

Original Research

Exploring the Factors that Shape the Design and Delivery of Youth Sport across the Western United States

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ABSTRACT

Youth sport in the United States is shaped by diverse practices and principles (e.g., competition, positive development), and youth sport leaders face numerous demands while defining, pursuing, and measuring organizational performance. Although numerous researchers have focused on leadership styles and organizational effectiveness, little research has been designed to examine sport leaders' perceptions related to decision-making. Accordingly, the present study was designed to explore youth sport leaders' perspectives and decision-making processes related to the design and delivery of youth sport and framed within the integrated model of the youth sport system (Dorsch et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 youth sport leaders across the western United States and were analyzed using modified qualitative analysis (Kalpokaite and Radivojevic, 2019). Participants revealed how perceptions of proximal and distal influences shaped the design and delivery of youth sport in their communities. Findings suggest that youth sport remains an unregulated competitive and developmental context for youth. Future work should be designed to investigate the many ways community leaders identify and negotiate barriers and opportunities to leverage youth sport as a developmental context and how those processes vary across clubs, communities, and cultures.

INTRODUCTION

Youth sport is one of the most popular extracurricular activities in the United States, serving nearly 60 million youth annually (Hulteen et al., 2017; National Council of Youth Sports, 2024). It is also a highly profitable area of investment and generates around \$9 to 15 billion nationally in annual revenue (Howie et al., 2020; Worldmetrics, 2024). Despite this financial potential, the youth sport landscape in the United States is highly fragmented, and leaders in this setting often rely on personal knowledge to make decisions about the design and delivery of youth sport (Bruner et al., 2022).

In the absence of broader organizational assistance and guidelines, leaders must subsequently be aware of individual and contextual factors shaping the sport experience and must then translate this knowledge effectively. However, little is known about how a leader's understanding shapes their decision-making processes (Dorsch et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2021). The present study, then, was designed to answer the question: What are youth sport leaders' perspectives and decision-making processes related to the design and delivery of youth sport in the western United States? Given that sport leaders should be aware of individual, relational, and other contextual influences on design and delivery, the integrated model of the youth sport system (Dorsch et al., 2022) was utilized as a guiding heuristic to frame the results. Findings could provide a more nuanced empirical understanding of youth sport leader perspectives and could serve to refine Dorsch and colleagues' (2022) model.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is difficult to offer a universal definition of youth sport due to the varied contexts in which it exists. Indeed, sport can be designed and delivered by municipal or state governments and can be promoted as organized competition, as an extracurricular educational setting, as a public good offered through recreational and nonprofit settings, or as an unstructured form of physical activity (Harris & Jedlicka, 2020; Hartman & Kwauk, 2011). Much like the country itself, sport in the United States remains shaped by an eclectic set of values, goals, and organizational structures that range from positive development to competitive pursuits (Coakley, 2016). In line with this variety and to distinguish free play opportunities from adult directed sport involvement, youth sport has been defined as organized athletic opportunities offered to children and adolescents under the age of 18 years that involve regular adult interactions (see Feltz & Lirgg, 2001).

Within the youth sport system (see Dorsch et al., 2022), youth sport leaders are of particular interest because they are

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responsible for decision-making regarding the design and delivery of programming to youth.

Sport leaders include coaches, parents, educators, camp counselors, and administrators of sport or extracurricular activities (Newman et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2022). These leaders fulfill multiple complex roles related to achieving the developmental promise of youth sport (Gould, 2019; Newman et al., 2016) and in doing so have the potential to affect the experiences and outcomes of the youth and families who participate (Cruickshank & Collins, 2016). In the increasingly ubiquitous for-profit sector in the United States, sport leaders must be able to promote the effectiveness of their organization (or “product”) to youth sport families (Bruner et al., 2022). The absence of a centralized governing body in youth sport (see Harris & Jedlicka, 2020)—in combination with a need for sport organizations to produce revenue—means that youth sport leaders face various pressures as they attempt to balance performance outcomes with the developmental outcomes sport is known to produce (Dorsch et al., 2022). Moreover, they are often asked to do so with few resources to help them succeed.

Although many other Westernized countries have federal policies and regulations to guide the design and delivery of youth sport (Hartmann-Tews, 2006), the United States remains relatively unregulated, with little centralized oversight. The lack of government policy has left often untrained sport leaders with great discretion to develop one-off strategies to meet the developmental needs and goals of their specific clubs and teams. These leaders likely have diverse perspectives related to financial profits, implementing organizational goals, and managing relationships within their sporting milieu; however, limited research in youth sport has focused on the underlying experiences of leaders themselves (Michalski & Lee, 2021). Indeed, most of the current research on sport leaders is devoted to clarifying aspects of effective leadership, indicating a lack of knowledge about *why* and *how* leaders lead in specific ways to serve their communities and contexts (see Cruickshank & Collins, 2016). As a result, educational resources, trainings, and structured programs have not adequately addressed the developmental concerns, context-specific challenges, and opportunities that youth sport leaders face in contemporary youth sport (Michalski & Lee, 2021).

