Risk, Resiliency, and Outcomes among LiFE Sports Youth Leadership Academy Participants

Thesis

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Abstract

There are many challenges faced by youth today. Participation in positive youth development programs has been proven an effective deterrent of these behaviors. Of particular importance for adolescents are programs that support college and career readiness, ones that promote leadership skills, and those that teach important skills important for withstanding risks. This study examines the experiences in relation to supports, motivators, struggles, pressures, and experiences of youth involved in the Ohio State University's Learning in Fitness and Education through (LiFE) Sports Youth Leadership Academy (YLA). Interviews were conducted with 10 participants, and program data were explored assessing outcomes from pre-to-post participation among 37 youth. These youth reported multiple supports and motivators in the peer, home, school, and community systems, such as positive influences from parents and teachers. Youth reported outcomes from their participation such as improved leadership qualities, interpersonal skills, and positive peer relationships. Quantitative results documented increased perceptions among youth participants in areas of leadership, problem solving, self-efficacy in regards to learning, & future self-efficacy in relation to their school performance Additionally insights from the interviews showcased ways in which the youths' lives were positively impacted by the YLA programming. Findings can inform future YLA programming, and the design of other college and career programs aimed to meet the needs of today's youth.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Youth are experiencing multiple problems and needs that can hinder their positive development. Negative behavioral outcomes include bullying, drug/alcohol use, peer pressure, unprotected sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, poor school performance, and criminal delinquent behavior. According to the Center for Disease Control's (CDC, 2014) Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, 34.9% of youth had consumed alcohol, and 23.4% have smoked marijuana in 2011. 46.8% of students had engaged in sexual intercourse while only 59.1% reported using a condom. In 2011, 1,470,000 juveniles were arrested by law enforcement (Puzzanchera, 2013). Other indicators of need exist. Sedentary behaviors among children and youth today are increasing, as documented through increased screen time and decreased physical activity and sport involvement (CDC, 2012; 2014). Childhood obesity and overweight rates are growing (CDC, 2012; 2014). Nutritional habits among children and youth, such as intake of fruits and vegetables and consumption of sweetened beverages, are limited (CDC, 2012; 2014). Youth also may be struggling with unmet mental health needs. For instance, estimates suggest that 1 in 5 youth are lacking in age-appropriate life/social skills (Blumberg, Carle, O'Connor, Moore, & Lippman, 2008).

Broader youth development indicators showcase the implications of engagement in these problem behaviors. Every day almost 7,000 students become dropouts (Boling &

Evans, 2008) and only 1/7 students successfully complete high schools (Fields, 2008). High school dropouts influence a community's economic, social, and civic health, as well. For example, "Having a large number of high school dropouts makes it more difficult for cities and states to attract new business. At the same time, additional spending on social programs and the criminal justice system drains state and federal resources. Increasing numbers of dropouts translate not only into lost human potential and lower tax revenues, but also a vitiated democracy and a weakened ability to compete in the global economy" (Amos, 2008 p.13).

Great needs exist among youth from diverse backgrounds. Specifically, youth living in poverty and/or youth of color are at higher risk for poor outcomes, as greater levels of need exist among youth of color and from disadvantaged circumstances (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2014). Likewise, young people coming from vulnerable circumstances are at increasing levels of risk for poor health and well-being outcomes (Klebanoff & Muramatsu, 2002; Nowicki, 2003; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012). Negative outcomes can be exacerbated by the communities and environments in which youth are raised.

Urban adolescents living in communities with high crime rates and chronic neighborhood problems, especially, are exposed to extraordinary stressors, and these stressors are generally linked with negative outcomes (McMahon, Coker, & Parnes, 2013). Negative outcomes can include drug and alcohol use, delinquency, criminal activities, and early sexual activity. Understanding the factors that contribute to negative outcomes for youth, especially youth from diverse backgrounds, is critically important.

Risk and Resilience.

Many factors exist that influence whether youth will engage in problem behaviors. Negative influences are called risk factors, and exist in individual, peer, family, school, and community systems.

Individual risk factors are often qualities of the individual, and include characteristics such as rebelliousness and impulsivity (Fraser, 2004). Peer system risk factors include youth engagement in problem behaviors, involvement in unsafe activities, and peer pressure. For instance, Choi, He, Herrenkohl, Catalano, & Toumbourou (2012) discussed how youth are increasingly more likely to commit negative behaviors in a group than when alone. Risk factors are present in homes, such as living in a single parent home, being a young parent, and experiencing family conflicts (Rath et al., 2004). Risk factors in the school include grade retention, high rates of absenteeism, low levels of engagement in school, and a perceived lack of academic and social support from teachers (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Furthermore, youth experience risk factors in their community systems, ones such as poverty, unsafe neighborhoods, and community violence. Contextual issues influence access and opportunities, as well as present varying levels of risk exposure to youth depending on community norms, values, and broader racial-discriminatory issues (Hardaway, Mcloyd, & Wood, 2012).

However, not all youth exposed to risk factors have poor outcomes. Protective factors often nullify exposure to risk factors and/or predict positive outcomes (Fraser, 2004). Like risk factors, protective factors exist in individual, peer, family, school, and community systems.

Individual protective factors include qualities such as hopefulness, optimism, and coping skills. Protective factors in the peer systems include positive social interactions, relationships with friends, and involvement with pro-social peers. Protective factors in the family system include qualities within families such as adequate supervision, family attachment, and parent support of learning. For instance, as reported by Rath et al. (2008), family protector factors might include school-related reinforcements such as when parents provide academic monitoring and support adolescent academic achievement. Similarly, there are protective factors in the school system. Factors include being exposed to a positive school climate, which is known to reduce adjustment problems by providing a safe haven and serve as an outlet that promotes communication and help-seeking (Hardaway, Mcloyd & Wood, 2012). Other protective factors in the school include having positive relationships with teachers and engaging in school extra-curricular activities. Last, protective factors also are present in communities. For instance, the availability of activities such as sport, band, drama, and the arts has been linked to positive educational, psychological, and behavioral outcomes (Hardaway et al., 2012).

The risk and resilience framework for ameliorating youth problems, at its core, considers the presence or absence of risk factors and then identifies protective and resilient traits that help youth overcome adverse conditions and function normatively in the face of risk. Resilience is the process of building a "buffer" to potential threats throughout a lifetime (Khanlou & Wray, 2014), and thus can be triggered by risk and protective factors. Essentially, resilience fostered through protective factors can be

developed through positive relationships and interactions in the peer, home, school, & community systems. Resilience brought on through risk factors could include a young adult encountering adversity and deciding that this is the catalyst for positive change in their lives. Risk and protective factors together, and their interactive processes, relate to a youth's resiliency. In turn, resilience can lead to positive personal and social outcomes (Khanlou & Wray, 2014).

The field of positive youth development (PYD) has emerged as a result of the research in this area, and explores the interface of risk and protective factors across all systems relating to healthy youth development. Essentially, there are two strategies to quality PYD programs: Reduce risk factors and increase protective factors. More specifically, PYD has been described by Hamilton, Hamilton, and Pittman (2004) as enabling individuals to positive development as a youth which translates into positive societal engagement as an adult. Example positive engagement experiences includes civic activities, nurturing others, increased social responsibility, and participation in social and cultural activities. PYD also has been shown to increase life satisfaction, which may in turn result in positive outcomes in other areas of ones lives) such as intrapersonal, interpersonal, vocational, health, and educational fields). In the end, involvement in these pro-social experiences also is related to a decrease in the participation in problem behaviors (Zullig *et al*, 2001).

Examples of PYD programs across the country include the Girl Scouts, which serves over 200,000 girls annually. The 4-H club is another example, serving approximately seven million youth. There are other examples. For instance, an example

which empowers youth to rehabilitate their neighborhoods is YouthBuild, which serves over 16,000 youth annually around the globe. Together, all of these programs have different objectives and missions, however, they all have one goal: to provide support to youth and assist in their positive development. The aforementioned programs are just a few examples of PYD programs which affect youth and are designed to reduce risk and improve protection. Others are examined as follows.

PYD Programs.

There are various types of PYD programs. Afterschool programs, faith-based programs, sports-based programs, extracurricular, and career/college readiness are among these types. Some programs combine different perspectives, such as afterschool and career/college readiness.

One example of a college and career readiness program would be the U.S. Department of Education's 'Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). The Department of Education's comprehensive intervention program (CIP) outreach program is intended to enable nearly 1 million low income, middle school students and their families to learn about, plan for, and prepare for college (Cabrera et al., 2006). The GEAR UP program provides access to various programs and interventions which open doors for low income youth to various schools, businesses and organizations. Program goals include a hope to bridge the gap from low income neighborhoods to universities or job training programs.

Faith-based programs are especially relevant. An example of faith-based programs would be youth volunteering through their church congregations. Programs include volunteering in the community with programs such as helping the homeless, responding to environmental problems, tutoring, and caring for persons in nursing home and hospitals (Sherr, Garland, & Wolfer, 2007).

In addition, many programs include some type of sport activity. For instance, an example of a sport based PYD program would be Sport Hartford Boys Program in Hartford, CT (Fuller, Percy, Bruening, & Cotrufo, 2013). Programming utilizes mentors who visit youth twice a week for two hours. During these visits they combine sport, life, and nutritional lessons. Existing curriculum is coupled with 45 minutes of homework assistance to support learning in the classroom.

Another type of PYD program focuses on college and career readiness. College and career readiness programs are relatively recent developments in social policy, and often are fueled by a desire to see every student advance towards their goals despite race, disability, or socioeconomic status (Castro, 2013). College and career readiness programs were brought about by the realization that an educational inequality exists among high school students of color, low SES students, undocumented, and/or underserved students. Negative societal constructs needed to be overcame, and in doing this, youth in turn can continue to develop their PYD skills. College and career readiness programs might include strategies such as assistance with college applications, the provision of information related to financial assistance, and tracking and support designed to help youth overcome obstacles.

With few resources being offered in lower income areas, there also is a need for youth to develop into leaders and in turn be able to foster the same development in their younger peers. Youth leadership programs offer these types of services by developing collaboration, problem solving, conflict resolution, public speaking, and responsible decision skills among youth (Rehm, 2014). When youth are able to develop these skills, they are not only learning, but also are empowered to be able to give back to their peers, families, schools, and communities.

