“Going the Extra Mile”: Fostering Social Connections within After-school, Sport-based PYD Programs

by

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Abstract

Social relationships between staff and youth are often regarded as one of the most important mediums to achieving positive youth development (PYD) program aims (McDavid & McDonough, 2019). Despite the promising impacts of staff and youth relationships within sport-based PYD settings, little research has explored how staff foster connections with youth in these settings—particularly youth who are considered at-risk. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to describe and interpret staff members' perceptions of how they foster social connections with youth at-risk within after-school, sport-based PYD programs. Purposefully selected participants included ten staff members (eight women and two men), that work within after-school, sport-based PYD programs. Data were generated via one-on-one semi-structured interviews that were conducted either in-person or via Zoom. All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Smith and Nizza's (2022) four-step process of data analysis was used to identify six themes that represent the findings of this study: (1) getting to know, investing, and showing intention towards youth, (2) fostering positive spaces and relationships, (3) allowing for autonomy and leadership, (4) practicing what you preach, (5) awareness of power dynamics, and (6) approaching with caution. Grounded in the experiences of staff members, findings from this study highlight critical considerations and strategies for fostering social connections with youth that may function to improve the experiences of both youth at-risk and staff members in sport-focused PYD programs.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Katie Jeannie Marie Kavic. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board 1, Project Name "From a staff perspective: Fostering social connections with youth at-risk in an after-school, PYD sport program," Pro00136673, December 6, 2023.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to a man who vacates a particularly special and singular place in my heart—Grandpa Ed. You nurtured my love for reading and learning, and for that I am forever grateful and indebted to you. This thesis—my journey into university and graduate school—would not have happened without your love, support, guidance, and knowledge. I miss you everyday, wish you were here to read this, and hope everyday that I am making you proud.

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CHAPTER 1: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

During any typical school week, children and youth have between 20 to 25 hours of time that is free from supervision and school-related responsibilities (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2007). The time between 2:00 pm and 6:00 pm is described as "the riskiest time for youth", as troublesome behaviours are most likely to occur during this potentially unsupervised time (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2007, p. 58). However, research has demonstrated that this timeframe after school allows the chance for youth and children to engage in physical activity opportunities (Holt et al., 2013). Increasing demands on classroom learning and the elimination of recess time also provide further justification for physical activity or sport focused after-school programs (Weiss et al., 2019).

Participation of children and youth in sport and physical activities can be associated with physical, social, cognitive, and psychological benefits (Herbison et al., 2019; Weiss et al., 2019). Physical activity is a practical foundation for positive youth development (PYD), as programs have the potential to address multiple components of wellbeing for at-risk youth and may further benefit youth by helping foster skills and assets required to ensure their long-term wellbeing—if intentionally structured (McDavid & McDonough, 2019; Ullrich-French & McDonough, 2013). However, as mentioned by McDavid and McDonough (2019), the promotion of positive values and outcomes within PYD programs is dependent on the quality of the social relationships formed in these settings. The staff of PYD sport and physical activity programs are regarded as a "valuable source for introducing, reinforcing, and modelling PYD programme values and goals" (McDavid & McDonough, 2019, p. 479). Social relationships between staff and youth are often regarded as one of the most important mediums to achieving PYD program aims (McDavid & McDonough, 2019, p. 490). Particularly within after-school settings, staff stand outside of the

roles and constraints of teachers and parents, where they have the potential to provide a safe context for support and guidance, whilst still being able to pass on adult values, advice, and perspectives to youth (Rhodes, 2004). Despite the promising impacts of staff-youth relationships within PA and sport-focused PYD settings, little to no research has explored how staff foster connections with youth in after-school PA or sport-focused PYD settings. The purpose of this research was to describe and interpret staff members' perceptions of how they foster social connections with youth at-risk within after-school, sport-based PYD programs.

The Benefits of Physical Activity and Sport-Focused After-school Programs

Physical activity (PA) and sport-focused after-school programs for youth have the potential to provide an affordable, safe, and enjoyable space for youth to engage in various forms of PA (Holt et al., 2013). For children and youth, the potential benefits of participating in sport and physical activity are widely known—where participation is linked to a myriad of psychological, psychosocial, and physical health outcomes (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2007). Namely, youth may be provided with opportunities to foster new friendships, experience improvements in their self-esteem, gain confidence when interacting with peers and adults, and may experience a reduction in both depression and anxiety (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2007). There are also many academic benefits that are both directly and indirectly linked to participation in physical activity and sport, where children and youth experience improved cognitive function, higher academic achievements, reduced rates of dropout, and greater odds of attending college full-time (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2007).

Despite the promising impact of integrating physical activity or sport into after-school programs, the evidence supporting the effectiveness of these programs in yielding positive outcomes is still mixed (Holt et al., 2013). However, implementing a positive youth development

(PYD) focus into after-school programs is known to have significant positive effects on youth involvement within both after-school programs and physical activities (Marttinen et al., 2019). McDavid and McDonough (2020) argue that not all PA-focused contexts result directly in positive psychosocial outcomes, but “if programs are intentionally designed to provide a positive social environment, they have the potential to be very effective PYD contexts" (p. 1). Therefore, the potential of PYD as a guiding framework to promote and enhance positive outcomes for youth in both sport and physical activity settings is important to explore.

Positive Youth Development Within Sport and PA Contexts

PYD is a field of practice that aims to address and extend the skills, competencies, attributes, and successes of youth among all life domains (Ullrich-French et al., 2012). In contrast to prevention-oriented approaches that seek to avoid or minimize troublesome behaviour in youth, PYD places emphasis on building youth’s potential in their competencies to be successful (Johnston et al., 2019; Ullrich-French et al., 2012). PYD as a framework within youth programming utilizes a strengths-based approach that intends to develop a variety of protective factors such as meaningful relationships with adults and social supports (Newman et al., 2022) rather than focusing solely on reducing problem behaviours (Strachan et al., 2018; Webb & Karlis, 2019).

There are several ways to conceptualize PYD; however, within sport contexts (Fuller et al., 2013; Herbison et al., 2019, Weiss et al., 2019), and PA contexts (Iachini et al., 2017), the 5Cs of PYD outcomes developed by Lerner et al. (2005) is an effective and widely used model. The 5Cs framework uses five broad characteristics (competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection) as measures to evaluate the positive development of youth over time (Holt et al., 2012; Webb & Karlis, 2019). Fuller et al. (2013) provides a useful description of four of the 5Cs,

where competence is defined as the development of a range of skills within health, physical, social, and cognitive domains; confidence is recognized as the self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-worth of youth participants; connection is described as the ability for youth to develop and maintain positive social relationships with non-family adults, peers, family, and community members; and character is referred to as positive qualities and values such as trustworthiness, respect, and accountability that are exhibited and acted on by youth. The fifth C, caring (sometimes referred to as compassion) is defined as an individual's sense of sympathy and empathy for others (Jones et al., 2011). There is also a sixth 'C', contribution, that is discussed within some literature that uses Lerner et al.'s (2005) model, where youth have the potential to contribute meaningfully to society as an outcome of developing these five characteristics (Fuller et al., 2013; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Strachan et al., 2018).

The benefits of integrating PYD into programming for youth is discussed both in PA and sport-focused contexts. In physical activity contexts, Ullrich-French et al. (2012) recognize that utilizing PA as a vehicle for PYD has notable potential because of the myriads of benefits that result from participation, especially in terms of both mental and physical health. Community sport-based PYD programs provide a setting where activities can be intentionally designed to engage youth in meaningful experiences and promote social and health-related developmental outcomes (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2019). The development of these personal assets within youth through PYD sport programs "supports an individual's ability to engage in resilience-promoting behaviour" (Warner et al., 2019, p. 1-2). Along with this, an acknowledged strength within sport-based PYD programs is the potential positive impact of adult figures such as staff (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2019). Within the general context of PYD, supportive relationships and interactions with both peers and adults will determine the ability to which youth acquire and

build upon vital developmental outcomes (Ullrich-French & McDonough, 2013). More specifically, positive relationships held between youth and adults, and supportive and caring environments fostered by adult leaders are associated with positive outcomes for youth (Ullrich-French & McDonough, 2013). To further support this point, Iachini et al. (2017) argues that "the interactions between youth participants and program leaders are critical for maximizing positive youth development during after-school hours" (p. 44). However, even though relationships developed between committed adults and youth are one of the most vital assets in adolescents' lives' for promoting PYD (Bowers et al., 2015), research that explores the relationships between youth and nonfamily adults within after-school PYD physical activity or sport contexts is nearly non-existent.

The literature on PYD as a general framework within sport and physical activity is extremely vast; however, patterns can be seen amongst studies regarding the outcomes that are evaluated. As mentioned previously, PYD is used widely both as a framework around which PA and sport-focused programs are created and is also used to evaluate the effectiveness of programs in promoting the constructs of PYD. More specifically, Lerner et al.'s (2005) 5Cs model is used throughout PA and sport-focused PYD literature either to ensure or evaluate the presence of caring behaviours, connections with peers and/or adults, positive character traits, and confidence and competence within youth throughout programs. For example, a study by Fuller et al. (2013) used the 5Cs within Lerner et al.'s (2005) framework to examine the extent to which the participation of Black and Latino boys in a PYD, sport-focused program translated to positive developmental outcomes. Alternatively, Lerner et al.'s (2005) framework is also used to ensure the presence of the 5Cs within programming, where Girls on the Run has been explored within PYD literature as a PA-focused program grounded directly in these characteristics (Iachini et al.,

2017). In summary, much of the literature on PYD within PA and sport-focused contexts focus on evaluating the effectiveness of programs in facilitating the development of each of the 5Cs (e.g., Fuller et al., 2013; Weiss et al., 2019), or exploring the impact of the integration of the 5Cs within specific sport programs (e.g., Moore et al., 2021).

Aside from studies that examine the 5Cs, another section of PA and sport-focused PYD literature is dedicated to evaluating the effectiveness of programs in the promotion and transfer of life skills. For example, in the context of a community sport-based PYD program, Newman et al. (2022) explored how negative or challenging experiences of youth function to positively impact the development and transfer of life skills. Furthermore, another study by Newman et al. (2020) sought to understand the impact of key adult figures (staff and caregivers) on the development and transfer of life skill outcomes within a community sport-based PYD program serving urban youth of color. Other studies that have evaluated the effectiveness of PA or sport-based PYD programs also have explored physical health and fitness-related outcomes (e.g., Anderson-Butcher et al., 2019), psychosocial outcomes (e.g., Henert et al., 2021; Ullrich-French & Cole, 2018), and the overall experiences of participants within sport-focused PYD programs (e.g., Johnston et al., 2019; Marttinen et al., 2019).

Although the literature on PYD in sport and PA contexts widely uses Lerner et al.'s (2005) 5Cs framework, these five characteristics are rarely ever examined separately—with little attention paid to their individual influences on youth (Herbison et al., 2019). Furthermore, many sources that use the 5Cs model discuss all five characteristics of PYD together (e.g., Fuller et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2021; Weiss et al., 2019), instead of researching these outcomes independently (Herbison et al., 2019). Holt et al. (2012) mention that it is a consistent challenge of researchers to establish which developmental constructs have the greatest influence on the

positive development of youth. An example utilized by Holt et al. (2012) highlights how there is difficulty establishing if "helping to boost character is more important than improving competence or confidence" (p. 111). However, in the context of this research, connection is argued to be a vital component of PYD that must be separated and examined exclusively, for reasons that will be established in the following sections.

Connection as a Vital Component of PA and Sport-Focused Programs

Programs that allow for the development of social connections are critical in fostering resilience in youth, especially those facing barriers such as poverty, social marginalization, or exposure to risk factors (Agaskar et al., 2020; Warner et al., 2019). Along with this, within sport-focused PYD programs, connections formed between youth and adults contribute to building personal and social assets for youth and play a vital role in wellbeing and development (Ullrich-French et al., 2012). Connection as a developmental construct within PYD has been found in the literature to have significant, positive developmental effects (Holt et al., 2012; Weiss et al., 2019); however, connection is rarely ever examined independently (Herbison et al. 2019; Ullrich-French et al., 2012).

Despite the fact that youth benefit from both the quality and quantity of connections they have with adult figures, Bowers et al. (2015) argue that "youth only need one adult who is crazy about them" (p. 103). This statement is key to acknowledge when understanding the role of facilitators in fostering connections with youth in PA and sport-focused PYD programs. It is most essential to recognize this in settings with youth at-risk, as one connection with one adult could potentially support positively significant outcomes. This is reflected in a report done by Harvard University, where it was found that regarding hardship, "the single most common factor for children who end up doing well is having the support of at least one stable and committed

relationship with a parent, caregiver, or other adult" (Center on the Developing Child, 2015, p. 1). Youth-staff connections are considered throughout the literature on PA-focused (e.g., Iachini et al., 2017) and sport-based PYD programs (e.g., Fuller et al., 2013; Marttinen et al., 2019), but connection is typically only discussed briefly, with little to no detail provided on how social connections are fostered within PA and sport-focused PYD settings. Rather, many studies only address whether social connections are present within programs.

