The influence of junior coaches on club members in the Start2Finish Running & Reading Club: A qualitative study

Majidullah Shaikh[a],*, Tanya Forneris[b]

[a] School of Human Kinetics, University of Ottawa, 75 Laurier Ave, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5, Canada
[b] School of Health and Exercise Sciences, University of British Columbia (Okanagan), 3333 University Way, Kelowna, British Columbia, V1V 1V7, Canada

ABSTRACT

Introduction: This study's purpose was to explore youth leaders' involvement and influence on younger program participants in a physical-activity-based positive youth development program (PA-PYD).
Methods: A case study was conducted where 16 youth leaders (8 males, 8 females, M_{age} = 13.37, SD = 1.36) and 15 program participants (8 males, 7 females, M_{age} = 10.53, SD = 1.12) from four sites of a PA-PYD program in Canada participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews regarding their program experiences. A deductive-inductive thematic analysis was conducted.
Results: Five themes were identified: (a) learning and building skills, (b) receiving support, (c) enjoyment, (d) relatability, and (e) challenges faced. Program participants shared several ways in which the youth leaders they interacted with had a positive influence on their personal experiences. The youth leaders' perceptions largely aligned with those of the program participants.
Conclusions: This study provides insight into the value that youth leaders can bring to youth programming.

Positive youth development (PYD) programming focuses on helping youth enhance their well-being and fulfill their potential through the development of life skills (e.g., decision-making, communication, confidence; Danish, Forneris, Hodge, & Heke, 2004; Lerner et al., 2013; Spencer & Spencer, 2014). These programs often target at-risk youth who may face barriers (e.g., from families living on low-income, living in resource-poor neighbourhoods, lack of access to transportation) in accessing resources for their health and well-being[1] (Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri, 2002). Such barriers can lead to negative outcomes like disengagement, poor academic performance, low rates of physical activity, drug and alcohol abuse, poor emotional well-being, and high rates of delinquency (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Bockern, 2002; Collingwood, 1997; Ullrich-French, McDonough, & Smith, 2012; Wright & Li, 2009). Positive youth development programming can help these youth overcome barriers through building self-competence and making contributions to their social surroundings, which may help empower them overtime as opposed to marginalising them (Sanders, Munford, Thimasarn-Anwar, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2015).

Physical activity contexts are popular environments for integrating PYD programming. These physical activity-based positive youth development (PA-PYD) programs, can involve the integration of youth leadership practices – where youth adopt formal roles as

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* Corresponding author.
  E-mail addresses: maji.shaikh@uottawa.ca (M. Shaikh), tanya.forneris@ubc.ca (T. Forneris).
[1] The term 'at-risk youth' has commonly been used in the literature, however, the terms 'disaffected youth', 'disengaged youth', 'low-income youth', and 'underserved youth' are also synonymous with this term and refer to those youth who face barriers to opportunities and their development.

positive role models and mentors for younger peers (Gould, 2016; Martinek & Hellison, 2009). As these youth leaders may influence the development of their younger peers, it warrants further investigation as to what these influences are in order to gain insight on ways to optimise youth leadership practices. While some PA-PYD programs have intentionally integrated youth leadership roles (e.g., Bean, Forneris, & Fortier, 2015; Danish et al., 2004; Hellison, 1995, 2011), after extensive searches of the current literature, the authors' have found no studies that have explored perceptions of the youth leaders and the youth they lead, within PA-PYD programming.

The terms youth, young people, and adolescents have been used to categorise people in the life stages between childhood and adulthood, and the use of these terms may vary based on age. For example, the United Nations categorises youth between the ages of 15–24 and young people between the ages of 10–24, while the World Health Organization categorises adolescents between the ages of 10–19 (UNDESA, 2018; WHO, 2018). What may be more pertinent is that throughout these life stages, people experience several biological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural transitions as they mature into adults (Wang & Eccles, 2011). Moreover, these transitions do not occur in the same progression at the same age; there are many intrapersonal differences in the rates that youth mature. Thus, these transitions can influence the extent to which one may have the necessary attributes and competencies to be a leader to their younger peers. Given the lack of literature on experiences of youth leaders and the younger peers they lead, the following sections present three factors (i.e. relatability, mentorship, and autonomy-supportive leadership) that may be important to consider based on the literature around youth-to-youth and youth-adult relationships, as well as important practices within PA-PYD programming.