In general, research demonstrates the importance of PYD settings. Specifically, youth participation in high quality PYD programs results in positive academic, physical, mental health, and social/emotional outcomes (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2014; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). More specifically, PYD programs increase resiliency and social, emotional, and cognitive competence, as well as seek to foster self-determination, spirituality, future self-efficacy, bonding, and positive identity (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). In essence, PYD programs are designed to increase protective factors and reduce risk factors. Risk factors are predictive of problem behaviors. PYD programs such as afterschool programs, faith-based programs, sports-based programs, extracurricular, and career/college readiness are essential to promoting better outcomes. The true value of these settings, however, is not fully understood.

More research is needed to better understand the specific mechanisms within a program that underlie the relationship among participation and healthy outcomes is needed (Anthony, Alter, & Jenson, 2009). Sometimes youth participate in programs and experience well-intended outcomes; whereas in other PYD programs outcomes are not as

evident (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2012). More specifically, there is a lack of research on lower income youth and children of color (Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012). There is a need to explore the benefits of PYD programs for older youth of color and/or from poverty, so to ensure programs are aligned and effective. Additionally, these programs may be especially important for adolescents, as older youth also are more likely to not engage in PYD programs, and therefore may not benefit as much as they could from these experiences (Anderson-Butcher & Fink, 2008). There is a lack of research on the benefits of PYD for older youth, especially ones who are transitioning from high school to college (Anderson-Butcher & Fink, 2008; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012).

There also is a need for research to examine specific types of PYD programs, especially older youth of color and/or of poverty. For instance, college and career preparation programs are necessary PYD programs especially for older at risk youth who may not have the supports or knowledge necessary to progress to the next stage of their development. Increased support from peers, family, schools, and community, particularly for this group, might increase the likelihood that older youth have the tools necessary for successful transitions to adulthood.

In fact, college and career preparation PYD programs and other youth leadership programs for adolescents can reinforce current support systems in assisting youth reach their goals. However, there are some factors impeding the understanding the effectiveness of these programs. First, there are a limited number of college and career preparation programs which can meet the needs of at risk youth (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013). Secondly, there is a gap in research measuring the effectiveness of these PYD programs

(Radcliffe & Bos, 2013). As such, the present study seeks to remedy this by providing greater insight into the effectiveness of these types of PYD programs.

Present Study

Given these needs, this study examines current issues of youth today, especially ones that participate in a sports-based PYD program for older youth. Unmet needs in the literature are addressed here, especially as the various characteristics of programming that are effective and/or ineffective are examined (Chalip, 2006). Given the gaps in the research, there are three research questions that guide the study. There are three research questions. More specifically, the study aims to:

1.) To understand the experiences in relation to supports, motivators, struggles, poor choices, exposure to risk factors faced by themselves and their peers, and coping mechanisms of youth from diverse settings who participated in the YLA;

2.) To examine outcomes associated with participation in the YLA; and how these outcomes contribute to the development of resilience in youth of different ages, genders, and races; and

3) To explore ways the YLA could be improved to better support PYD among youth participants.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Youth today are engaging in problem behaviors. Many risk factors exist in their individual, peer, home, school, and community systems. While there are also protective factors that nullify risk exposure, PYD programs seek to address multiple influences on youth development by reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors (Fraser, 2004). PYD programs exist across a wide array of models. PYD programs may be especially important for youth from diverse backgrounds, especially youth living in poverty of who may be exposed to more risks (McDonough, Ullrich-French, Anderson-Butcher, Amorose, & Riley, 2013).

One area where programs can have a big difference is in supporting older youth, who are also working towards transitions to college and careers. Older youth struggle with the transition from adolescence to adulthood. More support is needed to provide guidance and resources to be able to successfully transition youth to the next stage of their lives, whatever their goals may be.

One type of PYD program which shows promise for older youth involves college and career readiness. Programs exist to bridge the gap of youth's aspirations and how to bring those aspirations to fruition. Overall, youth achievement scores according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that only around one-third of 8th graders are "at or above proficient" in areas such as reading, writing, math and

science. Hispanic and African American youth are shown to underachieve compared to white students, resulting in a gap of achievement between white and minority students (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013).

College and career readiness programs are aware of this gap and attempt to empower youth to be able to achieve their educational or career goals. An example of this type of programming would be Naviance (2014) which is a program implemented in 5,500 schools, reaching 4.5 million students. An on-line resource assesses students, create plans for their future, and provides them with the guidance and resources to reach their post-secondary goals. Naviance allows students to assess their own personal qualities and skills, their network of support, their college and career plan, and finally their finances to ensure awareness of resources which they may qualify for. The program's online resource model is an easy and efficient way for schools, even underserved schools, to implement college and career readiness programming. The program's success was seen in the implementation in their programming in the Yonkers Public School District (YPS) in New York. In 2008, 67% of seniors in the YPS districts expressed interest in attending college. In 2012, 91% of youth applied to college with scholarship awards improving from $23 million in 2010 to $ 49 million in 2012 (Naviance, 2014).

Another example would be the Career Institute (CI), a career development intervention program implemented in early college schools (Rivera & Schaefer, 2009). CI addresses different areas of student development using school counselors, academic, career, and personal/social. Interventions begin in the 6th grade and continue through

graduation. The CI's curriculum begins with self-awareness training in 6th and 7th grade and then develops into information on careers and making decisions about college majors and careers. CI's programming takes into account gender, culture, and socioeconomic status by presenting youth with resources in developing a framework for success. CI also identifies culturally diverse speakers to engage students in discussions about belief systems, barriers, and opportunities. CI's programming allows students, teachers, and counselors to work together to identify the most appropriate way to support students in their college and career development. CI's programming allowed for positive development in student performance, engagement, self-awareness, and access to college and career resources which could positively impact participant's futures (Rivera & Schaefer, 2009).

Another type of PYD program which positive impacts youth is youth leadership programs. In the past several years, it has been noticed by researchers that youth are less respectful of authority and are less engaged in the learning process (Anderson & Kim, 2009). To counteract this, there is been an increase interest in fostering youth leadership. Aspects of fostering youth leadership allow for youth to feel more a part of their education and development and are able to make the connections between academics and real world application (Anderson & Kim, 2009). In 2000, Marais Yang & Farzanhehkia four elements which were necessary for developing positive youth leadership skills. Elements included facilitating youth/adult partnerships, granting young people decision making power and responsibility for consequences, providing a broad context for learning and service; recognizing young people's experience, knowledge, and skills.

An example of leadership programming would be the 4-H program. The Head, Heart, Hands, & Health (4-H) program focuses on developing life skills, as well as establishing leadership traits in their participants (Carter & Kotrlik, 2008). Youth begin in the program as campers and then development into youth leaders. In this role, they act as role models and mentors to the newer members of the organization. Camp counselors are viewed as adult staff which means increased responsibility in youth who participate. Youth who participate in the 4-H program as counselors are shown to positively develop their leadership and life skills (Carter & Kotrlik, 2008).

In the end, there are many examples of types of PYD programs which include different components meant to reach youth. College and career readiness and youth leadership models have special promise, especially for older youth as they transition to adulthood. There are still needs in the literature, however, to measure the outcomes of PYD programs in relation to older youth and youth of color.

More specifically, further research is needed to better understand the specific mechanisms within a PYD program that underlie the relationship among participation and healthy outcomes is needed (Anthony, Alter, & Jenson, 2009; Durlak et al., 2012; Eccles & Barber, 1999). Youth participate in programs and experience well-intended outcomes; whereas in other PYD programs, outcomes are not as evident (Anthony et al., 2009; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2012); Eccles & Barber, 1999). Further, there is limited understanding of the value of these programs for youth from diverse backgrounds who may be exposed to greater risks in various social settings (Riley & Anderson-Butcher 2012). Additionally, a lack of research also exists on older youth as they transition from

high school to college (Anderson-Butcher & Fink, 2008; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012). A need to understand the experience of youth exists to better examine if programs are aligned and effective.

Research also is needed to examine specific types of PYD programs for youth, especially older youth of color and/or of poverty (Forneris, Whitley, & Barker, 2013). For instance, college and career preparation programs are necessary, especially for older at risk youth who may not have the supports or knowledge necessary to progress to the next stage of their development (Hooker & Brand, 2010).

As such, this study strives to measure the effectiveness of the one sports based program that emphasizes college and career readiness. The study explores the ability of the YLA to improve college and career outcomes, while also providing avenues for growth amongst participants. The study also will foster understanding of the experiences in relation to supports, motivators, struggles, poor choices, exposure to risk factors faced by themselves and their peers, and coping mechanisms of youth from diverse settings who participated in the YLA. The findings of this study will allow for better understanding of the development of resilience factors in youth.

Lastly, the study explores ways in which the YLA, and other similar programs, could be improved to better support PYD among youth participants. Findings will allow for continuous development and evolution of programming and interventions. Results might empower program participants, especially as they showcase their leadership skills by advising staff on how to impact the positive development of youth in the program.

Chapter 3: Methods

There were two parts to the study. The first was qualitative in nature, and included in-depth interviews with YLA participants. Youth were asked questions to explore specific risk and protective factors they face, as well as the various factors and influences youth report experiencing in their daily lives. Youth perceptions of outcomes also were examined to explore resilience in youth of different ages, genders, and races. Last, youth were asked about their experiences within the YLA, specifically exploring how the YLA has affected them in their everyday life and what improvements they believe should be made to the program.

The second methodology used quantitative analyses. Secondary data collected within the YLA were examined to determine if the YLA participants' perceptions of their skills and competencies changed over the course of their YLA participation. Pre- and post-test scores among youth who completed the YLA in 2013-2014 were analyzed to explore whether perceptions changed across participation. In this chapter, the context for the study is first overviewed, and then each methodology is presented in detail.

Context

The study context involved one PYD program that is part of the Learning in Fitness and Education Through (LiFE) Sports, an Initiative started at The Ohio State University in 2008 to foster positive development through sport among youth. LiFE

Sports specifically targets youth from diverse backgrounds aged 9-15 years of age in the Columbus, Ohio metro area. One key component of LiFE Sports is its 4 week summer camp which utilizes sports (i.e., social dance, basketball, football, health and fitness, lacrosse, baseball/softball, swimming, soccer, and volleyball) to increase social and athletic competence (Anderson-Butcher, Riley, Amorose, Iachini & Wade-Mdivanian 2014). LiFE Sports also holds various sports-based clinics throughout the year to create a year-long outreach program to area youth.

