Trauma-Informed Youth Sport: Identifying Program Characteristics and Challenges to Advance Practice

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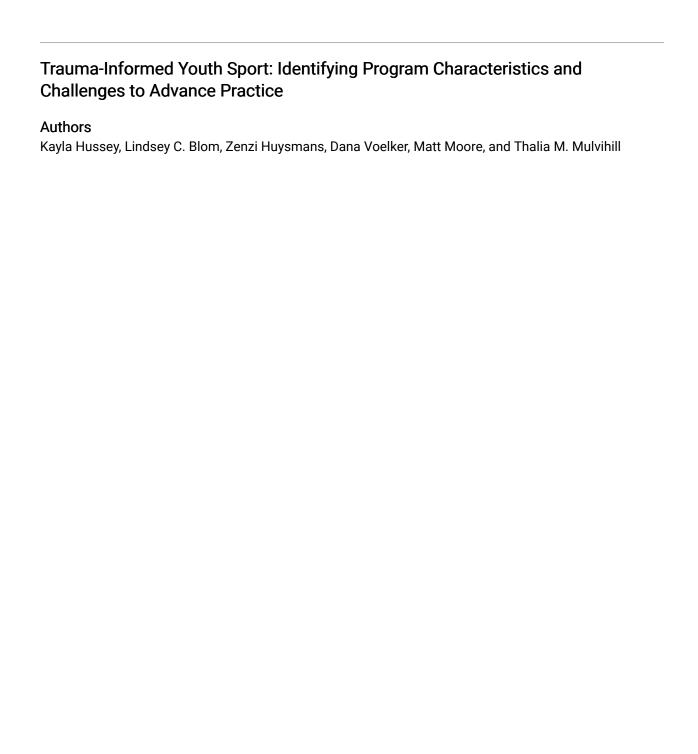Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/jyd

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Introduction

Trauma is defined as a physically or emotionally harmful event that deleteriously impacts individuals' physical and mental health (SAMHSA, 2014). Recent data suggests over 60 percent of U.S. adults across 23 states have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE; Merrick et al., 2018), which implies youth are particularly at risk for trauma and associated consequences, such as emotional dysregulation, decreased motivation and attention, and interpersonal difficulty (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). ACEs are among the most widely studied events associated with potential exposure to trauma and include three primary categories: abuse (i.e., physical, sexual, emotional), neglect (i.e., physical, emotional), and household challenges (i.e., domestic abuse, substance abuse, mental illness, parental separation or divorce, or an incarcerated family member; Felitti et al., 1998). While ACEs provide an introductory understanding of potential trauma exposure, other types of traumas not captured by ACEs certainly exist, such as community violence, generational trauma, immigration processes, natural disasters, racism, and other forms of discrimination. Further, there are certain youth populations, including BIPOC youth (Pumariega et al. 2022), refugee youth (Miller et al., 2019), and LGBTQIA+ youth (Craig et al., 2020), who are more susceptible to experiencing trauma given additional barriers and challenges faced by these youth populations.

When youth experience trauma, especially complex trauma, there are consequences which impede youth development related to healthy attachment, emotional regulation, behavior and impulse control, cognitive functioning, self-concept and body image, and physical health (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2003). Exposure to trauma activates the nervous system, resulting in a physiological stress response to either a real or perceived unsafe situation (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010; van der Kolk, 2003). As toxic stress develops and youth do

not receive resources and care to appropriately and adaptively manage trauma and related stress, the stress response can become discordant with the actual situation (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010). For example, a young person who experienced domestic violence in their house hold may become activated and exhibit as stress response when they are in situations with adults yelling, such as at a sporting event or in the classroom (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010). Given the high prevalence and lasting adverse effects, trauma has been identified as a public health concern and warrants the need for exploration and implementation of resources targeting trauma in youth (Crouch etal., 2019; Srivastavetal., 2017).

Accordingly, professionals in settings such as healthcare, schools, and juvenile criminal justice systems have adopted a trauma-informed approach which aims to provide youth with safe, supportive environments that limit retraumatization and restore healthy relationships (e.g., Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). SAMHSA (2014) offers a useful framework for organizations to implement trauma-informed practices with six guiding principles: (1) safety, (2) trust worthiness and transparency, (3) peer support, (4) collaboration and mutuality, (5) empowerment, voice, and choice, and (6) cultural, historical, and gender issues. These principles provide a general understanding for youth-serving organizations and professionals to build awareness of, conceptualize, and tailor programmatic components to best fit the needs of youth through the lens of trauma.