Anecdotally, youth sport leaders appear acutely aware of their own roles and responsibilities and are also mindful of how broader sociocultural contexts influence youth athletes and their families (see Gould, 2019; Newman et al., 2021). Relevant sociocultural contexts include aspects of individuals, communities, cultures, location, and history that influence patterns of sport participation, with research specifically having been conducted on aspects of accessibility (Eime et al., 2017), type of community (e.g., rural or urban; Fleming et al.,

2023), geographic location (Fleming et al., 2023; Kokolakis et al., 2014), socioeconomic status (Eime et al., 2017; Fleming et al., 2023; Gemar, 2020; Hardiman et al., 2024), commonality of volunteering (Gemar, 2020; Kokolakis et al., 2014), cultural and historical traditions (Gemar, 2020; Hardiman et al., 2024), and weather (Orr & Inoue, 2019). Youth sport leaders influence the sporting environment through direct interactions with families and athletes and indirect administrative roles (e.g., policy creation, implementation, and evaluation). However, there remains a general lack of knowledge about key stakeholders’ perspectives and experiences related to developmentally sound decision-making processes. It is, therefore, important to consider the experiences of these leaders to understand better how they navigate the youth sports landscape.

The Current Study and Guiding Heuristic

Given the scarcity of literature aimed at understanding the experiences of youth sport leaders (Dorsch et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2021), the present study was designed to answer the question: What are youth sport leaders’ perspectives and decision-making processes related to the design and delivery of youth sport in the western United States? The integrated model of the youth sport system (Dorsch et al., 2022) was utilized as a guiding heuristic to frame the results since it conceptualizes a wide range of potential influences across individual, relational, and broader contextual levels. This model combines bioecological, systems, and developmental approaches to foster a more integrated understanding of the interconnected and holistic influences present in the sporting landscape over the course of a child’s participation. Dorsch and colleagues (2022) place athletes at the center of the model; families, peers/teammates, and coaches are posited to be more direct/proximal influences on youth athletes, while organizations, communities, and societies are distal components of the environmental subsystem that provide overt programming, normative behaviors, and wider cultural meanings. However, the model does not fully highlight the role of youth sport leaders in shaping sport experiences and outcomes, so the current study serves to (a) empirically understand leadership roles in relation to sport programming and (b) further refine components of the youth sport system (Dorsch et al., 2022) model.

Method

The present study is a part of a large-scale research project designed to examine the experiences of participants involved in youth sport, unstructured physical activity, and land-use recreation across the western United States. An institutional review board for the protection of human participants approved the study protocol and APA 7th edition ethical standards were adhered to.

The present study utilized interview data from youth sport leaders across the region, and the authors utilized a post-positivist perspective (Panhwar et al., 2017) and a modified qualitative analysis described by Kalpokaite and Radivojevic (2019). This flexible approach allowed the authors to explore the varied perspectives of youth sport leaders while simultaneously relying on past research and theoretical underpinnings when creating categorizations and concepts (Yuwono & Rachmawati, 2023). The analysis integrated inductive and deductive approaches, along with memo-writing, interpretative thinking, and flexibility across procedures, yet remained guided by a post-positivistic perspective. Specifically, this modified analytic protocol included cycles of inspection (basic content analysis and coding), coding (pre-coding, initial coding, elaborative coding), categorization (revisions and adaptations), and modeling (elaboration of the final conceptual framework).

Researcher Positionality

The first author, a White adult female in her late-20s, grew up in the suburbs of a large city, participating in “elite” competitive soccer from a young age. The second author, a Black adult male in his mid-30s, grew up competing in basketball, track and field, and baseball and coached high school and college basketball for seven years. The third author, a White male in his mid-20s, participated in multiple sports growing up, with an emphasis on club basketball. The fourth author, a White male in his late-20s, grew up in a relatively rural area and participated in various sports at the high school level, including soccer, basketball, and baseball. The fifth author, a White female in her mid-30s, actively identifies as an athlete by way of participation in Olympic weightlifting, dance, and figure skating and has experience in the gymnastics community. The sixth author, a White male in his late-20s, has competed in his country’s national track & field championships, was an NCAA Division I student-athlete, and participated in many sport activities as a youth. The seventh author, a White male in his late-40s, currently participates in youth sport as a parent, club director, and coach. He also competed in four sports in high school and was a two-sport Division I college student-athlete and professional athlete. Collectively, the research team values sport and the vital developmental role it plays in young people’s lives while also recognizing how the roles and perceptions of leaders and organizations have the potential to influence youth athletes’ experiences in positive and negative ways. Our independent and collective positionalities helped us serve as insiders and build rapport with participants. These identities also shaped our understandings of sport systems, benefits and challenges of involvement, and interplaying of micro and macro factors in shaping experiences.

Procedures, Participants, and Interviews

Participants were recruited from a four-state region in the western United States using purposeful sampling strategies (Suri, 2011). Inclusion criteria included: currently having more formalized leadership and/or administrative responsibilities in youth sport in at least one of the four states included in the identified region of interest; having experience in an organized sport environment, where adults predominantly lead experiences (as opposed to working only in free play settings); and affiliation with a wider sport or youth organization (as opposed to operating individually). Sport leaders affiliated with different sectors, organizations, and settings were contacted via email or phone to reach potential participants across various settings across the four states. The first author contacted potential participants via cold-calls and emails. Snowball sampling and referrals were then utilized to obtain broader participation from those in similar roles across the four-state region. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and cross-checked for accuracy by the third and fourth authors. The transcribed interviews totaled 363 pages of single-spaced data.