The LiFE Sports YLA, the program of interest in this study, evolved from the LiFE Sports camp and clinics. The YLA began in 2013 and is currently in its 3rd year of operation and targets past LiFE Sports camp and clinic participants. In 2014, 37 youth were members of the YLA (YLA 2013-14 Annual Report, 2015). The LiFE Sports YLA is a leadership development program dedicated to preparing LiFE Sports Youth, ages 15-18, for college and future careers. The YLA seeks to expand on the important skills taught at LiFE Sports (i.e., S.E.T.S – self-control, teamwork, effort, and social responsibility) by providing older youth with additional education and work experiences that will help them gain the necessary skills to succeed at work and in life.

The YLA is split into three phases, including the skills phase, success phase, and culmination phase. The skills phase consists of a curriculum which emphasizes teamwork, integrity, self-discipline, and self-identity. The success phase focuses on career and college readiness. This curriculum includes instruction on the job application process, college admittance process, financial aid, military enlistment process and life skills which include cooking, budgeting, and self-reliance. The success phase also

includes the youth leader role. YLA members are given the opportunity to return to camp and fulfill the role of youth leaders. YLA youth leaders are assigned to a group of youth and act as positive role models, peer mediators, and motivators. Youth leaders are able to foster positive relationships with camp participants in ways that adult counselors may not. In this capacity, youth are able to act as positive role models through demonstrating positive behaviors, peer mediation, and by providing insight to camp staff. The YLA meets monthly for leadership instruction and to participate in activities which foster a sense of teamwork while improving leadership and positive life skills (Youth Leadership Academy Program Curriculum, 2014). The last phase, the culmination phase, allows youth leaders to apply their knowledge through positive interactions with younger members and campers. The present study examines YLA context during the 2013-2014 year of programming. Please also note that study procedures were approved by The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board.

Qualitative Methods

Participants

Ten youth were interviewed. Six females and four males were included. Family income levels were reported by the youth in 2013-2014 demographic surveys conducted by the YLA, and included from $20-39,999 (six youth), $40-59,999 (one youth), to $60-79,999 (2 youth), with one youth not reporting. Nine youth were African American, and one youth was mixed race. The average number of years participating in the LiFE Sports and YLA program was 4 years (with a range of 2-6 years participating). The average age of participants was 15.9 years (with an age range of 15-17 years old).

Procedures

Thirty seven youth participated in the YLA program in the 2013-2014 year. Seventeen of these youth had been previous LiFE Sports camp participants and had participated in the YLA at least one year. These criteria were established to ensure the youth involved in the study had been involved in the sports-based, college and career readiness, and youth leadership components of LiFE Sports. The seventeen youth meeting the criteria were contacted by phone and email to initially ask them to participate in the study. Of these 17, 10 replied to recruitment efforts. Four youth replied to the initial round of phone calls to youth and parents/guardian, with six responding after emails were sent to parents/guardian.

Interviews were set up with each youth in a community meeting place which was both convenient for the youth and private enough to ensure confidentiality. Parent/guardian consent and youth assent forms were brought to the interview and filled out by youth and parents after any questions they had were answered. Parents/guardians left the room to allow for the interview to be done in privacy, and/or left the meeting space and later returned picking the child up. Interviews were completed until data saturation was reached. After eight interviews, no new or relevant information emerged from youth. Two more interviews were completed to ensure that this was correct. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Recordings were erased once transcribed. Upon completion of the interview, participating youth were given the 20 dollar Visa gift card incentive.

Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was developed for the interviews. Protective and risk factors, as well as positive youth outcomes, were examined. Questions explored the environment in which the youth are living. In order to better understand this, questions were asked concerning goals, stressors, supports, as well as positive and negative behaviors. Questions measuring protective factors were separated into four different sections examining their peer, home, school, and community support systems. Questions included, "What is your biggest motivator;" "What is your biggest stressor;" and "Who is your biggest source of support?" Risk factors were measured in a different series of questions which included, "Currently, what are the biggest struggles you are facing;" "Are you faced with pressures to use substances and/or engage in behaviors such as violence, unprotected sexual activity, and/or crime;" and "Do your friends ever pressure you to participate in activities that you may not feel comfortable in doing?"

Additionally, several questions explored the participants' satisfaction with the YLA and LiFE Sports, in general. Example questions included, "What is your favorite part of the YLA? Life Sports?" and "In what way, if any, do you feel the YLA has had a positive impact on you. What about LiFE Sports?" In addition, youth perceptions about strengths and limitations of the program and its various were explored through questions such as, "What has been your favorite part of the YLA? What about LiFE Sports?" Areas of improvement also were probed through questions such as, "If you had complete control over the YLA, what lessons/activities would you implement' and "What about LiFE Sports?" Last, the interview questions explored the outcomes, if any, did youth

perceive they experienced as a result of their participation in the YLA. For instance, youth were asked general questions such as, "What life lessons have you learned from the YLA;" and "What about LiFE Sports?" Reported information was used to further the understanding of the impact in which the YLA had on its members. Elaboration probes were used throughout the interviews to allow for more in-depth information to be elicited.

Analytic Approach

To analyze the qualitative data collected from youth, interview transcriptions were initially reviewed for overall themes. Once familiar with the interview responses, I deciphered individual quotes from each interview that represent single items or themes. The ATLAS.ti program was used to analyze quotes and identify themes which arose. Themed quotes served as the raw data.

The raw data were then analyzed using inductive procedures, allowing for the themes and sub-themes to emerge within each area through data coding. Data were coded into mutually exclusive classification schemes using clustering techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Throughout the process, themes and categories were reshaped, modified, omitted, and added to other themes and categories until no further categories could be created.

To enhance credibility within the coding process, a peer reviewer was used to assist with coding and promote validity. More specifically, once analyses were complete, consensus validation was established with a peer reviewer familiar with the data, as recommended by Lincoln, Guba, and Bloom (1994). The peer reviewer was asked to

code raw data quotes into the theme areas created through the analysis. Codes were then compared to indicate overall high validity. When discrepancies were found, the researcher and the peer reviewer together re-clustered the themes, establishing consistency between thoughts. An example of this would be when the researcher could not directly identify a theme because the youths answer was vague. More specifically, in one case, the youth was asked how often he would face certain pressures to participate in problem behaviors. He replied, "sometimes weekly, sometimes, daily, some monthly." The peer reviewer and the researcher decided to modify one of the themes of "rarely" to "varied."

As recommended by Stern and Pyles (1985), resultant themes were shared with researcher with expertise in PYD; and (b) a representative from the YLA. These expert consultants were asked the degree to which the resultant themes seemed to reflect their YLA experience. An expert in the field (and the advisor for this research) provided assistance with these classifications. More specifically, she provided insight into broader themes, and assisted in connecting and confirming quotes as well as emergent ideas. This process added to the validity of the study findings by helping to confirm that findings represented the youth experiences.

Quantitative Methods

Procedures

Secondary data collected from the YLA program were examined. More specifically, as part of the regular YLA program, youth participants in 2013-14

participated in a pre-and post-survey. All YLA participants' data were examined. Analysis consisted of reviewing and comparing results from the pre- and post test results.

Participants

Thirty seven youth involved in the YLA completed pre and post surveys. Data were collected from the 2014 year. Of the 37 youth, 19 were male, and 18 were female. There was an average age of 15.5 years with an age range of 15-18 years. Twenty seven youth were African American, with 7 mixed race, and 3 Caucasian.

Measures

Several measures were completed by the youth at pre-and post- YLA participation time periods. The measures were organized in three sections, including Individual Traits, Sense of Self, and Community Belonging. One measure assessing overall YLA Experiences was only completed at post-test, as youth had to have completed the YLA to be able to answer. Measures are overviewed next.

Individual Traits

Three different measures examine individual traits among the youth, including ones examining leadership, communication, problem solving skills, accountability, working together, teamwork, and time management. Each is described here.

Leadership.

Leadership was assessed using the Leadership Self Perceptions Scale (Rutherford, Townsend, Briers, Cummins, & Conrad, 2002). This scale is comprised of 23 items

assessed on a five point Likert-type scale ranging from *(1) "Strongly Disagree" to (5) "Strongly Agree."* This section measures how effective the youth feel they are in leadership positions. Examples of questions asked were "I can cooperate and work in a group" and "I can lead a discussion."

Communication.

Communication was assessed using a scale created by Scheve, Perkins and Mincemoyer (2005). The tool assesses constructs related to positive communication techniques such as eye contact and organization of thoughts. Items on the scale are assessed on a five point Likert-type scale ranging from *(1) Never to (5) Always*. Two examples of questions asked were, "I try to keep eye contact" and "I recognize when two people are trying to say the same thing, but in different ways."

Problem Solving Skills.

Problem solving skills were assessed using the Problem Solving Inventory (Maydeu-Olivares & D'Zurilla, 1997). This tool is comprised of nine items assessing youth's ability to confront difficult situations and to utilize positive problem solving skills to overcome these. Items are assessed on a six point Likert-type scale ranging from *(1) Strongly Agree to (5) Strongly disagree.* Two examples of questions asked include, "When my first efforts to solve a problem fail, I become uneasy about my ability to handle the situation" and "I trust my ability to solve new and difficult problems."

Teamwork.

The Teamwork Scale (Community and Youth Collaborative Institute, 2014) was assessed using a four point Likert-type scale ranging from *(1) Yes, a lot! to (5) Not at all.* The teamwork section measured youth's ability to with others in a positive manner. Questions measured the effect of emotions on their actions in team situations. Examples of questions include "I work together with others," and "I compromise in order to get things done."

Citizenship.

The Citizenship Subscale of the 21st Century Skills Tool (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2009) was used to assess using a five point Likert scale ranging from *(1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly agree.* The citizenship section measures a youth's positive participation in their community, school, and issues in both. Examples of questions include, "I like trying new things that are challenging to me" and "It is important to me that I actively participate in local teen issues."

Sense of Self

Several different measures examine the youths' perceptions of Sense of Self, including perceived measures of learning ability, and self-efficacy.

Self-Efficacy

Three types of self-efficacy were measured, including self-efficacy related to school, jobs, and college. All items were assessed using a five point Likert scale ranging

from *(1) Not at all true to (5) Really true* (Anderson-Butcher, Lower, Paluta, Rochman, O'Quinn, 2013). **(**The Self-efficacy-School section measures a youth's perception of their ability to accomplish tasks in school and at a place of employment. Examples of questions include, "When I am in school, I am sure that I will meet my teachers' expectations of me" and "I know that I will graduate from high school."

The youths' perception of Self-Efficacy, another measure developed by the (Community and Youth Collaborative Institute, 2014) was used to measures the youths' ability to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. Items were assessed using a five point Likert scale ranging from *(1) Not at all true to (5) Really true.* Examples questions include, "I am confident in my ability to overcome obstacles" and "I am confident in my ability to push myself."