Sport is one setting in which the trauma-informed lens could dramatically benefit youth. Sport has long been identified as a context where youth can learn important life skills and adopt healthy behaviors (e.g., Beanet al., 2018) and, in the past decade, has become an increasingly popular setting for trauma-informed approaches (D'Andrea et al., 2013).Trauma-informed youth sport programs aim to support youth ineffectively managing, and growing from, traumatic experience through intentional curriculum and coach education, examination and adaptation of common sport traditions, and the development of safe and supportive environments focused on relationship development, skill-learning, and autonomy (Bergholzetal., 2016; Massey & Whitley, 2020). Similar to SAMHSA's (2014) six guiding principles for implementing a trauma-informed approach, Bergholz et al.(2016) offered five sport-specifictrauma-sensitive design principles: (1) physical and emotional safety, (2) long-term engagement, (3) attachment focus, (4) supportive organizational structures, and (5) integration with local cultural practices. Practical examples in a practice or competition environment include consistent practice plans, incorporating time for personal reflection, purposeful connection with youth initiated by coaches, and adjusting sport structure as needed (e.g., adding additional time-outs to help youth regulate). While SAMHSA and Bergholzetal (2016) imparted guidance on how organizations can foundationally operate from a trauma-informed design, there is little research on the actual implementation and experience of facilitators in youth sport programs employing the trauma-informed approach.

Recent findings from LiFE*sports* programming at Ohio State University further supports the need to understand program implementation from the voices of facilitators in sport-based PYD programming for socially vulnerable youth (e.g., Newmanet al., 2020; Newman & Anderson-Butcher, 2021). For example, in a recent LiFE*sports* study on a community sport-based PYD summercamp for economically disadvantaged youth, 26 program staff completed "sessionlogs" designed by the researchers to explore facilitators' ratings of their own instruction over the course of the 15 days of curriculum in three key areas of implementation (i.e., program climate, program curriculum, and program instruction (Newmanet et al., 2020). Program staff in this study rated program climate practices (e.g., "youth being greeted as they arrive," ("encouragement for participation by all") the highest from the three key areas of implementation (Newmanetal., 2020, p. 80). In addition, socially vulnerable youth also recognize the importance and influence of program staff in sports-based PYD programs. In a case study of 13 socially vulnerable youth who began a LiFE*sports* program with reportedly below average levels of life skills, youth explained how program staff helped develop life skills and foster the transfer of life skills from sport to other domains (Newman & Anderson-Butcher, 2021). More specifically, youth in this case study attributed life skill development by program staff as having intentional and direct conversations about life skills by framing sporting activities in relation to life situations (Newman & Anderson-Butcher, 2021). While the studies mentioned from LiFE*sports* programming do not explicitly use trauma-specific terminology, there are parallels across PYD and trauma-informed practices, as well as similarities in characteristics of youth populations who are considered socially vulnerable or have experienced ACEs or trauma.

Though few studies have investigated trauma-informed sport programs with youth specifically, preliminary evidence does demonstrate promising potential toward improving adult-and peer-relationships, building capacity for resilience, and promoting positive self-identity (e.g., D'Andrea etal., 2013, Ley et al, 2018; Shaikh & Forneris, 2021; Whitley, 2022). For example, Ley and colleagues (2018) followed a youth war and torture survivor with Post-