Participants were 24 youth sport leaders who resided in a four-state region of the western United States (see Table 1 for demographic information). Participants took part in semi-structured interviews ($M_{\text{length}} = 46.30$ minutes, $SD = 12.4$ minutes) via Zoom. Research assistants completed ethical and procedural training prior to conducting these interviews, including the first, third, and fifth authors. In line with Wexler’s (2001) call for enhanced knowledge mapping in qualitative research, the interview guide was designed to answer questions about leaders’ perceptions of the who, what, when, where, and why of youth sport. Leaders were specifically asked about *who* participated in sport as it related to their roles (e.g., “What do your participants look like,” “Who in the sporting environment do you most often interact with on a regular basis?”); *what* their job responsibilities and sport for development programming entailed (e.g., “What tasks do you perform daily?”); *when* sport programming was conducted across the year and their time commitments (e.g., “How many months out of the year do athletes participate in this sport?,” “What do your time commitments look like across the year for this role?”); *where* participants participated in sport programs and how this related to youth sport leader location; (e.g., “In what locations do your athletes and sport staff play sport or perform duties?”); and *why* participants, athletes, and others might be involved or not involved in sport (e.g., “Why are you involved in sport?,” “Why might children participate (or drop out) of sport?”). To promote meaningful elaboration, follow-up probes were utilized throughout each interview (Robinson, 2023). Utilizing the who-what-where-when-why aligned with the aim of the current study, affording a relatively comprehensive understanding of leaders’ perceptions of the ways they engage in the design and

delivery of youth sport programming in the western United States.

YOUTH SPORT DESIGN AND DELIVERY

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Number	Type of Stakeholder	Organization Type	Sport(s) Represented	Age Range (years)	Gender	Race	State	Community Type
1	Administrator	National Governing Body	Winter sports	45-54	Male	White	UT	Rural/ Urban
2	Administrator	National Governing Body	Winter sports	55-64	Male	White	UT	Rural/ Urban
3	Administrator	City-wide recreation center	Variety	25-34	Male	White	UT	Rural
4	Manager and administrator	For-profit competitive club	Ice skating and indoor winter sports	35-44	Female	White	UT	Rural/ Urban
5	Administrator	City recreation center	Variety	35-44	Female	White	NM	Urban
6	Administrator	City recreation center	Variety	35-44	Female	Latino White	NM	Urban
7	Coach	National Governing Body	Skiing	25-34	Male	White	UT	Rural
8	Administrator	For-profit business	Parkour	25-34	Male	White	CO	Urban
9	Administrator and coach	More competitive sport club & school-based	Rugby	25-34	Nonbinary	Black	CO	Suburban
10	Coach	School-based sport	Rugby	55-64	Male	Multiracial	CO	Suburban
11	Coach and athletic trainer	School-based sport	Variety	18-24	Female	White	CO	Urban
12	Administrator	For-profit competitive club	Soccer	55-64	Female	White	UT	Suburban
13	Administrator	More competitive sport club & school-based	Rugby	45-54	Male	White	CO	Suburban
14	Coach and sport recruiter	More competitive sport club & school-based	Rugby	25-34	Male	White	CO	Suburban
15	Administrator and parent	Community-based recreation, For-profit competitive club	Variety	35-44	Female	White	NM	Rural
16	Administrator	Nonprofit organization	Fishing	55-64	Male	Latino White	NM	Urban
17	Administrator	Community-based recreation	Variety	25-34	Female	White	WY	Urban
18	Administrator	More competitive sport club & school-based	Lacrosse	35-44	Male	White	NM	Urban
19	Administrator	Nonprofit youth organization	Variety	18-24	Female	White	NM	Suburban
20	Administrator	Community-based recreation	Variety	35-44	Female	White	WY	Urban
21	Administrator	Community-based recreation	Variety	35-44	Male	White	WY	Suburban
22	Administrator	Community-based recreation	Variety	25-34	Male	White	WY	Rural
23	Administrator	Community-based recreation	Variety	18-24	Female	White	WY	Rural
24	Administrator	Community-based recreation	Variety	45-54	Female	White	WY	Rural

PROCEDURE

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by the first, third, and fourth authors using the basic processes outlined by Kalpokaite and Radivojevic (2019), including an inspection cycle, a coding cycle, a categorization cycle, and a modeling cycle. *Inspection* included the researchers inductively familiarizing themselves with the data via reviewing transcriptions at least twice. Basic coding and content analyses were utilized during this stage, with the first, third, and fourth authors highlighting relevant topics of interest. *Coding* included the researchers highlighting unique aspects of transcripts via pre-coding, initially creating broad codes around the findings, and then deductively comparing codes to concepts within the integrated model of the youth sport system (Dorsch et al., 2022) to create more elaborative codes. Although emergent codes were compared to the model, the authors chose to adapt some unique phrasing to better encapsulate and complement terminology from the model while retaining the perspectives and language used by study participants. The steps of *categorization* and *modeling* were undertaken by the first author and included the revision and creation of broader themes with focused coding, revisiting the integrated model of the youth sport system (Dorsch et al., 2022), and finalizing the conceptual framework. Engaging in these iterative analytic procedures required both inductive and deductive procedures and ultimately allowed the research team to develop a framework around the perspectives described by participants.