Research has shown that peers can have a strong influence on one another (Choukas-Bradley, 2015; Fitzgerald, Fitzgerald, & Aherne, 2012; Ginis, Nigg, & Smith, 2013; Price & Weiss, 2011). As youth transition through adolescence, they put a greater reliance on peer relations, peer opinion, and generally have more positive perceptions of peers than with adults (Brown & Larson, 2009; Mustillo, Dorsey, & Farmer, 2005; Weiss, Kipp, & Bolter, 2012). Within the context of youth programming, this implies that program participants may appreciate having an older peer leader rather than – or in addition to – an adult leader; peers may be more relatable, familiar, and approachable, due to their proximity in age, frequency of contact, and similar life experiences (Ender & Newton, 2000; Fitzgerald et al., 2012). Examining the potential advantages of this relatability warrants further investigation as, to the authors' knowledge, no studies have explored the perceived influence of relatability between youth leaders and younger peers within PA-PYD programming.

Mentorship has been looked at in the context of youth sport and physical activity and has been conceptualised as the provision of caring, guidance, and opportunities for development (Mekinda & Hirsch, 2014; Rutten et al., 2011; Sandford, Armour, & Stanton, 2010). Rhodes (2002, 2005) model of youth mentoring identifies growth in social-emotional, cognitive, and identity domains for youth who have experienced high-quality mentorship. Furthermore, growth in these domains can be developed through the presence of emotional support and trusting relationships, opportunities to develop life skills, and positive role modelling that youth can observe and internalise (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). Mentoring can also be a corrective experience for youth who have had fractured relationships with adults in their life (Tolan, Henry, Schoeny, Lovegrove, & Nichols, 2014); when at-risk youth have relationships with mentors who have faced similar life circumstances, this can lead to resilience (Herrera, DuBois, & Grossman, 2013). Given these advantages, it merits investigation as to the presence and role of mentorship in youth leader and younger peer relationships, as, to the authors' knowledge, no research has explored mentoring in these relationships within PA-PYD programming.

The concept of autonomy-supportive leadership has gained increased attention in youth physical activity programming (e.g., Coatsworth & Conroy, 2007; Duda et al., 2014; McDavid, McDonough, Blankenship, & LeBreton, 2017). An autonomy-supportive leadership style involves behaviours such as providing choice to youth, acknowledging participants' perspectives, providing constructive feedback on performance, and the avoidance of controlling behaviours (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Hence, this leadership style is highly aligned with priorities of PYD programming and research has shown that autonomy-supportive leadership can lead to increases in athletes' self-determined motivation (Fenton, Duda, Quested, & Barrett, 2014), engagement (Almagro, Sáenz-López, & Moreno, 2010), and well-being (Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2012). Given these advantages, and the lack of research in general on the role of youth leaders in PA-PYD programming, exploration of how youth leaders may adopt aspects of autonomy-supportive leadership and its perceived influence on younger peers in PA-PYD programming is warranted.

In the larger field of PYD programming, researchers assert that program structure and the quality of youth-adult and youth-youth relationships have the greatest influence on youth developmental outcomes (Gould & Carson, 2008; Holt et al., 2017). As mentioned previously, youth leaders can range in age and be in various transitional stages of their lives; as such, youth leaders have the potential to negatively influence their younger peers. For instance, leaders who are not inclusive or are unsupportive may lead their younger peers to experience increased distress, low motivation, and low engagement (Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Fraser-thomas & Côté, 2009; Martins, Marques, Sarmento, & Carreiro da Costa, 2015). Therefore, it is important to explore the overall experiences (both positive and negative) that program participants may have with youth leaders within PA-PYD programming.

In sum, research is needed to address the current gaps in the literature on youth leadership in PA-PYD programming. This study aimed to address these gaps using a qualitative approach, which is ideal for exploratory research when limited knowledge on a particular topic exists (J. A. Smith, 2015). Moreover, as qualitative research focuses on how people interpret their social worlds (Sparkes & Smith, 2013), it was the appropriate approach to use to capture perspectives from both youth leaders and program participants to help understand their lived experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the involvement and influence of youth leaders in PA-PYD programming. Three research questions were proposed. First, how do youth leaders perceive the influence they are having on program participants? Second, how do program participants perceive youth leaders' influence on their development and well-being? Third, do youth leaders' perceptions of their influence converge or diverge with program participants'

perceptions? Such work has the potential to contribute to the development of new models and theories of youth leadership within PA-PYD programming as well as in the initial development of evidence-based practices for youth leadership development and implementation.

1. Methods

1.1. Context

An instrumental case study was used as the methodology to explore the phenomenon of the influence of youth leadership in the case of a PA-PYD program, through capturing experiences from multiple perspectives – youth leaders and program participants (Stake, 2005). A constructivist paradigm was the philosophical position adopted by the authors, which acknowledges the existence of multiple different and unique experiences to explain a phenomenon (Denzin, Lincoln, & Guba, 2018).