Traumatic Stress Disorder over a three-month sport and exercise therapeutic program (i.e., *MoviKune*) using an in-depth case study approach. Researchers reported the *Movi Kune* program helped the youth war and torture survivors gain a sense of belonging and acceptance, increase motivation and attention, and alleviate traumatic symptoms (Ley et al., 2018). Similarly, Whitley (2022) described the narrative of a young refugee woman who participated in the *Street Soccer USA* program and found sport to be a place of community and an opportunity to cultivate skills such as leadership. Up2Us (2020), an organization that trains coaches and facilitators in trauma-informed sport approaches, reported 84.5 percent of youth participants across their programs improved in at least one social-emotional learning skill (e.g., self-awareness, positive identity), and 81.9 percent reported looking up to their coach as a role model. D'Andrea et al. (2013) explored a five-month trauma-informed basketball program with 88 adolescent girls receiving residential treatment for emotional and behavioral concerns associated with abuse and neglect. Using a therapeutic curricular approach (i.e., *Do the Good*) founded on clinical frameworks (e.g., Dialectal Behavior Therapy), program objectives were to build relationships among participants and increase self-regulation, responsibility, and leadership skills to complement their treatment. Girls who participated in the program, as compared to those who did not, demonstrated more peer-to-peer helping behaviors, fewer internalizing (e.g., withdrawal) and externalizing (e.g., aggression) symptoms, and fewer time outs. Further, coaches who underwenttraining in the trauma-informed curriculum engaged in more one-on-one time with players. Similarly, Shaikh and Forneris (2021) investigated a trauma-informed program, *Bounce Back League*, aimed to build resilience and life skills in immigrant youth. Program staff reported positive increases in youth participants' engagement and comfort around peers (Shaikh & Forneris, 2021). Shaikh and Forneris (2023) further reported on leaders in the *Bounce Back League* program after a two-year pilot period. Leaders in the *Bounce Back League* stated trauma-informed training was applicable to their experiences with youth in the program, relationship building was a key leadership skill, and a focus on integrating life skills was purposeful to the structure of the program (Shaikh &Forneris, 2023). Collectively, research suggests sport is a promising opportunity to engage and support youth exposed to trauma.

Given the extant research is largely focused on youth outcomes (Ley et al., 2018), coach behaviors (e.g., D'Andrea et al., 2013), or features of single trauma-informed sport programs (e.g., D'Andrea et al., 2013; Shaikh & Forneris, 2021; 2023), little is understood about the characteristics and challenges potentially shared across, or unique to, trauma-informed youth sport programs (Massey & Whitley, 2020). Further, while scholars have posed initial guide lines and best practices for the design and implementation of trauma-informed youth sport programs (Bergholzetal., 2016; Massey & Whitley, 2020), little research is available to support and evaluate contextual details that inform programmatic operations. Investigating how trauma-informed approaches are implemented acrossmultiple and diverse youth sport contexts will offer insight and inform strategies toward defining, strengthening, and expanding the approach to benefit more youth. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives and experiences of trauma-informed youth sport program facilitators to identify shared characteristics and local challenges associated with program design and implementation and, inturn, inform their development and sustainability.

Method

A descriptive qualitative research design informed by a post-positivist paradigm as used in the present study. In conducting post-positivist research, methods are practical in nature and aim to uncover meanings from direct experiences (Henderson, 2011), which was demonstrated in the current study through logical phases of inquiry, collection of multiple participant perspectives, and a systematic data analytic approach (Creswell, 2013). The role of the researcher with in a post-positivist paradigm is to assume the responsibility of a "learner" who constructs a narrative through dialogue along side participants, versus a "tester" conducting research on participants (Ryan, 2006, p. 18), which elevates the participant, versus the researcher, as the dominant voice. The research team was led by the first author, who also conducted the interviews, under the supervision of the second author. The third and fourth authors audited data collection, analysis, and writing while the fifth and sixth authors assisted in study conceptualization. A three-person team analyzed the data, including the first author and two graduate students who served as peer debriefers to question and share novel insights toward data interpretation. Collectively, there search team identified as women (*n*= 7), men (*n* =2), White (*n* =8), and African American (*n*170=1) and had diverse experiences germane to the study (i.e., formal training in positive youth development [PYD] and working in the youth sport sector in coaching, consulting, and research capacities).

Participants

To qualify for participation in this study, facilitators had to be atleast 18 years of age or older, in a current leadership position (i.e., guiding, directing, or teaching coaches or youth) in a trauma-informed youth sport training organization or direct service program. The sample often total facilitators (M_{age}=36.2 years, SD=6.03) identified as female (n=8) and male (n=2) and reported their ethnicity as White (n=7), AfricanAmerican (n= 1), ItalianAmerican (n= 1), and Hispanic (n=1). Participants had an average 4.43 years (SD=4.61) of experience in their current leadership position as founder (n=2), trainer (n=1), consultant (n=1), director (n=5), and coordinator (n=1). All participants indicated extensive experience as a former athlete or former or current coach in a variety of sports and indicated having previously received training specific to trauma-informed sport. Three participants had positions in *training organizations* that develop coaches in implementing a trauma-informed approach within their youth sport setting, five participants had positions in *direct-service programs* that implemented trauma-informed programs with youth sport participants, and two participants were involved in *mixed-service programming* consisting of both training and direct service. Additionally, participants were involved in programs and organizations which served BIPOC, LGBTQ+, low SES, refugee and undocumented youth, and girls.