Data Analysis

To analyze outcomes associated with participation in the YLA, pre- and post-test data from youth participants were examined. A series of repeated measures t-tests were used to examine whether the youth scores at the different time periods improved over the course of their program participation. Given the small sample size and pilot nature of the study, statistical significance was determined at the .10 level. This decision was supported by Fisher (1956), when he recommended that significant levels can be set according to specific circumstances.

Chapter 4: Results

There were two parts to the study. The first study component explores the various factors and influences youth report experiencing in their daily lives, as well as the specific risk and protective factors youth face. The second part of the study then looks at the experiences and outcomes associated with involvement in the LiFE Sports YLA. Given these purposes, the results are organized in two sections. The first section examines the themes emerging related to general experiences and risk and resilience trends. The second section of the results examines experiences and outcomes youth reported in relation to the YLA.

Youth Experiences

Two major themes emerged from the data that describe the various factors these youth were exposed to in their daily lives, as well as the varying experiences they reported coping with every day. The first theme focused on Support from Others, and includes several subthemes describing the types of supports youth reported receiving from peers, individuals in the home, at school, and in the community. The second major theme, Motivation from Others, included subthemes such as their future, school, and competition between peers.

Support from Others

Support from others was an emergent theme that arose from the data. These youth reported feeling support from others in their peer group, home, school, and community support systems. Support was described by participants as "being there for youth", both through positive and negative experiences. Each specific subtheme is described in the following.

Support from Peers.

Sixty percent of the youth who participated in the study discussed specific friends as sources of support in their lives. Various reasons were given related to the value of support and the way in which the support was provided. Some of the themes related to general support. For instance, one youth said that her friend "supports me in everything I do, regardless of what it is." Another responded by stating, "She basically understands me, she doesn't judge me or nothing, we are super close." Still another mentioned, more specifically, that her peer was a role model. She stated that her friend "carries top grades, she carries herself in a respectful manner. She is very ladylike so by being friends with her, she allows, she basically is a role model for me. I want to be more like her because she keeps me on my toes."

Others talked about peers at school providing support. As an example, one girl stated that her friend was her motivation to stay on task. She stated, "She (my friend) is really smart, and we have been best friends for three or four years. She is one of those in the book type people where I am kind of drifting off; she will pull me back and keep me

together." A different youth described her strong peer group, as well as the importance of these friends. She continued, however, by indicating how she was her own biggest source of support. She stated, "I don't want to say I don't have friends. I have a lot of friends. But a lot of my friends I feel like come to me to support so I don't so I don't really have a person." She goes on to agree that she is the "rock that everyone leans on." This person found her own source of support within herself, but also had a large group of friends, too.

Other youth talked about their peers in relation to their social group. For instance, 30% of youth mentioned that their "group" of friends was their greatest peer support. When questioned further, one youth stated that their friends "all support me equally." One participant described a certain motivation that was provided by their peer group. She reported, "All of my friends push me to do everything that I need to do." Another youth described how having friends, especially positive ones, was critical. She stated, "I pick a good choice of friends, so I don't really have bad friends, they all support me." This suggests that for these youth, having a positive group of friends in their lives was supportive and motivating. This results in them feeling confident in their choice of a peer system. For these youth, being able to surround themselves with a positive group of peers provided more support, as opposed to having one close friend, in particular.

Youth also were asked specific questions related to the status of their relationships in their peer systems. Their responses were overwhelming positive, as 70% of youth reported on good qualities and relationships. One girl reported, "I have good relationships." Another girl stated, "They are good. I don't get into no drama. It's

pointless." Another girl spoke about how her family has to approve of her friends, suggesting that this created a better relationship. When asked out the status of her peer relationships, she stated, "Good, very tight. They beat the family and all. If my family likes them, then they stay."

Thirty percent of youth reported that their relationships were "mixed." Mixed relationships were characterized as not entirely positive or negative. Examples included one young man reporting the difficulties he faced with in his peer relationships. He stated, "Most of my relationships with my peers are pretty cool, people mostly know me as the funny, laid back, chill guy that can be goofy and loud when it's needed. But then again there is the other half that I really don't associate with because of some of the choices they make and I don't want to go down their bad path because I am on my good track right now." Another young man discussed how his relationships were unstable in their longevity. He reported, "You know they say that time changes people. I have lost a lot of friends, but at the same time, I have gained a lot of friends too. I think that I've gained a lot more than I've lost." This shows that peer support, whether it be specific individuals or groups of friends, are important to these youth. Having friends who understood their experiences, cared about them unconditionally, and were good role models, together emerged as an important theme related to support among these youth.

Support in the Home.

Several themes emerged in relation to supports received in the home environment. More specifically, one theme emerged in relation to the importance of parents in providing support. 80% of youth cited a parent or parents as their biggest sources of

support. These youth provided several reasons related to the value of parents. They reported that parents often supported them throughout difficult struggles and assisted them when they experienced challenges. For example, one girl stated how she could look up to her mother because "She just always seems to do the right thing. She is not afraid to stand out and be her own person." Another youth reported how her mother motivated her. She stated, "She wants me to experience as much as I can at my age so she pushes me to do stuff. Allows me to do different things and allows me to go into different fields such as education and stuff like that." One youth discussed how his mother and father were his biggest sources of support, but offered different reasons for each. He stated, "When it comes to college, helping me with scholarships, who got me, accepted into Ohio Wesleyan, it would have to be my mom. Because if it had not been for her, I would've probably been a sitting duck." His father supported him in a different way. He continued, "When it comes to sports, football, wrestling, tennis, well my dad was the football player." Another youth shared the sentiment of both of his parents providing support. He reported, "My mom, most definitely. And my dad too, but I live with my mom more like during the school and staff so that is really my support."

When asked about the status of the relationships in their home, 90% of youth reported their relationships were mostly positive. As one stated, "Our relationships are fine, everyone in the house is goofy, knows how to have fun. Even though sometimes everyone does have their differences and bickers with each other, we are a pretty happy family" reported one male. Another girl spoke about the closeness she feels with her

family. She stated, “It’s very close, I tell my family everything. If they don’t know it, they will usually find out. Or they can tell when I am sad or mad or something.”

A different youth reported that his relationships in the home were “mixed.” He said, “We will have our good and bad days. Most of the days, we don’t see eye to eye, yea.” When asked to elaborate further, he reported that there were verbal arguments in the home. He reported that arguments occur “bout like three to four times a month but I try to, at home I try to stay away from them because I really don’t like to hear them talk.”

Support in School.

These youth reported having differing sources of support within their school environments. Some of the youth reported receiving support from teachers, principals, and school staff. In fact, 60% talked about the importance of a specific teacher or school administrator in providing support. One youth stated, “They (teachers) are people I can go to when I have issues with work, like school work or I need to talk to them about something.” Several of the youth reported that they have a certain teacher who helps them when they need to talk about an issue they are having, or need a “helping hand” with their class assignments. For example, one girl reported, “The teachers, they’ll try to ask me questions and make sure I am ok and help me out with my OGT’s and ACT’s and making sure that I am keeping up with them.”

A different youth stated that their teachers take extra interest in their activities, which motivated her to do well. Another participant stated that she had such a strong connection with a teacher than it only took a “look” from her to get her motivated. More

specifically, she said, “My first period teacher Dr.----------. I, like if anything that is like my school mother. I have the highest respect for her. The respect level I have for her is almost the same as Ms.--------, like she can look at me and I know what I am doing wrong. I will be like “OK I understand, I will get it together Another youth reported on how his football coach was really supportive. He stated, “He’s always helps me out with anything I need. Like when it comes to needing more studying, or needing to talk to teachers and I can’t talk to him right then and there.”

In general, when asked about their relationships in school, 70% of youth reported that they had “positive” relationships in school. However, three youth indicated that their relationships at school were sometimes negative. Specifically, one youth cited a negative relationship with teachers. He stated, “Ok, now there’s a couple of teachers that test me. Like, they just give me a hard time in the classroom so they’ll get mad when I don’t do my work. But if I don’t understand you and I ask for help nicely and continue to ask but you don’t help, there will be a point where I don’t do your work, even if I try to do it at home. Get help, then that leads me to not do it or copy off my friends.” When further questioned about how the youth processed the negativity from the teachers, this youth reported, “I try to block them out. I try to learn from the paper by myself but I don’t understand the material.”

Another youth reported that he tries not to build relationships in school due to him trying to complete his schoolwork with minimal distractions. He stated, “Most of my relationships are, I would say OK. Because I really don’t associate with a lot of people. I mean they talk to me and you know I conversate back. I just don’t keep it up like “oh hit

me up outside of school and so we can hang out and stuff. Well this is school, I am here to get in and get out." One participant discussed staff again stating that "from time to time I got kind of a smart mouth but it's only because some of the things they say are unfair or they treat the students unfairly."

Support in the Community.

Community also was a sense of support for these youth, although the youth in the study had trouble defining what this meant and/or included. After further clarification, these youth discussed several areas of support that did exist in the community. Overall, 40% mentioned specific individuals in the community. One youth, for example, reported how a neighbor had helped him through a personal struggle. He stated, "At my old house, it was my neighbor Ms. _____, um yea, she, I went through a lot at home. There was a time where I was going through something and she was there. So it was her, and now it's, she moved and we moved." Community support also was mentioned in other ways. For instance, 40% of the youth mentioned how they received support in relation to their recreational program involvement in the community. For example, one youth described how she participated in a local Youth Center. She stated she received support from this program because "I go there every week, and we do a lot of stuff and they're a good organization." A different youth discussed the development of his community support: "Growing up, I would have to say the whole community. Because my mom, when she was here, she knew everybody. I really couldn't get away with anything when I was younger, so anything bad, she knew, that's why she kept me into boxing and basketball."

When asked about their relationships in the community, 100% of the youth reported that they had "positive" relationships in their community. One youth described his relationships as "close knit," while another girl described how her positive relationships in the community created a "sense of pride" in her family. She stated, "I am very friendly, and when they [community members] meet my mom they always tell my mom that I am a good kid. So my mom is like, she is very proud about that. I am not disrespectful at others and I try to greet myself with other adults so I can have a good relationship and not seem like a bad kid and all that so they know that I am not like the 'others.' They know me." Another youth described how his relationships are positive but limited: "Most of my relationships are fine. It is kind of like school though, stay to myself, really laid back, quiet, but people know I can be goofy and loud."