To increase methodological rigor, the first, third, and fourth authors engaged in triangulation (see Archibald, 2016) to discuss and limit biases. This process allowed for the more nuanced coding of themes and their interrelationships as they related to the conceptual framework. The remaining authors served in “critical friendship” roles by challenging the assumptions made in the analysis and by highlighting biases that may have shaped initial interpretations of data and interrogating the finalized framework that was ultimately derived from the analytic process (Kincheloe et al, 2011). An example of this entire process included highlighting content of interest related to when youth participants dropped out (code: “drop out around middle and high school”; *inspection* phase); comparing this to other codes related to general disparities (e.g., socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity) and to the youth sport system model to create more a more elaborative code that encapsulated aspects systematic influences on sport (*coding* phase); and *categorization* and *modeling* phases that led to the creation of organizational and cultural influences on sport leader decision-making. Triangulation and critical processes facilitated further distinction and refinement of this theme into distinct organizational/sport, community, and cultural influences.

Results

Participants reported a complex variety of possible influences on sport design and delivery when situating themselves within the youth sport system in the western United States. These perceptions shaped their decision-making processes around youth sport programming and implementation. Results are categorized into proximal and distal influences, which aligns with the definitions set forth by Dorsch and colleagues (2022).

Proximal Influences on Decision-Making and Sport Programming

Proximal components included *individual* and *relational* subcategories. Participants highlighted the importance of motivation, assigned roles and responsibilities, daily duties, and relational interactions in shaping how they designed and delivered sport programming. Awareness of athlete opportunities and challenges was largely shaped by interactions with families, young athletes, and others, with participants reporting that their positions could involve more direct or constant exchanges or more indirect and infrequent exchanges.

Individual Influences on Youth Sport Leaders

Non-formal and individualized reasons for involvement were cited by participants as crucial in facilitating positive sport experiences. Motivation and personal reasons for involvement

were directly related to how youth sport leaders chose to implement specific programming. Youth sport leaders reported that they had their own reasons for continued involvement, with many citing a general passion and desire to help athletes, parents, and others achieve their goals in these settings as a primary factor for staying in their leadership roles: “I achieve my goals when they achieve their goals, or they’re feeling good about the path that they’re on, the road that they’re leading for the future” (Participant 4). Others reported that wider aspirations to change the entire culture of sport motivated them daily and shaped their own behaviors and decisions:

The culture in (in sport) is that if you’re gonna go start a sport, that means that you’re going straight to the top ... But sport is so much more ... So, my vision is to be able to install [sic] that into society. (Participant 6)

It is notable that none of the participants mentioned salary or more financial-based goals as regular reasons for shaping involvement. Rather, their personal beliefs in the value of sport shaped decisions around how and when to interact with athletes, parents, families, and others within their organizations and communities.

More formalized roles, responsibilities, and duties served to direct daily objectives and behaviors related to sport design and delivery. The explicit roles and responsibilities of a position largely dictated leader’s goals and perceptions of sport. For example, one participant primarily served in a direct coaching role on a ski team and thus describes daily processes relative to creating effective practices for different ages of skiers:

Practice for the littlest ones is an hour and 15 ... They’re not skiing the whole time ... Middle schoolers, hour and a half. They’re moving most of that time. But ... they get breaks every 15 to 20 minutes to get some water and catch their breath, or whatever they need. (Participant 7)

However, these duties and responsibilities became more complex for participants that reported exhibiting multiple stakeholder roles – administrator, management, coaching, parent – sometimes simultaneously. Those individuals described a need to successfully transition between positions and to understand how job duties and responsibilities overlapped to ensure that they could effectively deliver sport programming across all roles. For example, one coach that served in recruiter, coach, and referee roles explained how these experiences helped them maintain a more holistic understanding:

When I look at matches, now I look at it more as a referee ... Like, okay, look at that play. Why didn’t that player do this? And really looking at it. Well, how can I use that? As coaching, going into games? (Participant 11).

Each participant’s combination of duties and roles provided them with a unique perspective to inform their decision-making. In the absence of universalized governing sport bodies, sport leaders in this region rely on personal motivations to facilitate sport programming and take on a variety of roles and positions, with even the same positions having drastically different duties and responsibilities.

Relational Influences on Youth Sport Leaders

Relationships were described as key components shaping sport design and delivery. Sport leaders specifically considered how roles, familial motivations for sport involvement, and ideas about effective leadership shaped relational outcomes. They relied on both implicit perceptions and understandings and explicit communication and contact with coaches, youth athletes, parents, and other stakeholders within the system. However, the formalized roles of youth sport leaders largely shaped what implicit or explicit sources of information they utilized to make decisions. Those holding administrative-type roles reported more indirect or explicit contact with athletes and families. One administrator highlights this lack of frequent interaction: “The coaches are obviously more hands on with the kids. I’m usually able to walk around and I interact a little bit, but the coaches are the ones who are hands-on with the kids” (Participant 3).