Instruments

A demographic survey was used to gather participants' age, gender, ethnicity, current facilitator role, education and training experiences, and sport background. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore facilitator perspectives and experiences in trauma-informed youth sport programming. Questions examined what it means to use a trauma-informed approach in youth sport and how it differs from traditional approaches, key characteristics of these programs and local challenges in their implementation, and how these programs are believed to serve youth who have experienced trauma. The interview guide was reviewed by experts in sport for development and peace, qualitative research, trauma, and social work to assess appropriateness and relevance to the study purpose. Using a semi-structured approach, the interviewer used clarification and probing questions to garner insights and verbally summarized and reflected participants' accounts to support data trustworthiness and credibility (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Procedures

This study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board. Then using a purposive sampling approach (Creswell, 2013), the first author used internet searches to compile a list of 14 training organizations and direct-service programs that *explicitly* used "trauma-informed" or "trauma-sensitive" to describe their programming. The first author sent a recruitment letter via email or a professional networking site to 11individuals in leadership positions within each identified organization or program using contact information listed on their respective websites. Five prospective participants responded with interest, six declined due to time constraints or loss of contact, and an additional five were recruited via snowball sampling; the final sample included 10 participants. Each participant completed informed consentand demographic forms prior to each audio-recorded interview conducted via an online video conferencing platform. Mean interview duration was 53 minutes, ranging between 39 and 65 minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim yielding 129 pages of data and identifying information was replaced with pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The three-person data analysis team used Braunand Clarke's (2013;2019) reflexive thematic approach. Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively; as recruitment and data collection occurred, completed interviews were transcribed and analyzed through constant comparison (Creswell, 2013; Fram, 2013). As transcribed interviews were made available, the team read them to garner familiarity, noted impressions, and generated initial codes independently as a form of investigator triangulation for data validity (Carteret al.,2014). The team then met to discuss each coded transcript in detail to identify a single semantic label for each code. These semantic labels were

applied to each subsequent transcript where applicable while noting any novel ideas unique to each new interview. After all data were coded and labeled and the analysis team met to review and discuss each coded transcript, the first author collapsed the codes, deductively, into larger themes aligned with the primary research questions. Codes were then inductively organized into sub-themes within each larger theme. Peer debriefing was utilized during the analysis process with the second author to support data credibility, in which the first and second authors met several times during data analysis to discuss the interpretations and development of findings, as well as the continuing methodological steps (Carter et al., 2014; Spall, 1998). Next, the themes were reviewed by the analysis team and study auditors to challenge, clarify, and refine. During the audit process, the third and fourth authors were oriented to the processed data, study procedures, and analysis (deKleijn & Leeuwen, 2018). At the time of the study audit, original findings were organized by themes and sub themes of *shared characteristics* and *local context* of programs. Following recommended revisions, main study findings remained consistent, but were reorganized to include sections on *challenges* in programs and *strategies* to mitigate challenges. There alignment of themes allowed for deeper exploration of how the current study findings related to broader positive youth development literature, as well as addressing tensions with traditional youth sport settings. Upon theme realignment, the first author identified quotes to provide rich, thick description for illustration in a detailed narrative. Finally, all members of the research team reviewed, provided feedback, and agreed on the final interpretation of study findings for dissemination.

Results

The results are organized into two main themes: (1) shared characteristics and (2) local context, challenges, and strategies associated with trauma-informed youth sport programs. Sub-themes in each are italicized for emphasis across the narrative.

Shared Characteristics of Trauma-Informed Youth Sport Programs

Facilitators reported their trauma-informed youth programming prioritized **safe and supportive environments** to strategically mitigate risk for retraumatization. These measures included establishing "consistent" and "predictable" schedules and routines and implementing "regulation" techniques. Amanda reported: "…if someone becomes dysregulated…if they're a lacrosse player…have them do wall balls or have them take a walk so they're doing some patterned, repetitive rhythmic activities…" Facilitators also described reconstructing sport conventions that may activate a stress response like the trauma youth experienced. Michelle explained: "…we still fire a gun to start races, right? So, if you live in a community where firing a gun means you dive under the bed so that the bullets don't come through your window…that's retraumatizing." Chelsea echoed: "…competition is stress. And all you're doing is sort of being more intentional about how stress can impact kids, and giving them some dosed, controlled stress so that they're better at handling it."

