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Youth Leadership Development in the Start2Finish Running & Reading Club

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Abstract

Researchers have asserted that offering intentional leadership roles to youth can help them to develop life skills (e.g., communication, decision-making); however, few physical-activity-based positive youth development programs provide youth these intentional leadership roles, and little research has explored the impact of these opportunities on youth who take them up. The purpose of this study was to understand the developmental experiences of youth leaders in a physical-activity-based positive youth development program. Sixteen youth leaders (M_{age}*= 13.37,* SD *= 1.36) from 4 sites of the Start2Finish Running & Reading Club participated in semi-structured interviews to discuss their experiences as junior coaches. Fertman and van Linden's (1999) model of youth leadership development was used to guide the data collection and analysis. Through deductive-inductive thematic analysis, 3 themes were constructed: (a) awareness: developing into leaders started with seeing potential through role models, (b) interaction: learning by doing and interacting with others helped youth to practice leadership abilities, and (c) mastery: taking on greater responsibility allowed for opportunities to refine leadership abilities and develop a variety of life skills. These themes helped to bring an understanding to the processes involved in leadership and life-skill development. Practical and research implications are discussed regarding leveraging youth leadership opportunities in youth programming.*

Key words: life skills, physical activity, positive youth development, qualitative, youth leadership

Physical activity (PA) contexts are popular environments for after-school programming and offer rich atmospheres for the development of life skills (e.g., communication, decision-making; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Hodge, Danish, Forneris, & Miles, 2016). Participation in PA has been associated with more positive experiences related to emotional regulation, initiative, and teamwork, compared to other youth activities (e.g. socializing, schoolwork; Holt & Neely, 2011; Larson & Seepersad, 2003). However, researchers have asserted that youth do not develop life skills simply through participating in PA (Bean & Forneris, 2016; Gould & Carson, 2008); rather, programs that incorporate intentional strategies for developing life skills show optimal effectiveness in building those skills in youth members (Weiss, 2016). These intentionally structured programs are referred to as physical-activity-based positive youth development (PA-PYD) programs (Weiss, 2016).

Multiple scholars have identified leadership as an important life skill for youth to develop and that all young people have the potential to be leaders (e.g., Gould & Voelker, 2010; Jones & Lavallee, 2009; Martinek & Hellison, 2009). Fostering leadership skills has been associated with enhanced confidence, increased motivation and engagement, and career-related success (Extejt & Smith, 2009; Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006; Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2008). Given the value of leadership, researchers have been investigating how to best leverage leadership opportunities in youth programming.

A primary focus in the literature on leadership in PA has examined *peer leadership* roles, like team captains (e.g., Crozier, Loughead, & Munroe-Chandler, 2013; Price & Weiss, 2011; Voelker, Gould, Crawford, 2011). Youth athletes in these roles are responsible for influencing team members toward set goals (Loughead, Hardy, & Eys, 2006), commonly adopting non-hierarchical relationships with their team members and maintaining their roles as peers. Peer leadership opportunities tend to be more common in traditional sport programs, which are likely to adopt the primary objectives of engaging youth in sport and developing sport-specific skills, while developing leadership may be regarded as a secondary objective (Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005).

Little research has examined PA programs that prioritise leadership development and promote *intentional youth leadership* strategies (Gould & Voelker, 2012). While leadership in these programs also involves influencing team members towards achievements, the relationships that leaders adopt with their peers in these programs tend to be hierarchical with an explicit cross-age component, where all youth are offered opportunities to adopt adult-like roles in leading, coaching, and mentoring younger youth (e.g., Martinek, Schilling, & Henderson, 2006). These

programs may be advantageous because (a) youth are given purposeful opportunities for decision-making and power sharing, which has been associated with youth empowerment (Zeldin, Gauley, Krauss, Kornbluh, & Collura, 2015); (b) younger club members are more likely to look up to and seek help from older youth than same-aged peers (French, 1987); and (c) these programs can employ several leaders, which can lead to greater group cohesion compared to programs with only one or two leaders (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Given these comparative advantages, further investigation of the developmental experiences of youth in intentional youth leadership programming is warranted.