Often those with more supervisory roles felt responsible for providing supervision and guidance for coaches to indirectly influence athletes and parents. However, some reported that they ended up interacting with parents directly because parents often served in voluntary staff or coaching roles: “The parents are usually involved, because we have to have volunteer coaches ... The parents are involved at some level with either coaching or just helping out with being there, bringing snacks after the end of the game” (Participant 3). Others in higher levels of administration did not necessarily interact with athletes or parents but acknowledged that they were responsible for helping create policies, philosophies, and procedures regulating parent involvement:

We’ve been trying to create greater parent engagement, then we’ve had before ... We’ve really been trying to bring, bring parents in. And ... if you were to describe kind of our philosophy ... we often refer to them less as teams and more as clubs. (Participant 2)

In contrast, those with coaching or managerial roles reported more *direct or explicit* contact with youth athletes, parents, families, and others. Participant 18 highlighted the direct role coaches play in shaping athlete experiences and retention:

One reason that kids might stop (playing sport) is ... coaching ... You often don't have experienced adults that know the game well enough to both inspire and coach well, and develop players in the way they need to be developed.

These results emphasize that those working in different roles rely on different sources of relational information when making decisions about sport programming and that coaches and others that directly work with athletes have clearer influences on youth sport programming via relational outcomes.

Perceived Motivations. The perceptions that participants held around what families, athletes, and others wanted from sport involvement also shaped their choices related to sport design and delivery. Leaders reported that athletes had diverse, but mostly positive, goals for participating in sport: “Anywhere from wanting to go to the Olympics one day ... to, like, be a good teammate for their team and be a good role model for the community. But yeah, basically, the whole spectrum” (Participant 7). Parental and family involvement, in contrast, could be more negative than positive. Negative aspirations included parental ambitions that were under-involved or overinvolved in their child's sport participation, including more maladaptive behaviors, such as screaming on the sidelines. Participant 20 explains that overinvolved parents exist and that there is a need for immediate intervention to stop those behaviors:

Just having that conversation with them ... “Listen, it's great that you're so involved in your kids' sports, and I love that you're here and encouraging them. But maybe yelling at them to get their butt moving across the court is not always is a helpful thing.”

However, some parents had more positive aims for sport involvement with their children, engaging in supportive and appropriate behaviors: “There wasn't a big separation. They just respected that I was their coach, and they encouraged me to coach their kids ... Their involvement was more of just support than anything else for the kids” (Participant 14). Stakeholders often attempted to target these diverse goals for participation by promoting aspects of development and competition and by intervening when parents engaged in destructive sporting behaviors.

Concepts of Effective Leadership. Leadership was an important aspect of facilitating positive sport outcomes. Participants highlighted how effective leaders mitigated negative goals and behaviors and encouraged more positive aspirations and behaviors. To achieve this, some participants in administration relied on formal or informal evaluations to establish effective policies:

What I've found is that to really make the headway we're trying to make, I need to spend my time in the evaluation and the planning ... And then spend time with those programs ... laying out a solid plan that says, okay, you know, we need to do a better job of addressing these things. (Participant 1)

Though most participants did not mention an explicit guiding framework related to effective leadership, it was clear that leaders reported the necessity of being able to see the needs of athletes and families and then the ability to address these to facilitate a more positive experience.

Distal Influences on Decision-Making and Sport Programming

Distal components included perceptions of the *organization and/or sport*, the *community*, and the *current sport culture* in the United States. These influences were reported to be more ambiguous and looming, indicating that it was more difficult for participants to understand, mitigate, and leverage these components to foster youth sport participation.

Organizational and/or Sport Influences

Participants attested that there were sport cultures and related norms that existed and need to be considered when determining policies and plans around sport involvement. Culture and norms were related to history, traditions, and currently accepted behaviors within a particular sport organization or sport. These influenced the sporting environment as youth sport leaders needed to account for them in the design and delivery of sport programming. For example, one participant explains that there is a strong alternative or counter-cultural movement often historically associated with parkour, which influences who participates in this sport:

The culture of parkour, it has its fundamental roots ... in punk rock skater culture. It is very much that counter idea of, “nope, you can't tell you what to do, I want to have I want to move in the way I want to move.” ... You get into the idea of parents being like, “Oh, I don't want my kid jumping on rooftops, I don't want them breaking into buildings.” (Participant 8)

Given this history, Participant 8 also reported that it was difficult to facilitate wider regulations and more universal scoring options for performances to coaches and others due to this counterculture. Another participant mentioned that lacrosse is often perceived by others to be a sport for privileged, White youth: “So, what has happened is youth players are like, oh, it's just a private school sport. You know, lacrosse already has the issue of being a Whit, rich sport” (Participant 18). They reported that it was challenging to recruit traditionally marginalized athletes due to this

stereotype and that there was a need to reach out to these groups to go against these beliefs. The specific perceptions leaders had about organizational and sport cultures and norms thus impacted the design and delivery of youth sport programming.