Related to fostering a safe and supportive environment, facilitators additionally described the significant and careful role of adults in building **healthy relationships** with youth who have experienced trauma. Jade explained: "…building that relationship to understand that child because their trauma maybe something as small as no one's paying attention to them or it may be something big as seeing someone get murdered or being shot." Brian commented: "…it's caring adults, not just like good, competent, but like actually actively warm, loving, outgoing, open-hearted staff that are attuned to what's going on, that are emotionally intelligent." Other key characteristics of effective relationships in this context were "trusting," "consistent," "stable" "meaningful," and "long-lasting," which were believed to facilitate openness among youth. Fred explained:

> …you're able to have even some tougher conversations. I've had some of my older kids ask about things like systemic racism more and they're like 'I've never asked this to anybody, I don't know who to talk to about this, what do you know? When you have that space for them and to see them transform like that, it's huge.

With strong, positive relationships as the foundation, facilitators described **intentional psychological and socialskill-building** as a characteristic of their programs. Ashley described providing opportunities for peer-to-peer connection and discussion during practice:

> "We really utilize circle time and then that's when weexpresspositivecommunication. We talk about what unconditional love looks like and at the end, we always do shout-outs. It's part of our program, expressing gratitude towards one another."

Facilitators reported teaching a range of strategies to assist youth ineffective emotion management. Michelle stated:

...one of the things that we talk to coaches about a lot is that every person who's ever played basketball has a specific routine they go through before they do a free throw. And so, what's the equivalent of that in your sport? And then how do young people bring that into other parts of their lives? Jade described the usefulness of attentional cues:

> ...she would say whatever came to her head. And so, the coach that I was working with and I always used to tell herput a filter in your brain, like when you're making coffee, everything doesn't come out. And so, by the end of volleyball season, she was repeating that phrase, and when she wanted to say something, she's like, 'I gotta put a filter on.'

Chelsea recounted the use of "visualization" as part of building routines while Brian described training referees to detect and de-escalate signs of stress during competition:"…if the young person does get mad, [the referee] might call them over and say 'hey, let's take some deep breaths together."

Local Context, Challenges, and Strategies Associated with Trauma-Informed Youth Sport Programs

In efforts to develop healthy environments within which youth could effectively develop from their trauma-experiences, facilitators expressed the importance of understanding the local context. Participants cited the trauma experiences encountered by youth served in their programs including "poverty," "homelessness," "food insecurity," "the Covid-19 pandemic," "racism," and "community violence." Michelle described the impact of ACEs:

> So, you know, if adverse childhood experiences is a public health issue, then they are certainly a social justice issue in terms of resources and communities, and we're working in communities where young people are more likely to have compounding adversities...

Brian discussed the experience of a newcomer youth participant in his program:

> ...there's a young person in our program right now... he was abducted trying to migrate from (*name of country*) and was basically held in solitary confinement in (*name of a different country*), and then was released and came straight to (*trauma-informed sport program*). And like, so, you know, as a15-year-old boy that happened to him and now he's 18.

Heidi recalled an incident of gun violence witnessed by youth in her program, stating "...they're out in the school yard and a guy got shot, like literally right in front of them... there's astronomical amounts of gun violence happening." Heidi further highlighted characteristics of neglect within a young girl in her program whose parents were going through a divorce:

> ...her clothes were wrong, her backpack was broken, and her shoes don't lace, her hair's a mess. Kind of like the basic activities of daily living, like not getting the boxes all checked. So, you know, it's like, even in a family that has plenty of financial resource... who knows what kinds of family stress and trauma are impacting this girl...

Unsurprisingly, facilitators described numerous local challenges, such as lack of "funding" for programming and staff; "access" issues in terms of "equipment," "infrastructure," and "transportation;" "language barriers" between program staff and youth participant families; and "retaining staff." To effectively engage local culture and community toward managing these local challenges, facilitators described the following key strategies.