Fertman and van Linden (1999) suggested that leadership development does not occur overnight upon assuming the leadership role; rather, it is a process that can be visualised across three stages. In the first stage, *awareness,* youth are introduced to leadership roles, and through observation of other leaders begin to generate ideas of what leaders are (e.g., how people become leaders, characteristics and expectations of leaders). In the second stage, *interaction*, youth take on increased responsibilities and begin to experience the benefits of being leaders from interacting with others and practicing leadership skills. In the final stage, *mastery*, youth further apply their newly-developed leadership skills and begin to identify as leaders. Throughout these stages, youth can develop leadership information, attitudes, and skills like communication, decision-making, and stress management (Fertman & van Linden, 1999).

When understanding Fertman and van Linden's (1999) model it should be noted that not all youth will advance linearly through each stage; individual and contextual differences can play a role in this progression. Martinek et al. (2006) observed that youth differed from one another in their progress and that they could advance or regress through developmental stages at different time points. To date, little empirical work has been conducted using this model (Gould, 2016); however, the intuitive value it offers in understanding youth leadership gives merit for its use in this study as a guiding model.

Initial research has provided insight on what programs can do to foster youth leadership (e.g., Blanton, Sturges, & Gould, 2014; Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006; Martinek et al., 2006), along with influences of youth leadership on outcomes for youth leaders and those they lead (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2008; Moran & Weiss, 2006; Shaikh & Forneris, 2018). However, limited research exists that explores youth's developmental experiences from involvement in PA-PYD programming (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Such work can help researchers and practitioners better understand the impact of intentionally incorporating youth leadership roles and how

these strategies can be optimised. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of youth leaders within a PA-PYD program.

Methods

A constructivist paradigm was adopted by the authors, which acknowledged that people interpret their realities based on their interactions in the social environment; thus, multiple realities can exist (Creswell, 2012; Crotty, 1998). An instrumental case study was utilised to understand the phenomenon of youth leadership development within the specific case of a PA-PYD program, through capturing the realities constructed directly from those who experienced this phenomenon (Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

Context

The Start2Finish Running & Reading Club (R&R Club) was the program selected for this study. The mission of Start2Finish is to combat illiteracy and obesity in at-risk communities through educational support and structured PA opportunities (Start2Finish, 2015). Youth are referred to the R&R Club by school staff based on specific criteria, including: being from a low-income family, having limited opportunities to participate in physical activities, having delays in literacy, and exhibiting behavioural issues. This program aligned with Roth and Brooks-Gunn's (2015) criteria for a PYD program in that it: (a) emphasised program goals that value and intend to promote PYD; (b) provided an atmosphere that supports positive relationships with peers and leaders, empowers youth, expectations of positive behaviour, and opportunities for recognition; and (c) offered challenging and motivating activities for youth to engage in.

All program sites ran the R&R Club for one 2-hour after-school session each week, for 32 weeks. Each session included welcoming activities (e.g., taking attendance, announcements), physical activities (e.g., warm-up, jogging, capture-the-flag), a snack break, literacy activities (e.g., reading challenges, word-of-the-day, library visits), personal reflection (e.g., journaling, one-on-one reading sessions), and a debrief session (e.g., team reflection, praise in the form of 'shout-outs'). Each R&R Club had a head coordinator, a team of adult leaders (known as adult coaches), and a team of youth leaders (known as junior coaches). The program participants were known as club members, aged 6 to 12 years old, from grades 1 to 6.

Junior coaches in the R&R Club were in formal leadership positions, distinct from club members. These coaches consisted of either former club members who aged out of the club or volunteers

with no prior club experience. The junior coaches were between 12 and 17 years old, from grades 7 to 12. To be selected as a junior coach, youth had to apply with a description of why they should be chosen.