This research was conducted with the Start2Finish Running & Reading Club (S2F-RRC), which is a PA-PYD program that intentionally incorporates youth leaders. The S2F-RRC has been operating for over a decade within inner-city schools across Canada. Youth are referred to the program by school teachers, and priority is given to admit youth based on at-risk criteria (e.g., from low-income families, poor literacy, exhibiting social and behavioural issues). The program runs for 32 weeks during the school year, once per week, for two hours each session. Each session begins with an attendance and welcoming activity, followed by physical-activity time (e.g., warmup, running laps, capture the flag), a snack break, literacy activities (e.g., reading challenges, word-of-the-day, library visits), a journal session (e.g., personal reflection period), and a final debrief (e.g., team reflection, recognition of achievements). A head coordinator and a school representative manage each club. A team of adult leaders (i.e. adult coaches) and a team of youth leaders (i.e. junior coaches) are responsible for delivering the program to the program participants (i.e. club members).

1.2. Participants and selection

Sixteen junior coaches (aged 12 to 17, attending grades 7 to 12) and 15 club members (aged 9 to 12, attending grades 4 to 6) were recruited from four program sites to participate in this study (see demographic characteristics in Tables 1–3). Recruitment procedures were conducted only after ethics approval was received from the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity at the University of Ottawa. With the help of each site's head coordinator, purposive sampling (Sparkes & Smith, 2013), was used to select a diverse sample of participants (i.e. selecting both female and male program participants, with varying levels of club involvement, and who have been led by participating youth leaders) to improve the variation in experiences that could be captured. Youth leaders were also selected in a similar fashion. Parental consent and assent from the participants were obtained through the provision of information forms as well as informing participants verbally about the research study's purpose, their potential involvement, and assurance of their voluntary participation and confidentiality. All youth who were selected agreed to participate in this study voluntarily.

1.3. Interview protocol

The first author attended four sessions at each club for the full length of session time, over the course of a month. While relationships between the author and the participants were not as familiar or strong as the participants' relationships with adults in the program, positive rapport was perceived to be established within this time as the participants felt comfortable to share their experiences. The head coordinator was involved in the recruitment process, and the participants' willingness to share may have been positively influenced by their trust and familiarity with the head coordinator.

Table 1
Overall demographics of the junior coaches and club members.

		Junior Coaches		Club Members	
		N	%	*n*	%
Gender	Male	8	50%	8	53%
	Female	8	50%	7	47%
Languages spoken	English	16	100%	15	100%
	French	7	44%	5	33%
	Tamil	5	31%	5	33%
	Other	5	31%	4	27%

	Junior Coaches			Club Members		
	M	*SD*	Range	*M*	*SD*	Range
Age	13.37	1.36	12–17	10.53	1.12	9–12
Grade level	–	–	7–12	–	–	3–6
Years of Involvement in Club	4.25	1.81	1–7	2.90	1.44	1–5
Years of Involvement as a Coach	1.56	0.72	1–3	–	–	–

Table 2
Specific demographics of the junior coaches.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Club	Background	Years of Involvement in Club	Years of Involvement as Coach
Navya	Female	13	A	Canada, Sri Lanka	5	2
Amit	Male	13	C	Bangladesh	3	1
Emily	Female	14	A	Canada	5	2
Sanjay	Male	12	A	Sri Lanka	3	1
Ishvar	Male	13	C	Bangladesh	5	1
Isaac	Male	17	B	Jamaica	2	2
Nala	Female	15	B	Somalia	7	3
Brennon	Male	12	C	Canada	7	1
Noah	Male	13	C	Trinidad, Guyana, Haiti	3	1
Nadir	Male	13	C	Syria	1	1
Savannah	Female	13	C	Ethiopia	2	2
Shivani	Female	12	B	Sri Lanka	6	1
Faith	Female	14	A	Canada, Trinidad	4	3
Simone	Female	15	D	Nigeria	5	1
Varun	Male	12	D	Sri Lanka	4	1
Athiya	Female	13	C	Sri Lanka	6	2

Table 3
Specific demographics of the club members.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Club	Background	Years of Involvement in Club	# of Junior Coaches*
Faisal	Male	10	A	Canada, Palestine	1	
Jude	Male	9	D	Canada, Saint Lucia	2	8
Gregory	Male	12	B	Canada, Philippines	5	5–6
Isaiah	Male	9	B	Jamaica	1	6–7
Tashi	Female	12	A	India, Tibet	3	15
Caleb	Male	11	A	Uganda	4	
Mason	Male	11	C	Ethiopia	3	2
Ginni	Female	11	C	Nepal	1	6
Rishita	Female	12	B	Sri Lanka	4	4
Rob	Male	11	B	Caucasian/White	5	
Anjali	Female	9	B	Sri Lanka	2.5	3
Aishwarya	Female	11	A	Sri Lanka	3	2–3
Basma	Female	9	B	Canada, Pakistan	2	
Priyanka	Female	10	D	Sri Lanka	2	10
Manish	Male	11	B	Sri Lanka	5	3–4

Each participant engaged in a one-on-one, face-to-face, semi-structured interview, either during program time or school time. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their usefulness in helping gain insight on a phenomenon by asking relevant questions in a pre-determined order, while also maintaining responsiveness to the interviewee (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Interviews were conducted in the clubs, in areas that participants engaged in (e.g., the library, the gym, the stage), to support their comfort and familiarity. Participants were informed that they could skip questions they preferred not to answer and could stop the interview and revoke their participation at any time without consequence. Participants were ensured that no explicit identifying information would be tied to their responses – they would be referred by pseudonyms in any reports or published literature. The first author conducted all the interviews which were recorded using a digital audio recorder.