Strategy 1: Promote Youth Voice and Advocacy

Facilitators described the intentional solicitation of input from youth in their programs as a critical component of the trauma-informed approach and a primary way to continually tailor the curriculum. Fred explained:

> … we have an organization that we partner with who, just this year, started a poetry program because… we have kids that come in, they're just here sort of for the social. They don't even like sports, but we want to keep them around. And they told us they like poetry… It's things like that. It's being more accommodating. It's continuing to expand.

Rachel explained how "youth voice" incited deep and meaningful dialogue with facilitators on significant social issues:

> … there is no way to separate mental health from racism and from oppression because to them, that is what they're experiencing and causing them trauma. So, there's been a very clear expression from our kids that we need to talk about that more… in the middle of our sessions, we have a little bit of like a storytelling piece…

Michelle similarly stated: "…racism lives in sport, misogyny lives in sport… we have to think about how do we make sure that sport does no harm?" Strategies for creating belonging for diverse youth included hiring a diverse staff. Monica described:

> "We have a pretty high percentage of immigrant families and non-English speaking families… so, we have native Spanish speakers on our staff here."

Through providing youth participants a safe space to voice their feedback and observe how experiences were valued by the adults structuring their environment, facilitators reported the youth-adult power hierarchy was increasingly balanced. Chelsea commented:

> I think sport can be a really authoritative place…and so easing up on some of those traditions and embedding choice into warm-ups, who you play catch with…just figuring out where it's not going to hurt your coach power.

Facilitators also sought to address youth participants' concerns through tangible assistance, such as free programming, transportation, equipment, meals, and internet access for schoolwork, especially during the pandemic. Monica explained:

> Do you know how you can get meals distributed to you? Do you know how to sign up for a Wi-Fi router so that you can participate in distance learning? It became critical needs that we needed to worry about. And that's always in the background of our work.

Brian described helping immigrant youth and their families transition to tasks of daily life as part of their programming: "…placing a volunteer with a family to specifically go into the home and do tutoring work, but then also with like family, navigating life in the city, paying bills…applying for social services."

Strategy 2: Attend to Staff Needs, Professional Development, and Training

Facilitators described pathways for ongoing development, such as attending workshops and trainings as a staff, sharing relevant resources like podcasts and articles, mentoring and supervising coaches, and evaluating their programs through internal research. Monica explained: "We do a lot of training to make sure that we are always working personally on like anti-bias and anti-racism training, because unfortunately, that is trauma that many of our youth face daily." Ashley described how program coordinators observed coaches in their program using a "coaches manual" and, in turn, developed a "shared language" to provide coaching feedback. Similarly, Fred described site-visits to improve coach delivery:

> …it's not like a pass or fail thing…if we notice that a lot of our coaches aren't doing a certain technique or aren't comfortable…we kind of bring those notes back to the training team. That way, we kind of decide how we need to deliver that better.

Importantly, facilitators acknowledged while they attend to the ongoing professional development and training needs of their staff, there is neither a uniform definition of trauma-informed youth sport nor standards for doing it well. Michelle explained:

> The silver lining of the pandemic may be that people understand the need to help young people be more resilient to stress. The potential danger in that is that everybody saying that they do trauma-informed sport when they don't. So, there's like a little bandwagon potential challenge here where people are like 'oh I do trauma-informed sport.'

Strategy 3: Forge and Nurture Local Community Partnerships

Facilitators described essential collaboration with community partners to increase resources and assist in outreach. Schools were identified as among the most powerful community allies. Brian explained:

> …a lot of our staff are at the school sites…and collaborate with teachers to try to provide wraparound support. We do some pullout groups during the school day as well with some of our students who are in the program who are maybe more high risk or getting lots of office referrals for discipline issues.

Monica elaborated: "I want to underscore the transportation thing again. That's why it is part of [our program's] model to meet kids where they are at schools. They just walk from the classroom to our program. We're right there waiting for them." While school systems served as a critical support for many of the programs represented in this study, outreach remained a challenge. Heidi reported:

> We try to make connections and network to the extent that we can….it's hard to reach girls in a high poverty neighborhood where the parents really are either potentially not around or obviously trying to just make ends meet to get food on the table.