Once selected, the junior coaches attended a brief orientation to learn their responsibilities. These coaches were responsible for being positive role models, performing various tasks (e.g., set-up and clean-up, distribute snacks), working with club members (e.g., providing supervision, leading small groups, encouraging participation in activities), and facilitating running and reading activities (e.g., running with club members, conducting one-on-one reading sessions, helping record fitness and reading accomplishments in club members' journals). Each R&R Club had between four and eight junior coaches and up to 30 club members.

Participants and Procedure

Sixteen junior coaches (eight male, eight female) were recruited from four program sites in Ontario, Canada (see Table 1 for demographic characteristics). With the assistance of each site's head coordinator, maximum variation sampling was used to recruit a diverse composition of participants (e.g., males and females with various years of experience) to enhance the range of variation captured in youth leaders' experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Presenting the nationalities of these youth was important to provide an appropriate representation of the diverse makeup of youth who participate in the R&R Club. Convenience sampling was used as a supplementary method when participants were readily available and could be interviewed during the session (Bryman, Bell, & Teevan, 2012).

Following approval from the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity at the University of Ottawa, participant consent was obtained, and each junior coach participated in a one-on-one, face-to-face, semi-structured interview. The first author conducted and audio-recorded all interviews on site in the last three weeks of programming. Semi-structured interviews were used for exploration of participants' experiences (M_{length} = 24:31 min; Ponterotto, 2005). These interviews allowed for guided conversations with flexibility for the first author to play an active role in helping youth construct their realities of a phenomenon—in line with constructivism (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). An interview guide was developed and included questions about the youths' program experiences and their leadership development (e.g., their motivations, learning experiences, changes in their abilities). This guide was partially informed by Fertman and van Linden's (1999) model of youth leadership development. Sample interview questions included:

"What is your role as a junior coach?" and "Do you perceive that you've changed since becoming a junior coach? How so?"

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Junior Coaches

Name*	Gender	Age	Grade	Nationality	Years in program	Years as a coach
Rashmi	Female	13	8	Canada, Sri Lanka	5	2
Mahir	Male	13	7	Bangladesh	3	1
Emma	Female	14	8	Canada	5	2
Lahiru	Male	12	7	Sri Lanka	3	1
Hossain	Male	13	7	Bangladesh	5	1
Abraham	Male	17	12	Jamaica	2	2
Aamiina	Female	15	9	Somalia	7	3
Nicholas	Male	12	7	Canada	7	1
Caleb	Male	13	7	Trinidad, Guyana, Haiti	3	1
Sayid	Male	13	7	Syria	1	1
Anna	Female	13	8	Ethiopia	2	2
Harshani	Female	12	7	Sri Lanka	6	1
Renee	Female	14	9	Canada, Trinidad	4	3
Melody	Female	15	9	Nigeria	5	1
Nuwan	Male	12	7	Sri Lanka	4	1
Senuri	Female	13	8	Sri Lanka	6	2

Note. *All names are pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

A deductive–inductive thematic analysis—a process of interpreting patterns of meaning from data—was conducted following Braun, Clarke, and Weate's (2016) 6-phase process. In phase 1, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. Interviews were transcribed verbatim with the removal of filler words such as "like" and "uhm," and imported into NVivo 11 (QSR International, 2015) to be managed and coded. The first and second authors separately read three initial transcripts and met to discuss their interpretations. In phase 2, the first author read the rest of the transcripts multiple times to enhance familiarization with the data. A deductive approach was taken to extract passages related to Fertman and van Linden's (1999) stages of leadership development and coded under representative labels. An inductive approach was used

to extract and code any other passages that were interpreted as interesting or relevant to this study. Multiple extracts could be coded under the same or different labels. In phase 3 of the process, coded extracts and their respective labels were reviewed; labels could be grouped together, omitted, or renamed. This process of refinement continued until all sources were exhausted and novel ideas were no longer being interpreted. In phase 4, all authors met to review and categorise labels as potential themes with respect to the stages of leadership development. In phase 5, themes were defined and renamed to illustrate a clear story that described the data. The final phase involved developing the results that included compelling extracts to represent each theme: awareness, interaction, and mastery.