Motivators

The second major theme area emerging from the interviews was related to motivation. These included motivational factors in their peer system, homes, schools and communities. Motivation can be described as fostering a sense of drive in participants so that they are better able to accomplish tasks and ultimately, goals. Each emergent subtheme is described here.

Motivation in Peer System.

Youth in the study reported several motivational influences were reported in the peer system. Most of them reported on how their peers provided motivation specific to their school achievements. More specifically, youth were motivated by the possibilities

that a good education brings them, with 60% of the participants reporting this as their biggest source of motivation. One youth described his desire to graduate and leave Columbus as he and his peers' motivation. He stated, "Getting out of Columbus. We, well me on the other hand, I have both of my parents. A lot of my friends have 1 or no parents. Like my best friend who got a full ride to OSU's main campus. He's basically by himself." He goes on to state, "Our main goal that each one of us has is, do right, get the grades, and get out of there, you know."

Sometimes motivation came from peers. For instance, 30 % of youth discussed how there is a friendly competition to succeed and outperform each other. As one stated, "We have a lot of 'oh you got an 80, well I got an 82." Self-improvement also was reported as the biggest motivator amongst a young man and his peers with him stating that "Our motivation is to make ourselves better and make a change and improve people that doubted up when we were young and wrong."

Motivation in the Home.

In their home lives, 70% of youth reported that parents and/or relatives were their biggest motivators. One youth stated that his older sister who attended Kentucky State University was his biggest support. He stated, "She is the backbone, she like really urges me to make sure I am on top of my stuff." Both direct and indirect motivation was cited. Youth talked about how they could be motivated by someone who participated actively in their lives, or by having a role model which they tried to emulate. . For instance, one youth described how her parents motivated her to obtain better grades: "My parents, like they're always pushing me to get better grades." Another youth spoke about how the

memory of his grandfather motivated him to succeed both sports and life in general: “He lost the battle with breast cancer at the age of 75, so whenever I win a wrestling match, or whenever I have a good play on the football field or heck LiFE Sports, whenever I win at LiFE Sports, I look up to my grandfather and say thank you for helping me get to where I’m at now. “

Motivation in School.

Additionally, school motivation was consistently reported by these youth, with 70% reporting that their academic success was their biggest motivation. Essentially, these youth reported wanting to succeed in school. They felt that success in school would ensure they would graduate and pursue a higher education and/or their respective career paths. One participant discussed her drive and desire to succeed in school as a mixture of competition between herself and others. She stated, “Seeing other people get good grades, being at honor roll assemblies. I mean I am in them but I want to be the 4.0 instead of the 3.5.” Another youth discussed his dedication to achieving academic success both in high school and college. He stated, “The biggest one would have to be, seeing myself on the academic wall of fame. And I look up there and say “that’s going to be me in college too.” Others discussed how they were motivated to do well in school so that they can begin different career paths. One stated, “Oh the Marines, get out and go into the Marines.” Another stated, “It goes back to my future. Just knowing that by what I am doing now it will pay off in the long term. If I mess up now it’s going to have long term effects. Going back to if I do good. I want to be an ambassador and to be an

ambassador it takes lots of experience and just knowing what works and what doesn't work. And by being in high school I learned all of that."

Motivation in the Community.

A major theme that presented itself involved youths' motivation to engage in their community , with 70% of kids mentioning how it was important to better their community. One youth stated, "My biggest motivator in the community is seeing the violence, some of the violence that we have avoided as youth like me. You know and that's pretty much why I am doing the things that I am doing. Giving back to the community at an early age." Another youth used a "lead by example" approach to community improvement. He stated, "I would say, leading by example. Basically, because especially on the south side where my dad lives, there's like a lot of gang violence and bad stuff going on. I want to like, I'm like, known throughout my dad's side of town so like, if I make it out, basically I can show that other people can too." Community violence was stated by another youth when describing their motivation to succeed in this aspect of their lives. This young reported that his biggest motivation was "to see the community change." When asked to elaborate, he stated "less shootings, less fights, just the whole community at peace. No violence."

Youth Risk Factors

Youth in the study also were asked a series of questions in regards to the risk factors that which they face in their lives. Several themes emerged, such as struggles, stressors, and poor choices made by youth. Additionally, youth were asked about risk

factors that their peers encounter in order to evaluate how this affects their development. To explore the effects of their peers on their development, youth were asked whether or not they can be themselves around their friends. Finally, to gain an understanding on the coping mechanisms youth utilized in combating these risk factors, a series of questions were asked in regards to specific coping skills. The answers in this section were more varied which may reflect the diverse backgrounds that the participants in the YLA program come from. Major risk factor themes emerged including peer pressure, the need to fit in, and risk behaviors such as substance use and sexual activity. Themes arose in regards to gender differences, as well. Themes and gender-specific trends are showcased in the following.

Struggles Faced by Youth.

Struggles that the youth faced and how they dealt with these struggles were discussed by the youth. Bullying was the top challenge discussed, with 50% of youth reporting that bullying was an issue. One youth described it as, "I think a lot of times we find it necessary to put each other down to feel good about ourselves, like bullying or especially with twitter and Instagram it gets easier every year." Another youth discussed conditions for some youth in high school, by stating, "High school is horrible, people get really messed up in high school." When asked to elaborate, she stated, "There's a lot of bullies in high school and they pick on people. Some people just keep to themselves or don't talk to anyone. Some people just drop out of school and don't come back." Females reported witnessing bullying at higher rates than males. No male participants reported witnessing or participating in bullying at school.

Thirty percent of youth reported that "trying to fit in" and related self-esteem issues were the biggest challenges they faced. For instance, one youth reported, "Trying to figure out how you dress, how you want to act, the way you want to define yourself to people, the way you want to present yourself to people. Trying to fit in, that's basically self-explanatory, trying to find a group of people that you want to be around." Peer pressure also was a challenge for some of these youth, with 20% of youth reporting this as an issue. For instance, one stated, "Like, if you're out and your friends are out with a group of people that you don't know and they start drinking or something. Then they want you to do it, like a group of people that you don't know with try and get your friends to get you to do it. And you just don't want to do it, but with some people it's just peer pressure. People are watching you and you don't want to be the one left out or feel like lame." Females reported higher rates of self-esteem issues. Both genders reported pressure to fit in; females reported more stress associated with trying to fit in. Males reported pressure to fit in. However, males reported being able to minimize this pressure by avoiding friends who made them feel this way.

A different youth reported describing the struggles he faced with racism, reporting "Teenage guys, they face stereotypical "oh he's a bank robber, oh he's going to kill someone, Oh he's fast because he's black, he can play sports, he's not smart, black people don't know how to count correctly, you know, the typical stuff, back when we were in slave times."

Youth also were questioned about the biggest struggles which they are currently facing. Academic struggles were reported by 60% of participants. "Currently, senioritis.

I am ready to get out of high school soo bad. Yea, trying to get out high school, trying to pass my OGT's, trying to fill out stuff for college and the ACT's." One other young man described his struggles academically as: "college, well not college, school. Keeping up my grades, staying on top of my stuff." In general, males reported higher rates of struggling in relation to their academics.

Negative peer interactions also were reported by 20% of youth. One youth reported being involved in "drama." When asked to elaborate she stated: "Just like someone trying to give me a hard time about who I hang out with and it almost ended up physical. But I was just like I don't have time to be getting suspended right now over stupid stuff. Just because you don't like someone I hang with, doesn't mean you got to come towards me. I don't understand that." Another girl discussed how she takes on other people's problems. She stated, "I think trying so hard to be like, that light for everyone. So I take on other people's issues and you know like you said I don't have anyone to really be a rock for me. I mean I am fine, but every now and then it gets a little sad." Female participants reported higher rates of dramatic interactions with peers than their male counterparts.

Family interactions were reported by youth as sometimes challenging. Fifty percent of youth reported that family interactions were the greatest challenge faced in the home. One girl reported that trying to see others' perspectives in the home was a challenge for many in her family. She described it as, "Trying to see things the other people's way, like just when you get into it and it's just you know, being well minded about things." She continued by stating that the inability to see from each other's

perspective "leads to arguments." One young man described how his mother's expectations of success often led to challenges in the home. He stated, "Some grade wise, mostly grade wise. Ms.-------, if our grades are slacking and she feels as if she's not doing the right job, she will get on us so that she doesn't feel bad and she doesn't want us to make her feel bad. We don't want her to feel bad which is why we put our feet in gear and we do our work and get our grades back up." One youth described it as, "They always are on my back, yelling at me about stupid stuff. Stuff like they could do, like if I'm not home or if I'm tired after doing some of my chores and my homework. Like if there is a couple of dishes after were done eating and I go upstairs to go to sleep after I am done eating, because they are still eating, they'll literally wait until they go to bed. 12 or 1 o'clock in the morning to go do the dishes. Or they just, or they'll try to punish me even though I didn't do anything wrong. I don't feel it's right for you to punish me." Another youth simply described her struggle as "getting along with me parents." There was no differentiation between genders as it pertained to rates of reporting negative family interactions.

Another major struggle faced in the home that youth reported related to finances (30% of youth mentioned this as a challenge). Youth reported instances of families currently struggling, or struggling in the past "to make it" to where the family currently is. For example, when talking about her mother, one youth discussed past struggles faced by her mother. She stated, "Because she like, she started out very low working at Wendy's and stuff and then she ended up to be like what she wanted to be. She started really low and became what she wanted." Another girl reported that a recent medical

event had created a financial setback for her family. She stated, "Just like work, overworking themselves. Sickness, my stepdad his leg is jacked up and my mom's arteries. It doesn't allow him to walk as much as he wants to or be on his feet. So it puts a stop on us, well it limits how much money we have because of the health issues throughout the house. So that's like a big challenge with them."

Poor Choices Reported by Youth.

Another theme that emerged from the data focused on youth making poor choices. These involved youth ultimately engaging in problem behaviors. More specifically, poor educational choices were reported by 30% of the youth. One youth described how she makes poor choices, by stating "not turning in homework. I am a goody two shoes. Basically slacking and doing stuff, procrastination by saying "oh I will do that you know since they're not really doing anything and they're going to give me an extra day." Another youth spoke about the consequences of his poor educational choices. He stated, "Also my freshman year, I regret that I was not on top of my grades. It is hard to bring it back up one you slip up in the beginning." Females reported higher rates of poor educational choices, including actions such as procrastination and not turning in assignments.