Brian commented: "…what I think is a really underrated aspect of trauma-informed design is the outreach that is necessary to get people to come, and then to continue to come, to continue to make those positive choices." Some facilitators described hesitation from the traditional youth sport community to collaborate. Monica explained:

> …[the trauma-informed approach] is still rejected by a lot of people in the sports community as being too soft…But I think as we get more science that shows the effects of trauma, and more research on practices that can literally help heal the effects of trauma, to me that's worth exploring and disseminating widely.

Fred echoed: "…you see a lot of people who think that being trauma-informed means like, oh, the participation trophy, or you know, kids can't compete. That's so far from the truth as well." Chelsea shared resistance from coaches:

> I still, you know, get some pushback like, 'I can never know what my kids are going through… I'm not a social worker, I can't do all this'. And it's like, this will get you a better sport experience, like this is better for everyone.

While facilitators described doubt from the traditional sports community in using a trauma-informed approach, facilitators acknowledged the likelihood of trauma appearing in traditional youth sport programs. Amanda stated: "You're not going to make any brains feel less included by doing this. Even kids who haven't experienced trauma will benefit from it. And by the way, kids have experienced trauma on your team if you think so or not."

Discussion

The current study leveraged the voices of facilitators to provide needed data to better understand shared characteristics and strategies for mitigating challenges when implementing a trauma-informed approach in youth sport settings. The common features, according to facilitators, largely reflected the guiding principles of PYD that have been established in the general and sport-specific literature (e.g., Holt et al., 2017; Lerner et al., 2005; Newman et al., 2020). These common features also support the conceptual guidelines for trauma-informed programming from SAMHSA (2014) and Bergholz and colleagues (2016). In elevating the voices of facilitators across trauma-informed programs and organizations, this study provide empirical support for, and extends understanding of, how conceptual guidelines for trauma-informed programming can be applied with tangible examples, driven by qualitative narratives, that may be useful to others in similar youth-serving positions.

The present findings included fostering safe and supportive environments within which trusting relationships between youth and adults were nurtured and psychological and social skills were taught with intentionality. Such features found in this study relate to the specific trauma-informed guidelines presented by SAMHSA (e.g., trustworthiness and transparency; 2014) and Bergholz and colleagues (e.g., attachment focus, physical and emotional safety; 2016). Comparably, Bergholz and colleagues (2016) described long-term engagement as a key principle of trauma-informed youth sport, yet a notable finding in the present study included staff retention and youth recruitment and attrition as a challenge cited by facilitators. A deeper exploration of how to retain staff and keep youth consistently engaged in programming is warranted for the sustainability of trauma-informed youth sport programs. Further, aligned with trauma-informed practices (i.e., acknowledging the impact and signs of trauma, creating policies and procedures to minimize retraumatization; SAMHSA, 2014), facilitators described adapting traditional youth sport conventions to uniquely implement PYD principles with youth in their programs (e.g., eliminating gun fire to begin a race). Based on the findings of this study, facilitators' knowledge and skills to intentionally teach youth how to adaptively cope with trauma through implementation strategies (e.g., such as educating coaches on self-regulation practices) is one area practitioners may evaluate in their own programs.

Importantly, the present findings both align with and extend current academic conceptualizations of trauma-informed youth sport. For example, scholars have suggested the most essential component of trauma-informed youth services was understanding the social worlds of youth in their programs and integrating local cultural practices toward improved long-term engagement (Bergholz et al., 2016; Monte Verde et al., 2019), yet very little was understood about how programs introduced these contextual elements into their programmatic operations. Correspondingly, facilitators in the current study shared examples and explicated the meaning of key strategies that leveraged local culture (e.g., promoting the voices and involvement of youth participants, staff, and community partners) to address local challenges. Together, our findings suggest trauma-informed youth sport programs share aims with and uniquely blend PYD principles, trauma-informed practices, and multi-stakeholder inquiry and intervention to address the needs of youth and their families.