Trustworthiness

To acknowledge his views, biases, and assumptions, the first author participated in two bracketing interviews before and after data collection. This helped him to be reflexive, bring awareness to his underlying experiences, and understand how his constructed realities can shape his views (Rolls & Relf, 2006); these self-reflective practices were carried throughout the analysis. Further, all participants were ensured anonymity and encouraged to be honest in their responses, which helped the authors to derive a critical commentary on participants' experiences, without inhibiting critique. Finally, the first and second authors met at multiple points in the data analysis process to discuss their interpretations and consider alternative explanations of these data, a practice of critical friendship (Tracy, 2010).

Results

The junior coaches described how they learned to be leaders, and how having leadership opportunities facilitated greater confidence, responsibility, and mature attitudes. Most importantly, many junior coaches saw their leadership development as a process. The junior coaches discussed their transition from seeing the potential to become leaders, to gaining confidence in their roles as leaders, as Amina shared: "I am definitely not as shy as I used to be back then. I am more of a leader now; I can do certain things that back then I wouldn't have wanted to do. . . . I've matured."

However, not all junior coaches shared these same experiences of developmental progression, with some mentioning that they did not change in any way during their program involvement. Three participants stated: "I never noticed what I've improved on that much" (Mahir); "I don't think I see myself as a role model" (Nuwan); and "I feel like there's a lot that I have to learn, a

lot that I have to change about myself before I can call myself a role model" (Harshani). Thus, it should be recognised that all of these junior coaches constructed individual realities of their experiences, and while of some of these perceptions were shared, all were subject to individual and contextual differences.

The three overarching themes presented below represent the junior coaches' developmental experiences in the R&R Club as they correspond with the three stages of Fertman and van Linden's (1999) model: (a) awareness: developing into leaders started with seeing potential through role models; (b) interaction: learning by doing and interacting with others helped youth practice leadership abilities; and (c) mastery: taking on greater responsibility allowed for opportunities to refine leadership abilities and develop a variety of life skills.

Awareness: Developing Into Leaders Started With Seeing Potential Through Role Models

Learning Through Observing Junior Coaches

The junior coaches shared that they learned how to become leaders through observing their own junior coaches when they were club members. For example, Mahir said: "The junior coaches were the guidelines, they taught us what to do. We watched them." Relatedly, two leaders said: "[I learned] by watching the junior coaches help the other kids" (Harshani) and "I learned from experiencing with the other junior coaches when I was in the program—[these experiences] helped me. I was learning from them and now I'm doing what they're doing, so I got experience from them, like looking at them" (Renee). Here, the junior coaches had identified with their own leaders as role models to construct an understanding of what it means to be a leader.

Hossain spoke about witnessing his own junior coaches be compassionate towards others, and how it influenced him to want to do the same:

> *When we were just kids, there [were] other junior coaches that we saw do this [lead activities], and then we just knew them as friends; they were older than us but still friends. We see them help us, and help others, and we see them doing good and we want to do something good as well, like give back.*

Nicholas shared a similar sentiment: "It's always something I wanted to do, especially when I saw the coaches, I was like 'I wanna be that someday'. . . be a part of it, help the other kids exercise, help them read." Nuwan discussed his awareness of the potential to influence club

members: "I know I can help a lot of people read and write, and I can encourage them to run, because I had [similar] experiences with another junior coach when I was in a younger grade."

Learning Through Observing Adult Coaches

The junior coaches also discussed learning from their adult coaches. Mahir shared how he looked up to his adult coaches: "We follow certain coaches that we think is good for us, that we can be like them." Hossain described how he learned from seeing adult coaches' positive qualities (e.g., supporting youth): "I learned from [adult coaches] because they are really good for inspiration. I've seen them work with the kids, they were really helpful . . . they do a lot– they're always here on time, they always push us, and they encourage us." Similarly, Abraham mentioned how he inhibited his negative emotions based off how he saw his coaches lead: "Just seeing the way they react to the kids, I learned off them. If they don't get angry during a situation, I take that in and take in their behaviour."