With the intention of creating positive relationships with youth, it is recognized that understanding the previous experiences and meaningful life events of youth may be beneficial in this process (Newman et al., 2022). Marttinen et al. (2019) and Johnston et al. (2019) support this notion and highlight in their research on the REACH program the importance of understanding the lived experiences of program participants to foster an appropriate, safe, and supportive PYD climate. However, only one study that examines staff perspectives on building social relationships with youth in a PA-focused PYD setting addresses the significance of understanding the experiences and life events of youth in order to foster meaningful relationships (McDavid & McDonough, 2019). Therefore, it is vital to address this gap within the current study, and probe staff within PA or sport-focused PYD programs on whether they see importance in understanding the lived experiences of youth to foster positive and supportive relationships.

As previously discerned, studies that do mention the 5Cs evaluate all outcomes together, typically each in a brief manner (Herbison et al., 2019). However, it is relevant to mention that within this section of literature, the results regarding 'connection' as an outcome of PYD are promising. For example, findings by Moore et al. (2021) suggest that in a youth soccer academy PYD setting, "creating a culture of connection allowed for all stakeholders (teammates, coaches, family, and community members) to share in the holistic development of youth" (p. 418). In a

study done by Weiss et al. (2019), all participants within a PA-focused PYD program called Girls on the Run (GOTR) showed statistically significant improvements in both connection with peers and confidence throughout the course of a running program. Despite the importance of these findings, the majority of articles that do explore 'connection' as one of the five constructs only discuss the connection formed between peers, teammates, or friends (Herbison et al., 2019; Holt et al., 2012; Johnston et al., 2019; Vierimaa et al., 2017; Weiss et al., 2019), instead of considering connections made between youth and staff members of sport or PA PYD programs. This is also seen in studies that do not explicitly use the 5Cs model as an overarching framework, where Holt et al. (2012) concluded in the context of school-based sports and intramurals, some of the most meaningful developmental outcomes addressed by youth were the opportunities to develop social connections and friendships with their peers. Even within the research that does examine the importance of social relationships between staff and youth in PYD programs, McDavid and McDonough (2020) argue that only youth perspectives of these connections are explored as opposed to staff perspectives. This research considered the experiences of PYD staff, as McDonough et al. (2018) noted this to be an important future direction within PA-focused, PYD program research.

It is important to mention that a few studies do assess connection as an individual outcome within the context of PYD programs (Herbison et al., 2019; Ullrich-French et al., 2012). Herbison et al. (2019) explored the dynamicity of two PYD developmental constructs—character and connection—within a youth elite volleyball team by assessing the potential for athlete connections to influence character from the beginning of the season to the end. Findings suggest that athletes who were more popular within their teams at the beginning of the season demonstrated greater amounts of prosocial behaviours that developed their character (Herbison

et al., 2019). Herbison et al. (2019) therefore conclude that "connection is a PYD outcome influenced by participation and interaction with social agents within the context of sport" (p. 574). However, this research only evaluated the impact of peer-peer connections on character.

A study conducted by Ullrich-French et al. (2012) examined how changes in social connection are associated with shifts in psychological outcomes within a PA-based PYD program for youth. It was found that social connection perceptions were related to changes in psychological outcomes, where youth were more likely to experience positive effects on global self-worth, attraction to PA, and hope if they held positive perceptions of their social connections within the program. Therefore, Ullrich-French et al. (2012) concluded that interactions between youth participants, their peers, and adults play a vital role in development, and that both peer-peer and adult-youth social connections are important. This point should be emphasized, as a notable commonality amongst the literature on 'connection' in PYD settings is that primarily only peer-peer connections are examined. As a result, a significant gap within research on sport and PA PYD programs is that the 'connection' between staff members and youth is rarely explored. This gap is important to address, as McDavid and McDonough (2020) state that the "social relationships between staff and youth are a key mechanism in achieving PYD program aims" (p. 5).

The Role and Perspectives of Staff within PA and Sport-focused PYD Programs

PA and sport-focused PYD programs allow youth to connect with the adult leaders and staff that have the responsibility of running these programs. Staff members of PA-focused PYD programs are tasked with a multitude of responsibilities, such as facilitating and implementing program plans, creating meaningful experiences for youth, and fostering positive connections between peers (McDavid & McDonough, 2020). Therefore, the quality of PA and sport-focused

programs is impacted by the role of the facilitators, as youth may directly benefit from PYD settings where staff ensure a caring, welcoming, and supportive environment (Ullrich-French et al., 2012). Webb and Karlis (2019) highlight how staff in recreational PA settings can play an important role in the positive development of youth members by working with them to create nurturing and positive relationships, and through developing assets and skills that will help them both in short and long-term experiences (Newman et al., 2022). With PA and sport-focused PYD programs, leaders also support and influence positive interactions between peers (McDavid & McDonough, 2020), which in turn fosters a sense of belonging amongst youth, and contributes to "a sense of psychological safety, engagement, and the retention of youth participants" (Warner et al., 2019, p. 2).

Taking into account all previous points, the imperative role of staff within PA and sport-focused PYD programs cannot be understated. Instructors or staff within PYD programs can be seen as "natural mentors" (Bowers et al., 2015, p. 102), where these roles are held by individuals who work alongside youth in sport, hobbies, or other out-of-school activities. It is suggested that "youth who have natural mentors in their lives report a range of better psychological, socioemotional, and behavioural outcomes across adolescence compared to youth without these relationships" (Bowers et al., 2015, p. 103). Despite this, only a few recent studies have directly examined the various impacts and perspectives of adult staff/facilitators within sport and PA-based, PYD programs. For example, findings by Newman et al. (2020) from a sport-based summer camp suggest that "the independent effect of staff support significantly predicted each of the youth outcome variables" (p. 274), where the variables assessed were self-control, effort, teamwork, social responsibility, social competence, and transfer of learning. Newman et al. (2020) concluded that staff members within PYD sport programs have the potential to positively

impact life skill development, transfer, and the long-term development of youth through supportive relationships and practices.

Findings from Newman et al.'s (2020) study are consistent with previous research conducted by McDavid and McDonough (2020), where youth who reported positive social connections with program staff in a PA-focused PYD setting also reported "positive perceptions of social competence, self-worth, and hope" (pg. 5). Furthermore, McDavid and McDonough (2020) also suggest that observed staff engagement behaviours (e.g., allowing youth to make program-related choices and provide feedback on activities) positively predicted youth participants' perceptions of the relationships they held with staff, in turn positively impacting the social competence, self-worth, and hope of youth. It is clear that positive relationships held between staff and youth in PYD settings are significant—as long-term favorable implications may be the result for youth participants (McDavid & McDonough, 2020). Research within this study by McDavid and McDonough (2020) concludes that engagement behaviours on part of the staff or leaders of PA-focused PYD programs is vital to ensuring that staff are perceived as caring, interested, supportive, and engaged in the establishment of respectful and mutual relationships. Furthermore, research conducted by Riciputi et al. (2020) found that in the context of a summer, PA-focused PYD program, youth who felt more supported by staff members reported higher levels of emotional and behavioural engagement within the program. The association found between staff support towards youth and engagement were found to be significant, therefore demonstrating that staff relationships and support towards youth by staff can either promote or detract youth from PYD programs (Riciputi et al., 2020).

Despite a body of literature that highlights the critical role of staff in PYD programs, only a few studies have examined staff perspectives on facilitating social relationships within these

settings. For example, McDavid and McDonough (2019) conducted a study within a summer PA-focused PYD program, where staff perspectives on fostering connections with youth were examined. Interviews with leaders from a 20-day summer PA-focused program revealed that one-on-one interactions were very important in order to get to know youth participants, as "heart-to-hearts" with youth provided a safe space to discuss thoughts, feelings, and challenges (McDavid & McDonough, 2019, p. 483). Furthermore, participation in physical activities afforded leaders the opportunity to further connect and establish positive relationships with youth (McDavid & McDonough, 2019). McDavid and McDonough (2019) also highlight in their findings that staff leaders placed value on tailoring interactions with youth to meet unique needs, establishing true friendships with youth, taking into consideration the root cause of some undesirable behaviours by youth to develop understanding, and using program downtime to further connect with youth members. In order to support change and growth in youth, staff leaders detail the importance of "engaging youth in learning conversations, modeling positive behaviours to youth, helping youth participate in growth-inspiring activities, and demonstrating what constitutes a positive relationship" (McDavid & McDonough, 2019, p. 488).

Although these findings are encouraging and relevant, it is noted by McDavid and McDonough (2019) that staff only had 20 days to establish and foster connections with youth. Even though short-term relationships have long-term value, McDavid and McDonough (2019) mention that "long-term, continuous relationships are best for supporting growth in young people" (p. 488). The importance of longer-term relationships between youth and adults is also highlighted by Bowers et al. (2015), where in the context of mentoring relationships, positive outcomes are more likely to be experienced by youth in relationships that last at least a year. Taking these points into consideration, it is critical to address the fact that most published

research exploring the impact of staff or staff's perspectives of relationship-building in PA or sport PYD settings are conducted within short-term settings such as summer programs (e.g., McDavid & McDonough, 2019; McDavid & McDonough, 2020; McDonough et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2020; Riciputti et al., 2019). Staff perspectives on fostering connections with youth have not been previously addressed within longer-term PYD settings such as after-school programs, highlighting a gap within the literature that warrants further exploration.

Similar to the research done by McDavid and McDonough (2019), a qualitative study conducted by McDonough et al., (2018) explored youth and staff perspectives on factors that hindered or aided the formation of interpersonal relationships in a summer PA-focused PYD program. Their findings highlight youth perspectives on factors that either supported or prevented the formation of positive peer relationships; however, relevant findings were also discussed regarding staff-youth connections. Youth identified that receiving encouragement and praise from staff was important, and that they felt positively about staff that provided choices, were there for them when needed, maintained fairness, and taught conflict resolution strategies. Staff identified that in terms of interpersonal relationships with youth, it was important to be there for the kids when they were experiencing problems and to demonstrate receptiveness and understanding when youth were angry in order to effectively help. Furthermore, McDonough et al. (2018) described how both staff and youth mentioned the importance of staff spending time with and including youth to foster a mentoring relationship within this setting. They also argued that the structure of the program contributed to forming positive relationships, as there were ample opportunities for participation, skill development, and self-expression.

Findings by McDonough et al. (2018) highlight important PYD program elements that are meaningful to both youth and staff and contribute strategies on the development of positive

relationships between staff and youth and among peers. However, McDonough et al. (2018) state that “future research is needed to examine how best to foster these relationships across the late childhood-early adolescent period” (p. 26). Furthermore, I argue that this is not the only future direction stemming from this study exploring social relationships within PA-focused PYD programs. The authors within this study, along with numerous others (e.g., Ullrich French et al., 2012; Riciputti et al., 2020) examining similar topics commonly focus on ‘low income’ youth populations. However, this is not the only population experiencing risk factors that may benefit from PA and sport PYD programs. For this reason, it is necessary to extend the studied population within research focusing on PA and sport PYD programs to ‘youth at-risk’, as will be discussed in the following section.

PYD and Youth at-risk

Frequently within PA and sport-focused PYD literature, “low-income” (e.g., Johnston et al., 2019, p. 93), “socially vulnerable” (e.g., Newman et al., 2022, p. 456), or “underserved” (e.g., Newman et al., 2020, p. 264) youth are studied. There is acknowledged merit and reason for examining the experiences of low-income, socially vulnerable, or underserved youth in the context of studies on PA and sport-focused PYD programs (e.g., Fuller et al., 2013; Ullrich-French et al., 2012). Notably, such youth experience barriers related to systemic inequities, lack of space for physical activity, higher drop-out rates, lower academic performance, and higher rates of neighborhood violence (Marttinen et al., 2019). Barriers are further exacerbated for youth within marginalized populations such as youth of color (Marttinen et al., 2019) because of potential exposure to risk factors and stressors, poverty, and a lack of social resources (Newman et al., 2020).

A commonly understudied term is ‘youth at-risk’, and it is important to discriminate this term from others such as ‘low-income’ or ‘socially vulnerable’. Although not commonly recognized, ‘low-income’ does not always directly translate to ‘at-risk’, and vice-versa. Thornburg et al. (1991) importantly mention that there are youth who are considered ‘at-risk’ are not necessarily poor and do not belong to a minority group; rather, they can be from affluent families. Risk factors in youth go beyond poverty and may include internal or external factors such as family dysfunction, violence, trauma, mental health disorders, academic challenges and unsafe neighborhoods (Agaskar et al., 2020). Therefore, for the purpose of this research, the term ‘youth at risk’ was used to describe “individuals who have been exposed to risk factors in childhood that correlate with negative physical, mental, and/or emotional outcomes later in life” (Glaser et al., 2022, p. 2). By using this term as opposed to ‘low income’ especially, youth who are exposed to any number of these potential risk factors were included rather than excluded based on socioeconomic status or minority group membership. It is vital to include ‘youth at-risk’ within PA and sport-focused literature, as programs that include forms of physical activity and allow for the development of meaningful social connections may be protective against risk factors such as those aforementioned (Warner et al., 2019). Furthermore, as mentioned by Hopper et al. (2019), youth at-risk often have a sense of distrust in their relationships with adults as a result of being excluded within society. It is imperative that youth at-risk have adult relationships that are founded in safety and trust, as these relationships can help youth to feel better connected with their peers, mentors, and communities (Hopper et al., 2019).