Sexually acting out, or utilizing sexual acts as a means for attention, was reported by 30% of youth as well. One youth stated "I think a lot of my friends that are girls who don't have a father turn to like boys our age for that attention." Another reported that her peers are "having kids. Doing drugs and having kids and showing off their body." One other youth discussed her romantic struggle: "I would say, love is a good one. I mean

who doesn't want to be in love. Like I have the idea in my head that I am going to find a prince and I have standards (laughter). So by me having standards, you have to fit this criteria in order to date me." Females reported higher rates of sexually acting out, while males reported higher rates of pressure to participate in sexual acts.

Instances of violence were reported by 30% of youth. When questioned about how many times he has been in fights, one male youth reported that "Throughout my whole life so far, 5 I think, but then I started boxing. So then if someone started messing with me I couldn't do nothing because I was registered." He reported that 3 of his fights were in school and 2 were out of school. Another youth discussed how she used to fight on multiple occasions. She stated she was involved in "physically fighting. That's about it." When asked to elaborate she reported, "In middle school I was in a lot of fights. High school, like last year I was in a lot of fights too but this year I am just like, it's not even worth it." Violence was reported at a higher rate by male participants than female participants.

Drug and alcohol use was reported by 30% of youth. One youth reported that he "smoked before, I did all that stuff before. I drank before." Another described her drug use. She said, "I mean I have tried smoking before, but nothing I do on a regular basis. And nothing other than that. Because I haven't had sex or popped pills or nothing like that" When asked to elaborate on the number of times she has smoked marijuana, by stating, "Over the summer, like from summer time to like maybe like November-ish, it was like maybe once a week or something like that. It wasn't that often, hold on. It wasn't that often. Like I would go two or three times a month, not every week." The two

drugs which were reported being used among these youth were alcohol and marijuana. The three youth reporting drug and alcohol use also reported that they used substances in groups of other people. In the words of one youth, "I just wanted to try it and then it was like, the first time it was like, oh I didn't feel nothing. This is nothing, what does the law have against this? What is it doing to people? And then when I was with my cousins, they had, well the first time it was 50, second time with my cousins it was something, I don't know what it was called, it had a name but I don't know what it was called. Then it was like, it was a lot stronger. I felt like I was ooohh." Marijuana use was reported at a higher rate by females, while alcohol use was reported at a higher rate by males.

Other poor choices were mentioned less often. For instance, criminal activity was reported by one youth. He stated, "Just breaking into abandoned houses. Having firecrackers and throwing them under the cars when they're driving by. Busting windows, busting bottles, I just didn't care and wanted to have fun, it just wasn't the good fun. Poor choice of a peer network: "I have some poor choice of friends. Not all of my friends are poor choices but I have like that one little group of poor choice friends. I don't talk to them as much and I am trying to ease my way away from them because I know they are about nothing in life. They are not going anywhere in life." Also, one girl reported that she would not intervene when others in her support network would choose to make poor choices. She stated, "I think a lot of times I am silent when I shouldn't be. So like when I see something wrong I won't really say anything about it just because I am usually on the quieter side. Sometimes I just don't have the words to like fix the

situation. So probably consenting my silence." Males reported a higher rate of criminal activity, while more females reported not intervening when friends make poor choices.

Risk Factors Faced by Participants Peers.

Youth also were asked about their beliefs related to the pressures that peers may be facing in regards to substance use, violence, unprotected sexual activity, and crime. 80% of youth reported that there was pressure for youth their age to participate in unprotected sexual activity. One male reported, "Especially in sexual activities. You know, people make fun of me because I have a girlfriend and they say I haven't hit it yet. I mean come on, we have one kid who is 15 he's got two kids. I mean come on, and he's still trying to go to school. He got another girl who is barely a freshman, barely a freshman but she's really a senior, but she has freshman credits. She has three, three kids and she has no parents in her life to help her." Males reported higher rates of pressure to participate in unprotected sexual activity than females.

Drug and alcohol use by peers was reported by 60% of youth. One youth described it as her friends "smoking, taking pills and not going to school." One youth, in fact, reported that a friend of hers had recently overdosed on prescription pain pills. During the week of the interview, the two youth who had given her friend the pills were sent to prison for 5 years. There was no difference in the rate of reporting peer substance use by gender.

Other pressures were noted. One youth described how his peers are pressured into joining gangs. For instance, he stated, "One thing that really bugs me, people that I know

don't grow up with moms or dads or family figures. They join gangs and say that's their family and they feel love there. I'm like, I mean ok, they might be cool friends but you don't got to do everything they do, or go around robbing people or killing people just to get into a gang so you can feel loved. I mean at the end of the day, you might have a family, but they are going to do you wrong just like you do someone wrong. That's one of my big things that is my problem with people."

The other major challenge faced by youth in regards to their peers involved the home life and family interactions their friends experience (with 30% reporting this challenge). The struggles with these interactions transcended the systems in their lives and created challenges in those two aspects of their lives. One youth stated, "A lot of my friends have parents that seem to not care a lot of the time so they, like they have a hard time seeing things through each other's eyes. So they don't really understand each other and that causes a lot of conflict." Another youth reiterated this by stating, "It is very bad out there. So a lot of kids don't like going home. They know they don't have a lot of home so they just don't want to go home or they just try to find somewhere else to go. They probably don't have no food or there is just too many kids or their parents aren't helping them." Females reported higher instances of their peers having negative interactions with their families than males.

The youth reported another major challenge which created difficulty for their peers. This challenge involved social pressures, according to 30% of youth. One youth described the social pressures peers' experience "to fit in" and also described the negative influences that teens are introduced to. He stated, "Teenage life. Just all of the things that

you're introduced to. Some of them know how to handle it better than others. That's pretty much the biggest." When questioned further he stated, "Like, when you get older you start to go to parties, parents letting strings loose, allowing us to do more things. The more things you can do, the more bad situations you can put yourself to. So you get introduced to a lot." When asked what he meant by bad situations, he reported, "Me, not really but my friend, he started smoking weed and drinking and stuff." Another girl described how conflict occurs when her different groups of friends attempt to fit in with each other. She stated, "We all have different groups of people we hang around. And when there is a conflict, there is a conflict with the entire group so that's probably it." It was found that male youth reported higher instances of negative peer influences than females.

Effect of Peers on Participants.

To obtain a better understanding of peer pressure in their immediate peer groups, youth were asked questions about whether or not they felt they could be themselves around their friends, or if their friends ever pressured them to participate in activities which would make them uncomfortable. Although many peer pressures were reported by these youth, all youth reported that they could be themselves around their friends and that they do not feel pressure from their friends to participate in activities which would make them uncomfortable. However, one youth did report past pressure, stating: "They did, until they realized that I am not that type of person. I kind of changed a little bit." When asked to elaborate on how his friends reacted to him changing he reports: "it is like 'well I'm not going to do this around him because I know he's uncomfortable with this stuff so

imam change for at least right now." When asked for an example, he reported "…like if I am with one of my friends and one of his friends comes around and is like 'oh let's go smoke this doobie over here, or let's do this' they'll be like 'na dude not right now brah, I will catch you another time, but not right now, me and my friends is kicking it right now." So while youth may have peers that participate in risk behaviors, they report that this pressure does not transcend their friendships.

Coping Skills

Youth also reported they had specific coping skills that helped them to deal with challenges. How youth deal with these struggles varied just as much as the answers. Youth reported using both positive and negative coping skills. Positive coping strategies, such as sports, communication, positive thinking, and avoidance, were reported by 90% of youth. One youth reported that their peers utilized sports to escape troubles at home. "I see more people do it with sports. Yea, so they can stay after school and not really rush to go home." Positive thinking also was reported by 20% of youth. "Getting confidence in yourself, not letting other people say. Don't let that affect who you are as a person and just know that you are doing this for yourself." Avoidance of negative situations and people were reported by 30% of the youth. One youth reported incidents where bullying was severe enough to warrant therapy and medication management to stabilize the youth. Negative coping skills also were utilized. Two youth reported that drugs were used by youth to cope with the struggles they are facing, (namely marijuana).

Two other youth reported that violence was utilized by peers. One described it as: "They either like fight or I guess use drugs." Another youth discussed how her peers

resort to violence if positive coping skills such as communication do not work: "The way that I see people cope is they go to their friends and talk about it. Some take it out and fight the problem."

Forty percent of the youth reported that they used their own internal strategies to persevere. As one stated, "I just try and think about other people, other than myself. Especially if someone else needs me. Then I will just get over my own issues and help them and it helps me make myself feel better." Another youth reported that while basketball is his "go to" coping skill. He continued by stating that he "just thinks about all of the obstacles and think about a way to get around them." Additionally, 30% of youth reported that they either communicate with whoever is causing them stress or discuss the matter with their support systems. For instance, one youth stated, "I tell my parents at home or I talk to my principal or my 10th grade math teacher."

Examination of differences among youth reveal certain differences between gender, and levels of risk. In regards to how youth reacted to stressors, males were more likely to act out physically, with 50% of male youth reporting physical violence, while only 16.6% of female youth report physical violence. Thirty percent of females reported using positive communication when overcoming stressors in their lives. No males reported using communication to overcome stressors.

As it pertains to levels of risk, male youth reported drug use and delinquent activities at higher rates than female youth. 75% of male youth reported drug use while only 33% of female youth reported using drugs. Delinquent activities were reported by 50% of male youth, while no female participants reported delinquent activities.

LiFE Sports/YLA Outcomes

In addition to examining youth experiences and related risk and resilience, these youths involvement in the YLA also was explored. Two methods were used. First, qualitative interviews distilled outcomes perceived by the youth, as well as looked at what kids liked and didn't like at YLA. Second, pre and post surveys were conducted. Results from these two methods are presented here.

Qualitative Outcomes

Several themes emerged in relation to outcomes associated with the youths' involvement in the YLA. These included the positive impact of YLA, what (if any) life lessons have been learned from programming, themes related to them being prepared for youth leader tasks, and what (if any) negative impacts were made in participants lives due to the YLA.

Youth in this study reflected the positive outcomes created by sports and recreational activities. However, these activities may not have been available to youth without the active participation of their parents. With 70% of the youth reporting that their parents made them join.

After the introduction into programming, all of the participants remained in the program and transitioned to the YLA This would result in the youth participating not

only in the 4 week summer camp each year, but also one weekend a month. This demonstrates the retention ability of the YLA curriculum. The time spent with LiFE Sports and the YLA have provided a variety of positive outcomes with extremely limited negative impact on lives.