Learning from adult coaches also happened through mentoring. Emma said: "Every Tuesday at lunch, [adult coaches] come and we have a mentoring session, so we just basically talk about what we're doing that night . . . some days we talk about what it is to be a junior coach." Furthermore, when asked how adult coaches helped her to become a leader, Emma stated it was through their role modelling: "I think they all helped a lot . . . they're the ones who come to the coach mentoring session. We're role models to the kids, and they're our role models."

Interaction: Learning by Doing and Interacting With Others Helped Youth Practice Leadership Abilities

Learning Through Interacting With Club Members

The junior coaches shared how their responsibilities concerned looking after club members. Sayid said: "[A] junior coach helps to get kids organised, make them sit down, make them listen, help them running, help them reading." Sayid further shared how these interactions helped him refine his own skills: "I want to help the kids be good at reading and running, and I want to help myself too—I think faster, it helps my reading…I run here with them, so that makes me run faster, so this helps me." Relatedly, Hossain explained how he learned from interacting with others: "We get to work with others and we get to learn from our mistakes, that helps us."

Abraham explained that while their leadership roles were described to them by the adult coaches, he learned how to teach younger club members primarily through his own experiences: "Before we opened [began the program year], [an adult coach] told us what to do and what not to do to. But [to] teach the kids, I learned on my own how to talk to them." Senuri described feeling a sense of responsibility from her interactions with the club members: "I learned how to work with kids, assisting kids with anything they need help with . . . it makes me feel responsible because you're being responsible to help other kids." Amina explained how with more experience in carrying out her role she got better at facilitating activities:

> *At first, I can say I was a bit on and off; I didn't really know what to do. I was just sort of following everybody else around. But after that, with experience, I knew where to be, what to do, how to do it, when to do it, and all this stuff.*

As they continued these interactions, the junior coaches found that the club members began to approach them for assistance, further reinforcing their leadership roles. Hossain shared:

> *If they [club members] need something, they always approach me like "oh I have a problem with him or her." I'm like "oh" and I just bring the person over, they talk to each other and eventually they say "sorry" to each other and then they make up again.*

Nicholas also described how he helped to resolve a conflict between two club members: "There was one time these kids had a disagreement and I just heard both of their stories—why they are fighting—and I managed to solve the problem."

Gaining Confidence to Perform Leadership

The practice of learning by doing allowed junior coaches to develop confidence as leaders, as described by two junior coaches: "I became more open hanging out with kids, and I think I became more confident and less nervous" (Rashmi) and "I feel more confident as a person" (Sayid). Renee reflected on how being a leader made her feel confident and inclined to be a leader beyond the R&R Club:

> *Being a coach helped me with my leadership role. I wasn't much of a leader in my whole life or when I was growing up little, I was always a follower. But now I'm more of a leader, I actually do stuff first and try to stand out. . . . I would do this and do that and have kids follow me. So, I feel better.*

Mastery: Taking on Greater Responsibility Allowed for Opportunities to Refine Leadership Abilities and Develop a Variety of Life Skills

The junior coaches discussed receiving greater opportunities as they developed in their leadership roles, moving from small tasks such as handing out snacks, to larger tasks such as supervising club members and leading activities. They also spoke about various life skills they developed like conflict resolution and problem-solving techniques, perseverance, working hard, personal and social responsibility, respect, positive attitude, and positive identity.

Building Life Skills for Leadership Within the Program.

Melody outlined how she developed team-building and cooperation skills: "I've learned team-building, teamwork, I've learned to listen to people because they might not have the same ideas, learned to cooperate with people just [be]cause it's such a large a group you have to learn." Similarly, two participants discussed personal and social responsibility-related skills they learned: "[I've learned] responsibility, decision making—you have to do a lot of decision making out there, you can't rely on another coach to tell you 'oh there's something happening'—you have to see for yourself and act on it right away" (Amina) and "[I learned] leadership. . . . When I'm working with a group, if they're not doing what they're supposed to do, I go and [tell] them, 'That's not what you're supposed to do" (Senuri).