Two separate interview guides were developed, one for the junior coaches and one for the club members. Each interview guide was composed of three sections. For the junior coaches, the first section gained demographic information and general experiences in the program (e.g., "What is it like to be a part of the club?"). The second section looked at the participant's development (e.g., "Have you learned any skills from being a leader in the club?"). The third section explored their relationships with and contribution to others in the program (e.g., "Describe your relationships with your club members", "Do you feel that you have influenced the club members?"). Probes and follow-up questions were used to explore areas of the junior coaches' experiences further. For instance, if the junior coach answered yes to the previous question, a follow-up question would ask "How do you feel that you have influenced them?". These interviews lasted between 10 and 35 min ($M = 24:31$).

For the club members, the first two sections asked similar questions that were asked of the junior coaches, while the third section explored their relationships with junior and adult coaches, and what support they perceive from these relationships (e.g., "Do you find your junior coach is supportive?"). Probes and follow-up questions were used here as well. For instance, if asked about support from the junior coaches, further probes would ask "Is this support different from adult coaches?". These interviews lasted between 10 and 30 min ($M = 16:54$).

1.4. Data analysis

After data collection, a deductive-inductive thematic analysis was conducted (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). In the first step, pseudonyms were assigned, and interviews were transcribed verbatim with the removal of filler words (e.g., 'so', 'like'). The transcripts were imported into NVivo 11 (QSR International, 2015), a qualitative data analysis software, to be coded and managed.

The first author and another researcher with experience in analyzing qualitative data in PYD separately read six transcripts (three junior coaches, three club members), and then met to discuss their ideas. The first author then proceeded with steps two to four, first analysing the junior coaches' transcripts, followed by separately analysing the club members' transcripts.

During step two, all transcripts were read multiple times. Multiple readings helped the first author to immerse himself in the data, identifying passages that were related to previously identified concepts such as relatability, mentorship, and autonomy-support (deductive analysis), or any other novel or interesting findings (inductive analysis). Tags were created for passages that represented the same idea but created separately for junior coaches and club members. During step 3, tags that were similar were grouped together, creating multiple categories, and categories were grouped together to create initial themes and subthemes. During step 4, the tags were further modified for alignment with the themes, and this process continued until all sources were exhausted and saturation was reached, where novel ideas were no longer being recognised and further refinement was unnecessary.

During step 5, themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions. Within each theme, it was explored whether club members' and junior coaches' perceptions aligned or differed. For instance, while the junior coaches and club members both discussed "learning and building skills", they shared different perceptions on what these skills were and how they were learned. Once these themes and their characteristics were created, the last step involved presenting relevant quotations that helped illustrate the junior coaches and club members' perceptions', and how these perceptions aligned or differed.

1.5. Establishing trustworthiness

The first author engaged in bracketing interviews to gain an awareness of any underlying cognitions he may have had related to the research, and exercised caution in letting them influence his interpretations (Rolls & Relf, 2006). For instance, the first author carried assumptions based on his own youth programming experiences and the support he received from his leaders. He bracketed these assumptions to limit their influence on his interpretations of participants' experiences.

Studies with community organizations like S2F-RRC can be susceptible to illustrating cases in an exclusively positive light, inhibiting critique (Coakley, 2011). To derive a critical commentary, the club directors were briefed that this study would seek to identify both positive and negative experiences, and thus participants would be encouraged to be completely honest in their responses. In reconciliation, participating sites and participants would remain anonymous in any published literature, to protect their confidentiality.

During data collection, multivocality was practiced, where the first author actively inhibited their own assumptions from driving interpretations of each participant's view (e.g., not presenting leading questions), and from ignoring any perspectives that do not align with the author's assumptions (Tracy, 2010). After transcribing the interviews, member checking was used which had participants review their transcripts and identify if they presented the experiences they wanted to present (Tracy, 2010). Eight participants were sent their transcripts directly by email; none of the participants offered any changes. As mentioned above, another researcher, identified by qualitative researchers as a 'critical friend,' was approached to help analyse an initial six transcripts – an approach which helped provide a broader scope and different perspectives to the analysis (B. Smith & McGannon, 2017).

