






'We are all learning together': how youth mentors perceive their role in an after-school program

Keetyn Maxwell^a, Michael Dubnewick ^a, Brian Lewis^b, Tara-Leigh McHugh ^c and Tristan Hopper ^a

^aFaculty of Kinesiology and Health Studies, University of Regina, Regina, Canada; ^bGrowing Young Movers Youth Development, Regina, Canada; ^cFaculty of Kinesiology, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada

ABSTRACT

After-school recreation programs often utilize sports and physical activity to engage youth in underserved communities. Furthermore, there has been a rise in the usage of peer leadership in recreation programs, especially in after-school settings. Research has demonstrated that peer leadership can be utilized effectively to accomplish programs. However, there is a lack of understanding of how peer leaders experience their mentor role and the mutual benefits they receive. As part of a larger, ongoing YPAR study, this research focused on an after-school recreation program in an underserved community. The program aims to provide an after-school recreational space for youth in the community where high school youth work as mentors. By developing authentic relationships through consistent year-long engagement, four mentors participated in multiple one-on-one interviews and a formal group interview to explore how they experienced their role within the program and how this role impacted other aspects in their lives. Additionally, informal conversations and observations collected throughout the YPAR process informed the data. Interpretive description was utilized to analyse the data and recontextualize how the mentors experienced their role within the program and their experiences living within their community. Positionality was consistently reflected during data generation and analysis, ensuring researchers acknowledged their role in the co-production of data with the mentors. Four key themes were constructed from the data: (1) contributing to safe space, (2) developing authentic relationships, (3) recognizing self-growth, and (4) identifying with kids' experiences. The discussion addresses how peer leaders recognize the importance and impact of their role within the program and how this contributes positively to their self-image and sense of belonging within their community.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 November 2024
Accepted 26 March 2025

KEYWORDS

After-school programming; mentorship; peer leadership; youth-led participatory action research; interpretive description; sport; recreation

Introduction

Youth-led recreation programs are becoming more prevalent as they provide unique opportunities to promote engagement and empowerment and improve the health of children in communities (McHale et al., 2022; Trude et al., 2018). Schools are effective sites for empowering youth and supporting the overall aims of after-school programs (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). According to Holt et al. (2012), 'School-based programs are ideal contexts for promoting youth development in low-income areas because they can provide safe, supervised, and structured activities' (p. 98). Leos-

Urbel (2015) similarly found that supportive environments and structured interactions in after-school programs were associated with higher academic performance. Recreational sports that are offered through after-school programming in communities where children experience lower socioeconomic status (SES) can promote wellbeing and encourage community engagement (Massey et al., 2018; Miller & LeDrew, 2010) in a safe space (Marttinen et al., 2019). Given the importance of after-school programs for low SES youth, there is an established need to explore and enhance youth recreational activity experiences (Middleton et al., 2022). This research engages in these ongoing conversations with specific attention to youths' experiences of living as peer mentors within an after-school program to explore how youth mentors perceive their role in an after-school recreation program, and by doing so, understand how the role of being a peer leader benefits them in various aspects of their lives.

Within these programs, research has identified that peer leadership opportunities are profound for youth as they benefit from identification, credibility, trust, and role-modelling influences (Christensen et al., 2022a; Marttinen et al., 2019; Trude et al., 2018; Turner & Shepherd, 1999), which helps increase the likelihood that positive youth development occurs (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Sjogren and Melton (2021) suggested that when students act as mentors in after-school programs targeting marginalized youth, there is a positive impact for both mentees and mentors. Recreational activities that incorporate sports or physical activities have been shown to contribute to the development of both social and emotional skills (Dauenhauer et al., 2022; Massey et al., 2017) and can be utilized to achieve other outcomes, such as the enhancement of social competencies (Christensen et al., 2021). For leaders, this encompasses leadership, personal, and social development, which can transfer into other life domains (Massey et al., 2018).

Literature review

After-School programs and intended outcomes

After-school recreation programs can have various goals and serve many children. There are considerable differences regarding after-school programs, including the location, size, staffing, funding, activities, structure, and mission and goals (Durlak et al., 2010). Witt (2004) suggested that three broad rationales support after-school programs: safety issues and childcare, decreasing negative behaviours, promoting positive ones, and improving educational achievement. Another focus is the development of social and emotional skills since the development of these skills 'may be a pathway to school success and other indicators of positive youth development' (Fredricks et al., 2017, p. 31). Generally, after-school recreation programs are designed to support school-age children with various enrichment activities such as physical recreation, nutrition and opportunities to develop social skills (Durlak et al., 2010). Dauenhauer et al. (2022) noted that after-school recreation programs focused on physical activity produced physical, cognitive, academic, social and emotional benefits for children, suggesting that these benefits were increased when programming was held on school campuses and occurred more than two days a week. These programs are often portrayed as providing opportunities to racial/ethnic minority or low-income students to overcome society's ills (Holt et al., 2013; Kremer et al., 2015).

On the contrary, after-school programming has been critiqued for its use as an effective intervention tool to develop youth into neoliberal citizens (Sharpe et al., 2022). This has been especially true for Indigenous youth and communities, where sports and games have historically, and continue to be, used as a form of colonial assimilation (Forsyth & Giles, 2013). There are evident discrepancies in recreation and sport policies in Canada that intend to advocate for equitable access to recreation spaces, which are further emphasized by the tensions expressed by Indigenous youth and communities on the margins (McHugh et al., 2019). Further, Tink et al. (2020) addressed the need to better understand how recreation reinscribes Eurocentric ideals on communities who are and have been, marginalized in dominant after-school programming discourse. Indigenous youth are not explicitly

mentioned in existing recreation or sports policy. According to Haudenhuyse et al. (2014), if programming aims to be purposeful, one must explore the social, political, and cultural barriers to participation alongside youth.

Peer leaders in programs

Peer leadership has been focused on in research, often done so with interchangeable terms, including peer-mentorship, peer-tutoring, peer-delivered, peer-assisted learning or youth-led (McHale et al., 2022). Each of these terms is underpinned by the same value: ‘that through the interaction with peers, learning occurs across various domains’ (Jenkinson et al., 2014, p. 254). Moreover, it has been suggested that youth prefer to interact with peers and may be more engaged and, therefore, more influenced when led by peers (Jenkinson et al., 2014; Larson et al., 2005). Christensen et al. (2021) highlighted how peer-to-peer approaches are prominent in after-school recreation programs, largely in part because young people ‘are especially susceptible to peer influence concerning values, decision-making, and the emotional displays of others’ (p. 812). This connects to homophily, which is a social phenomenon that suggests social ties are more likely between people with similar characteristics (McPherson et al., 2001). Applying this to peer-leadership, Brechwald and Prinstein (2011) found that youth behave in ways they perceive a role model would approve; by doing so, youth can develop a heightened sense of self. Thus, peer leaders acting as role models can influence the attitude and behaviour development of youth who look up to them (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). Furthermore, it makes sense for after-school programs to utilize peer leadership in their programming since children spend a significant amount of time with peers in a school setting (Smith, 2011). There is potential for peer-led programs to achieve the targeted goals, especially when older youth engage with peers younger than them (McHale et al., 2022). Burton et al. (2022) found that ‘older peers are thought to be uniquely situated to provide a relationship within which the mentee can value, respect, and idealize the mentor’ (p. 211). Research into peer leaders identified benefits when engaging in peer leadership. For example, Massey et al. (2018) found that junior coaches saw themselves as mentors to the youth they worked with, recognized positive changes in their behaviour, and developed more social responsibility when engaging with others. Research on peer leadership in recreational programs often emphasizes the importance of proper training for youth leaders (Jenkinson et al., 2014; Massey et al., 2018; McHale et al., 2022; Trude et al., 2018). In McHale et al.’s (2022) review of peer-led strategies for promoting physical activity, all but one of the included studies reported training for peer leaders, demonstrating its importance in ensuring effective peer leadership.