The junior coaches explained how their involvement in the R&R Club helped them to learn how to regulate their emotions, demonstrate respect, and maintain positive attitudes. Abraham described how his attitude improved from internalizing positive messages about respect (e.g., positive signage, coaching guidelines):

> *The stuff that we read—respect, attitude—it has helped me to maintain that aspect and the attributes. Before I was just wild, I didn't care if anyone heard me yelling and screaming. But, now I am more in-tune with myself, I know how to handle my emotions, I know how to be respectful at times and when to be firm.*

Transferring Life Skills Related to Leadership Beyond the Program

Life skills are not only assets that can be used within the program in which they were learned, but can also be applied beyond the program, in other contexts. Renee described how she utilised what she learned about expressing oneself through her own sports involvement:

> *[Before], in sports teams I would not usually say stuff, but now, say if you're doing it wrong—I would let the person know. From helping with junior coaches, they told me not to be shy and say what you're going to say. Don't keep it all in, if you keep it all in you're going to explode one day and it's all going to come out at once and you'll say it aggressively; so say what's in your mind and don't take it as aggressive.*

Here, Renee felt free to express herself when a problem was recognised, as opposed to letting the problem fester to a breaking point.

Many of the junior coaches mentioned how the R&R Club helped them to become "a better person." Specifically, Nicholas explained how he learned skills that can help him in the future in school and work-related opportunities:

> *I like helping other kids, and problem solv[ing]. It's helpful in the future, when you get older and there's things you need to do. It's also useful for high school... It can help you for some jobs – when it comes to daycare, you need to know how to manage kids. You can't try to tell someone what to do, you need to know how to make them listen to you.*

It was evident that the junior coaches valued opportunities to learn and develop skills in the program to help them in the future.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore youth's leadership development through youth leaders' experiences in the R&R Club—a PA-PYD program—using the three stages of Fertman and van Linden's (1999) model. In alignment with current understandings of youth leadership development, the results suggest that the junior coaches of this sample were in different stages of developmental progression (Martinek et al., 2006). Collectively, these junior coaches' experiences were spread across stages of awareness, interaction, and mastery at the time of data collection; as such, the authors were able to construct an initial understanding of the processes of development at each stage.

With regards to the experiences categorised under the awareness stage of this model, the junior coaches discussed how they learned what it means to be a leader by observing their own

leaders, and receiving their explicit mentorship (e.g., guidance and support); these results are in alignment with research on leadership learning processes in PA programming (Voelker et al., 2011). Of the experiences in the interaction stage, the junior coaches discussed how they assisted their adult leaders, led activities, supported their club members, and learned to perform effectively through practice and continued interaction with others. This stage emphasised experiential learning processes and learning through trial and error (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). Finally, with regards to the mastery stage, the junior coaches discussed their adoption of leadership-related life skills as they internalised an identity around being leaders (Martinek & Hellison, 2009; Martinek et al., 2006). In this stage, reciprocal teaching processes play an influential role in which youth leaders are building assets by teaching others (Mosston & Ashworth, 2008).

The junior coaches discussed developing their PA and reading skills through teaching club members these skills, and developing life skills like team building, decision making, and emotional regulation in their roles. Smith (2014) found that when teaching others, teachers practice, refine, and internalise the content they are teaching and develop life skills in confidence, leadership, and role-modelling capabilities. Also discussed was the transfer of these life skills to other contexts (e.g., in sport, at school). Research suggests that leadership-related life skills can transfer from PA to other domains (Gordon & Doyle, 2015; Gould & Westfall, 2014). Taken together, the results of this study point to the advantages of employing youth leaders in teaching and facilitating PA, in that they may enhance their own PA skills, as well as learn leadership-related life skills that can be transferred to other life domains.

As prefaced in the results, not all the junior coaches shared experiences of positive development. This may be due to several reasons. First, many young adolescents may not be aware of their own progress as they are still developing their cognitive capacities (Sanders, 2013). Second, youth leaders may encounter different developmental pathways, whereby advancement is dependent on one's current developmental stage (Martinek & Hellison, 2009). Relatedly, youth leaders who expressed no change may not have been in the program long enough to experience developmental transitions yet. Third, the roles that youth leaders were offered varied in responsibility (e.g., assisting vs. leading capacities); those in assisting roles may have had limited opportunities to develop their leadership skills (Shanahan, 2015).