2. Results

The perceptions shared by both the club members and the junior coaches spanned over five themes: (a) learning and building skills, (b) receiving support, (c) enjoyment (d) relatability, and (e) challenges faced. Some of the larger themes are comprised of multiple subthemes that are presented below.

2.1. Learning and building skills

The theme of learning and building skills was comprised of two subthemes: Literacy and physical activity skills and life skills.

2.1.1. Literacy and physical activity skills

Club members shared how their junior coaches taught them literacy skills. Manish, spoke about how his leaders would teach him and his peers through the 'word-of-the-day' activity, which helped them work on their literacy-related skills (e.g., learning definitions): "Like when they [the junior coaches] do the word-of-the-days, they try to improve your mind. They say definitions and you're supposed to guess or know the word. And we say if we are pretty sure about the word". Like the previous quotation, another club member, Tashi, learned through the quote-of-the-day activity, in which the junior coaches would act scenarios to help illustrate different uses of words: "They're [the junior coaches] are acting a lot for their quote of the day … the quote-of-the-day is integrity, so they'll act out something that involves integrity and something that's not integrity; like the positive and the negative.". Club members also shared their experiences of learning to be physically active from the junior coaches. Aishwarya, a club member, spoke about how her coach provided her guidance and instruction during her run: "And when we're doing the run, they're like 'start slowly, then go faster, don't worry about anything else'". Manish also spoke about how he developed running skills: "I built up my speed and stamina

… my legs have improved because now I run for longer distances."

The junior coaches' perspectives aligned with the club members' in that they recognised that they taught youth physical and literacy-related skills. This junior coach, Isaac, explained how he engaged youth in running and reading activities:

> We run for our fitness which is about 15–25 minutes, every week. And then we do the word-of-the-day challenge, and that is basically to help the kids with their reading and writing. And we do the journals, and we have to write how much times we ran today, and talk specifics about how we felt … [Club member's name], I've been with him for about 2 years, and at first, he didn't know how to spell any of the words, or anything, and then after doing the program and coming every week, he's starting to learn the words and is doing an amazing job. So basically, just to help the kids be active if they haven't been active and help the kids who are in need.

With regards to developing physical skills, another junior coach, Simone, discussed how she helped club members improve in their running skills:

> I helped them improve their reading and their running. Cause there's this girl, she's like my family friend, so whenever we do laps, when she runs, I run. She always gets tired, but I keep telling her to run and her marks always improve when I run with her.

Another junior coach, Brennon, described exercising different literary techniques to help club members learn literacy-related skills:

> I read with a whole bunch of kids. I remember reading with the younger ones, trying to help them pronounce certain words. If they didn't understand, if they never understand a sentence, after a couple of times I'll ask them some questions about the story to see if they know what the story is about.

Sometimes, teaching also involved junior coaches having to look back on their own experiences to help pass knowledge and skills down to others. Faith related to club members by teaching them in a language they understand – by simplifying words to help with comprehension:

> We [the junior coaches and adult coaches] just like teach the same kind of [way], but in different words, 'cause our language – if they don't understand it … ours is more like a kid version of what they're saying. if they don't get it, we'll explain it, 'cause we have a sort of language that kids understand, we understand … we talk in less experienced words, and come up with little words that they know and experience.

2.1.2. Life skills

The second subtheme focuses on how club members learned life skills. From the accounts of club members, the junior coaches taught many life skills to them. The club members shared that the junior coaches incorporated life skill-related words into their word-of-the-day activities and explained the life skills such as teamwork and confidence. At other times, the junior coaches integrated the teaching of life skills into the physical activity such as perseverance. For example, Aishwarya shared that in developing her ability to run longer distances: "[They taught us] to never give up and …. when I run one of the junior coaches last year they helped persevere me". Another club member, Caleb, provided an example of how the junior coaches taught him and the club members how to be honest and respectful: "[They taught us] to be honest, respectful, not treat anybody different[ly], treat everybody the same way you would want to be treated".

While the club members reported experiences around life skill development – particularly being explicitly taught by junior coaches – the junior coaches did not share experiences around influencing the club members' life skill development. However, junior coaches did describe facilitating activities that integrated life skills. For instance, Emily described how she and her peers invited youth to help facilitate their word-of-the-day skits:

> Most of the time we [the junior coaches] trade weeks, so we get them [the club members] to help us too. Sometimes we choose a kid, and they also get to become a junior coach for part of the day. Especially for the skits, me and [other junior coach] bring the kids up to do the skits and help us. They help us plan the skits and help us make it more interesting for them. So, it's not just us planning, they think it's funny, we also get them to help us too.

In allowing the club members to experience what it is like to be a leader for the day, junior coaches were helping develop the club members' planning and leadership skills.

2.2. Receiving support

Club members spoke about the support they received from their junior coaches. Two subthemes to describe the shared experiences of club members and junior coaches with respect to support include: (a) autonomy and competence support and (b) emotional support and caring.