Despite the increasing focus on peer leaders in after-school recreation programs, there remain gaps in the literature. Massey et al. (2018) highlight the need to understand peer leaders’ perceptions of their role in the program and McHale et al. (2022), suggest that future research should explore the benefits beyond those associated with physical activity, such as emotional, social, or leadership enhancement as they engage with peer leaders. This includes how being a leader helps establish a sense of belonging, a sense of community, or enhances their self-image. As part of an ongoing, youth-led community project, the purpose of the current research is to explore how youth mentors perceive their role in an after-school recreation program, and by doing so, understand how the role of being a peer leader benefits them in various aspects of their lives.

Research context

Growing Young Movers (GYM) is an intergenerational after-school program based around cooperative play and recreational activity. The program is facilitated in a major city located in central Canada and started in 2015 through a collaborative process involving community members and Community Elders (Lewis et al., 2022). GYM is situated in an underserved part of the city where many residents experience a low SES and face a range of associated social challenges (e.g. housing security, food

scarcity, addiction). The racialized inequalities associated with this neighbourhood have led to the habitual framing of it as a crime-ridden place of violence (Lewis et al., 2022). The program is a partnership with a high school, where students in a designated leadership pathway that interconnects their education with leadership development are employed as mentors at GYM after-school to ensure an inter-generation approach to enhance physical education, wellness, and cultural well-being (Lewis et al., 2022). Peer mentors range from grades 10 to 12 and are supported by teachers and community volunteers, with each day of programming targeting specific age groups (GYM, n.d.). Most of the students employed as mentors within GYM reside within the local community and, therefore, they tend to share similar lived experiences to the rest of the community. The original motivation of GYM was not only to confront the limited youth programming offered to children but also to address the lack of leadership opportunities for older youth (Lewis et al., 2022). GYM is 'moving for change' (GYM, n.d., para. 2), seeking to change society's perceptions of the community and youth who live there (for more context on GYM as a program, see Lewis et al., 2022). GYM utilizes a dedicated space located within the high school to offer after-school programming for elementary-aged students in the community. The program seeks to address several challenges that children in this community encounter, including food scarcity, safety, and meaningful social interactions. The program also works to address potential barriers to youth participation. For example, they provide youth with the necessary clothing required to participate in the programming and offer transportation to ensure children make it home safely. Snacks are provided to children, and the program structure emphasizes cooperative play, personal connections, and organized recreational games. In addition, GYM offers external programming to elementary schools in the community, where grade 12 students attend other schools to deliver the program for youth who are unable to travel to the high school.

The inclusion of high school students as staff acts as a form of cross-age mentoring, with each grade of students being responsible for a certain age range on a specific day of the week. Cross-age mentoring is especially effective at implementing and achieving intended program outcomes (Burton et al., 2022). For GYM, employing high schoolers from the community is a unique, intentional aspect that aims to benefit not just the children who attend but also the peer leaders. Many of the GYM leaders self-identify as Indigenous and share both a spatial and ethnic identity with the community and youth attending, which contributes to the effectiveness of peer leadership (Carpenter et al., 2008; Lopresti et al., 2021). As mentors within GYM, the high school youth support after-school programming for neighbouring elementary students through cooperative play. This research is part of a larger Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project that is focused on the relationality of youth in an after-school program.

Methodology

Part of a larger ongoing community-based project that utilizes a YPAR approach (Ozer, 2016), a youth-centred engagement approach was utilized and drew from the McCain Model of Youth Engagement (Heffernan et al., 2017) which emphasizes the tenants of transparency, reciprocity and co-learning, the flexibility of the continually evolving process, ensuring a youth-friendly environment, and providing adult support as resources (Hawke et al., 2018). Respect was fostered between the researchers and the youth from the beginning, ensuring that the youth were fully aware of the aims of the research. Through long-term engagement and clear communication (see positionality), the interview guides were constructed to highlight the youth as experts in peer-leadership and community experience. The youth developed and led the group interview themselves, ensuring they were authentically involved in data generation. Youth-centred engagement has shown promise to effectively address significant societal issues and challenges faced by youth (Chou et al., 2015; Gomez & Ryan, 2016; Quarmby et al., 2024). Recently, there have been calls in the sport and recreation literature to embrace participatory research methodologies when attempting to understand the experiences of participants in programming, particularly when youth are involved (Hayhurst, 2019;

Smith et al., 2023; Spaaij et al., 2018). YPAR starts with young people identifying a problem or question they want to address and then cycling through research and action processes with the guidance of adult facilitators and involves academic researchers being in a respectful, reciprocal partnership with the community through co-learning and power-sharing for mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge (Boyer, 1996).

Participants

There were four mentors involved in the YPAR project and the current research. Each of them had been a part of the leadership pathway since entering high school and were in grade 12 at the time of the interviews. The mentors were originally recommended by the director of the program for involvement in the study since they were exemplary mentors who were heavily engaged in the program and demonstrated significant growth throughout their time in the leadership pathway. Once asked, all consented to be involved in the larger study and consented to engage in interviews. There were three self-identifying females and one self-identified male. Each participant self-identified as Indigenous and had grown up in the local community.

Interpretive description

Interpretive description (ID) was utilized to guide the design and analysis. ID is a non-categorical method of research that is guided by interpretive naturalistic orientations (Thorne et al., 1997) and is embedded in a constructivist paradigm (Thorne et al., 2004). ID is not a formal method, but instead, is a methodological approach that encourages high-quality qualitative studies in an applied context (Thorne, 2016). It encourages borrowing from other qualitative design techniques that are best suited for the research question (Thorne, 2016), acknowledging that individuals experience subjective constructed realities with the possibilities that they can be shared (Clark et al., 2011). Researchers utilize ID when they want to signify the importance of their theoretical and epistemological positions when they are departing from the full scope of their work within a conventional qualitative tradition, or when they want to inform modifications to the way that traditional methods are taken up (Thorne, 2016).

