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

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A B S T R A C T

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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[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'