Community Influences

Community influences included how youth sport leaders perceived various community factors to affect their organization and how organizations situated themselves within a given setting. All sport leaders wanted to positively influence their surrounding communities. Participants mentioned how geographic location, community norms, and town standards influenced sport participation and retention. For example, one stakeholder discussed a need to consider how to ensure that the timing was appropriate for sport programs to allow for locals from nearby indigenous reservations to participate: “There’s ... maybe seven small reservation schools within a 40-minute drive ... that also participate in a lot of our programs. So, logistically when we’re creating programs, ... we ... do very few things right after school” (Participant 24). This participant thus reported that they started programs later because they needed to account for this specific community context to most effectively support participation, particularly for a historically marginalized group.

Youth sport leaders also highlighted several location and community norms and explained that it was vital to account for these influences when making decision about their youth sport programming. For example, Participant 17 specifically highlights how they utilized their lived knowledge about the demographics of their communities to increase participation from families in structurally vulnerable communities:

We’re one of the bigger cities in Wyoming ... We have our poor communities ... We don’t require specific shoes, we don’t require them to go out and buy uniforms, and that kind of thing. And we are able to really be available for more of our poor communities.

Participant 6 highlights that their town was more basketball-oriented and expressed how the COVID-19 pandemic affected this culture in the longer term:

We are very much a basketball town (but) COVID kind of changed the culture and changed the mindset of the people around town. And so, people are less likely to sign up for a league ... I mean, we still get a lot of participation, but a lot of it is less organized.

Referring to a “basketball town,” this participant described a community norm and culture that values basketball, along with how challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic and

perceptions of safety led to more participation in free play and unstructured forms of basketball and sport.

Broadly, these youth sport leaders wanted to help serve the community, requiring them to understand its needs to improve the overall health and wellbeing of its residents. Having a good understanding of community norms and challenges allowed youth sport leaders to better implement programs, with Participant 9 highlighting how she developed a sport program to help people with intellectual disabilities since her community did not have many therapy services for this population:

When I first started here ... we saw a need in the community. We have a couple of therapy services within the community, but they stop at five years old ... So, I started a program ... It was basically meant for kids; it was a PE program where we would introduce kids with varying abilities into sport. (Participant 9)

Leader knowledge of community strengths and needs served to foster more effective sport programming and improved participant outcomes, highlighting a need for community-oriented programming.

Cultural Influences

Cultural influences refer to perceptions about wider cultural norms and influences across states, regions, and the entire United States. Reported state and regional influences varied and included geographic conditions, policies, and general norms around sport in physical activity in a particular area. For example, one participant explains that it is difficult to participate in and coordinate organized sport in the west due to a need to travel large distances: “It’s tough here, especially in the west. Officials are traveling large distances to get places. So, they’re getting in a car and driving for hours and running up and down a football field” (Participant 22). Leaders also reported a generalized need for coordination between varied organizations across states and regions, as larger groups can collect more information and allow for more systematic forms of decision-making around youth sport programming. Participant 20 had worked to personally develop a state-wide organization to foster cooperation, develop more universal policies, and effectively foster more state-wide sport participation and retention:

Just trying to share that (information) with everybody, even the small people [towns]. Because there’s a lot of small towns in Wyoming, and they’re not represented ... We’ve reached a lot of people. I think we have a huge impact.

Moreover, youth sport leaders described how larger, country-wide influences in the United States shaped local and regional youth sport participation, including (a) the COVID-19

pandemic, (b) sport specialization versus diversification, (c) pay-to-play sport models, and (d) broader disparities. Issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic included policies and a need to adjust sport programming to meet conflicting and changing federal and state guidelines. Participants mostly described more negative long-term impacts on participation rates and retention, including Participant 7: “The program is just starting to pick back up now. And I feel like it’s, we’re starting to get back to a better place, almost to where we were prior to the pandemic.” These challenges highlight issues with federal and state cohesion and translatability, which can lead to detrimental outcomes for sport organizations and participants.

Issues related to *specialization versus diversification* included a perceived need to either conform to a model that promotes specialization in one sport or to conform to a model that promotes diversification and more community-based physical activity involvement. Participant 12 discussed the challenge of establishing policies or procedures for athletes missing time away from the club due to the large volume of their athletes in the area diversifying their sporting experiences:

Most of our multi-sport athletes are really good athletes ... And that’s a dilemma we talk about ... We would love to have consequences for the kids who are missing ... But ultimately, those are usually really athletic kids, and it hurts the team more ... So, we go back and forth. What are we? Are we [a] competitive club? Are we a community club? What are we?

This sport leader wanted to serve diverse child and parent aspirations, but their organization and other competing organizations held policies to promote specific types of athlete development and participation (e.g., year-round elite sport participation, seasonal positive youth development), ultimately reflecting larger issues of specialization present across the United States.