To achieve this, ID encourages ‘careful and systematic analysis of a phenomenon and an equally pressing need for putting that analysis back into the context of the practice field, with all of its inherent social, political, and ideological complexities’ (Thorne, 2016, p. 57). ID research questions must be framed in a way that reflects the overall aim to position knowledge back within the disciplinary knowledge of the field. When considering the overall YPAR project, and the specific aim of this study to explore the experienced phenomenon of peer leadership within the lives of youth and the applied context in which GYM is based, it was appropriate to utilize ID. The aim of the research is not just to generate description alone, but to explore meanings and explanations that may lead to applied implications (Thorne et al., 2004). These implications can be applied to the lived experience in the data and are found in the overarching themes, relationships, and patterns that are identified (Fortune & Oncescu, 2024). ID has been previously utilized in research on sport and recreation programs, including studying the effects on low-income families (Fortune & Oncescu, 2024; Holt et al., 2012; Kingsley & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2015), gender (Clark et al., 2011), parental involvement (Furusa et al., 2021; Pynn et al., 2019), and mental health supports (Elliott et al., 2023).

Data generation

Prior to data generation, ethical approval was granted through the lead investigator’s *University Research Ethics Board (2020-2089)*. Data were generated via observations and one-on-one interviews. Within the broader YPAR, numerous interactions between researchers and GYM mentors took place over a one-year period. Informal conversations allowed the researchers to learn about the everyday

experiences the mentors faced and any unique or noteworthy aspects they associated with their role. These conversations allowed for meaningful relationships to form where researchers were better able to appreciate the unique identities and lived experiences of the mentors within their mentorship role, thus, contributing to data generation (Swain & King, 2022).

Positionality

The project's lead researcher (TH) has devoted 5-years to creating reciprocal relationships with youth and GYM to ensure the research is relevant and responsive. Additionally, the lead author (KM) has spent the better part of 1-year creating reciprocal relationships with the youth co-researchers and program. As a research team, we are committed to the substantial time and energy needed to build trusting, transparent, and respectful relationships with the mentors. The formation of such relations is pivotal in the success of YPAR (Ozer, 2016) to support spaces of possibility for youth to realize their full potential and better understand how they are experiencing their participation in after-school programming.

Interviews and group interviews

We conducted two semi-structured interviews with each of the four mentors. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes and was recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. The interview guides asked specific questions to each mentor related to four broad concepts that relate to their mentorship experience: (1) Their experiences within the community, (2) Their experiences attending their school and leadership pathway, (3) the experience of being a mentor in the after-school recreation program, and (4) experience engaging in the YPAR project. Observations of GYM programming, along with group meetings around the larger YPAR project, assisted in developing questions to ask on specific aspects of the mentors' experience. For example, by observing the mentors engaging in programming, questions related to their understanding of their role were generated. Some example questions include: 'How has living in [your community] impacted your experiences?'; 'Why is it important to have a program like [redacted] in your community'; and 'What does it mean to be a [program] mentor to you'. Youth mentors were also invited to participate in a group interview where follow-up questions were asked that linked each of the individual interviews. The interview guide was created in collaboration with the mentors, allowing them to form questions regarding each other's experiences; this group interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Data analysis

The data analysis process took place concurrently with the data generation by reflecting on it, asking questions, and considering what makes sense (Thorne et al., 2004). The analytic strategy followed Thorne's (2016) three-stage analytical approach, which aimed to establish associations, patterns, and relationships within the data (Watchman & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2017). This process is focused on inductive reasoning, where analysis moves from comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing, and finally recontextualizing (Watchman & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2017). This process first included familiarizing oneself with each interview transcript and beginning to identify any associations related to the school, community, or mentor experience. This process assisted in developing the group interview guide, along with initial data analysis. Patterns across all mentors were then explored, such as specific aspects of the mentor role or program that were prevalent across multiple interviews, such as safety or experiences growing up in the community. Finally, both the lead author (KM) and lead researcher (TH) utilized memo writing to highlight and discuss relationships between the mentors' experiences and their understanding of their peer leadership role. Verbatim quotes from the mentors were utilized to support each theme, and the usage of terminology such as 'kids' for participants reflects their vocabulary.

Results

Following ID's analytical approach, four themes were developed from the data. These themes weave how the youth discussed their roles as mentors at GYM alongside their experiences in the community and within the high school leadership pathway. The themes include (1) contributing to a safe space, (2) developing authentic relationships, (3) identifying with kids' experiences, and (4) recognizing self-growth.

Contributing to a safe space

When asked to reflect on their community and the role that GYM plays within it, the mentors recognized many of the challenges that are often associated with their community such as drug addiction or gang violence. While they were aware of these aspects growing up, the mentors also commented on how these challenges were experienced as more present in the community today. For example, Mentor J painted a vivid picture of how safety perceptions have shifted over time and reflected temporal shifts that she noticed in her community. In discussing these shifts she shared her prior knowledge of her neighbourhood as a place characterized by a sense of security and freedom, whereas today, there is more perceived fear: *There's been a lot of drugs and violence coming around, so a lot of people haven't been coming out of their houses ... That's a lot scarier now these days* (Mentor J, personal interview)

While these inward experiences around shifting ideas of safety were discussed, the mentors were also asked about the non-resident perspectives regarding their community. Social issues and racial stereotypes were discussed as being the main contributors to an outsider's perspective about the community:

They call it the hood, so it's probably a lot about like natives and stuff, 'cause there's a lot of natives that live in this community. I'm pretty sure it's mostly natives so stuff they say probably wouldn't be good ... the community is a bit dirty too, and [there are] a lot of abandoned and burned down houses. (Mentor S, personal interview)

Additional participants spoke about the challenges their community faces. For Mentor J, they said: *'I think they would say that our community is very dirty and very not good. We represent a lot of gang violence'* (Mentor J, personal interview). The outsider's perspective is prevalent throughout the city. Mentor J emphasizes that these perceptions do not accurately reflect the true nature of her community *'they don't really know what really happens in the hood'* (Mentor J, personal interview). This highlights a critical gap between external judgments and the lived experiences of community members, suggesting the need for a more nuanced understanding of urban neighbourhoods. While the mentors recognized this negative perspective exists, they also acknowledged the ongoing challenges within the community and how this can create an unsafe space for kids. Amidst these expressed tensions the mentors recognized GYM as a program that offered a safe alternative for children and youth in the community as they sought recreational activities and spaces. For example, Mentor E noted that GYM was a safe space: *'I always assume GYM would be a – a more safer place for [kids] to be or hang out with than say, going to a random park with no supervisors'* (Mentor E, personal interview).

While GYM provided a safe physical space for kids to experience recreation, the mentors also understood how they contributed to creating safe spaces within the program and their community. When asked how they engaged in creating spaces where kids felt safe at GYM one of the mentors talked about the importance of open spaces, explaining that:

An open space would be people that you can talk to. A place that doesn't have violence and bad energy. You have resources on how to get different things, like say something's happening at home, I need help. We have people here at GYM that could help. (Mentor J, personal interview)

This was echoed by Mentor E when he discussed how mentors assist in facilitating escapism for kids. When asked to expand on escapism, they explained that: *'when [kids] come to GYM, they have a*

good opportunity to forget about that for a bit ... Play with friends, have snacks, stuff like that Generally, just giving them a sense of safety and lack of worrying about later ... Escapism' (Mentor E, personal interview). Since the mentors all recognized they were responsible for providing a safe space to have fun and converse with kids, they were able to connect their mentor role to creating the safe space GYM offered. While part of the responsibilities of being a mentor at GYM was to ensure kids felt safe within the after-school program, mentors spoke in ways that supported these notions of safety while further considering how openness and help were a foundation for contributing to safe places. Drawing on the early discussion points associated with their community, the mentors recognized that safety was not just offered at GYM in a spatial sense, but kids also required safety in a social and emotional sense, which was the responsibility of the mentors to provide at GYM.