Of note, facilitators' reported tension in promoting practices that are trauma-informed within traditional youth sport contexts that emphasize athletic skill development in a highly competitive environment that can create, versus reduce, stress. Contrary to popular belief, facilitators explained trauma-informed youth sport programs are not void of competition or athletic skill-building, but rather do so in a way that assumes youth have experienced trauma and, therefore, conceptualize and modify sport traditions to meet the needs of youth in a particular setting. Despite resistance from traditional youth sport communities, facilitators still supported its application to all youth sport contexts given that most coaches are likely to mentor youth who have experienced trauma. As researchers and practitioners continue to evaluate the environmental factors through which personal and athletic skill development can be achieved

simultaneously (Harwood & Johnson, 2016), trauma-informed approaches should be considered. In fact, some youth sport programs have replaced 'trauma-informed' with terms like 'healing-centered' and 'resiliency-building' to be less stigmatizing (The Center for Healing and Justice Through Sport, 2022; Norris & Norris, 2021). Such reconceptualization may lessen the tension between 'trauma-informed' and 'traditional' youth sport toward an amalgamated approach that is person-centered, strengths-based, and inclusive for all youth sport participants.

This study addresses a gap in literature by providing empirical evidence aligning with trauma-informed principles suggested by SAMHSA (2014) and Bergholz et al. (2016). Taken together, the shared characteristics and key strategies from the present study, along with Bergholz et al. (2016) guidelines, provide encouraging information for facilitators to adopt trauma-informed practices in programming or serve as a point of reflection and evaluation for facilitators. As highlighted by participants in the study, it is imperative to the sustainability and development of trauma-informed sport to allow youth in the program to be active agents in program design, provide coaches with feedback and training opportunities when possible, and evaluate program operations for the purpose of continually meeting youth needs. While much of the literature on trauma-informed practices focuses on facilitators' capacity to build awareness and conceptual understanding of trauma, this study also conveys the value of facilitators' knowledge to help youth adaptively cope with trauma, primarily through attachment and self-regulation skills. Importantly, participants in this study were involved in organizations who claim to centralize a trauma-informed framework to programming. While participants' perspectives do align with existing research on trauma-informed practices, the findings should be interpreted with caution as evaluation of effectiveness and associated youth outcomes were not the purpose of this study. Trauma-informed sport programs should certainly not take the place of clinical intervention (Bergholz et al., 2016), but facilitators' ability to purposefully teach and implement self-regulation strategies (e.g., breathing exercises, visualization) with youth, especially during stressful sport situations, is significant for promoting youth resiliency.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

The strengths of this study were engaging facilitators' perspectives across multiple programs, including those with training and direct-service roles, toward deeper understanding of the application of trauma-informed principles in youth sport contexts. Participants in the current study shared the diversity of youth in their programs (e.g., newcomer youth, low-SES youth) and ways they made their programs more accessible (e.g., partnering with schools to alleviate transportation issues), inclusive (e.g., suggesting the trauma-informed approach can be used across all youth sport contexts), and equitable (e.g., offering no cost participation). Youth who have experienced trauma have been historically marginalized as exuding signs of weakness and, accordingly, trauma-informed youth sport programs have been marginalized as divergent from, and lesser than, traditional, "real" versions of youth sport. The participants in this study, however, challenge these dominant narratives to illustrate how sport can be especially useful as strengths-based approach and suggest all youth sport programs may consider trauma-informed approaches. Finally, the participant quotes in the current study are used to illustrate the shared characteristics, challenges, and strategies across programs that may support readers in the design and implementation of youth-centered and trauma-informed programming.

This study was, however, limited to a convenience sample lacking in racial diversity, consisting primarily of white females (n = 7). It is unclear if this is generally the primary demographic of facilitators in trauma-informed youth sport spaces, and future studies may further explore how facilitator identities represent the demographic of youth served in the programs and how facilitator identities relate to the training and application of trauma-informed youth sport principles. Participants in this study reported prior training in trauma-informed sport, however, this study did not investigate in detail the extent, source, modality (e.g., a multi-week course, single presentation), or content of participant training backgrounds. Future studies may consider exploring different types of trauma-informed training backgrounds of youth sport facilitators to better understand the impact on implementation practices, as well as similarities and differences found among training content.

While the findings are transferrable to similar settings, they do not represent the voices of all programs. To further advance knowledge toward the development of trauma-informed practices in sport, researchers should triangulate multiple data sources across facilitators, parents, participants, and community partners (e.g., Whitley et al., 2016; 2018). Studies investigating retention and longer-term impact would clarify the most and least essential programmatic components to engaging youth and promoting ongoing development. Further, examining the most and least effective approaches to coach learning and development, especially with facilitators of diverse identities, would help to define 'trauma-informed coaching'. Finally, examining the trauma-informed approach in more traditional youth sport settings would provide useful insight into its viability as an inclusive design for all youth.

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