Other themes which emerged were the youth describing how the YLA has had a positive impact on their lives. 70% of youth reported that the life skills learned in the YLA had the biggest impact of their lives. One participant reported that YLA taught him about "being assertive. And standing up for what you believe in, and having goals, and being focused." Another youth discussed how the YLA helped her overcome her fear of public speaking. She stated, "Talking in front of people. I don't like talking in front of people. I am terrified of talking in front of people but like it helped because when you are there and your coach needs help, you're just by yourself and you can't be afraid to talk or they're not going to take you serious." One other youth described how the YLA allowed her to become more social. She stated, "Actually making new friends. I have become more friendly when I started the YLA program because before I was really mean. I used to come off really mean. My social skills, making new friends."

When asked about what life lessons were learned through the YLA programming, 70% of youth reported positive attitude traits. One young man reported, "To not always yell, not always get mad first. Stay calm; find a different direction to go in before you start getting mad." Another youth responded by describing how his positive attitude developed. He stated, "I learned that when life hands you lemons, you make lemonade, meaning, not to be funny but sometimes things are sour. But lemonade is sweet right?

Or when life hands you apples, you make apple juice. You make something sweet and turn it into something sweeter. Because something's can be bittersweet, or some things could be truly sweet. And when something is bitter sweet you like it for the moment but later on you're going to regret it. But something that is truly sweet is going to stay with you for the rest of your life." One other youth discussed how the YLA has created positivity in her life. She stated the YLA taught her to "stay positive in a lot of situations regardless of the outcomes."

Another theme that emerged when discussing lessons learned was tangible skills which were taught during YLA programming (with 30% of youth responding with this answer). One youth disclosed how the YLA allowed her to "make a resume." Another youth described how a lesson involving a banker from Huntington bank opened his eyes to how difficult financing can be. He stated, "Banking is a really hard thing." When asked what lesson he learned, he jokingly responded, "The lesson I learned was to not become an accountant." A third youth discussed how he learned a similar lesson from the same banker. He stated, "it's good to finance your money sooner rather than later."

Preparedness for leadership roles within the summer camp work experience were discussed by these youth. Youth reported that the biggest lesson learned which prepared them for their roles at camp. 60% of youth responded with examples of positive leadership skills. One youth discussed this, she described it as, "Well they get our minds ready for the kids. Because sometimes it is hard to deal with them and we may get a little hot headed. But they teach us how to stay calm, how to connect with the kids, how to try to understand them and their position." Another youth stated how he was prepared for

camp, “They prepare you on how to handle your kids. How to be more responsible. Because you have a lot of responsibility. Patience also, teaching patience.” A third youth discussed her peer mediation skills improving by stating, “They do help us learn how to solve situations. Because I think before I wouldn’t be able to solve a situation between two campers or two groups.”

Although nearly all the youth (90%) reported that the YLA had no negative impact on their lives, one youth also reported some negative impacts of the YLA. He stated “Sometimes, some of the females do be causing unnecessary drama.” When asked to elaborate he reported “Just talking just to be talking. Just because they feel like they can do it. I just walk away from them. I will admit, it is aggravating.”

Likes, Dislikes, and Changes to be made to the YLA.

Three themes emerged describing the youth experiences in the YLA programming. These included what the participants liked about the YLA, what they disliked, and what the changes they would make to programming to make it more beneficial to future participants. Each of them is described as follows.

Sixty percent of youth reported that the aspect of the YLA that they liked the most was the positive peer interactions. One youth described her relationships as the “friendships and bonds that you make with people.” A different youth described her experience as “just being with the older, same age group, being around the same age group as me.” One young girl went into further detail, by stating the “YLA, meeting new people, especially in the beginning, especially if it’s your first time and not a repeat YLA

member. I mean you meet new people and grow relationships. Then you learn how to be, how to apply all of the skills we learned to do during the sessions into real life and that's going to help you, later in the future so."

Forty percent of youth reported that the leadership aspects of the YLA were what they enjoyed most during their experience. One youth simple described her favorite part of the YLA as "being a leader." Another youth described the feeling of being a role model to the younger participants. She stated, "Just interacting with the kids. I feel that they may not get the attention that they need at home or they're just interacting with other kids and seeing what they are doing with their lives. So interacting with them, playing sports, letting them experience new things, giving them knowledge that I already have and being a role model. I think that's a great aspect of it." Another youth shared this sentiment by stating that her favorite part was "being a leader to the younger kids, being a role model."

Least favorite parts of the YLA also were discussed. However, 30% of the youth reported there were "no negative aspects." A few negative components were mentioned. For instance, 20% of youth reported that camp staff was their least favorite aspect of the YLA, with one youth discussing her thoughts on staff," Staff. Staff at times. Again, going back to them not knowing how to control kids and the fact that I have to step in at times." Another youth discussed how he felt that the staff at camp viewed him negatively. He reported, the staff: "don't treat us like we are kids. You can talk to us, just not like kids. That's where we get upset."

Twenty percent of youth discussed how their interactions with the campers were their least favorite aspect of the YLA. One youth reported that she did not like "having to deal with disrespectful kids." Another youth described it as "being a leader is my favorite and my least favorite. Sometimes it is hard to be assertive without being mean. So I think just trying to find that balance is difficult."

Sixty percent of youth reported that they would change some aspect of the programming with the YLA. One improvement focused on the amount of meetings the YLA had. One youth discussed his desire to meet more: "We meet only once a month. I mean if we met more I think it would be more beneficial." Or as another stated, " I would add more time for everyone to see each other because we only get to see each other once a month."

Improvements also were suggested in relation to the YLA curriculum. One youth stated he would improve "the lesson plans." He continued by stating, "I understand we know about drugs. We are teenagers, we know about drugs, not everything, but it is a big part of our lives today. So I would just implement, maybe actually going to a physician and us getting the facts from them. Or having, I mean I just want to leave the classroom, I don't want to stay in the classroom. I would rather interact with different people. Have us interact with the environment and other persons." Another youth discussed his idea for a lesson. He suggested the curriculum focus on "how to properly enunciate your words. Because you hear people on the streets and they are like 'ey whaddup mang' and you just look at them like 'really, this is how you speak to an elder?' This youth

continued by stating the curriculum should focus on teaching "social norms and self-respect."

One youth reported that he would like to see the YLA have an Olympic team during the LiFE Sports summer camp. Another young man described his change to programming as follows, "The only lesson I would honestly change is, let us come with nick names for ourselves. Like nick names for ourselves, not a nickname that's in our names, but regular nicknames."

Quantitative Outcomes

In order to examine the outcomes associated with YLA participation, scores on various measures were examined from pre- to post- YLA participation. Scores at post-test were higher than at pre-test for all measures except for Future Self Efficacy (for job and college). Statistically significant changes, however, were found in relation to perceptions of Leadership, Problem Solving, Self-Efficacy-Learning, and Self-Efficacy-School. Scores on these measures improved significantly from pre-to-post YLA participation. Overall findings are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Quantitative Results

Measure	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	Mean Change	P
Individual Traits				
Leadership	3.95 (0.69)	4.35 (0.51)	0.40	.01*
Communication	4.06(0.5)	4.2 (0.44)	0.14	.16
Problem Solving	4.50 (1.04)	4.56 (1.05)	0.06	.06*
Teamwork	3.14 (0.52)	3.24 (0.55)	0.10	.15
Citizenship	4.12 (0.67)	4.25 (0.57)	0.13	.11
Sense of Self				
Self-Efficacy: Learning	4.18 (0.73)	4.31 (0.65)	0.13	.01*
Future Self-Efficacy: School	3.87 (0.86)	3.92 (0.75)	0.05	.09*
Future Self-Efficacy: College	4.49 (0.64)	4.42 (0.67)	-0.07	.44
Future Self-Efficacy: Job	4.65 (0.51)	4.49 (0.62)	-0.16	.67

*Difference between pre and post is significant at $p < 0.10$ and $p < .05$

Chapter 5: Discussion

The first part of the study examined these youths' experiences in relation to supports and motivators in their lives, struggles, poor choices, exposure to risk factors faced by themselves and their peers, and coping mechanisms. It was found that youth reported having high rates of support from their peer systems, including encouragement from specific friends and also groups of friends. In the home, youth reported high levels of support from their parents, specifically their mothers. In the school system, youth reported high levels of support from their teachers and/or administrators. In the community, youth reported the highest levels of support from specific individuals, as well as recreational centers & programming. This is similar to the kinds of support found by Fredericks, Hackett, and Bregman (2010) when researching PYD. Support from individuals and programming can benefit youth, especially at-risk youth, by linking them with pro-social peers, developing their skills, increasing motivation, and lowering problem behaviors.

Motivators among the peer system were found to include a system of friendly competition set up among youth and their peers. Youth reported wanting to outperform their peers on their educational assignments and desired to be more successful in school than their friends. In the home, youth reported being motivated by their parents, especially their mothers. Youth reported high levels of parental involvement. In school, youth overall were motivated greatly by their hopes for educational success and future careers. In the community, youth reported two major motivators. First, they wanted to

give back to their community. They also enjoyed witnessing community improvements. Community improvement has been demonstrated to be a motivator to develop new supports and opportunities which could assist in PYD (Lawson, Clairborne, Hardiman, Austin, & Surko, 2007).

When youth discussed struggles, bullying and peer pressure were the most prevalent amongst their peer systems. In the home, youth reported that their biggest struggles were positive communication with their families and finances. In school, youth reported their biggest struggles were the academic rigors they faced through course load, assignments, and standardized testing. In the community, youth reported their biggest struggles as negative influences as well as lack of positive activities. While support systems and motivators were found to be in the systems they interact with, youth are still encountering struggles. However, these struggles seem to build resilience in the youth as is the case with the school system. Moreover, these youth reported that their biggest motivators in school were assignments and the sense of competition to succeed. At the same time assignments, testing, and course load were reported as struggles. These findings add to the research regarding developing resilience through not only protective factors, but motivation in the face of adversity (Tiet, Huizinga, & Byrnes, 2009).

When youth discussed poor choices, youth reported succumbing to peer pressure and not intervening in the poor choices of their friends. In the home, youth reported poor choices which included arguing with members of their family and not completing tasks when asked. In school, youth reported poor educational choices which included not completing assignments and procrastination. In the community, youth reported poor

choices such as delinquent activity. When discussing substance use, 75% of males reported using marijuana and alcohol, while females reported substance use at a much lower rate (16.6%)

Poor choices may be related to increased risk factors in these youths' lives. Risk factors found among the peer system were peer pressure and peer involvement in delinquency-, substance abuse-, and violence-related activities. Risk factors reported in the home included financial difficulties and lack of positive communication. In school, there are reports of lack of perceived academic support. In the community, youth reported the presence of gangs, community violence, and drug activity.