Developing authentic relationships

The mentors recognized that they were able to form authentic and meaningful relationships with the kids who attended GYM. The mentors spoke positively about their ability to connect with the kids and viewed their position not as one that placed them in an authoritative position, but one that facilitated connection:

I would say it's an opportunity for kids in the community to build relationships and have the opportunity to let themselves go, just be themselves, have fun in an environment where they can be themselves, not worry about what other people think. They can talk to us about anything, which is great, and we can be those people to listen and understand them and help them with what they need. (Mentor M, personal interview)

While GYM programming focused on providing kids with the chance to have fun, be active, and address food insecurity, the mentors all highlighted how weekly, monthly, and multi-year-long peer-to-peer relationships contributed to an environment where kids, and they, wanted to return to the program given the authentic relationships developed. Thus, the mentors recognized that by being in their role, they not only were responsible for the environment of GYM, but also for connecting with the kids in specific ways, as *listeners*, *understanders*, and *helpers* as Mentor M stated. This was made evident during the group interview when mentors discussed how kids wanted to return to the program because of who the mentors were:

These kids wanna come back, and they wanna talk to us, and they wanna be with us because we're ... I don't wanna say above them, but we're just slightly older than them, so we can still understand and talk about the same stuff and still joke around about the same things. (Mentor M, Group Interview)

The fact that the mentors were close in age and shared similar lived experiences with the kids allowed for meaningful relationships that, from the mentors' perspective, kids recognized and desired. The relationships between the mentors and kids were consistently referenced as an important part of being in the mentor role:

Certain kids look up to certain mentors in a certain sort of way. Like the things we'll do ... They'll think about it and sometimes they'll think, 'Oh. I want to be like him when I grow up' ... I would say certain kids are impacted by certain mentors. (Mentor E, personal interview)

While relationships were developed collaboratively and collectively through larger group games, the mentors also recognized the particularity of relationships that were developed amongst children and youth mentors as being important. Sometimes these certain relationships with certain children and certain mentors became more visible during specific moments of free time and snack time. An interesting note was that all the mentors discussed how the free time GYM worked into the program schedule and was often the most important when building relationships with the kids. This was especially emphasized during snack time when mentors and kids sit and converse while sharing a meal:

The snack really does bring a lot of kids together too. We just have really good conversations, and I feel like it just really helps us build the relationship that we need to work along them and help to mentor them. That's snack time. (Mentor J, Group Interview)

Mentor E also emphasized the importance of connecting over snack time when they said: *'We like snack time. It's a nice time to talk and see how everyone's growing up in life'* (Mentor E, personal interview). While the games and recreational activities contributed to creating fun experiences, ensuring physical engagement, and allowing for bonding opportunities between the group, it was the unstructured times when mentors had the most impactful moments to converse that allowed for authentic relationships to develop.

The relationships the kids had with the mentors were not just recognized as important for the kids but were often reciprocal in the sense that the mentors also valued the development of authentic relationships with children. The mentors took pride in the connections that developed with the kids and discussed how they desired to leave a lasting impact on them. The development of relationships was not just a responsibility of their role, but something of pride. Even small gestures between the mentors and kids were storied as meaningful in the mentor's lives: *'Like, the simple things like, tying their shoe. Simple things, but still teaching 'em something ... I hope they'll remember me for it'* (Mentor S, personal interview). Another example of small gestures being a moment of pride was when Mentor E shared about a kid who gravitated to him:

There was this one kid last year ... And every Thursday and Tuesday I showed up, he would always hang out with me. From start to finish, he'd always be there beside me, kinda thing. I like to think I left a good impression. (Mentor E, personal interview)

While many of the mentors discussed the importance of relationships between child participants and themselves as mentors, they also discussed the importance of GYM to connect differently with teachers. Since GYM is connected to their learning pathway, they work alongside teachers after school. Mentor J highlights the ease of building strong relationships with teachers at their school, which she did not experience at her previous school *'It's so easy to build a relationship here with a teacher one-on-one'* (Mentor J, personal Interview). The mentors did not see the teachers with an authoritative perspective, just as they did not see their relationship with the kids as one with an authoritative dynamic. Instead, GYM facilitated relationships between the mentors, kids, and teachers that were genuine rather than expected. This led to mentors taking more initiative because they recognized the important role, they had in fostering these meaningful relationships: *'I got to build these relationships with all these kids and these teachers, and you know, be here and make a difference'* (Mentor E, personal interview).

Identifying with kids

It was evident that the mentors were able to connect with the kids attending in part because they could identify with their experiences. They recognized that for many of these kids, they had been in their position not long ago and could connect to their current experiences within the community. Being able to share this mutual understanding was highlighted by the mentors as one of the most effective aspects of their role. During the group interview, the mentors discussed how it was important to have mentors from the community, rather than hire mentors from outside their neighbourhood: *'Us, being in the hood is also another way of, like, understanding the slang, kind of. Like understanding where they're coming from'* (Mentor J, group interview). Further, Mentor M added, *'It makes them feel more belonging and more this is normal, and people are going through it, and ... people can get over it'* (Mentor M group interview). Being able to identify with the experiences the kids have in the community seemed to empower the mentors to recognize the importance of their role. They were able to act as leaders and assist the kids as they navigated the experiences they had within their community as they drew on their own lived experiences and knowledge. More importantly, they were able to demonstrate to the kids that individuals can overcome the

challenges within the community, thus acting as role models. Despite being only a few years older, the mentors knew they could make a meaningful impact on the kids: *'We have that perfect advice. We can just give what we can. But it's the most genuine advice you can probably get when it comes to a mentor and the student coming to join them'* (Mentor M group interview).

An interesting aspect is that the mentors spoke about how their interactions with the kids made them reflect more on their own experiences. Mentor S talked often about how they would have wanted the opportunity to attend GYM as a kid, reflecting on their own childhood experiences and seeing how the kids who now attend receive numerous benefits that they did not have as a child. All mentors discussed how they would have attended GYM had the opportunity to be there during their childhood. Mentor E discussed how by being a mentor, not only did he identify with kids' experiences, but his interactions also made him reflect further on his experiences within his community growing up *'... it's eye-opening. It gives you a perspective of what being in [the community] is like for other people and you, as well'* (Mentor E, personal interview). While Mentor E identifies with kids' experiences because he grew up in the community, in his role, he realized that there are kids who face more challenges. This further emphasized the importance of the mentor role and how through a common understanding of the community and what it is like growing up there, Mentor E was able to act as a better leader.