It is well-established amongst the literature on PA and sport-focused PYD programs that connections made between youth and staff members may potentially result in positive outcomes for youth participants (McDavid & McDonough, 2020). Social connections and caring

relationships formed between youth and adults within these settings can act as a protective mechanism against risk factors for youth at-risk that may help youth to flourish both in the present and future (Newman et al., 2022; Warner et al., 2019). Taking this point into consideration, it is critical to better understand how these connections can be facilitated between staff members and youth participants. With the exception of a few studies, it is clear that connections fostered between staff and youth within PA or sport-focused PYD settings are understudied. This research gap is even more pronounced within long-term settings such as after-school programs. As argued by McDavid and McDonough (2019), "PYD programme staff are a valuable resource, and research should continue to recognize and utilize this important resource to enhance programme experiences for both youth and staff" (p. 491). The importance of staff-youth connections may be even more imperative within the context of PYD programs focused on at-risk youth, as such social connections may act as a protective factor against the risk factors they face (Warner et al., 2019). Thus, the purpose of this research was to describe and interpret staff members' perceptions of how they foster social connections with youth at-risk within after-school, sport-based PYD programs.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

Researcher Position

There are components of my identity that likely impact my perspectives and interactions within research, such as the fact that I am an able-bodied, white, heterosexual, cis-gendered female in my mid-twenties. I understand that these components of my identity hold many embedded privileges, along with potential scenarios of power imbalance—especially within research. With this in mind, reflexivity as a practice becomes exceptionally imperative, as the purpose of reflexivity is to bring awareness to any assumptions or power dynamics that may arise within research and addressing these components through a continuous process of learning (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). I carefully approached this research with any potential privileges my identity may hold in mind, and recognize the importance of reflexivity within this research process.

The desire to research this topic stems from both academic and professional interest, where it is important to mention that I have had the privilege to work as an Early Childhood Educator during my time as an undergraduate and graduate student. The roles of 'kinesiology student' and 'early childhood educator' have complimented each other over the years, as my knowledge of the benefits of physical activity, sport, and play for children and youth have aided my role as an educator tremendously. I highly value my role as an educator because I truly love working with children and youth—I learn new things from them every day. They challenge me to think more open-minded about nearly everything, and they help me maintain a positive mindset. I am very much inspired by the children and youth that I work with, and this research would not have been thought of if it was not for my experience as an educator.

Within my role as an educator, along with countless other experiences I have had working alongside children and youth in various play and sport-based settings, the path has led me to this research interest. I have seen first-hand how vital it is to foster strong connections with children and youth in these settings, and the positive implications of these connections. However, I have also seen the importance of creating strong connections with youth at-risk, and at times how challenging this can be for adults. Therefore, my hope is that this research will provide insight on the experiences of staff within sport-based settings, and the ways in which adults foster connections with youth at-risk.

Research Approach

This topic is explored as an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), as this method seeks to understand the lived experience of individuals and how they make sense of these experiences in their own social and personal contexts (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The personal meaning attached to these experiences are vital to explore in IPA, as they relate to "people's views of their world and their relationships" (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 4). This approach aligns very well with my worldview as a researcher, as constructivism posits that realities are multiple— individuals construct and associate personal meanings to their experiences based on their own social and historical backgrounds (Kamal, 2019). IPA studies give value to these personal, subjective, and individual experiences—and the unique contexts in which these experiences occur (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Researchers holding a constructivist worldview understand that their perspectives and realities shape the research they engage in (Kowalski et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to consider my own personal connections to this research topic, and how my own realities and experiences working with youth in an after-school setting impact the construction and

interpretation of the findings. I acknowledge that I am an insider to this research topic, as I currently work in an after-school setting that provides sport to children and youth. As highlighted by Smith and Nizza (2022), identifying as an insider as a researcher has both pros and cons—as it may potentially be easier to recruit participants; however, a greater effort will need to be made to ensure personal ideas associated with the research topic are put to the side in order to illuminate participant experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Practicing reflexivity throughout the research process allows for awareness and reflection on the personal ideas I hold regarding this topic.

IPA has three primary theoretical components: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This first component, phenomenology, attends to the subjective, first-person accounts of experience that are sought out within this methodological inquiry (Smith and Nizza, 2022). Consistent with the phenomenological tradition, the focus is placed on maintaining naturalness in how an individual perceives and speaks on a certain phenomenon, rather than describing phenomena "according to predefined theoretical categories" (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 7). The second component of IPA, hermeneutics, is concerned with meaning-making within research and on part of the researcher (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Within IPA studies, the researcher engages in a 'double hermeneutic' process, where the participants first try to make sense and associate meaning to their experiences and follows with the researcher attempting to interpret the participants' meaning making of their experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). As discussed above, due to my personal connection to this topic, within the findings I will speak to my own experiences as they relate to the words of participants. This will aid in demonstrating how interpretations were constructed, and how I held true to the hermeneutic tradition of IPA by attempting to make sense of participants' experiences using a

constructivist lens. Idiography, the third component of IPA, can be described as the case-by-case, in-depth analysis that occurs with each individual participant and the experiences they share (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Attending to an idiographic approach means analyzing each individual case in relation to their unique context prior to making any conclusive statements or comparing with various other experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). When a detailed analysis of each participant is completed, only then will the researcher attempt to compare and contrast between participant experiences; in other words, seeking out convergence and divergence (Smith, 2004). Each of these principles have a vital function in IPA, and justify decisions made regarding sampling, recruitment, data generation, and the process of data analysis. This will be further discussed within the following sections.

In summary, the primary goal of IPA is to explore and investigate how research participants make sense of their lived experiences—where researchers "attempt to understand what it is like to stand in the shoes of their subject (though recognizing that this is never completely possible) and, through interpretative activity, make meaning comprehensible by translating it" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8). In aligning with the purpose of this research, IPA was used to provide rich descriptive content from the perspective of the participants (i.e., staff) in order to better understand their experiences in fostering social connections with youth at-risk in after-school, sport-based settings (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Participants

Purposefully selected participants included ten staff members that worked in various after-school, PYD programs within the City of Edmonton that provide sport programming to youth. Of the 10 participants, 7 self-identified as female, 2 as male, and 1 did not disclose. Participants were between the ages of 19-27 years and worked with youth between the ages of

12-18. Due to the idiographic nature of IPA studies, “small sample sizes are the norm in IPA” (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p. 94) as they allow for a detailed and comprehensive case-by-case analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Within IPA, it is ideal to aim for a homogenous sample of individuals who share similar experiences (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Love et al., 2020; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) in order to best “understand the true make-up of the research subject matter” (Alase, 2017, p.13). Therefore, participants in this study were purposefully sampled as this allowed for the relevance and significance of the research problem to be addressed by a defined group of individuals (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Participants were purposefully sampled based on the following criteria: having a least one year of experience working within after-school youth sport programming, experience working alongside youth between the ages of 12-18, and must be fluent in English, and had to be currently working with youth at-risk. The participants for this research were purposefully sampled through both my professional and personal networks, and a snowball sampling approach was also used. As stated by Bowers et al. (2015), in mentoring relationships, those being mentored are more likely to experience positive outcomes in relationships that last at least a year; therefore, staff participants were required to have at least one year of experience working with youth in after-school, sport programming. In addition to this, research suggests that relationships between youth and nonparental adults are particularly important across all stages of adolescence (early, middle, and late); therefore, participants that work with youth within the age range of 12-18 were included (Yu & Deutsch, 2021).

Participant Self Descriptions

Tatum (19) described herself as an energetic extrovert with two years of experience and a strong passion for working with youth; she described how she shares a mutual respect with

youth. Casey (23) shared how a large part of her identity is based around playing sports; she was a coach before she began working in her current role with youth and she has 8 years of experience working with youth. *Quinn,* a previous coach, expressed her passion for physical activity and getting youth active. *Wren (24)* has 3 years of experience working with youth and described himself as a very level-headed people person with a passion for sports and recreation. *Morgan (20)* described herself as a student-athlete and coach with four years of experience working with youth; she said she is bubbly, approachable, enthusiastic and energetic. As an older sibling with 4 years of experience working with youth, *Sydney* (21) described herself as being "in a good place to give youth good advice and help them grow into people who are well adjusted to go up in the world". *Avery (27)* shared her experience working with youth through volunteering, working sports tournaments, and educational experiences over the past 7 years. *Carmen* shared her passion in working with youth—as she has plenty of experience in school, childcare, and tutoring settings; she always knew she would do something with her career that supports children in keeping them safe. *Drew*, with 6 years of experience working with youth, shared how his experience as a past university-level athlete influenced his interest in offering sports opportunities for youth. *Payton* described their wide history in various roles working with youth, and shared their goal of creating a space for youth that is open for everyone— regardless of their situation.

Data Generation

Data was generated via one-on-one semi-structured interviews with participants. Given that the primary objective of IPA is to gather rich and detailed accounts and experiences from participants on a specific topic, the most popular method to achieving this is by generating data using semi-structured interviews (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Interviewing is the most feasible approach in studies that use IPA, as idiographic accounts can be captured (Love et al., 2020). In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer phrases questions in an open-ended format, where participants are encouraged to tell stories about experiences, memories, reflections, or opinions, and respond however they see fit in relation to the questions (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). Semi-structured interviews as a data generation method within IPA allows "the researcher and the participant to engage in a dialogue in real time" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 10), and ensures that participants have ample opportunity to share their personal stories, experiences, and views. The conversations that occur within an interview generate rich and new knowledge regarding social or personal aspects of a person's life, along with insight into individual's decisions, motives, perceptions, and values (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). This is ideal in the context of this study, as the aim of this research was to describe and interpret the experiences of staff in how they foster connections with youth. The conversations that arise through interviewing better illuminate the decisions and motives behind staff within these settings, and what they value and see as important when creating connections with youth at-risk.

Participants had the option to participate in the interviews either in person or online via Zoom. Eight completed interviews via Zoom, and 2 participated in-person. As mentioned by Dempsey et al. (2016), it is vital for participants to feel at ease and comfortable during the interview, therefore it is suggested that interviews are to be conducted at a place and time selected by the participant, with options to meet online or in-person. Using Zoom as a medium for the one-on-one interviews allowed for the conversations to be recorded and transcribed using the functions available on this platform. The development of the interview guide (see Appendix C) was informed by literature and previous research completed on topics related to this study,

and consist of introduction questions (e.g., What are your experiences working with youth at-risk in after-school, sports-based programming?), research-focused questions (e.g., What characteristics do you think are important for staff members to have when working with youth at-risk in after-school, sport settings?) and closing questions (e.g., What has not been discussed that you think is important to share in regards to staff fostering connections with youth at-risk in after-school, sport programming?). Interviews lasted between 44-94 minutes, and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai transcription embedded into Zoom.

Data Analysis

Smith's (2022) four-step process of analysis was used to ensure the fundamental components of IPA were addressed: (1) reading and writing exploratory notes, (2) formulating experiential statements, (3) finding connections and clustering experiential statements, and (4) compiling the table of personal experiential themes. The analysis of data with IPA is complex and time-consuming, as the researcher must allow themselves to be completely immersed in the data, or "try to step into the participants'' shoes as far as possible (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 11). Smith and Nizza (2022) discuss fundamental components to data analysis in IPA, where the process must be interpretative, inductive, idiographic, and iterative. With this said, interpretation is a principal focus—where the researcher brings attention to understanding the participants point of view and how they make sense of their experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Analysis is inductive, meaning that there is the potential for unanticipated themes or topics to emerge from the data as a result of the flexibility employed by the researcher (Smith, 2004). This component ensures that the data for each participant is "as free as possible from theoretical constraints" (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 31). As discussed previously, the idiographic nature of IPA allows for the detailed examination of each case in a singular fashion prior to comparisons and

generalizations are made (Smith, 2004; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Finally, the process of data analysis is iterative, meaning that revising may occur at each stage prior to any interpretative decisions being made (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

The first step was reading and writing exploratory notes, where the first transcript was read over multiple times, the audio recording listened to, while notes were developed (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Nizza, 2022). The notes made consisted of observations, reflections, thoughts, and comments regarding the context of the interview and other significant points (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Comments associated with personal reflexivity were also made, such as how personal characteristics of the interviewer interacted or affected rapport with the participant (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It was vital at this point to read slowly, and engage with the text with an open mind, and look beyond what was "expected to be found, staying with the participant's words, reflecting on them, and trying not to jump to conclusions" (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 33). By doing so, the inductive process of IPA was fulfilled to an extent, and the potential consequences of being an 'insider' were addressed by ensuring the participants' experiences and meaning making came before personal thoughts and ideas. Three types of notes can be demarcated within this initial step: descriptive notes (i.e., face value of the participant's thoughts and experiences, basic notes that summarize explicit meaning of what is said), linguistic notes (i.e., the actual words spoken or how these words are spoken—pauses, laughter, repetitions, hesitations, tone, etc.), and conceptual notes (i.e., formed in question format, consider the participants' and researchers' understanding of what is mentioned; Smith & Nizza, 2022).