Issues related to *pay-to-play sport models* referenced a lack of access for lower socioeconomic status families and a need to pay a large amount for elite or better-quality participation, with Participant 13 concisely describing issues associated with this model:

The big problem with American rugby is if you use the pay-to-play model, you kind of get ... middle-class kids. Or you rule out ... the inner-city kids ... If you wanted to play on the travel team, it’s like \$20,000 a year for your 14-year-old kids.

Broader *disparities* demonstrated in sport and even general physical activity settings included issues related to socioeconomic status, gender, race, and ethnicity. Many participants reported that these disparities largely shaped *who* participated in their sport organizations, with Participant 11 providing more detailed insights into how these disparities

can influence job duties and stressors due to the need for leaders to become a multi-faceted resource for disadvantaged students:

I’m in a fairly lower socioeconomic area ... Oftentimes, the parents are working, and so they’re not there to really support the kids. So, I would say that I am largely the only medical care ... unless I’m sending them to the [emergency room] ER or something ... And then ... athletic trainers are largely counselors. We are hanging-out buddies, we are safe adults in their world ... My kids are in here all the time. They tell me everything about their lives ... We’re tutors and kind of parents for them. So, it’s a lot.

Participants often viewed cultural perceptions and processes as vaguer and more difficult to challenge, although they reported trying to mitigate challenges and leverage opportunities situated within these wider systems to promote youth sport involvement more effectively.

Discussion

The present study was designed to answer the question: What are youth sport leaders’ perspectives and decision-making processes related to the design and delivery of youth sport in the western United States? The results of the inductive-deductive adapted qualitative data analytic process (see Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019) framed participants’ perceptions and outcomes in terms of concepts related to proximal and distal components of the youth sport system (see Dorsch et al., 2022). Proximal components included individual and relational interactions, while distal components included organizational/sport, community, and cultural interactions.

Empirical Contributions

This study provides novel contributions related to its description of how participants recognized and described proximal and distal factors influencing their organizations’ ability to deliver on the developmental promise of youth sport. At more proximal levels, individuals relied on formalized and informalized sources of information when designing and delivering youth sport programming. These findings align with research on the need for role clarity for sport administrators and stakeholders (Friedman et al., 2004; Parnell et al., 2022) and on the importance of values in shaping leadership behaviors (Peachey et al., 2015). Moreover, these results highlight that quality forms of relationship-building are integral to sport programming, despite being largely understudied and underutilized in this context (Kim & Trail, 2011; Nolan et al., 2024; Wylleman, 2000). Interventions for youth sport leaders could be particularly influential given that they are often responsible for programming and policy creation and need to utilize

accurate and varied sources of relational knowledge to effectively shape positive participant experiences and outcomes (Gould & Voelker, 2012).

This study also highlights how participants understand and attempt to mitigate or leverage distal influences in the design and delivery of youth sport programming. While *organizational/sport* perceptions have been found to impact the design and delivery of sport programming in other past research studies on professionalized sport (Blumberg & Markovits, 2021; Girardin et al., 2020), the role of these influences on youth sport have largely been ignored. However, it was apparent from current findings that these pertinent perceptions and processes included sport- and organizational cultures (e.g., history, traditions) and that these served as unofficial markers for *normative* and *non-normative* trends within these settings. *Community* perceptions and processes included broader community factors and how organizations situated themselves within a given social milieu, with other scholars also finding that most youth sport leaders feel a sense of acknowledgement and social responsibility towards their communities (Moyo et al., 2020; Zeimers et al., 2021). Finally, *cultural* perceptions and processes included state, regional, and national norms for sport, aligning with past studies on this topic (see Kelly et al., 2022; McCullough et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2021). Taken together, results suggest that youth sport leaders assess and incorporate multiple influences into the design and delivery of activities.

A final novel and unexpected finding includes insights into how participants interpreted and aimed to mitigate challenges associated with structurally vulnerable groups and broader cultural disparities. Prior research indicates that certain demographic factors, including race, employment status, marital status, and neighborhood type serve as differentiators with regards to how youth and parents experience sport, typically in the form of barriers to access and/or participation (Alexander et al., in press; Fleming et al., 2023; Hardiman et al., 2024; Pandya, 2021; Whitley et al., 2021). Participants were often aware of potential barriers and disparities facing youth and their families but struggled to make programmatic decisions to support traditionally marginalized groups to meaningfully participate in sport. Because this setting has historically been constrained by societal inequities and lack of accessibility due to gender, income, and other disparities (Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Hardiman et al., 2024; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011), a lack of knowledge or even a lack of acknowledgment of these issues may inadvertently perpetuate structural issues within youth sport settings. Lower-level, more local youth sport leaders may have an advantage in addressing these inequities as they are able to make quicker, more nuanced adaptations to their programs to the unmet needs of the local community.

Theoretical Contributions

Regarding the environmental subsystem, the current study focuses on sport leaders from the western United States, and specific suggestions can be made to help sport leaders in this area based on the current analysis. This region is characterized by certain geographical, geological, and meteorological conditions that influence seasonal sport involvement and accessibility to distinctive forms of sport and physical activity (e.g., skiing, hiking, mountain biking). It is also a region characterized by a low population density, meaning that travelling long distances to participate in these and other sports is common and expected. Furthermore, these environmental characteristics are not static. Climate, population centers, and cultural norms will continue to change, requiring youth sport leaders to adapt their approaches and perspectives throughout their careers. This highlights the developmental, dynamic aspects of all parts of the youth sport system. Further investigation into how the levels of the youth sport system change in isolation and in relation to one other may allow for better delivery of current and future youth sport programs.