Identifying with kids' experiences allowed the mentors to develop more meaningful relationships and understand the value GYM offered by providing a safe space in the community. This highlights how peer leaders are positioned to connect and support kids genuinely. Mentor J shared a story explaining how kids and mentors alike can connect through shared experiences by just knowing firsthand about the community:

We can understand where they're coming from when they're talking, and we can understand *'[the kid] was at [local community spot], and you know that tree beside the corner? Oh, yeah, it fell today'. And I'll be like 'no way, I know what tree you're talking about' You can understand where they're coming from ... that's the best example I could give you* (laughs). (Mentor J, personal interview)

Recognizing self growth

While the previous two themes focused on aspects connected to the development of relationships and safe spaces, the mentors also recognized their personal growth from being in their role. For example, Mentor E discussed how there were kids who gravitated to him and spent a significant amount of time being around him in a previous year, which required Mentor E to be more cognizant of their actions to ensure they were being a good role model: *'I'm kind of glad the responsibility is there, to be honest 'cause I didn't get a whole lot growing up, and it's good to get some of that'* (Mentor E, personal interview). Other shared aspects the mentors recognized and discussed included communication, attitudes, and confidence. Since GYM is explicitly connected to the mentors' education pathway, they were simultaneously engaging with concepts of mentorship while also acting as mentors. This was perhaps best exemplified by Mentor M:

It really changed who I am and how I view the world and how I view school and how I view friendships. I think it has ... I found out who I am through leadership class. My confidence, I feel great. (Mentor M, personal Interview)

All the mentors discussed that their role in GYM changed their outlook on many aspects of life. By being positioned as mentors and being positioned as capable of supporting kids in their community, the mentors all discussed how they could see a different outlook on their everyday lives. Mentor S discussed how their role as a mentor allowed them to appreciate themselves more: *'I don't really know how to explain it ... I feel better about myself, 'cause I'm doing something and actually helping other people'* (Mentor S, personal interview). Furthermore, the mentors consistently discussed how their involvement in GYM supported spaces to shift attitudes and perspectives. Considering the community they grew up in and their recognition of the social challenges related to lack of opportunity,

the youth discussed the necessity of taking a positive attitude to be an effective mentor. As Mentor E said:

You gotta be positive for them. It'd be wrong to go into work with a bad attitude and spreading that bad attitude. So, I kind of move that into my school life. And it's just greatly impacted me in such a huge way, and in a great way. I'm forever grateful for it. (Mentor E, group interview)

What stood out the most was not just the mentors recognizing they needed to shift their attitudes while in their leadership role working with the kids, but how they were able to see changes in who they were as individuals because they were mentors. When asked how their involvement in GYM changed their self-perspective, Mentor J provided a detailed reflection on how they used to see the world around them and how being a mentor opened their worldview:

I think I see myself a little bit differently with my mind. I am more positive than I used to be very ... how can you say this? Judgmental. I used to be very selfish in ways. But the kids and [director] have helped me see that there are other opinions out there and there are other minds that think differently, and there are other hearts out there that feel differently. (Mentor J, personal interview)

Mentor J narrative underscores her resilience, developed through surviving and thriving in a challenging environment: *'It makes me see myself as like ... someone that's survived ... the hood.'* She later adds, *'Growing up here, you learn to be tough and resourceful. These are skills that help you in any situation'* (Personal Interview).

GYM aims to challenge and change negative perceptions of the community. While the focus is first and foremost towards providing opportunities for kids, it also led mentors to recognize how GYM opened space to challenge many of the previously discussed negative perceptions. This can be viewed as self-growth as mentors reframed the negative perceptions from outsiders and their own experiences: *'We highlight the good things happening here, and how the community is trying to make things better. People need to see that there's more to our community than just the bad news stories'* (Mentor J, personal interview). Mentor E shared a similar perspective when discussing who should know about GYM; however, they suggested that it was people from within the community that would benefit from knowing about GYM: *'Cause [Highschool] is a part of the community, and I feel like if [Highschool] got a good reputation ... people would look at [the community] a bit differently, as well'* (personal interview). GYM has a reputational impact on the high school in which it is operated, and the wider community was expanded on by Mentor S. Rather than just discussing their thoughts, they suggested that the kids attending GYM would see the high school and its role in their community, in a much more positive way:

Everyone just said [Highschool] was a bad school, not good to go to ... I feel like if I came to the building to go for GYM, I would see for myself how it was. (Mentor S personal interview)

The mentors discussed how GYM challenged the preconceived notions about the community it serves, and how their role contributed to reframing how local kids saw the community. Moreover, the mentors recognized how their understanding of their community shifted, which further changed the way they saw their own experiences, self-perceptions, and futures.

Discussion

This research explored how youth mentors perceive their role in an after-school recreation program and, by doing so, understand how being a peer leader benefits them in various aspects of their lives. Each theme that emerged in the findings highlighted the way the mentors experience and understand the importance of their role.

The mentors not only acknowledge the safe space that GYM provides but could appreciate it by reflecting on their own experiences as kids in the community and being aware of the social issues that exist. Witt (2004) previously highlighted that one of the broad rationales of after-school recreation programs includes safety and childcare. Bean and Forneris (2016) also found that providing a

safe environment is the most basic requirement for providing growth experiences in positive youth development in recreational sports contexts. Each of the mentors involved discussed how GYM and their involvement in the program created a safe space for kids to engage in recreational play. This was even more prevalent due to the mentors' connections, experiences, and understanding of the community GYM served, allowing them to appreciate the importance of offering safety for kids in both a physical sense, but also in an emotional and psychological sense. This ties to Burton et al. (2022) finding that peer mentoring may have a larger effect in urban environments. From the mentors' perspective in our study, they recognized both the importance of their role and the overall impact of GYM as a program within the social context in which it operated. Parker et al. (2019) emphasized how safety and trust were foundational to developing relational accountability between peer mentors and mentees, thus, the mentors acknowledging how they contribute to a safe space supports this aspect of peer mentoring. Furthermore, the mentors also acknowledged how the safe space did not just exist in a spatial sense but was constructed by the mentors themselves. The mentors recognized an important aspect of their role was contributing to this safe space, and this could be done through their attitudes or the connections they formed with the kids. This self-recognition of the mentor role connects to Morgan and Parker's (2023) discussion on SfD program design. The mentors all had an appreciation for the challenges participants faced in the community through their own first-hand experiences, they all recognized how GYM created a space within their community that could provide kids experiences away from the social issues that exist, and GYM mentors took pride in how their role contributed to the environment. This pride and recognition may assist in creating programming that encourages open learning environments due to the potential for more buy-in from those responsible for delivering the program, since they may appreciate the change, they are making. This was evident by how all the mentors involved identified that they would have appreciated the opportunity to attend a program like GYM during their childhood experiences in their community.