The second step was formulating experiential statements (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Within this step, the series of exploratory notes made in the first step were used to make one or more

experiential statement(s) that summarized what was learned about the meaning of the experience to the participant (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This summary highlighted what was discovered to be important in the notes made throughout portions of the transcript (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Smith and Nizza (2022) state that "for each of the participant's speaking turns in the interview, you should aim to identify one or more experiential statements" (p. 39). This step required deep reflection and engagement with the content of the transcript and exploratory notes to allow for an interpretative account of the participant's experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

The third step consisted of finding connections and clustering experiential statements (Smith & Nizza, 2022). At this stage, a long list of experiential statements—each statement associated with a portion of the transcript—was formed. These experiential statements were then distilled, refined, synthesized, and similar statements were brought together (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This method is called 'clustering', where the researcher must reflect on what statements should go with what (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This depends heavily on the research question, what statements are available, and the interpretation on part of the researcher (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

The final step in this process was to compile a table of personal experiential statements, where the clustering was then converted into a table of personal experiential themes (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Each overarching theme was given a title that reflected convergence of experiential statements brought together throughout the process (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Following the completion of this table, the four-step process was then repeated with the interview transcript associated with the second participant, and so on and so forth (Smith, 2004). The table of themes from the first case can be used to direct this second analysis, or this process can be done from scratch with the first table of themes put to the side (Smith, 2004). In the context of this study,

the first half of the transcripts were each analyzed from scratch, and the analysis of the second half the transcripts were directed using the first themes generated from the first five participants.

Rigor

Smith (2011) suggests several factors to ensuring a high level of quality within an IPA study. In order to secure high-quality work and practice rigor, a number of features introduced by Smith (2011) regarding study focus, data, rigor, interpretation, and convergence and divergence will be discussed.

To begin, this study had a clear and specific focus, where the purpose of this research was to describe and interpret staff members' perceptions of how they foster social connections with youth at-risk within after-school, sport-based PYD programs. Data was derived from semi-structured interviews, where quality is determined by skillful interviewing (Smith, 2011). In the context of my own research work, I have had the ability to apply academic teachings from a qualitative methodology class in various practical settings by conducting semi-structured interviews for four research projects aside from this current work. In my interviewing experience, I have developed skills to build rapport, ensure comfortability, allow for flexibility, and practice active listening to engage in a deep conversation with participants. Another feature discussed by Smith (2011) is ensuring the analysis is interpretative—not just descriptive. This was established by engaging in and reflecting on the double hermeneutic process present within IPA and through incorporating my own experiences (as they relate to the words of participants) into the findings to actively demonstrate how interpretations were made.

The final feature that determines quality in IPA as suggested by Smith (2011) concerns convergence and divergence, as there should be "a skillful demonstration of both patterns of similarity among participants as well as the uniqueness of the individual experience" (p. 24).

This component was ensured throughout the research process in data analysis, where each case was engaged with in an immersive and singular fashion; illuminating the participant's meaning associated with their experiences of the phenomena. Attention to convergence and divergence was also established in the final writing, where the goal was to present themes as an unfolding narrative that "provides a careful interpretative analysis of how participants manifest the same theme in particular and different ways" (Smith, 2011, p. 24). Despite these features just being few of many ways to demonstrate quality in IPA, these components are especially relevant to the current study, in addition to reflexivity.

Researcher reflexivity can also be seen within qualitative research as another method to ensuring rigor (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). It is important to mention that reflexivity is a continuous process that begins before the research takes place and does not end with the completion of data collection and analysis (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). As mentioned previously within this section, reflexivity was a continuous practice of mine throughout this research process to ensure consistent awareness of the impact my identity and positionality as a researcher had on the research I engaged in (Berger, 2015). As stated by Berger (2015) it is necessary to "take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation" (p. 2). Reflexivity is of importance to ensure rigor and ethical soundness within this research, especially as an insider to this topic

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research was received by the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Board prior to recruitment. Furthermore, this research project adhered to the most recent version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement released in 2022 (TCPS-2, 2022). The Tri-Council

Policy Statement is a set of guidelines that ensures the ethical conduct of research involving humans (TCPS-2, 2022). As a whole document, the TCPS-2 (2022) was followed closely within this research to guide or refer any ethical decisions or concerns. Three core ethical principles are at the heart of this document: respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice. In order to ensure these three core ethical principles were recognized throughout the duration of this research, the following section will discuss the ethical considerations that were made in the context of this study.

The first principle, Respect for Persons, recognizes the obligations to respect the autonomy of those participating in the research process, and the necessity to protect those with either developing, diminished, or impaired autonomy (TCPS-2, 2022). To acknowledge this principle, free, informed, and ongoing consent is of significant importance (TCPS-2, 2022). Along with this, all participants within this research were well-informed of the research purpose, all potential benefits and risks to both the participant and society, along with information regarding confidentiality and use of information prior to participation.

The second core principle, Concern for Welfare, acknowledges that the welfare of a person is the "quality of that person's experience of life in all its aspects" (TCPS-2, 2022, p. 7), including their physical, mental, spiritual health, along with other determinants of health such as family life, community membership, social participation, among other factors such as employment, housing, and security (TCPS-2, 2022, p. 8). As suggested by the TCPS-2, welfare was protected within the current study by ensuring that any foreseeable risks associated with this research were fully communicated to all participants, any unnecessary risks were avoided, and that all risks associated with the research were minimized in order to achieve an ideal balance

between potential risks and benefits (TCPS-2, 2022). The potential risks associated with this study will be discussed further in the following section.

The third core ethical principle found in the TCPS-2 is Justice, which refers to the obligation within research to treat all people fairly and equitably; where fairness concerns treating all people with the same respect and concern, and equity is defined as distributing the benefits and burdens of research participation so that no portion of the population is unfairly subjected to the harms of research or denied its benefits (TCPS-2, 2022). With this principle in mind, it was vital within the context of this research to ensure the equitable treatment of all participants, and to acknowledge the inclusion criteria when seeking out participants to ensure a fair process of recruitment (TCPS-2, 2022). Another vital consideration regarding the third core principle is the potential power imbalances that may exist as a result of the differing identities and realities of those participating, and their varying levels of understanding concerning the current research. As mentioned within the TCPS-2, "participants will generally not understand the research in the same way and in the same depth as does the researcher" (p. 9), therefore potentially leading to a power imbalance (TCPS-2, 2022). To ensure this is not the case, I recognized that all participants involved in this study had valuable information to offer on the research topic, and I realized the obligation to recognize that all participants held their own valuable knowledge that was unique and subjective. Reflecting on my constructivist philosophical worldview throughout the research process, and how I view knowledge, aided in ensuring I avoided entering this research with perceptions that had potential to cause power imbalances between myself and the participants.

Aside from compliance with the TCPS-2 (2022), there are various other imperative ethical considerations within this research that must be acknowledged in order to further ensure

that the respect, welfare, and justice of participants is maintained. First, I acknowledge that this research along with the interview questions may be considered a 'sensitive topic', as youth at-risk were discussed in depth, and discussions arose regarding staff experiences with youth at-risk that included sensitive details about the lives of youth, their experiences, challenges, or realities. Being that a major discussion point of this research concerns fostering connections with youth at-risk, naturally there are components of these relationships shared between staff and youth that allow for personal details to be shared—not all of which are positive. Therefore, all participants were equipped with mental health resources (e.g., The Alberta Health Services Mental Health Help Line, 1(877) 303-2642) that had the potential to be utilized if they felt, following the interview, that they were in need of professional mental health assistance. Furthermore, to ensure voluntary participation and informed consent, this potential risk was revealed in its entirety prior to participation, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw or avoid any questions of their choosing if they were uncomfortable.

Furthermore, another potential ethical consideration that is vital to recognize is the potential for the disclosure of alleged abuse, maltreatment, or neglect of youth by participants. Staff within these settings work closely and frequently with youth, therefore the connections and relationships they form with youth may lead to the disclosure of potentially negative or abusive situations. Therefore, it was recognized prior to recruitment that these disclosures were to be potentially discussed by participants (staff). As mentioned by the TCPS-2 (2022), this may result in the increased likelihood of the researcher being placed into a position where there may have to disclose certain information to third parties. A few imperative steps were taken to acknowledge the potential of this ethical situation arising: first, participants were advised of this "reasonably foreseeable disclosure" (TCPS-2, 2022, p. 83) within the consent process, and were further

informed that confidentiality was to be maintained within the extent of both ethical principles and the law (TCPS-2, 2022). Therefore, any potential claims of abuse, maltreatment or neglect were to be assessed and managed on "a case-by-case basis and guided by consultation with colleagues, any relevant professional body, the REB, legal counsel and/or persons knowledgeable about applicable laws and regulations in the relevant jurisdictions" (TCPS-2, 2022, p. 82). Prior to recruitment, it was recognized that if necessary, disclosures would potentially result in reports made to third-party services or authorities to protect the health and safety of youth mentioned. However, it is important to mention that this is only the reality in compelling circumstances (TCPS-2, 2022), and that efforts were made to ensure interview questions were designed in such a way to avoid or mitigate any foreseeable conflicts or ethical troubles—as suggested by the TCPS-2 (2022). During the research interviews, no reports had to be made, as every mention of abuse, maltreatment, or neglect of youth members by staff was previously reported. I ensured this by asking, when necessary: "was this situation reported?", where all participants confirmed that they, or the individual dealing with the situation, reported the case to the appropriate authorities.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to describe and interpret staff members' perceptions of how they foster social connections with youth at-risk within after-school, sport-based PYD programs. Staff members' experiences are represented by six themes: (1) getting to know and investing in youth, (2) fostering positive spaces and relationships, (3) allowing for autonomy and leadership, (4) practicing what you preach, (5) awareness of power dynamics, and (6) approaching with caution.

Prior to describing each theme, it is important to first provide a brief overview of the ways in which participants classified youth as at-risk. Youth at-risk were identified by staff members by various characteristics, and an understanding of such characteristics provides important contextual information for understanding the ways in which they foster social connections with such youth. Participants described five main characteristics that are considered when identifying youth as at-risk: family life and social support, behavioural challenges, neurological differences, financial stresses, and cultural and community-related considerations. In terms of family life, participants described how at-risk youth may have inconsistent and uninvolved parental figures or they may be youth that live in foster care or group homes. Youth at-risk may also have parents or close family members who experience addiction, crisis, or have low or no income. Regarding social support, staff members described how youth at-risk often lack positive role models in their everyday lives, and they often do not receive the mental health support that they require. Staff also described how youth at-risk are often characterized by signs of abuse, neglect, or those identified as runaways. In respect to behavioural challenges, participants described various behavioural issues often observed among youth at-risk, including overstimulation issues, those who struggle to build trust with others, the appearance of 'big'

emotions such as separation anxiety, abandonment issues, avoidance, sadness, worry, and aggression. Regarding neurological differences, neurodivergent youth (e.g. youth with ADHD or Autism) were also discussed as youth potentially considered at-risk. The fourth consideration addresses the financial stresses that may be present in youth members' lives, where staff members described youth at-risk as those who are classified as low income, dealing with poverty, and/or experiencing unstable housing. Finally, in terms of cultural and community-related considerations, participants described how when referring to youth at-risk, these youth often identified as Indigenous, newcomers, and/or members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community.

Getting to know and investing in youth

All participants highlighted the importance of getting to know and investing in youth at-risk. Participants acknowledged that connections with youth take time and effort to build. Staff members emphasized the importance of getting to know youth on a personal level. They explained how they commit to learning youth members' names, understanding different learning styles, their triggers, and what promotes particular emotions (e.g., happy, sad). Casey explained, "seeing someone crying and learning different forms of comfort. For me, I don't like to be touched when I'm crying so asking a kid, 'do you need a hug? Do you need this?...what's going to calm you down here?'". In my experience working with youth at-risk, it has been imperative to respect youth's comfort levels, as sometimes what seems to be comforting for most will have the opposite effect on some. For example, I have learned that using physical touch (e.g., hugging a youth that may be sad) especially with youth considered at-risk may actually make them feel uncomfortable and will prevent them from being calm. It is vital not to assume, but rather to learn what each youth needs.

