). The study demonstrates that small gestures between coaches and athletes which appear unimportant, build trust and create feelings of belonging. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) provides a useful lens for understanding our findings, as it emphasizes that motivation increases when individuals' needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence are met. Leaders who establish relationships through care create stronger connections that enhance the enjoyment and significance of sports activities. Similarly, Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy is relevant because participants described feeling more confident when leaders offered encouragement and reassurance. Caring leaders can provide naturally through encouragement and reassurance. Education and professional programs should expand their teaching to include direct instruction of relational skills. The COMPASS model (Rhind et al. 2010) serves as a method to achieve this goal through its framework which supports transparent communication and motivational support and confidence-building measures. Paired with the 3 + 1 C model (Jowett et al., 2016), which emphasizes closeness, commitment, and mutual understanding, COMPASS demonstrates the value of companion models that address both relationship quality and practical behaviors. The training programs for coaches at schools and community organizations should implement the same framework to educate future leaders about building compassionate relationships and handling challenges effectively.

Limitations

The following section will highlight some of the limitations of the study. The largest of these was sample size. Despite the intention of having five or six people per group, turnout was lowered by inclement weather and scheduling conflicts. The study was limited by the small number of participants, which made it difficult to examine different experiences. The participants brought diverse sport experiences to the study since some competed at an elevated level while others played for recreational purposes which could have influenced their understanding of care. Additionally, this was a pilot study conducted by novice researchers, which introduced constraints related to methodological rigor and experience in qualitative research processes. Future studies need to conduct this research with a larger diverse participant sample while observing leaders over time to monitor their intentions until they transform into actual organizational actions. The evaluation should concentrate on actions which create feelings of care through communication techniques and feedback strategies.

Conclusion

This research adds new knowledge about a caring climate through its examination of sport and exercise leaders' approaches to climate development. The participants experienced care through communication which functioned as the unifying element between them because they maintained open dialogue and active listening and continuous support. Importantly, caring climates are not only essential for athletes but also for individuals engaged in exercise and health-related activities, as these environments promote sustained participation and overall well-being. Leaders who focus on empathy and openness and inclusion will establish spaces where athletes experience value as complete individuals beyond their athletic performance, which becomes essential for their continued engagement and motivation and success. Such environments ensure that exercisers, fitness participants, and other non-athlete groups also feel supported and valued, reinforcing the broader applicability of caring climate principles across sport and exercise contexts.

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