2.2.1. Autonomy and competence support

Coaches supported their club members' autonomy by allowing them time to work on their journals independently and providing choice for what games they can play and what books they can read. Along with choice, the junior coaches also challenged the youth to take on more difficult tasks to help increase their levels of competence. As Aishwarya expressed:

They let us choose what books you want, but if it's too easy, 'cause some of the junior coaches they know me well 'cause of my sisters, so like some of them, if I choose the easy book, they'll say it's too easy for you, you have to read another book, so you can get better to improve your reading, and then I get another book.

Competence was also supported by providing youth positive feedback, such as encouragement (e.g., "keep going" and "don't give up"), and praise (e.g., providing 'shout-outs', recognition of achievement at the end of the session). Tashi described the feedback that she received: "They're very 'encouragable' … I don't know how you say that. They're very … if you give up on them they'll still … they're still behind you and pushing you to go forward and not backing down.".

Junior coaches also perceived that they engaged with the club members in ways that supported their competence. As Shivani, a junior coach, shared:

Some of the kids, even after we practice the words, they have a little bit of trouble spelling the words or writing them down in their journal. [I would help] spell the word out for them. And like say they need help with running like half of them will run a lap and they'll walk the rest. So, I run with them sometimes to support them.

Along with directly helping them through engagement with them, the junior coaches gave words of encouragement to the club members to help foster confidence in them. Faith described how she encouraged the club members:

It's mostly at the end but even during the program, even us junior coaches, we encourage the younger kids. Say if they didn't want to run and then you'd be like 'oh you can do it, you can do it' and stuff like that, and they encourage them and help them read, and they start reading a book or something, and we tell them 'oh can you read this, can you read that, and see what that is'.

Support for club members' need for autonomy was less prominent in the junior coaches' accounts, while club members mentioned being given choices and some opportunities for independent work. Again, junior coaches focused more on how they encouraged and engaged with club members in activities to help them build skills.

2.2.2. Emotional support and caring

Club members found that their junior coaches were compassionate, caring, and had their best interests in mind. Caleb said, "They're caring, they care about everyone in the program, and they want everyone to have a better life.". The junior coaches were commonly characterised as 'kind', 'respectful', 'trustworthy', 'polite', and 'nice'. The club members found that their coaches approached them when they were sad or down to offer their assistance, and were available to be approached for advice or help to solve a problem or issue: "She's very supportive and humorous too. Sometimes when I'm having a problem, she uses humor and makes me laugh. And sometimes I have problems and she's over there like 'I feel you'."

The junior coaches also shared experiences of supporting the club members emotionally and provide caring to youth. The junior coaches would approach their club members if they noticed that they were feeling sad, as Nala relates "If I see someone crying and I ask them 'Hey, what's wrong?'. They're not afraid to tell me there's something wrong because they know that I'm going to do my very best to try and help them". This account illustrates that the junior coaches were available to youth and utilised their understanding of them to support them.

In addition, the junior coaches shared how being a positive role model was important to help support the overall development of the club members. For instance, Navya, a junior coach, found that it was important to be modelling positive actions because the club members were always watching and observing her: "A role model is when you depend on a person or look up to them; I think that they look up to me like in ways of motivating them, to come [to me] with their personal problem, to help them". Similarly, Emily talked about how younger youth would look up to her, and thus it was important for her to set an example for them to learn from:

I think it's just nice that someone looks up to you. It's just important. It's just important I guess, for kids to look up to you, to set an example and everything … it's just in the same like big brother-little brother kind of way, you have to be their role model, you have to be their teacher, to teach them what's right, what's wrong, and everything else.

Overall, the club members' and junior coaches' experiences were aligned in how they described the support that club members received.

2.3. Enjoyment

A common motivation for participation in the clubs was enjoyment. Caleb expressed his enjoyment of the program: "This place is like my second home, it's very fun". What made the club enjoyable for the club members were the variety of activities that they could engage in, as well as the junior coaches' involvement with them. For example, Faisal found that when the coaches engaged in the programming with him and his peers, he enjoyed it more: "It seems really fun because they [the junior coaches] play in the tag games … and they also set things up for you too. They do the word definitions … they act in plays–it's really funny". Similarly, Manish expressed how unenjoyable activities may be more fun with junior coaches' participation in them: "When something is not that fun - like some people don't like to run that much - they always encourage us to run and they say 'you wanna race'? And so in a way it motivates everyone including me." Finally, the positivity of the coaches helped make the program more enjoyable. When asked what makes the program fun, Mason, a club member, said: "The coaches … they always use positive words. They always have a smile on their face … they never, they're not mean".