The mentors for GYM had many shared characteristics that contributed to fostering peer relationships with the kids, as highlighted when mentors reflected on their relationships. Researchers who have studied peer-to-peer leadership in recreational programs have highlighted relational elements that may be heightened due to the closeness in age between the leader and the peer (Burton et al., 2022; Christensen et al., 2021; Smith, 2011). For example, Christensen et al. (2022b) discussed how it was important to consider the shared characteristics of peer relationships that can contribute to role modelling and identification. While the findings only provide the perspective of the mentors, there is some connection to wider research on relationship impact for positive youth development programs in similar contexts. McDonough et al. (2018) found that in programs that had adult staff working with children, relationships were an important aspect for both the staff and the child. Our findings found similar aspects for the mentors, such as the importance of fostering a mentoring relationship, teaching social skills, spending time, and being there for kids highlighting that peer leaders recognize similar important aspects as adult staff do in recreational programs. The fact they spoke of these relationships as authentic and meaningful indicated that peer-to-peer leadership can create reciprocal relationships where the relational in-between space between youth mentor and child is mutually appreciative. Larose et al. (2015) study on community programs found that youth involved felt that recreational activities were more meaningful because there was alignment with their interests and preferences, thus, positively contributing to the mentoring relationship. This was similar to how mentors in this study spoke about the various activities they engaged with kids during GYM. Snack time and the emphasis on free, unstructured play were perceived as a time to make meaningful connections with kids. This further supports Christensen et al.'s (2024) assertion that programs utilizing peer-led approaches need to balance program intentions while allowing adaptations to ensure peer leaders can form authentic connections.

The mentors' self-growth all extended beyond just leadership development and impacted aspects of their self-image and outlook on their experiences. Like other research that has explored peer leadership in physical activity programming, the mentors were positively affected by engaging

in peer leadership (Christensen et al., 2021; Massey et al., 2018; Miller & LeDrew, 2010). This is in line with Arshad et al. (2021), who found that youth involved in mentoring leadership programs can experience positive outcomes not only during mentoring but also within the organizational community. McDonough et al. (2018) found that staff recognized the importance of acting as role models to kids, sometimes requiring a shift in their attitudes or actions. For mentors in our study, this recognition of role modelling contributed significantly to changing their attitudes and encouraging reflection on their experiences. Lopresti et al. (2021) had similar findings with their youth mentors; that through their leadership role, mentors develop a sense of ownership that positively contributes to their self-esteem.

Each mentor felt it was important they were able to identify with the young kid participants. The mentors involved all emphasized the importance of sharing experiences with the kids, contributing to Christensen et al. (2021) discussion about peer leader recruitment. Christensen and colleagues highlighted that suitable peer leaders are those who differ from authoritative figures, especially when engaging vulnerable youth. All four mentors identified with the kids' experiences and highlighted how this was a crucial aspect of their role, suggesting shared identity is important to ensure effective peer leadership implementation. As highlighted by Christensen et al. (2022b), peer-to-peer approaches can be especially effective when programs draw on, value, and make leaders 'peerness' (p. 10) visible. Our findings emphasize that peer leaders themselves recognize their peerness and the importance it has.

Across all four themes, the mentors' personal experiences highlighted important aspects often associated with peer leadership and its effectiveness. This was not only related to improving the recreational program but also benefited the mentors themselves. The findings address both Massey et al. (2018) and McHale et al. (2022) call for more understanding of peer leaders' perceptions of their role and the benefits they perceive. For example, the findings from our work alongside youth provide parallel considerations to Massey et al. (2018) work, which identified that personal and social development were valued and experienced alongside leadership development with junior coaches. Much like the coaches in their study, the mentors we sat down with were able to identify with kids and their experiences, saw positive changes in their behaviour in their everyday lives, and were more socially responsible and aware of the impact they had on their community. This self-development for the mentors was notable in the last three themes on relationships, self-growth, and identifying with kids. This also contributes to McHale et al. (2022) call for researchers to consider benefits such as emotional, social, or leadership enhancement for peer leaders. Specifically, the findings demonstrate how mentors established a sense of belonging to their community by interacting with local kids, strengthened their sense of community by allowing them to reflect on their experiences, and enhanced their self-image by providing them with the opportunity to take responsibility and create a meaningful difference.

Conclusion

The current research was part of a larger, ongoing, community-based project. Future research should remain focused on co-produced approaches to exploring youth experience in after-school programming. Scholars (Leman et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2023) have recently called for the use and documentation of co-produced approaches in recreation spaces. Further, this research approach lends itself well to equity-seeking communities. More generally, little is known about the need for more opportunities for peer-to-peer mentorship and how this enhances participant experiences. Further, there is a considerable gap in the recreation-related literature about youth-led after-school programming and the community development implications these programs have.

In conclusion, findings from this research detail how youth mentors perceive their role in an after-school recreation program, and by doing so, describe how the role of being a peer leader shapes various aspects of their lives. Through our ongoing youth-led project, including the narratives presented here, this research suggests that for the mentors in GYM, the experience of being peer

mentors had profound impacts on their lives and, subsequently, their community. This research supports the need to incorporate peer-to-peer mentorship opportunities within recreational after-school programming. In doing so, we argue that this positions youth as knowledge holders and experts within their own lives and allows them the opportunity to experience being leaders within safe spaces. Mentor J summarized the findings holistically when they said '*I am learning many things, kids are learning many things. We are all learning together in ways that are fun, like through activities*'. As was the case with the youth mentors introduced in this research, they felt empowered to change the gloomy narrative about their community, create meaningful relationships with participants, and gain skills that they never knew they had; by being mentors, they were provided opportunities to learn about themselves, the role they have in their community, and the ability to make positive and lasting impacts on younger peers. This highlights how peer leadership can effectively benefit recreational programs, not only for the participants but for the leaders as well. When peer leaders share similar life experiences and identity characteristics with the participants, as in the case of GYM mentors, out-of-school programs can benefit from youth in the community can see how older peers have navigated similar situations, while also empowering the leaders to see their communities and themselves in new ways, challenging the stereotypes and negative connotations that these programs are often targeting.

Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada. Funding ID: 430-0858-2021.

Note: Portions of this work were previously presented at the North American Society for Sport Management conference (2024). We appreciate the conference attendees' feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada [Grant Number 430-0858-2021].

ORCID

Michael Dubnewick  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9262-9460>

Tara-Leigh McHugh  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6528-9613>

Tristan Hopper  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1781-234X>

References

- Arshad, M. M., Ismail, I. A., Ahmad Fesol, S. F., & Ismail, A. (2021). Character development and youth leadership mentoring. *Pertanika Journal of Science and Technology*, 29(S1), 39–55. <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.29.s1.03>
- Bean, C., & Forneris, T. (2016). Examining the importance of intentionally structuring the youth sport context to facilitate positive youth development. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 28(4), 410–425. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2016.1164764>
- Boyer, E. (1996). The scholarship of engagement. *Journal of Public Service and Outreach*, 1(1), 11–20.
- Brechwald, W. A., & Prinstein, M. J. (2011). Beyond homophily: A decade of advances in understanding peer influence processes. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21(1), 166–179. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2010.00721.x>
- Burton, S., Raposa, E. B., Poon, C. Y. S., Stams, G. J. J. M., & Rhodes, J. (2022). Cross-age peer mentoring for youth: A meta-analysis. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 70(1–2), 211–227. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12579>
- Carpenter, A., Rothney, A., Mousseau, J., Halas, J., & Forsyth, J. (2008). Seeds of encouragement: Initiating an Aboriginal youth mentorship program. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 31(2), 51–67.