Staff members described how they work hard to relate to youth by "putting themselves in their shoes." Wren explained:

> Looking at it just biologically, our brains are just more developed when we're adults. So being patient and understanding of where someone may be in their development and how things in their life have affected them, I think, is super important.

Building upon this, Wren discussed how youth often behave in certain ways because of triggers and therefore it is critical to work to understand the aspects within youth members' lives that may be hard or challenging.

Staff members explained how it is often easier to connect with youth and their families if they share common characteristics. For example, Sydney shared that she feels "a sense of community within a community" with the parents of youth who are from Nigeria, as she is from Nigeria. However, participants also mentioned variations between youth and staff in regard to culture, ethnicity, gender, and community (e.g., being a member of the 2SLGBTQI+ community), which may create challenges in fostering connections. Some solutions were given, where Carmen shared: "being aware of my biases, and then also being aware that everyone does things differently…A lot of self-awareness that I've had to learn over many years… it's never ending, there's always more reflection needed." Wren described how staff should discuss with each other strategies for building relationships with youth who belong to differing groups—for example, strategies male staff may use to connect with female youth.

Participants outlined the importance of showing interest and investing in getting to know youth; this is critical for building connections with youth. In my experience, showing interest in youth takes genuine effort, and is best achieved when you take the time to get to know each youth as an individual. In order to connect with youth by showing interest, Avery shared:

I'll bring things from home that relate to them. A couple of weeks ago, some of the boys

> are talking about hockey cards. I have an abundance of hockey cards…and just being able to bring that in and show them…I'm also invested in this, I'm interested in this, let's talk about it, let's make it a whole thing…When they see that what they've talked about is an interest from an adult as well… it means the world to them.

Participants explained how it is necessary to know the appropriate time and place to demonstrate interest in youth at-risk, and it is critical to treat them like other youth that may not experience hardships. Avery further explained: "When people know what certain children are going through, they automatically try to treat them differently, and that's obviously not what they always want– they want that normalcy." This suggests that it is vital for staff to ensure equality amongst youth by finding a balance between showing interest and promoting normality.

Participants focused on ensuring "genuineness" in interactions with youth—for example, Tatum expressed focusing on making sure youth feel "heard, listened to, and understood." Several participants addressed how youth should be spoken to and communicated with like adults rather than children, where Casey shared: "I like to talk to them like I talk to any adult." In my experience, communicating with youth like adults has been vital in showing youth how they are perceived by me as a staff—I see them as mature, and understand them on a level where I am not above them. In this sense, I find speaking to youth like adults allows for better understanding and promotes a connection of mutual respect. Quinn and Avery suggested listening to youth to "really get to the bottom" of what they feel or need, as youth may say one thing and mean another. Staff members shared strategies to go out of their way to interact with youth—such as connecting with youth outside of the program and off-shift. This speaks to acknowledging youth not just as participants, but as people. Payton stated:

> Even if I see them in Walmart, it's about acknowledging them as you're more than just a person that comes to my [program]. You're a person, and I know you, and I see you…it's all about that acknowledgement, because oftentimes they don't have that, right?

Staff members expressed the value in showing care through being curious about youth, giving them attention and remembering details. However, Avery, Carmen, and Drew emphasized that at times, it is appropriate to be blunt with youth and give "a little bit of tough love" to be genuine. Staff members expressed through their experiences that in order to foster connections with youth members, it is vital to get to know each youth on a personal level, understand the challenges they may face, and to show interest in youth while ensuring to be genuine in interactions.

Fostering positive spaces and relationships

Participants described the need to foster positive spaces and relationships with youth members, and reflected on the unique roles they play in such relationships. In listening to participants, I reflected on how critical it has been in my role to make a positive impact. Participants described feeling like second parents, and the youth centre as a second home. Sydney shared:

> You get to spend a lot of time with these kids and get to really watch them in an environment where they're supposed to grow, and they're supposed to play, but then you also start to see different things where you're like, 'oh, the only other person who would see the things that we see are their parents.'

In terms of fostering positive spaces, Casey described her role as being a "support system", and Carmen as a "a safe person" for youth members to go to. Carmen added: "I'm an educator, I'm a support, I'm a friend, I'm a sister." Avery and Payton argued that rather than being a friend to the youth, it is more important to play a role of supporting youth. These thoughts resonate with me, as my role with youth changes from situation to situation. Sometimes it is important to be a friend, whereas during other moments it may be more appropriate to be more of a supportive 'adult'—being flexible has helped immensely to connect with youth. Furthermore, Payton suggested the use of sharing circles:

> It gives the youth a voice, but not only a voice to us, a voice to their friends, a voice to their teachers, a voice to security– whoever is involved… it shows them that we're all equal, and nobody's higher than the other person.

To foster positive relationships, participants shared ways in which they provide support, praise, respect, and show pride towards youth members. Casey stressed being "an adult figure that respects [youth]." Quinn and Carmen discussed actions that show praise and pride towards youth, such as noticing changes in positive behaviours or physical changes (e.g., a new jersey) where Drew suggested showing up for extracurricular activities to praise youth and cheer them on. To best support youth, staff members considered their relationships with fellow staff members. Quinn emphasized "knowing when to ask for help" from other staff if a youth is shutting down, not wanting to talk, or exhibiting challenging behaviours. In my experience, knowing when to ask for help from other staff members has allowed for youth to get the support they need in that moment. It feels counterintuitive at times, trying to provide support by almost 'stepping aside'—however sometimes it takes a new face and new approach in that moment for youth to open up or calm down. Avery suggests: "having the knowledge of your team…being in tune with your team as well, and just knowing who you should direct them to."

Fostering comfort and openness was also extremely important to participants. To get youth to open up, Tatum suggested asking "very generic questions" and Avery added to engage in "simple conversations" about their weekend, plans for the evening, or how their day went. Many staff members spoke on ways to foster comfort—where Avery discussed always "being emotionally available" for youth to address their concerns at any time, about anything. Sydney spoke to the significance of being relatable for youth to feel "a strong sense of comfortability." Various participants emphasized expressing personal experiences and saying things such as 'that's happened to me', and 'sometimes I get upset too' so youth members do not feel alone in

what they go through. Quinn discussed showing youth “that I'm a human as well, and it's normal to have human emotions.” In my time working with youth, I cannot express enough the importance of being ‘human’ and sharing personal experiences for youth to connect and relate with—especially when youth need comfort.

Participants agreed on the importance of providing emotional safety. Carmen states: “Children need to feel that they can trust the person they are talking to, they need to feel safe, they need to feel that this person is someone I can come to when I need help.” In terms of physical safety, participants mentioned allowing for privacy when youth need it and connecting youth to the space by adding familiar languages, home artifacts, and interested-based materials. Staff highlighted the program space as being designed for youth. Drew describes telling youth:

> This space is meant for you…have control over what goes on here…but at the same time the way you leave the space is basically under your control…Be mindful of what you're doing, because… you don't want to ruin things that belong to you basically, it's not for us– it's actually for you.

Participants considered potential challenges in connecting with youth following difficult conversations, where Wren suggested, “not treating them differently next time you see them just because you have that difficult conversation with them, you're still treating with the same respect, with the same friendliness…after the fact.” Staff members also described daily challenges with youth simply as a result of their changing emotions. In my experience, this is something that occurs very frequently with youth. As challenging as it may be to navigate, I have found that acknowledging the complexities each youth face from day-to-day in school, out of school, and at home aids in being flexible to youth’s changing emotions. Casey shared:

> One week they could be really warm, one week they could be really cold, and you really have to adapt yourself to that. Every kid is so different, that's such a big barrier for me personally, is okay…today you don't wanna talk, tomorrow you wanna talk my ear off.

From the words of participants, it is clear that significant challenges may arise in how youth act and respond from day to day that staff must be willing to navigate in order to connect with them.

Allowing for autonomy and leadership

Autonomy and leadership are two key features that staff members described as being critical to fostering connections with youth. Payton explained how leadership opportunities can be provided by "giving the youth volunteer opportunities," where they can be compensated with gift cards to purchase equipment of interest, such as basketballs or soccer cleats. Similarly, Casey explained how she encourages youth to volunteer or progress from a participant in programs to an employee:

> I'll talk to them about becoming a camp counselor and gaining that responsibility...I'll talk to them and be like, hey, would you want to help running these tournaments? Would you want to be more involved? And I think that gives them a sense of trust with me, with our staff, and all that kind of stuff.

Staff members also shared strategies that allow for youth to have the autonomy they need, even within a scheduled program. They explained that despite the organized program, they will encourage them to go for a walk, take a break, or sit on the sidelines. Casey shared:

> I think knowing that we can separate them from the program if we need to, like giving them options like 'hey, we can go to the we can go to my office and sit back there if we need, we can go for a walk outside if you need some fresh air, we can do a lap around the track if that's what you need'…

Providing such space for youth is particularly necessary in times of high emotions, and Tatum explained how youth will be "the ones that will lead the conversation if they want to." Carmen suggested asking, "do you want someone to talk to right now, or would you like to just sit alone for a little bit?" and "respecting their comfort and their needs in that moment." In my experiences with youth, giving youth options in times of high emotions is vital not only for them to regulate their emotions, but also in developing trust with youth. Reflecting on the youth I have

worked with, giving options allows them to feel supported on their own terms and when they need it most rather than when an 'adult' dictates it is best. Casey and Sydney also highlighted the importance of getting youth into a space where "they feel safe" and "comfortable." These discussions suggest that staff members must find a balance in being there for youth during difficult times while also respecting their need for space and autonomy.

In terms of autonomy, staff members emphasized how it is critical to ensure that youth feel heard by implementing activities of interest to them and allowing youth to have input and choices with respect to the programming. In my experience, this has proved true—youth do feel 'heard' and have more meaningful experiences in programming when they have a say in what they do. Engagement also looks much different, where youth *want* to participate when they can give their input. Tatum described how some lessons do not go well with youth, and it is her responsibility to incorporate feedback to make sure youth are enjoying themselves. She shared: "it's their experience rather than mine." Casey described the important role of youth in shaping programming:

> Making sure that you've created an environment where they not only feel welcome but feel they have a part in it too, it's not just my program– this is a program for them versus I'm running a program, this is the way it's going to be run…when I lead programs, I believe in child geared programs—I want to do what they want to do within what needs to be done, if that makes sense…I want them to enjoy what we're doing while still teaching them what needs to be taught.

Specific to his program, Drew spoke on how each sports program offered to youth "is fluid in the sense that it doesn't have to continue if the interest from the participants isn't showing." Also from this program, Payton shared many sports begin as pilot programs:

> So again, their word is what it is…all of our programs basically started as pilot, so if we had a group that wanted to play badminton or volleyball, okay, well, you know we could get this many people to show up, that's how we're gonna do it. And then that's putting it in the youth's hands, right?

In summary, the words of participants in combination with my own personal experiences with youth demonstrate that allowing for youth to have autonomy and leadership opportunities is vital to promote personal growth and trust in youth—thus being integral to fostering positive connections. Staff members explained how feedback is critical to sports programming and planning activities for youth, as this functions not only to ensure that interest is reflected by youth members and for programs to run smoothly, but also to allow youth to take the lead in the program rather than just the staff members.

Practicing what you preach

Staff members discussed their role of 'practicing what they preach' to youth members, and shared their reflections on how they lead, act, play, and interact with youth and co-workers. From my interpretation, these reflections function to ensure staff are connecting with youth on a level where they pass on positive values and actions—both within and outside of sports. Participants described how staff interactions are an important consideration when working with youth—as they may positively or negatively influence youth members. Sydney stated:

> All children can pick up on the environment…in certain situations when a staff member and another staff member are not getting along, they will be able to tell, and…they will be able to learn from that and be like, 'oh, I can not talk to somebody if I don't want to', or 'oh, I can talk behind this person's back if I want to'.

Staff members shared the importance of being aware of power dynamics in their relationships with youth, and that such awareness is critical for facilitating connections with youth. With respect to youth members, participants highlighted "getting to their level" in times of challenge and being relatable with youth to be at their level in a personal sense. I resonate closely with these experiences, as I have learned the importance of physically being at the same level with youth when I am speaking to them at any time I can be. This 'eye-to-eye' level helps immensely with communication and allowing youth to open up. Avery importantly shares:

“getting down at their level, cause a lot of the time people are talking above them, to them…making sure that ‘hey, I'm focused on you, we're eye to eye now, and we're equals in this moment.’” Tatum shared strategies on how to be relatable to youth:

> Being a friend more than someone a little bit higher up, because from my experience anyways, if you're acting like a friend with another youth they seem like they're able to be more comfortable with you by opening up and talking to you. Being a little goofy, too, I find that being silly can really help kids open up to you a little bit more because they're like, okay, this feels kind of funny, she gets me in that way.