The present study also extends the integrated model of the youth sport system (Dorsch et al., 2022) by providing new insights into how sport leaders perceive the various *family*, *team*, and *environmental* subsystems that surround youth athletes. The current model does not explicitly address administrators and other sport leaders, yet it is apparent that these actors have substantial impacts on athlete and familial experiences and outcomes. It is clear from the current study that leaders often interact directly with *family* and *team* subsystems to navigate personal and professional aspects of sport-contingent relationships, so more attention should be given to common roles that these leaders might play in shaping the sport system. Additionally, findings related to role multiplicity suggest a need to reconsider how various actors can play direct and indirect roles across varied subsystems and additionally hint at a need to consider the strengths and weaknesses in having one person holding diverse roles (e.g., being a parent, coach, and administrator in sport; Elliott & Drummond, 2017).

Implications for Youth Sport Policy, Practice, and Professional Development

Notably, many participants recognized there were no formal regulations or policies to guide decision-making in their organizations or communities, nor were there well-established informal guidelines or cultural norms. In fact, many of these youth sport leaders reported confusion and a general difficulty in addressing certain wider issues occurring across the broader youth sport landscape. Given that youth sport is an industry worth anywhere from 9 to over 15 billion dollars (Howie et al., 2020; Worldmetrics, 2024), there is a need to unveil the

contextual factors and processes further guiding how youth sport leaders seek and access educational resources for their professional development in these higher stake environments. Moreover, consideration of alternative governance structures across federal, regional, or state levels could facilitate more focused policies and guidelines related to the position/role clarity of sport leaders, universal policies and procedures for sport development, and safeguarding youth athletes (Harris & Jedlicka, 2020). Ultimately, researchers and practitioners should consider utilizing context-sensitive approaches (Ooms et al., 2021) and should carefully consider their invention orientation (e.g., universal versus context-specific principles; Barge, 2023) when making recommendations for sport organizations across diverse settings.

Considering these contributions, the present study provides potential implications for researchers and leaders concerned with the development of individuals, teams, clubs, and communities within the youth sport system. Participants often engaged in multi-faceted roles (Newman et al., 2021) and relied on their own perceptions and experiences to make decisions. Driven by a lack of broader policies and regulations, there is a growing need to provide ongoing professional development resources to youth sport leaders in the western United States. Prior scholarship suggests that leaders typically draw upon their personal experiences, which ultimately influence youth athletes and their families in both negative and positive ways (Camiré et al., 2012). Despite the potential benefits of educational resources, a notable emphasis within coach training remains on the development of resources related to performance, potentially neglecting other critical dimensions of sport leadership (Blom et al., 2011). To be more leader-focused, there is a pressing need to understand how contextually based perceptions and processes underpin the actions of youth sport leaders, especially since these factors influence leadership skills, behaviors, processes, and policies. Incorporating more contextually focused designs into current curriculum and research studies surrounding youth sport leader decision-making and development could lead to more relevant leadership and educational resources specific to the voiced needs and concerns of the target audience (Newman et al., 2016).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the contributions made by this study, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Although the study provided an in-depth analysis of youth sport leaders' experiences, data are constrained to the perspectives of leaders in the western United States. This is a unique context for sport, including widespread opportunities for winter sports and a unique geographical and social landscape. Future research should examine various actors, time-based factors, and sociogeographical contexts to gain insights into broader relational and motivational considerations present in the

youth sport system; this would also shed light on the reciprocal influences present in this setting (Dorsch et al., 2022). For example, future research could be designed to better understand the perspectives of sport leaders in different developmental contexts (e.g., school-based sport, intercollegiate athletics, professional sport settings) or regions (e.g., the Eastern United States, Canada, Europe) to gain better insights into the full range of relational and motivational considerations. Furthermore, while the present research did not delimit participants to a certain set of structural goals or aims, future work could be designed to investigate leaders' perspectives within a specific setting (e.g., recreational sport, interscholastic sport, or "elite"/travel sport).

CONCLUSION

Youth sport leaders face numerous challenges as they attempt to design and deliver programming that meets the athletic, social, and emotional (i.e., developmental) needs of youth in the United States. However, little research has sought to understand these leaders' contextual perceptions and processes. The present study explored the perspectives of youth sport leaders in the western United States, providing insights into the complex influences that shape their involvement in youth sport. Considering the present findings, future developmental researchers seem well-positioned to more carefully consider the proximal and distal influences that affect sport leaders' ability to meet the needs of athletes, families, and communities. Teaching sport leaders to recognize and leverage or mitigate these opportunities or constraints will allow them to more thoughtfully shape the values, goals, and organizational structures that will define the next generation of youth sport. In taking on this meaningful challenge, youth sport leaders must be prepared to navigate an unregulated setting in their efforts to deliver on the promise of youth sport.

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