Similarly, the junior coaches expressed that they enjoyed the program because of their involvement with the club members. Faith

described how her relationships with club members – helping the youth, hanging out with them, and forming bonds – made her time in the club enjoyable:

> I like helping the kids out, 'cause they're cool to hang with, even though you're older than them, they're fun to hang with and you get along with them well; you have a good bond with them, so that's what I like most.

Isaac also described his enjoyment of the club from his interactions with the members and the overall culture of caring:

> Everyone's involvement makes it fun, like the whole club put together, it all has its bits and pieces, like running with the kids, that aspect is fun with them. Having snack with them is fun. The word of the day with them is fun. It's just the environment is loving and caring and how no one judges anyone, and you just come and spend two hours with us and just have fun.

2.4. Relatability

Club members commented on how helpful, approachable, or trusting they perceived their junior coaches in comparison to their adult coaches. Although the club members responses varied on these distinctive characteristics, the club members perceived junior coaches to have a distinct advantage of being more relatable. Faisal, a club member, spoke about how junior coaches had similar interests to him: "They like the same stuff, they like reading, just like me, they like running, just like me". For another club member, Manish, having a junior coach that was an "older kid" provided him with more common interests to talk about, and in this sense, made the club more fun: "It's actually pretty fun [having junior coaches] 'cause sometimes when there's someone younger than you – they don't get things that older kids talk about. So, the junior coaches provide some people with conversation … they talk about things that we get".

The junior coaches also spoke about how they would relate to the club members because a lot of them had been club members themselves. As junior coaches could relate through similarity in experiences, they were better able to understand the youth. Navya articulated:

> They sort of come up to me with their personal problems. Like some of them, they don't wanna tell their friends, or their [adult] coaches; they usually tell their junior coaches 'cause junior coaches know what it's like, and adult coaches been a long time since they felt that, so they go to junior coaches to help them with their personal problems.

As well, Emily discussed having similar interests as the club members, again from having close ties with that experience:

> A few years ago I was in that program too. I didn't really know how to read that well, I couldn't run that fast or for that long. We also have a lot of the same interests too. Lots of them are bookworms like me. Lots of them are runners like my other friends and stuff … some of them really like drawing, which I also do. So, we have stuff to talk about.

Therefore, it appears that club members perceived the junior coaches as more relatable and that the junior coaches also recognised this sense of relatability.

2.5. Challenges faced

Some challenges came with having junior coaches. Club members found that junior coaches may have detracted from the program if they were fooling around, being unsupportive, or disengaged in the activities. Although a minority of club members expressed these experiences, they are important to note as they may have led to some distrust of the junior coaches. In Tashi's experience, she recognised that the junior coach's role is to be attentive and involved with the club members, yet some did not act this way:

> The junior coaches, some of them aren't really on-task, doing their job, like sometimes they're just fooling around … They should be like participating in the group. They just sit in the back and chat with their friends and stuff … And I'm not saying they're bad, I just think they could just do a bit better".

In comparison to the adult coaches, some club members found the junior coaches less trustworthy, as Rob, a club member, relates: "I trust the adult coaches more because they're adults … the junior coaches I do trust, but they might goof off a little". Junior coaches also recognised that they themselves, or their peers, demonstrated apathy toward their role, as Amit, a junior coach, said: "Some of us coaches – I don't want to name any names – they just sit around … they don't actually help".

Some junior coaches expressed difficulties and frustrations with their own roles. Navya described difficulties with managing the behaviours of the club members due to their proximity in age: "Sometimes the kids don't really listen to junior coaches … because we're sort of the same age; we're not really bigger. Because we're sort of the same age as them but unlike the [adult] coaches, they're more mature and more adult.". Nala spoke about how some gap in age is helpful while being very close in age could be a hindrance:

> Because I always help the younger ones with the running and reading and really understand them more and I try to be close together with them and really try to help them read, try to help them run a little, encourage them a lot. So, I guess when I'm like that they'll see me as that role model. But the older they get the harder it is to impress them.

3. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the involvement and influence of youth leaders in PA-PYD programming. Five themes were interpreted from the experiences shared by the participants and these are discussed in relation to the current literature. The club members shared that the junior coaches taught both running and reading skills, but also integrated opportunities to develop life skills both implicitly (e.g., role modelling life skills) and explicitly (e.g., providing opportunities to practice leadership and perseverance). This is supported by past research that has found that youth athletes can develop life skills in physical activity through both implicit opportunities (e.g., Holt, Tink, Mandigo, & Fox, 2008; M. I. Jones & Lavallee, 2009) and explicit opportunities (e.g., Camiré, Forneris, Trudel, & Bernard, 2011; Gould, Carson, & Blanton, 2013). However, while the junior coaches perceived that they taught running and reading skills, unlike the club members, they shared limited experiences related to explicitly and intentionally incorporating a life skill focus. Researchers assert that using explicit approaches to teach life skills can enhance opportunities for youth to learn life skills and transfer these skills to other contexts (Bean & Forneris, 2016; Camiré et al., 2011; Gould & Carson, 2008). While further research is needed to explore why these discrepancies in participants' accounts were observed, an important practical implication is that training could be developed for youth leaders to help them learn and be aware of explicit approaches to teaching life skills, so that they can improve their positive influence on the youth that they lead.