Coping mechanisms utilized by these youth were found to be both positive and negative. Youth reported using sports, positive communication, and avoidance of stressful situations as positive coping mechanisms. As it pertains to negative coping skills, youth reported substance use and violence, with a majority of males reporting negative coping skills compared to females. Females reported utilizing communication, and relying on others for support more than their male counterparts. Males were more likely to not communicate their needs when faced with challenges, but utilize stress relief activities including sports and avoidance of stress inducing persons or situations.

Outcomes associated with participation in the YLA also were examined. Qualitative results found that youth are receiving positive support from the YLA and report positive outcomes. Outcomes included leadership skills, positive communication skills, positive peer relationships, confidence in regards to public speaking, and peer mediation skills. Quantitative outcomes found that post-test scores were significantly

more favorable than pre-test scores in relation to leadership, problem solving, self-efficacy in regards to learning, and future self-efficacy in regards to school. Results corroborated the qualitative interviews which reported similar positive outcomes. Together these findings demonstrate the effectiveness of the YLA in relation to the youth leadership and college and career readiness PYD programs. Developed skills may in turn improve the abilities of youth to finish high school and reach their goals of higher education.

Additionally, positive outcomes demonstrate the helpfulness of PYD programs such as the YLA. Programming based on youth leadership, as well as college and career readiness, is beneficial to youth, especially at risk youth with limited means. These findings are similar to research synthesized by Radcliffe and Bos (2013).

Limitations

Findings overall should be interpreted with caution, however, as there are several limitations to the study. For example, the criteria for inclusion in the study reduced the number of available participants to be interviewed. This study was limited to interviews with 10 youth. Therefore, only 30% of the 37 youth who are active members of the YLA were actually involved in the qualitative portion of the study. Selection effects could be another limitation. Youth who volunteered to be a part of the study likely were the more engaged youth, and in turn may have reported more positive outcomes and experiences.

Another limitation of this study is that only one PYD program, the LiFE Sports YLA, was examined. Multiple other programs and settings (such as the school) influence

youths' lives. While the youth reported their feelings about programming and the systems they interacted with in their daily lives, this study may not be representative of other youth coming from similar background and experiences.

Additionally, bias could have been a factor that influenced the methods and results, especially given the researcher was a staff member of the YLA program. Youth may have answered questions in ways in which they thought the YLA staff would desire. For instance, they may have not fully disclosed risk factors and problem behaviors. Youth may have viewed such disclosures resulting in YLA staff and/or researcher perceiving them negatively.

Limitations also existed within the quantitative portion of the study. Pre- and post-tests were conducted on youth, however, there was a lack of experimental design. While positive results were shown, there was no control group for comparison. In turn, the generalizability of the findings is further limited. Additionally, the long-term effects of the program were not examined. A measurement at six months to a year post-participation might be more indicative of program overall success. Last, the study only looked at certain outcomes of interest, where there may be other impacts of the YLA that were not assessed.

Implications for YLA and other PYD for Youth from Diverse Settings

Although there are limitations, there are several implications that can inform YLA and other PYD programming. Implications include expanding curriculum to address

further skill development and identified needs, to increase reach to parents, to connect further with schools, and to engage further with the community. More details follow.

First, youth leadership programs such as the YLA might consider enhancing their curriculum. Curriculum could be adjusted to focus further on peers. Qualitative findings suggest that youth are dealing with peer pressures, and peers seem to be engaging in problem behaviors. Research also has demonstrated this to be the case in a study conducted by Yavuzer, Karatas, Civildag, and Gundogdu (2014). To counteract these pressures and peer behaviors, the YLA program may need to focus further on developing resistance skills to build youth's confidence to stand up to their peers and say no to engaging in problem behaviors. The YLA also could foster pro-social, peer-to-peer relationships so that participants in the program can become each other's positive peer group.

Another implication for programming involves further involvement of the family (especially parents). Family involvement is important because youth reported high levels of support from their parents (especially moms). Based on these findings, the YLA could increase contacts made to parents in between programming sessions. Contacts could include in home, phone, and email to discuss youth's progress and any concerns with their development. Parents also could be engaged in program activities, whether it be learning together with youth about college access opportunities, or participating in recreational activities.

However, there were reports of poor communication and verbal arguments in the home. To strengthen relationships in the home, the YLA and related programs might

consider focusing on teaching the youth further social skills, especially ones focused on effective communication with parents and others in their homes. In particular, curriculum focused on teaching youth how to properly communicate their emotions without becoming frustrated and/or angry will improve youths' ability to positive interact with their parents and others in the home. The YLA and other programs could enhance program content in this area.

Findings also suggest that these youth have positive relationships in school, and particularly receive support and encouragement from teachers and administrators. Youth also reported being motivated by their academic success and hopes for the future. As such, programs such as the YLA might deepen their linkages to the school by interacting with teachers on a quarterly basis to increase support and monitor youth's progress towards their goals. Assisting youth in school also might improve success rates, since youth see school as an avenue for their development. The YLA also might educate youth on proper time management skills and study habits, as well as provide more information on resources that are available to them (i.e., tutoring, exam prep courses etc.).

Youth did, however, report bullying and other schools stressors. The YLA should address these issues by first educating youth on the causes of and solutions to bullying. Solutions could include lessons which target attitudes and beliefs toward aggressive behaviors, as well as encouraging youth to use their leadership skills to intervene and stop bullying. Practice scenarios, reflection discussions, and skill building might be new components of the program, that will allow youth to process these challenging situations (Mynatt & Studer, 2014).

Additionally, youth reported a desire to improve and give back to their communities. The YLA already does outreach programs in the community and can expand on this by including YLA participants in monthly LiFE Sports clinics with younger youth. Collaborative connections also could be made with local organizations such as food pantries, children's hospitals, and senior centers to allow youth to reach population needs. By building on the youths' interests in this area and partnering with other community agencies, the program would empower youth while also improving community relations.

In addition to these implications, others are drawn in relation to the YLA and gender. Findings demonstrate different themes which arose in regards to gender reported by youth. Males reported higher levels of violence, substance use, and acting out. Females reported more "drama" attached to their peer groups, with female peers communicating maliciously about each other behind their backs. The YLA should address these different issues by targeting these behaviors in their curriculum. Lessons could be implemented which would address positive communication skills, the importance of positive relationships, how to improve relationships, and how to develop positive coping skills (especially ones involving female-to-female and female-to-male). Lessons should take gender further into account. Additionally, the diffusion of physical conflict could be directed specifically at male participants, as they reported more issues in this area. Positive male role models also could be further introduced as a motivation to succeed. Similarly, lessons for females might involve including female roles models

(who reflect the ethnicity of the participants) in the program, as well as incorporating female-directed sports initiatives.

In general, there were positive findings associated with the YLA, as supported through the quantitative and qualitative research. The program was able to reduce risk factors, increase protective factors, and strengthen resiliency among the diverse youth served. In particularly, findings suggest the YLA contributed to the PYD of older youth from poverty and of color. Given the lack of research in this area, as well as lack of understanding of how to address the needs of older youth from vulnerable circumstances, the findings have particular relevance.

Future improvements in the YLA and in other PYD programs can learn from these findings, and incorporate the curricular enhancements recommended here. Program designs may be improved and potentially create better outcomes for youth today, especially those from disadvantaged circumstances. Results may also inform social work practice in other PYD settings, especially ones focused on older youth and programs which utilize youth leadership as well as college and career readiness. With these results in mind, it is important to take into account further implications for continued research.

Implications for Research

More research is needed on the effectiveness of different PYD programs. The study could be broadened to reach more youth who participate in PYD programs. The research may not represent all of the feelings and experiences of you of the same age and situation. Likewise, a true investigation of the YLA might involve an experimental

design where youth are assigned to the intervention or comparison group. A more rigorous study design would allow for more decisive conclusions to be drawn from the quantitative analysis. This study also could be broadened to further explore the experience of different youth, perhaps investigating further nuances by gender, age, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

In relation to the quantitative component of the study, ceiling effects were evident. As such, youth who volunteered for the study had higher scores entering the program perhaps, as well as may have been more likely to have favorable perceptions of the YLA program (due to previous program involvement). Selection effects also exist in relation to the qualitative interviews. Youth who volunteered to participant (and who's parents consented) may have been more motivated, as shown by their response to phone calls and emails. Responses may, in turn, have been more favorable. Further research should be considered for less engaged youth.

Last, a six-month post follow up measurement period also would be an added enhancement to the study design. This would allow for the examination of the long-term maintenance of reported outcomes. Measurement also could be expanded to consider other outcomes associated with the YLA, those that were not measured here (such as interactions with pro-social peers). The results of this study should be interpreted with these factors in mind.

Conclusions

Stressors, struggles, and risk factors faced by youth were apparent through this research study. Risk factors have been proven to hinder the development of youth. However, with the positive support systems provided through their peer, home, school, and community systems, youth are better able to combat the negative effects of these risk factors.

Youth in this study described how they have used drugs, had sex, drank alcohol, committed crimes, participated in delinquent activity, made negative choices concerning their education, and utilized violence as a coping skill. However, they continue to demonstrate positive development towards their goals and adulthood due to the YLA and the other positive supports that surround them in their lives. Youth, especially those from diverse backgrounds who are exposed to multiple risks, may not always have these safety nets. Exposure to risks and engagement in problem behaviors, for many youth, can be the initial start of a chain reaction of events, ones that could have negative consequences and delay their development (such as juvenile detention, jail, expulsion from school, or dropping out of high school).

PYD programs, such as the YLA, become important in this regard. PYD programs assist youth by providing them with the social supports, education, skills development, and guidance that is necessary in life, while also providing positive outlets

for their frustrations and opportunities for advancement in the community. The YLA program develops positive skills in a safe, fun, and stimulating environment.

In summary, it is important that we continue to develop programs which provide these sort of social supports and learning for youth. Youth require a place where they can develop in a safe manner without feeling social pressures from their peers and community, ones that may hinder their development. Without these programs or support, as well as that of caring adults (i.e., parents, teachers, etc), youth are more likely to have catastrophic negative consequences which could follow them into adulthood. PYD programs, such as the YLA, demonstrate to youth that there is more to life than one's peers, home, school, or community. Youth learn that life is more than what is happening in the summer or this weekend. PYD programs demonstrate to youth that if they set goals, work hard, engage in pro-social activities, and display positive social skills (such as self-control, effort, teamwork, and social responsibility), in turn, they may be better equipped to become successful in today's world.

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