- Chou, F., Kwee, J., Lees, R., Firth, K., Florence, J., Harms, J., Raber, M., Stevens, T., Tatomir, R., Waver, C., & Wilson, S. (2015). Nothing about us without us! Youth-led solutions to improve high school completion rates. *Educational Action Research*, 23(3), 436–459. doi:[10.1080/09650792.2015.1013047](https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2015.1013047)
- Christensen, J. H., Elsborg, P., Melby, P. S., Nielsen, G., & Bentsen, P. (2021). A scoping review of peer-led physical activity interventions involving young people: Theoretical approaches, intervention rationales, and effects. *Youth & Society*, 53(5), 811–840. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X20901735>
- Christensen, J. H., Evans, A. B., Klinker, C. D., Staal, M. T., Bentsen, P., & Nielsen, G. (2022b). Activating the ‘peerness’ of youth leaders in a community sports programme through techne and phronesis. *Health Promotion International*, 37(6), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daac141>
- Christensen, J. H., Heinze, C., Kurtzhals, M. L., Elsborg, P., Bentsen, P., Nielsen, G., & Klinker, C. D. (2024). Youth-led community street sport in practice: Balancing programme intentions and peer leadership. *Sport, Education and Society*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2024.2396139>
- Christensen, J. H., Ljungmann, C. K., Pawlowski, C. S., Johnsen, H. R., Olsen, N., Hulgård, M., Bauman, A., & Klinker, C. D. (2022a). ASPHALT II: Study protocol for a multi-method evaluation of a comprehensive peer-led youth community sport programme implemented in low resource neighbourhoods. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(22), 15271. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192215271>
- Clark, M. I., Spence, J. C., & Holt, N. L. (2011). In the shoes of young adolescent girls: Understanding physical activity experiences through interpretive description. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 3(2), 193–210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2011.572180>
- Dauenhauer, B., Kulinna, P., Marttinen, R., & Stellino, M. B. (2022). Before-and after-school physical activity: Programs and best practices. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 93(5), 20–26. doi:[10.1080/07303084.2022.2053474](https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2022.2053474)
- Durlak, J. A., Mahoney, J. L., Bohnert, A. M., & Parente, M. E. (2010). Developing and improving after-school programs to enhance youth’s personal growth and adjustment: A special issue of AJCP. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45(3–4), 285–293. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9298-9>
- Elliott, S., Petersen, J., Drummond, M., Prichard, I., Drummond, C., Crossman, S., & Bramley, O. (2023). What are the perceived barriers for building and maintaining a culture of mental health support in Australian competitive youth sport? *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 36(3), 440–462. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2023.2274460>
- Forsyth, J., & Giles, A. (Eds) (2013). *Aboriginal peoples & sport in Canada: Historical foundations and contemporary issues*. UBC Press.
- Fortune, M., & Oncescu, J. (2024). Community sport and recreation organizations’ inclusion of low-income families in sport and recreation in New Brunswick. *Leisure/Loisir*, 48(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2022.2159862>
- Fredricks, J. A., Naftzger, N., Smith, C., & Riley, A. (2017). Measuring youth participation, program quality, and social and emotional skills in after-school programs. In N. L. Deutsch (Ed.), *After-school programs to promote positive youth development: Integrating research into practice and policy, Volume 1* (1st ed., pp. 23–43). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-59132-2>
- Furusa, M. G., Knight, C. J., & Hill, D. M. (2021). Parental involvement and children’s enjoyment in sport. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 13(6), 936–954. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2020.1803393>
- Gomez, R. K., & Ryan, T. N. (2016). Speaking out: Youth-led research as a methodology used with homeless youth. *Child Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 33(2), 185–193. doi:[10.1007/s10560-015-0414-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-015-0414-4)
- Growing Young Movers. (n.d.). *About us*. <https://www.growingyoungmovers.com/>
- Haudenhuyse, R. P., Theeboom, M., & Skille, E. A. (2014). Towards understanding the potential of sports-based practices for socially vulnerable youth. *Sport in Society*, 17(2), 139–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2013.790897>
- Hawke, L. D., Relihan, J., Miller, J., McCann, E., Rong, J., Darnay, K., Docherty, S., Chaim, G., & Henderson, J. L. (2018). Engaging youth in research planning, design and execution: Practical recommendations for researchers. *Health Expectations: An International Journal of Public Participation in Health Care and Health Policy*, 21(6), 944–949. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.12795>
- Hayhurst, L. M. C. (2019). Image-ing resistance: Using participatory action research and visual methods in sport for development and peace. In M. Chawansky, L. Hayhurst, M. G. McDonald, & C. van Ingen (Eds.), *Innovations in ‘Sport for Development and Peace’ Research* (1st ed., pp. 117–140). Routledge.
- Heffernan, O. S., Herzog, T. M., Schiralli, J. E., Hawke, L. D., Chaim, G., & Henderson, J. L. (2017). Implementation of a youth-adult partnership model in youth mental health systems research: Challenges and successes. *Health Expectations: An International Journal of Public Participation in Health Care and Health Policy*, 20(6), 1183–1188. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.12554>
- Holt, N. L., McHugh, T.-L. F., Tink, L. N., Kingsley, B. C., Coppola, A. M., Neely, K. C., & McDonald, R. (2013). Developing sports-based after-school programmes using a participatory action research approach. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 5(3), 332–355. doi:[10.1080/2159676X.2013.809377](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2013.809377)
- Holt, N. L., Sehn, Z. L., Spence, J. C., Newton, A. S., & Ball, G. D. C. (2012). Physical education and sport programs at an inner city school: Exploring possibilities for positive youth development. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 17(1), 97–113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2010.548062>