Recommendations

Formal training should be provided to youth leaders to help them develop an initial understanding of their roles, expectations, and strategies to perform well (e.g., Falcão, Gordon, & Gilbert, 2012; Gould & Voelker, 2010). These training sessions should be structured to resemble the contexts in which youth will perform, to help them better transition into their roles, as opposed to being thrust into leadership opportunities that are too challenging at their current levels. Beyond this training, adult leaders should hold youth leaders accountable to adopting the principles and strategies learned in training, through ongoing support, and keeping track of youth progress (Gould & Voelker, 2010).

The results of this study suggest that learning in leadership is multi-faceted—these leaders learned through observational learning, experiential learning, trial and error, and mentorship (Gould & Voelker, 2012). Knowing this, adult leaders can be more purposeful in promoting multiple learning experiences for youth leaders. By being positive role models (e.g., being warm, respectful, enthusiastic) adult leaders can set an example for youth leaders and promote observational learning. Through recognising youths' current abilities and providing them appropriate yet challenging opportunities to practice leadership, adult leaders can promote experiential learning (e.g., offering simple tasks to low experienced youth leaders like setting up an activity, while more experienced leaders both plan and run activities). Finally, adult leaders can provide ongoing mentorship to youth as they perform leadership (e.g., being accessible and addressing youth concerns, giving constructive feedback, holding leadership meetings to discuss progress; Gould & Voelker, 2012).

Active learning opportunities for youth should include tasks that enhance social responsibility through teaching and leading others (Hellison, 2011). Here, youth leaders make active contributions to others while also receiving reciprocal benefits to their own development (Mosston & Ashworth, 2008). In the same manner that youth leaders learned to be leaders from their adult leaders, they may also pave pathways for their younger peers to learn from and take on leadership roles in the future: a tri-level mentoring model (Deutsch, 2008; Shaikh, 2018).

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

This study addressed calls to give meaningful roles for youth to practice and develop leadership (Blanton et al., 2014). This study illustrates the value of intentional youth leadership strategies and provides empirical support for youth leadership as a process; there are multiple pathways

for learning leadership, and practicing leadership in youth programming can help enhance program-specific skills (e.g., PA and literacy) and the learning and transfer of life skills. Given these recognised strengths, existing programming should incorporate intentional youth leadership strategies to optimise the development of their youth members.

In understanding youth leadership development, program quality is an important aspect to consider. Several structural factors (e.g., program curriculum, facilities, resources) and social factors (e.g., coaches, peers, younger participants) can influence the development of youth leadership in these programs (Gould, Voelker, & Griffes, 2013). These factors were discussed by the participating youth leaders but extended beyond the scope of this article. These contextual influences should be further explored in terms of their associations with youth leadership experiences and long-term outcomes like life skills transfer.

This study was limited by the sample size and duration of the youth interviews. The time to conduct this research was constrained by the length of program sessions, the distance travelled for data collection, and the study conducted at a busy time as the sites were preparing for an end-of-year event. As well, participants were young adolescents who were still developing their language and conversational skills, which may have limited them from articulating their experiences effectively (Eder & Fingerson, 2001). Despite these limitations, detailed data were still obtained across all interviews, with most participants' experiences being represented in this article. Future studies with a similar sample should consider using multiple methods (e.g., photovoice, written responses, focus groups) to capture a broader and deeper range of youth leaders' experiences (Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005).

Conclusion

This study helped to understand leadership development as a process in which leaders gain awareness and competencies by modelling themselves after other leaders and through practicing leadership-related tasks. By having youth take on meaningful leadership roles, they can develop a broad set of skills and identify as leaders both within and beyond the program context (Gould & Westfall, 2014). It is the authors' hope that this work coupled with future research can inform youth leadership training, programming, and structure.

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