Staff members described the value in giving youth members “someone to look up to” and being “a role model” through actions, words, and intentions. Wren expressed that being a role model demonstrates care and benefits youth members’ self-worth. Morgan spoke on teaching youth the “morals and ethics of sport, not just the laws, and… in everyday life.” In a sports setting, in my experience it has been vital to pass on positive values such as teamwork and sportsmanship to youth. After passing on and teaching these values, I have seen incredible moments between youth in sport where they cheer each other on from opposite teams, change the rules to allow for different age groups to play, and encourage inclusion from youth who they may not frequently play with. Avery described being a mentor:

> Not everyone takes well to role models because they think that they need to be like them…whereas you want everyone to be their own individual self… in grade 6 in religion class, we did this poem called Footprints in the Sand, and it's like you're walking along the sand by yourself, but there's 2 sets of footprints, and it's like kind of saying, God is walking with you. So it kind of reminds me of that, like I'm walking alongside them—I’m not walking ahead of them showing them the path, I'm walking alongside them being their mentor, being with them in that moment.

Quinn expressed the significance of “teaching kids how to take a couple of deep breaths and regulate themselves or telling them how to have a conversation with others if they're upsetting them,” while Morgan discussed passing on good communication skills. In my experience with youth, teaching conflict resolution in conversations always allows for a better outcome than

enforcing consequences, as youth then learn what to do better next time and can carry this with them forward. This relates to a statement made by Payton:

> Showing them that we are here to support them, we may not always feel as though they did things correctly, but it's about explaining to them what they could have done better, and that's usually what is missing in a lot of organizations… there is no 'what could I have done instead? Because I really needed that– what could I have done instead?'

Participants shared the benefits of participating in activities with youth. Tatum and Wren spoke on how participation allows for a closer relationship between staff and youth members. Tatum stated when participating, "they're a lot more talkative to me, and they feel a lot more compelled to share that kind of level of friendliness towards me."

Participants explained how they participate in the activities whenever possible to make it engaging for youth. Casey spoke about the importance of not being the 'weird adult on the sidelines all the time," while Carmen added:

> For example, the boys are playing soccer almost every day, right? But then you see a little bit of a difference from when an educator jumps in and starts playing with them…there's a difference in that, the behaviour and the way they respond…they get really excited.

I resonate with these sentiments: there is a different kind of joy exhibited in youth when a staff member becomes a player too. Along with this, interest seems to be different, where I will hear a lot more youth express sentiments such as: "can we do that again?". Wren emphasized how participating "sets a dynamic where I'm not just an authority figure telling them what to do or how to do things…and allows us to have a closer relationship that isn't just using that authority to control what they're doing." From my interpretation, qualities such as being interested, energetic, and passionate are important for staff members to have in order for youth to then reciprocate interest, energy, and passion into the programming—and to connect and bond with youth members.

Awareness of power dynamics

Participants described the importance of understanding how youth are treated in other relationships with adults in their lives and using this information to guide their interactions with youth. In my experience, reflecting on the power dynamics between myself as an adult and youth members allows me to acknowledge what promotes equality, and what hinders equality in my connections formed with youth. This sentiment was shared by participants, where staff members clearly perceived youth experiencing unequal relationship dynamics with a multitude of different adult figures in their lives; for example, Avery discussed how youth are policed in a certain way by other adults:

> It was after school…it was 3:30, I'm outside, *name of another staff* is outside. We have some kids climbing the trees, the other staff is literally there, and they come and start yelling at the kids to come down. So, when you get experiences like that, and you know what they're always being told no, or they can't do that, it kind of doesn't make them feel as confident in certain things.

Payton addressed the perspective of some adults in the community regarding youth: "right away they're the ones who are stealing, even if they're not the ones stealing. But that's kind of the stigma that's kind of given off right?" Drew expressed not just focusing on youth as the problem, and rather understand how "staff and security and police actually handle situations of conflicts with this age group of people." In addition to this, many participants highlighted the 'unknown' circumstances youth have at home, at school and in the community—and the possibility that youth may not have someone in their life that listens to them, demonstrates sincere interest, or shows up for them. Wren spoke on this specifically:

> I think it's super important to show them that at least somebody does show interest in their lives. Because again, outside of the program or outside of the building, they might not get that from someone and if they're not getting that from someone, then it can really affect their feelings of self-worth and stuff like that.

Wren adds that it is important for youth to feel heard by staff, as this may not be the case for youth in relationships with other adults: “I think they're probably used to it in their life, just being told what to do or told what they are doing or told what's not okay…without actually being heard first.”

Staff members also spoke on being aware and adjusting body language to maximize trust and minimize power differences. In my experience, learning about body language has come with experience; however, I have learned the difference it makes when resolving issues between youth or addressing concerns. Casey expressed how body language functions to show interest:

> Body language is also such a big thing, if you're acting like you don't care, you don't want to be there, you're miserable, whatever, that's not going to bode well for how they're going to react to you if you're not giving them as much as you can in the moment. And I also like there's obviously days where staff aren't able to do that, but then at that point you can direct them to someone who can.

In times of challenge, Quinn described keeping “a lower cadence” in her voice, and Wren adds maintaining “open body language and a friendly attitude” to encourage trust from youth. Drew shared that facial expressions, posture, and other factors that may not be acknowledged can impact a youth’s level of trust in staff. As previously mentioned, in my experiences with youth, body language can function the same as using physical touch—in this respect, I am always careful to ensure my body movements in times of high emotions are as calm as my voice. Especially with youth considered at-risk, I have observed situations where body language only works to escalate situations. I have also witnessed and learned from other staff who are aware of their body language each time they go into a situation with high emotions or behaviours. Simply put, from the experiences of participants along with my own, it is clear that body language impacts trust on part of youth members, and conflict resolution attempts. As mentioned previously, Casey discussed that youth at-risk struggle “building and trusting connections” with

others, therefore it is vital to consider the impact of body language on forming connections with youth at-risk in after-school, sport programming.

Approaching with caution

Staff described the importance of approaching certain situations with caution— where nearly all staff members spoke about the importance of having a calm voice, maintaining control, and being at ease during tough situations or when youth display challenging behaviours. Such calm and control—especially during times of adversity—is critical for facilitating connections with youth. Casey explained:

> If you're going to get angry towards them[youth], it's just gonna escalate the situation. Like, if you're talking to them, 'Hey, what's going on? What's causing this, what can we do to fix it and trying to find a solution together?'– that is good for everybody…

Staff members emphasized being vulnerable towards youth and asking questions about the situation to aid in problem solving—where Tatum highlighted "approaching with a lot more ease and worry" rather than making assumptions. Quinn, Wren, and Sydney all agreed that it is vital for youth to have a moment to express their feelings. Wren said, "always letting them know that you do believe them, that you will hear them out and that they have a chance to kind of give their story before you make any judgments." Being openminded was a key component to conflict resolution described by staff. As stated by Drew: "close-mindedness really does limit your approach and also your ability to support the youth or even connect with that youth." This is something I believe deeply to be true, as being open-minded towards youth when exploring options to resolve conflicts or calm down in a challenging situation allows then for youth to be more open-minded as well. This is another point of learning for me—where youth take what they learn in these situations and what a staff suggests and carries it with them into future situations.

Staff members had varying perceptions on when to use physical touch as comfort, where Sydney stated, “there are times where, especially if some kids are having a really difficult time, I will go ahead and I will hug them.” However, Casey argued that it is best to understand different forms of comfort before assuming what youth need.

Participants spoke about addressing the personal lives of youth with caution, as it is vital to get to know what goes on in their lives—yet it is just as important to respect personal boundaries. In my experience, getting to know the personal lives of youth is important in forming a connection—as then it is easy on a daily basis to talk and discuss things in their life of interest to them. However, it also poses a challenge when some youth have a harder time opening up—as their life outside of the program is an easy connecting point. Without this connecting point, it may present challenges in connecting with certain youth. Tatum emphasized that some youth members are not comfortable sharing their personal or unique experiences with staff, and to “not dive deeper” than asking generic questions about their lives. As considered by nearly all participants, it is difficult to have acceptance in never fully knowing what is going on youth members’ lives. Casey states:

> I'm never going to fully know what's going on in their life, and I think that also creates a barrier, because maybe they have a really good life at school and a really tough life at home, I don't know. Maybe I think both are going wrong or something, and I just don't have an understanding, and I think that definitely creates a bit of a barrier, because I also don't have the expectation of youth ever wanting to share with me. I would never expect them to do something that they're uncomfortable with, unless obviously it's my duty to report it. But yeah, I don't know, I think I think just recognizing that...I don't have that power and that can be a barrier, and that's also even just an emotional barrier. That's a tough thing when you want to be there for somebody to not be overbearing, and to not indulge in a situation where it isn't your place.

I resonate with this comment, as it is a constant challenge to find a balance between getting to know youth members and what goes on in their different worlds, yet also make sure not to cross personal boundaries. Another challenge in my experience I have reflected on in listening to

participants is how each youth has a different boundary with their personal lives—some youth I know so much about as they are passionate to share, others very little.

In summary, participants considered areas to approach with caution when forming connections with youth—where times of high emotions and personal lives were discussed. Participants highlighted the importance of getting to know youth to foster connections with them; however, in not knowing personal details about youth members, it can be very challenging for staff members.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

This research was focused on describing and interpreting staff members' perceptions of how they foster social connections with youth at-risk within after-school, sport-based PYD programs, and findings from this work address several considerable gaps in the PYD literature. Notably, this study contributes to PYD literature as it is one of only a few studies that has examined staff perspectives of fostering connections with youth in PA or sport-based PYD programs. Staff perspectives have indeed been explored in previous PYD research (e.g., McDonough et al., 2018). However, McDavid and McDonough (2019) highlighted the need for more staff perspectives within PYD settings as these perspectives, such as those shared in this current study, provide critical insight into how relationships between staff and youth can be fostered to support PYD program goals. This study was also uniquely focused on staff-youth connections made in year-round after-school programming; most published PYD studies are conducted within the context of summer programs (e.g., McDavid & McDonough, 2019). The focus on year-round programming is important, as longer relationships between adult figures and youth can result in positive outcomes for youth members (Bowers et al., 2015). This study is also one of the few published PYD studies focused specifically on youth "at-risk." The unique focus on youth "at risk" advances the PYD literature by providing in-depth insights into the potential challenges that staff may have in forming connections with youth that face a variety of complex realities and risk factors (Hopper et al., 2019).

Findings from this research also provide unique insight into how staff members foster social connections with youth at-risk within after-school, sport-based PYD programs. Participants described the importance of *getting to know and investing in youth.* Emphasis was placed on understanding how various components within youth members' lives impact their

behaviours, such as their developmental level, challenging experiences they face outside of the program, and personal aspects such as triggers to both positive and negative emotions. By getting to know youth in this way, staff members explained how they are able to foster connections with youth. These findings are consistent with previous PYD research, where it has been acknowledged that understanding the challenging lived experiences that youth face in their everyday life may help staff in building positive relationships (Newman et al., 2022). However, findings from this research extend the PYD literature by providing in-depth examples of questions that staff members may ask in order to really get to know youth (e.g., "What's going to calm you down here?"). Such contextual information advances the PYD literature by providing necessary practical suggestions to facilitate connections between staff members and youth at-risk.

Participants in the current study also highlighted the importance of *fostering positive spaces and relationships* as a key factor in fostering social connections with youth at-risk. To foster positive spaces and relationships, participants emphasized being open with youth and embodying various roles in youth members' lives (e.g., acting as second parents, educators). They also described the importance of being emotionally available for youth whenever they need it, and their role in offering support and praise to youth. Similarly, in research by McDavid and McDonough (2019), staff also described how they act in the roles of "parent, sibling, friend, caregiver, and teacher..." (p. 484), and how they facilitate quality interactions with youth by being available and present when needed. Other PYD research (e.g., McDonough et al., 2018) has also shown that youth want and need support from staff members in PYD programs. While research is relatively clear that youth want and need support from staff members in PYD programs, the current study highlights the unique challenges that interfere with staff members

providing such support—ultimately challenging the development of connections with youth. Staff members shared in-depth examples of the day-to-day challenges they navigate with youth members, including the navigation of relationships after difficult conversations. Again, by sharing in-depth examples of such challenges that may be experienced by staff members when working to foster positive spaces, findings from this research highlight necessary considerations for staff members in facilitating social connections with youth at-risk.

To connect with youth, staff members in this study described the importance of *allowing for autonomy and leadership* in PYD programming for youth. Participants explained how they offered various volunteer opportunities for youth so they could demonstrate leadership. Such opportunities align closely with research by McDonough et al. (2018), who shared the importance of staff giving opportunities to youth to demonstrate responsibility and trust. In PYD focused literature, the importance of leaders offering youth choice and asking for their input has been previous recognized (Holt et al., 2012). A unique finding of the current study is that staff members emphasized the importance of finding a balance between giving youth autonomy in times of high stress, while also ensuring that youth feel supported and safe. While staff members in other PYD research have described how they promote "autonomy support" with youth by providing choice (McDavid & McDonough, 2019, p. 486), staff in the current study highlighted the importance of providing youth with opportunities to make autonomous decisions especially during challenging situations. Given that youth at-risk were the focus of this study, findings provide necessary insights into how autonomy and leadership opportunities may be facilitated with this particular group of youth.