It was also recognised that these junior coaches supported and mentored the club members through direct engagement in activities and indirect strategies like role-modelling. These positive contributions align with Rhodes (2002, 2005) model of youth mentoring as well as an autonomy-supportive leadership style (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). An autonomy-supportive leadership style has been suggested to lead to numerous positive impacts on youths' psychosocial development, including the satisfaction of basic psychological needs and increases in self-determined motivation (Adie et al., 2012; Bean, Harlow, & Kendellen, 2017; DuBois et al., 2011; Ginis et al., 2013; Rhodes, 2005). Although this study's findings provide initial evidence that youth leaders are capable of using autonomy-supportive approaches, future research is needed to explore whether such an approach by youth leaders have similar or differential influences on the developmental outcomes of program participants.

The club members also discussed how the junior coaches' involvement helped them to enjoy the program more. Enjoyment is recognised as a primary motivation for youths' engagement in physical activity (Martins et al., 2015), but the extent of enjoyment in this program appears to have been promoted by the strength of youth leaders' involvement and their provision of support. Research in youth sport has recognised that caring behaviours of coaches have been associated with enjoyment for youth (Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010). As well, peers, especially friends, are recognised as positive influences on the physical activity experience as they make activities more fun (Martins et al., 2015), and these positive relationships strengthen motivation to participate in physical activity (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). Thus, youth leaders' involvement may contribute to program participants' enjoyment, which is an important factor in retaining youth in programming so that they can benefit from positive development opportunities.

The findings here also recognised the positive influence of relatability (e.g., closeness in age, similarities in interests and experiences) in enhancing the strength of relationships between these junior coaches and club members. This reinforces the idea that youth may relate better to older peers than adults. Such findings are supported by research in the general youth development literature (DuBois et al., 2011; Grossman & Bulle, 2006; K. R.; Jones, 2006; Shanahan, 2015). Thus, it would be recommended to pair youth leaders and program participants in PA-PYD programming based on these relatability characteristics.

However, the findings in this study suggest that closeness in age may also have its disadvantages. For example, older club members in this S2F-RRC appeared to be less respectful to junior coaches than they were to adults. As such, proximity in age could act as a double-edged sword, having a hindering effect on the ability of youth leaders to lead program participants. In addition, the club members and junior coaches shared how some junior coaches were immature and uninvolved, which led to program disruptions. It is possible that these challenges may arise because many of these youth are in various transitional stages of development, which may limit their interpersonal competencies (Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005). Therefore, future research could help in determining various characteristics that youth should have prior to becoming leaders. Furthermore, those involved in implementing PA-PYD programming should screen youth leaders to ensure a level of quality assurance.

These findings together help create a greater understanding of the realities of youth leadership in PA-PYD. Integrating youth leaders into PA-PYD programming can enhance relatability through shared experiences and interests, leading to strengthened processes of teaching, mentoring, and support, which in turn can lead to positive outcomes of enjoyment and development of life skills. These advantages may outweigh challenges that can arise with having youth leaders, particularly if researchers and practitioners work together to identify how youth leaders may be recognised and then trained. Recent research suggests that formalised training may help youth leaders gain a working knowledge of how to be leaders and how to have a positive influence in their roles, which can help mitigate the lack of competencies that youth may enter these roles with (Shanahan, 2015).

3.1. Strengths, limitations, and future directions

A strength of this study was the triangulation of youth leadership experiences through two different perspectives (youth leaders and program participants), across four program sites. This enabled the authors to capture a broad set of experiences and this was reflected in the participants' accounts (Stake, 2005). However, it should be noted that this study relied solely on perceived experiences. Future research would benefit from integrating observational methods to further triangulate the data collected, which can also address the notion that youth may be more likely to discuss positive experiences in more detail compared to negative experiences. As the data collection period was short and held during a busy time of year – as participants were preparing for the end year event – this led to shortened, limited interviews. However, it is believed that the trustworthiness practices implemented in this study helped

compensate for this by maintaining rigor and credibility in the methods for obtaining and using these data.

4. Conclusion

Overall, this study helped to provide a greater understanding of how the influences of youth leadership are perceived within a PA-PYD program. There appear to be several perceived benefits that result from creating meaningful leadership roles for youth. Therefore, it is recommended that those working in the field of programming for at-risk youth begin to create meaningful leadership opportunities in programming that also integrate formal training on PYD and leadership approaches. Such opportunities and the associated training would help further empower at-risk youth and provide them with the necessary skills to succeed in their futures.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2018.07.004.

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