- Jenkinson, K. A., Naughton, G., & Benson, A. C. (2014). Peer-assisted learning in school physical education, sport and physical activity programmes: A systematic review. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 19(3), 253–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2012.754004>
- Kingsley, B., & Spencer-Cavaliere, N. (2015). The exclusionary practices of youth sport. *Social Inclusion*, 3(3), 24–38. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v3i3.136>
- Kremer, K. P., Maynard, B. R., Polanin, J. R., Vaughn, M. G., & Sarteschi, C. M. (2015). Effects of after-school programs with at-risk youth on attendance and externalizing behaviors: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 44(3), 616–636. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-014-0226-4>
- Larose, S., Savoie, J., DeWit, D. J., Lipman, E. L., & DuBois, D. L. (2015). The role of relational, recreational, and tutoring activities in the perceptions of received support and quality of mentoring relationship during a community-based mentoring relationship. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 43(5), 527–544. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21700>
- Larson, R., Walker, K., & Pearce, N. (2005). A comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven youth programs: Balancing inputs from youth and adults. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 57–74. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20035>
- Leman, A. M., Dariotis, J. K., Markazi, D. M., Kennedy, Z., Tracy, M., Park, Y. R., & Griffith, A. N. (2025). An interdisciplinary framework of youth participatory action research informed by curricula, youth, adults, and researchers. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 35(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.13007>
- Leos-Urbel, J. (2015). What works after school? The relationship between after-school program quality, program attendance, and academic outcomes. *Youth & Society*, 47(5), 684–706. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X13513478>
- Lewis, B., Schaefer, L., Lessard, S., & Koch, J. (2022). 'Nothing is gonna change if we don't care for everyone': A narrative inquiry alongside urban Indigenous youth in an after-school physical activity wellness program. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 4, 822547–822547. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2022.822547>
- Lopresti, S., Willows, N. D., Storey, K. E., & McHugh, T.-L. F. (2021). Indigenous youth mentorship program: Key implementation characteristics of a school peer mentorship program in Canada. *Health Promotion International*, 36(4), 913–923. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daaa090>
- Marttinen, R., Johnston, K., Phillips, S., Fredrick, R. N., & Meza, B. (2019). REACH Harlem: Young urban boys' experiences in an after-school PA positive youth development program. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 24(4), 373–389. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2019.1592147>
- Massey, W. V., Stellino, M. B., Holliday, M., Godbersen, T., Rodia, R., Kucher, G., & Wilkison, M. (2017). The impact of a multi-component physical activity programme in low-income elementary schools. *Health Education Journal*, 76(5), 517–530. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0017896917700681>
- Massey, W. V., Stellino, M. B., Wilkison, M., & Whitley, M. (2018). The impact of a recess-based leadership program on urban elementary school students. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 30(1), 45–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2017.1318417>
- McDonough, M. H., Ullrich-French, S., & McDavid, M. L. (2018). Helping kids connect: Participant and staff perspectives on facilitating social relationships in a physical activity-based positive youth development program for youth from low-income families. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 7(1), 13–29. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spy0000109>
- McHale, F., Ng, K., Taylor, S., Bengoechea, E., Norton, C., O'Shea, D., & Woods, C. (2022). A systematic literature review of peer-led strategies for promoting physical activity levels of adolescents. *Health Education & Behavior*, 49(1), 41–53. doi:10.1177/10901981211044988
- McHugh, T.-L., Deal, C., Blye, C.-J., Dimler, A., Halpenny, E., Sivak, A., & Holt, N. (2019). A meta-study of qualitative research examining the sport and recreation experiences of Indigenous youth. *Qualitative Health Research*, 29(1), 42–54. doi:10.1177/1049732318759668
- McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Cook, J. M. (2001). Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27(1), 415–444. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.415>
- Middleton, T. R. F., Schinke, R. J., Habra, B., Coholic, D., Lefebvre, D., McGannon, K. R., & Giffin, C. E. (2022). Centralizing forced immigrant male youths' stories in the development of socially just and inclusive community sport programs. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 11(2), 156–173. doi:10.1037/spy0000289
- Miller, S. R., & LeDrew, J. (2010). Increasing healthy active living through near-peer role modeling and mentoring: The play pals case study. *The International Journal of Learning: Annual Review*, 17(7), 467–478. <https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9494/CGP/v17i07/47158>
- Morgan, H., & Parker, A. (2023). Sport-for-development, critical pedagogy and marginalised youth: Engagement, co-creation and community consciousness. *Sport, Education and Society*, 28(7), 741–754. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2022.2075336>
- Ozer, E. J. (2016). Youth-led participatory action research: Overview and potential for enhancing adolescent development. *Child Development Perspectives*, 11(3), 173–177. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12228>
- Parker, A., Morgan, H., Farooq, S., Moreland, B., & Pitchford, A. (2019). Sporting intervention and social change: Football, marginalised youth and citizenship development. *Sport, Education and Society*, 24(3), 298–310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2017.1353493>
- Pynn, S. R., Dunn, J. G. H., & Holt, N. L. (2019). A qualitative study of exemplary parenting in competitive female youth team sport. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 8(2), 163–178. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spy0000141>

- Quarmby, T., Sandford, R., Gray, S., & Hooper, O. (2024). Working with trauma-affected young people in secondary schools: Exploring 'self-care' with pre-service physical education teachers. *European Physical Education Review*, 30(1), 511–526. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X231221665>
- Roth, J. L., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2003). Youth development programs: Risk, prevention and policy. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 32(3), 170–182. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X\(02\)00421-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X(02)00421-4)
- Sharpe, E. K., Lashua, B., & van Ingen, C. (2022). A good place for what? Placing 'value' in youth centers. *Leisure Sciences*, 44(4), 497–513. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2019.1604277>
- Sjogren, A. L., & Melton, T. N. (2021). The complexities of student engagement for historically marginalized youth in an after-school program. *Journal of Youth Development (Online)*, 16(5), 105–121. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2021.1068>
- Smith, L. H. (2011). Cross-age peer mentoring approach to impact the health outcomes of children and families. *Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing*, 16(3), 220–225. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6155.2011.00286.x>
- Smith, B., Williams, O., Bone, L. & the Moving Social Work Co-Production Collective. (2023). Co-production: A resource to guide co-producing research in the sport, exercise, and health sciences. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 15(2), 169–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2022.2052946>
- Spaaij, R., Schulenkorf, N., Jeanes, R., & Oxford, S. (2018). Participatory action research in sport-for-development: Complex experiences and missed opportunities. *Sport Management Review*, 21(1), 25–37. doi:10.1016/j.smr.2017.05.003
- Swain, J., & King, B. (2022). Using informal conversations in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 16094069221085056. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221085056>
- Thorne, S. (2016). *Interpretive description: Qualitative research for applied practice* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315545196>
- Thorne, S., Kirkham, S. R., & MacDonald-Emes, J. (1997). Interpretive description: A noncategorical qualitative alternative for developing nursing knowledge. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 20(2), 169–177. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1098-240X\(199704\)20:2<169::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-I](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1098-240X(199704)20:2<169::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-I)
- Thorne, S., Kirkham, S. R., & O'Flynn-Magee, K. (2004). The analytic challenge in interpretive description. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300101>
- Tink, L. N., Peers, D., Nykiforuk, C. I. J., & Kingsley, B. C. (2020). 'Vulnerable,' 'at-risk,' 'disadvantaged': How a framework for recreation in Canada 2015: Pathways to Wellbeing reinscribes exclusion. *Leisure/Loisir*, 44(2), 151–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2020.1760122>
- Trude, A. C. B., Steeves, E. A., Shipley, C., Surkan, P. J., de Morais Sato, P., Estep, T., Clanton, S., Lachenmayr, L., & Gittelsohn, J. (2018). A youth-leader program in Baltimore city recreation centers: Lessons learned and applications. *Health Promotion Practice*, 19(1), 75–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839917728048>
- Turner, G., & Shepherd, J. (1999). A method in search of a theory: Peer education and health promotion. *Health Education Research*, 14(2), 235–247. <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/14.2.235>
- Watchman, T., & Spencer-Cavaliere, N. (2017). Times have changed: Parent perspectives on children's free play and sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 32, 102–112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2017.06.008>
- Witt, P. A. (2004). Programs that work: Developing quality after-school programs. *Journal of Park & Recreation Administration*, 22(4), 103–126.