In developing social connections with youth at-risk in PYD programs, staff members in the current study described how it is important to consider *practicing what they preach* with

youth members. Staff described how they often serve as role models or mentors for youth, and how they share their own vulnerabilities with youth in an effort to get on "their level". These findings echo previous work done by McDavid and McDonough (2019) where staff, in their effort to build connections with youth, took part in activities with youth to "get on the level of youth, show their vulnerabilities by making mistakes and feeling goofy" (p. 484). However, unique to what has been previously published, staff in this current study discussed getting on the same level as youth members not only to be relatable, but also to demonstrate equality and minimize power imbalances in their relationships with youth members. Within youth-adult relationships, it is imperative to address and acknowledge the potential issue of asymmetrical power, and work to find solutions to balance power while simultaneously providing youth with support and structure (Ungar, 2013). This ensures a more equal relationship between youth and adults, and in conjunction with other engagement strategies, functions to increase "access to resources that predict resilience when facing adversity" (Ungar, 2013, p. 333). Within literature that addresses youth at-risk, resilience is commonly discussed as an important quality to foster in order to promote "the capacity to overcome adversity" (Ungar, 2013, p. 330). Resilience is facilitated by individuals who engage with the child or youth, including staff members. In this study, important considerations were made by staff to foster connections with youth which serve not only to form relationships, but also function to balance power imbalances, promote equality, and support resilience in youth.

Staff members also discussed the importance of having an *awareness of power dynamics*. This is consistent with other literature focused on youth at-risk, as youth often engage with adults in relationships characterized by power "where the adult is viewed as an authoritative figure" (Hopper et al., 2019). Participants within the current study acknowledged how youth are often

'policed' by other adults in their lives. Staff members also described how youth are often preconceived as devious by adults in general—even if youth are doing something completely innocent such as "going to Walmart". In-depth reflections on such power dynamics and negative perceptions led to staff being aware of what *not* to do, and how they could minimize or mitigate power imbalances in their relationships with youth members. Within PYD literature that discusses youth-adult relationships, it is highlighted that adults are most likely to function as mediums for PYD if they engage in developmental relationships with youth (Bowers et al., 2015). An essential component of these relationships is a balance of power between the youth and adult (Bowers et al., 2015). It is vital for staff members to understand how to balance power dynamics in their relationships with youth, as this is an important component to promoting PYD (Bowers et al., 2015). Furthermore, being that adults approach relationships with youth from a position of greater knowledge, experience, and power— "they often approach these interactions in ways that youth experience as over-controlling, paternalistic, or patronizing" (Sullivan & Larson, 2010, p. 101). Adults and youth also typically have negative perceptions of each other, further exacerbating challenges in fostering connections (Sullivan & Larson, 2010). Therefore, as demonstrated within the current study, continuous reflection is needed on part of staff members to acknowledge power dynamics and negative perceptions held by adults regarding youth in order to best foster connections with youth at-risk (Sullivan & Larson, 2010).

In developing social connections with youth at-risk, staff members shared numerous stories to demonstrate how they navigate difficult situations with calmness and control, and how they are regularly focused on *approaching with caution.* Participants shared many conflict resolution strategies (e.g., calm voice, approaching situations with ease) and they emphasized the high level of care that must be demonstrated during times of high stress to facilitate social

connections with youth at-risk. Findings of this study, which highlight conflict resolution strategies used by staff members, are consistent with principles of trauma-informed practice (TIP). There is significant overlap between youth considered "at-risk" and youth who have been exposed to trauma. As stated by Shaikh et al. (2021), "several different childhood experiences can contribute to traumatic consequences, including abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, peer victimization, racial discrimination, and community violence exposure" (p. 449). Shaikh et al. (2021) described how those living in under-served communities potentially facing inadequate housing, financial challenges, or food insecurity are exposed to and affected by traumatic experiences at a disproportionate rate. As outlined in detail in the Results chapter, many of these experiences were identified by staff members when describing how they define or classify youth as at-risk.

Despite the multitude of benefits associated with sport and physical activity for youth, it is vital to consider in the context of this study how sport involvement and interactions between staff and youth members may function to expose youth to negative experiences, thus potentially triggering re-traumatization (Shaikh et al., 2021). For example, a participant expanded on the importance of knowing the different comfort needs of youth; rather than assuming youth prefer comfort in the form of physical touch, it is vital for staff to ask what each youth needs in times of challenge. This aligns with another principle of TIP, as when working with potentially traumatized youth it is suggested to "not touch a student without permission as touch can be a trigger of past maltreatment" (Goodwin, 2020, p. 46). It is helpful to consider how each youth may be exposed (in the past or present) to trauma of some sort (Goodwin, 2020), and act accordingly to foster a relationship founded on trust and comfort in order to prevent re-

traumatization. This is especially important when working with youth at-risk, as it is clear there is strong potential for past or current experiences of trauma.

As highlighted by Holt et al. (2012), researchers of PYD often have trouble distinguishing which developmental skill of Lerner et al.'s (2005) 5Cs model is most valuable to fostering positive development in youth. However, findings from this study suggest that *connection* may be the most important outcome to foster in youth, as positive connections formed between youth and staff inherently teaches and fosters *competence, confidence, character*, and *care.* For example, participants in this study highlighted the importance of being a role model towards youth to demonstrate care and positively impact self-worth in youth (which is imperative to building confidence; Fuller et al., 2013). Additionally, through passing on vital skills (e.g., conflict resolution strategies), staff members highlighted ways in which competence was fostered in youth (Fuller et al., 2013). Addressing character as an outcome includes promoting positive qualities and values, where staff members in this study mentioned teaching communication skills, emotional regulation, and analyzing their relationships with other staff to set a positive example. Through these examples it is important to recognize how fostering connections between youth and staff members within sport-based PYD programs has the potential to address other outcomes for youth that achieve positive development, thus demonstrating the importance of connection as a singular outcome in the 5Cs model (Lerner et al., 2005). Holt et al. (2012) state that "more evidence is needed to enable practitioners to specify which developmental skills to target with different populations" (p. 112), and findings from this study form a strong argument for recognizing connection as a vital focus when working with youth at-risk because of the potential to build resilience and protect youth against negative risk factors (Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Warner et al, 2019).

This research makes several theoretical contributions, particularly with respect to trauma-informed practices and self-determination theory. In conjunction with previous discussion points on TIP, staff described many integral factors in relationships with youth and the physical space itself that can be regarded as 'trauma-sensitive'—such as safety and fostering meaningful relationships with youth (Bergholz et al., 2016). Staff discussed the importance of providing both emotional and physical safety for youth, implying the importance of being an attachment figure to youth that "supports…self-regulation and a sense of safety" (Bergholz et al., 2016, p. 245). The detailed descriptions of how staff members foster social connections with youth-at risk also reflect trauma-sensitive coaching techniques suggested by Bergholz et al. (2016). The C.L.E.A.R. acronym in trauma-sensitive coaching stands for using a Calming voice and tone, Listening deeply, Explaining how and why you are doing what you are doing, Asking engaging questions, and Reducing outside 'noise" (Bergholz et al., 2016). Each of these factors relate to conflict resolution strategies mentioned by staff within this study. Being that youth at-risk may have trauma resulting from their life experiences, it is important to consider the benefits of being aware of trauma-informed practices when fostering connections with youth at-risk.

Findings from this study also contribute to research related to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Within PYD literature, it is acknowledged that intentionally structured programs have the potential to address various aspects of wellbeing for at-risk groups (Ullrich-French & McDonough, 2013). Theorists of self-determination theory (SDT) argue that three specific needs—the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are vital to achieve psychological wellbeing and health (Nagpaul & Chen, 2019; Ward & Parker, 2013). Within this study, connections fostered between staff and youth attend to each of these needs within SDT. Autonomy was considered a critical component in fostering connections with youth whereby

staff, for example, supported youth to make decisions on activities and programs. The competence of youth was acknowledged by staff when they offered youth volunteer and job opportunities, and when they challenged youth in sporting activities. Relatedness was expressed by staff using phrases such as 'that's happened to me' for youth to feel comfortable and connected in the challenges they face. Findings of this research reflect the components of SDT, and importantly demonstrate how staff relationships function to improve the well-being of youth members within PYD programs.

It is critical to highlight that at-risk groups who are self-determined may be more resilient when experiencing unmet social needs when compared to those who are not, as self-determination is deemed a defining aspect of resilience (Nagpaul & Chen, 2019). In aligning with SDT, this study contributes to PYD literature by demonstrating how staff connections with youth at-risk can function to improve well-being and promote self-determination, thus allowing youth to be more resilient when facing various risk factors. Furthermore, purposefully implementing practices that align with SDT in PYD programs may promote psychological wellbeing in youth (Ward & Parker, 2013). Though unintentionally, staff members within this study demonstrated how strategies used to foster connections with youth align with SDT and have the potential to be purposefully used as a guide in PYD programs in order to promote psychological health in youth (Ward & Parker, 2013).

This study also makes several important methodological contributions. Few studies have utilized IPA to explore various topics within PYD literature (e.g., Fitch et al., 2017; Jones & Lavallee, 2009), and no published studies that I am aware of have used this approach to gather detailed, personal accounts regarding the experiences of youth nor adults in fostering connections or social relationships within PYD programs. While I myself am an 'insider' to this

particular topic, there was focus placed in asking, “do I have sense of something going on here that maybe participants themselves are less aware of?” (Smith, 2003, p. 51) when interpreting the words and experiences of participants. This insider perspective to the research topic allowed for an enhanced ability to execute the hermeneutic tradition of IPA studies that focuses on ‘mean-making’ of the participants’ experiences (Smith, 2003). This hermeneutic approach separates IPA as a method from other phenomenological approaches, as there is a particular focus in the researcher not only understanding an individual’s’ lived experience, but doing so in a way that works to “make sense of participants’ sense making” (Smith, 2003). Additionally, while other studies exploring connections with PYD PA settings have used interviews as a data generation method (e.g., McDavid & McDonough, 2019), this study is unique in respect to the level of interpretation achieved, as much effort was put into closely engaging with the data in order to understand how staff foster connections with youth at-risk in after-school, PYD settings.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the various strengths of this research, it also has some limitations that must be acknowledged. While choosing a homogenous sample has inherent benefits in IPA (Smith, 2003), findings of this study cannot be generalized to a wider population as participants were located in the same general region and were staff members at one of only three programs in this region. Findings can be helpful in relating to and extending various aspects of PYD literature; however, as stated by Smith (2003), “one needs to be careful in the degree of generalization one infers” (p. 76). Another limitation is that participants were given a non-constrictive definition of ‘youth at-risk’, as this definition was beneficial to use in the context of this study in order to be inclusive of staff working with youth who experience a wide variety of risk factors. However, in allowing such an all-encompassing definition, it must be recognized that findings of this study

speak to a wide population of youth facing a variety of complex realties, and findings from this study should not necessarily be generalized to groups of youth facing specific risk factors (e.g., youth facing abuse or neglect). Further research should be conducted to explore groups of youth exposed to *specific* risk factors listed in this study in order to allow for a better understanding of how staff foster connections with youth facing unique challenges (e.g., youth experiencing unstable housing as opposed to widely studying 'youth at-risk').

It must also be recognized that single, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were used in order to gather rich data from participants, as this data generation method is most common in IPA studies (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). However, it is important to acknowledge that multiple interviews conducted with each participant likely would have supported the generation of more in-depth data. A second interview allows the chance to develop rapport with the participant and gives time for the participant to reflect on the topic and their experiences, therefore encouraging the emergence of new material (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Another limitation of this study is the utilization of only one data generation method - one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. While semi-structured one-on-one interviews were a justified process of data generation for this IPA, using interviewing in combination with observation methods could help to further elucidate participants' experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

Findings from this study highlight several future research directions for consideration. First, the experiences of socially vulnerable or marginalized youth are typically left out of sport-based PYD research, as highlighted by Newman et al. (2022). Being that youth at-risk have been recognized throughout the literature as being socially marginalized (Hopper & Iwasaki, 2017), it is vital to further explore the experiences of youth at-risk within sport and PA focused PYD research in order to best support and serve youth in programming. Secondly, future research on

fostering connections with youth at-risk in PYD settings should seek out the perspectives of youth members to explore whether similar perspectives are held by youth, or if further considerations must be made by staff members regarding connection building. In addition, there is a need for more research focused in year-round PYD settings, as this is still a considerable gap within the literature that must be addressed in order to better understand strategies and challenges faced by staff in fostering connections with youth in such programs. Given the findings from this research, future studies should examine the use and benefits associated with trauma-informed approaches in connecting with youth members in PYD programmes. Such research is particularly relevant when working with those considered at-risk, as there is high potential for this population of youth to experience past or current trauma as a result of their life experiences.

The importance of focusing on *connection* rather than the other outcomes within Lerner et al.'s (2005) 5Cs model was outlined in this study; however, more research is needed to determine what developmental outcome is most valuable to focus on with youth to best promote PYD (Holt et al., 2012). This is especially important to consider in the context of various populations, as different outcomes in the 5Cs model (Lerner et al., 2005) may be more valuable to teach based on the population of youth. Finally, the importance of youth-staff relationships has been demonstrated and discussed intently throughout this study; however, it must be noted that training for staff specific to building relationships with youth has not been discussed in much depth. Findings from this study in conjunction with findings from similar studies (e.g., McDavid & McDonough, 2020) may be utilized for the development of future training or resources specific for youth-serving professionals in order to "learn the best ways to develop positive relationships with young people" (Bowers et al., 2014).

Conclusion

This research supports an in-depth understanding of how staff members foster social connections with youth at-risk within after-school, sports-based PYD programs. Detailed experiences shared by participants suggest that social connections can be fostered with youth through: getting to know and investing in youth; fostering positive spaces and relationships; allowing for autonomy and leadership; practicing what you preach; awareness of power dynamics; and approaching with caution. Findings from this study address several gaps within PYD literature, particularly concerning the inclusion of staff perspectives, exploring connections within year-round PYD programs, and highlighting the perspectives of staff who work with youth considered at-risk specifically. By sharing specific contextual information, examples, and unique challenges relevant to working with youth at-risk in sport-based programming, this study advances the PYD literature by providing practical suggestions to facilitate connections between staff members and youth at-risk. Furthermore, findings from this study demonstrate the importance of *connection* in PYD settings within Lerner et al.'s (2005) 5CS model, as connections between staff and youth may also function to promote *competence, caring, confidence, and character* traits within youth.

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APPENDIX A

Ethics Approval

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

RESEARCH ETHICS OFFICE

2-01 North Power Plant (NPP)
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Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2N2
Tel: 780.492.0459
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Notification of Approval

Date:	December 6, 2023
Study ID:	Pro00136673
Principal Investigator:	Katie Kavic
Study Supervisor:	Tara-Leigh McHugh
Study Title:	From a staff perspective: Fostering social connections with youth at-risk in an afterschool, PYD sport program
Approval Expiry Date:	December 5, 2024

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

Approved Documents:

Recruitment Materials
Recruitment Email - Nov. 29.docx
Consent Forms
Consent Form.docx
Questionnaires, Cover Letters, Surveys, Tests, Interview Scripts, etc.
Semi-structured Interview Guide .docx

Any proposed changes to the study must be submitted to the REB for approval prior to implementation. A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the REB does not constitute authorization to initiate the conduct of this research. The Principal Investigator is responsible for ensuring required approvals from other involved organizations (e.g. universities/colleges, community organizations, school boards) are obtained, before the research begins.

Sincerely,

Carol Boliek, PhD
Associate Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

Title of Study: From a staff perspective: Fostering social connections with youth at-risk in an after-school, PYD sport program.

Contact Information

Principal Investigator: Katie Kavic, MSc Student, Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation
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You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you take part, a member of the study team is available to explain the project and you are free to ask any questions about anything you do not understand. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you are a staff member that works in an after-school, sport program. You may be interested in talking about how you connect with youth in your program who may face challenges in their lives. These challenges are called 'risk factors'. The goal of this study is to describe how staff members who work in after-school, sport programs connect with youth who face challenges in their lives. These youth may be considered 'at-risk'.

What is the reason for doing the study?

Sport programs are a space where social connections can be formed between staff and youth. These connections are important to help youth go through challenges they may face. This is even more important for youth that face major challenges in their life. These challenges may include trouble at home, with family members, at school, or in a person's neighborhood. Social connections and caring relationships between youth and adults in after-school, sport settings may protect youth against these challenges they may go through.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be taking part in an interview where you will answer questions about how you connect with youth in your program who face challenges in their lives. This interview will take between an hour to an hour and 30 minutes, depending on what you have to say. This interview will take place either in person (face-to-face) or online over Zoom. If we meet in person, you can select

where we meet, as long as the meeting place is quiet so the conversation can be recorded. If we meet virtually, you have the option to turn off your camera at any time. This conversation will be recorded (with your permission) and transcribed word-for-word by the research team. The total time required by you will be between 30 minutes and 90 minutes.

What are the risks and discomforts?

You will not face any physical risks by choosing to participate in this study. However, you may face minimal cultural, social, psychological, and/or emotional discomfort. There may be conversations that come up about your experiences as a staff member that may include sensitive details about the lives of youth, their experiences or challenges. These experiences or challenges may be hard to talk about, as they may not be positive in nature. It is not possible to know all of the risks that may happen in a study. However, the researchers have made sure to reduce any risks or discomforts as much as possible.

You will have the right to skip or refuse to answer any question. Participation is completely your choice, and you may choose to remove yourself from the study for any reason, at any time. In the case that you do feel, following the interview, that you need mental health assistance, you can contact The Alberta Health Services Mental Health Help Line, 1(877) 303-2642), where you will be connected with a mental health professional.

It should be known that within this study, there is the potential for information to be disclosed concerning the alleged abuse, maltreatment, or neglect of youth. Staff members, such as yourself, work closely and frequently with youth, and the connections and relationships they form with youth may lead to the disclosure of potentially negative or abusive situations. The confidentiality of such disclosures, if they occur, will be maintained within the extent of both ethical principles and the law. Any claims of abuse, maltreatment or neglect will be assessed and managed on a case-by-case basis, and will be guided by consultation with colleagues (e.g., supervisor and study team members), relevant professional bodies, the REB, legal counsel and/or persons knowledgeable about applicable laws and regulations in the relevant jurisdictions, as suggested by the TCPS-2 (2022). If necessary, disclosure may potentially result in reports made to third-party services or authorities in order to protect the health and safety of youth mentioned.

What are the benefits to me?

By sharing your experiences, information in this study can lead to future research that aims to further improve the care of youth at-risk in sport programs or similar programs. This study will not only benefit youth who experience challenges, but also staff members within these programs, because research will provide a better understanding of how staff members make connections with youth at-risk. Therefore, current and future staff members both in the same or similar programs may be benefitted by using this information to make connections with youth who may or may not be considered at-risk. Along with this, staff members may be better prepared or aware of ways to create and maintain social connections with youth at-risk. It is also possible that some participants may get no benefit from taking part in this study. While there may not be any direct benefit to you, results from this study may help us learn about how staff members connect with youth at-risk and may benefit others in the future.

Do I have to take part in the study?

Being in this study is your choice. If you decide to be in the study, you can change your mind and stop being in the study. You will have 30 days from the date of the interview to have any information you shared removed from the study and deleted from the research project. After that point we cannot remove you from the study because by this point in time your responses will be a part of the data set. To withdraw from the study please contact Katie Kavic, at kavic@ualberta.ca.

Even if you stay in the research study, you may choose to take out some or all of your responses by contacting Katie Kavic (kavic@ualberta.ca) within 30 days following the date of your interview. We are unable to remove your answers after that time because your responses will by then be a part of the data set.

During the interview, you will have the right to skip or refuse to answer any question, and you may leave the study at any time for any reason.

Will I be paid to be in the research?

You will receive a $50 gift card of your choice for sharing your knowledge. You will receive this gift card even if you choose not to fully complete the interview. The gift card will be provided to you after the interview is complete and will be sent over email. The gift card will be sent in an electronic format either by the researcher (Katie Kavic) or supervisor of the researcher (Tara-Leigh McHugh).

Will my information be kept private?

During this study we will do everything we can to make sure that all information you provide is kept private. No information relating to this study that includes your name will be released outside of the researcher's office or published by the researchers unless you give us your express permission. Sometimes, by law, we may have to release your information with your name so we cannot guarantee absolute privacy. However, we will make every legal effort to make sure that your information is kept private.

The following steps will be taken to protect your identity and the privacy of the experiences you share. Names or other identifying markers will not be discussed outside one-on-one interviews. Pseudonyms (made up names) will be used instead of real names in all study reports, presentations, and/or newsletters. If you would like to choose your own pseudonym, you will be given a chance to do so during the interview. Audio files and digital copies of transcripts, and consent forms will be stored on the secure, password protected computer of the researcher (Katie Kavic) and deleted after 5 years.

Additionally, please note that the audio transcripts will be temporarily stored on the Zoom Cloud, before being downloaded onto Katie Kavic's computer. Because your information is stored outside of Canada it may be subject to the privacy legislation of those territories which

may include access by governmental agents.

During research studies it is important that the data we get is accurate. For this reason, your data, including your name, may be looked at by people from the Research Ethics Board.

After the study is done, we will still need to securely store your data that was collected as part of the study. All collected data (i.e., transcripts, consent forms and audio files) will be safely stored on a secure, password-protected computer that only the researcher (Katie Kavic) has access to. At the University of Alberta, we keep data stored for a minimum of 5 years after the end of the study. After 5 years, all data will be permanently deleted.

What if I have questions?

If you have any questions about the research now or later, please contact Katie Kavic (kavic@ualberta.ca) or her supervisor Tara-Leigh McHugh (tmchugh@ualberta.ca). You are also welcome to leave a message on Dr. McHugh's voicemail at (780) 492-3907 and your call will be returned. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office at reoffice@ualberta.ca or 780-492-2615 and quote Ethics ID Pro00136673. This office is independent of the study investigators.

How do I indicate my agreement to be in this study?

By signing below, you understand:

- That you have read the above information and have had anything that you do not understand explained to you to your satisfaction.
- That you will be taking part in a research study.
- That you may freely leave the research study at any time.
- That you do not waive your legal rights by being in the study
- That the legal and professional obligations of the investigators and involved institutions are not changed by your taking part in this study.
- That you agree to the data being stored as part of a data repository (where applicable)

SIGNATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT

_____ Pseudonym (if necessary)
Name of Participant

_____ _____
Signature of Participant Date

SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT

_____ _____
Name of Person Obtaining Consent Contact Number

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

APPENDIX C

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Purpose: To describe staff members' perceptions of how they foster social connections with youth at-risk within after-school, sport-based PYD programs.

Introduction questions:

1.) Generally speaking, how would you describe yourself?
    a. If comfortable mentioning, probe for age, self-identified gender, years of experience working with youth.
2.) Tell me about the youth at-risk that you have experience working with.
    a. What characteristics do they have that classify them as youth at-risk?
    b. What is the age range of the youth members that you have worked with in the past or present?
    c. What roles have you played in the past working with youth at-risk?
    d. What are the unique experiences of the youth at-risk that you have worked with in these programs?
3.) What is your current or most recent role working with youth at-risk in after-school, sport programming?
    a. What is/was the duration of this role?

Research-focused questions:

4.) What characteristics do you think are important for staff members to have when working with youth at-risk in after-school, sport settings?
    a. What do you do and say as a staff member to demonstrate to youth that you care for them?
    b. As a staff member, what actions do you take to develop a sense of trust with the youth you work with?
5.) As a staff member within an after-school, sport setting, what strategies are important to ensuring youth have choices and have the option to contribute?
6.) What actions are important as a staff member in order to provide support for the youth you work with?
    a. What do you do to support youth when challenging or negative situations arise during program hours?
    b. What behaviours or strategies do you think are important for staff to demonstrate to youth during times of conflict?
    c. How do you support youth members based on their varying unique needs and experiences?
7.) In what ways do you show the youth that you work with that they matter?
8.) What factors do you think create a physical 'safe space' for youth at-risk in your program?

   a. What factors create a ‘safe space’ in conversations between yourself and youth members in your program?

9.) How do you connect with youth at-risk about their personal lives outside of the program?
   a. What steps do you take to support youth in these conversations and show interest?

10.) How do you participate in the sporting activities offered within the program?
   a. What do you think helps you to connect with youth during this time within the program?

11.) Do you think it is important to demonstrate sincere interest in the youth at-risk in your program? Why or why not?

12.) As a staff member within an after-school, sport program, do you find it important to act as a mentor or role model towards youth? Why or why not?
   a. If yes, what behaviours or characteristics are important to pass on to youth that may help them in other relationships?

13.) What kind of training, education, or knowledge has helped you in this role to connect with youth at-risk?
   a. If any, what previous experiences have helped you in this role?
   b. Are there other skills you wish you had?

14.) What barriers do you experience in making social connections with the youth at-risk with whom you work with in after-school, sport programming?
   a. Do you have possible solutions? What worked? What did not work?

15.) Is there a specific group of youth that you connect the easiest with? What characteristics do they have?
   a. Why do you think you connect easily with them?

Closing Questions:

16.) In conclusion, what do you think is most important to you as a staff member in terms of creating social connections with the youth at-risk you work with in after-school, sport programming?

17.) What has not been discussed today that you think is important to share in regard to staff fostering connections with youth at-risk in after-school, sport programming?