

## Article

# Learning from Youth Voice: Student Reflections on Common Approaches in Youth Sports

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**Abstract:** In youth sports, young people are often subjected to approaches and coach behaviors misaligned with their physical and psychological development, including early specialization and the use of physical activity as punishment. Little research investigates these practices from the perspective of youth. This study used novel qualitative approaches to explore student reactions to these practices. Over four years, students who took an Introduction to Psychology class at one private high school in a West Coast city received a presentation about topics at the intersection of sports and psychology and submitted their reflections. A student-led research team analyzed the 332 reflections. The findings show that the information in the Long-Term Athlete Development framework was dissonant with student experiences in the U.S. youth sports system. Many had negative experiences with physical activity as punishment. Providing youth with information about developmentally appropriate practices in sports can help them advocate for change that will protect them and others from harm.

**Keywords:** athlete development; coach behaviors; positive and negative sport experience; early specialization; punishment; participatory research



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## 1. Introduction

In the U.S. youth and school sports systems, youth and adolescents are often subject to practices misaligned with their physical and psychological development (Brenner, 2016; Duru, 2021). Their long-term development and well-being are undermined by early specialization, overemphasis on winning, excessive competition (Balyi et al., 2013; Brenner, 2016; Duru, 2021), and the use of physical activity as punishment (Kerr et al., 2016). The normalization of these problematic practices, evident through the large-scale adoption of the Skills and Excellence Model as a primary option for organized youth sports in the United States (Coakley, 2021), is, in part, what accounts for their widespread acceptance. The Skills and Excellence Model is focused on the development of sport-specific skills and competitive success through deliberate practice and extensive travel: this demanding environment (physically and psychologically) requires high levels of financial and time commitments from the families, coaches, and athletes and puts pressure on producing results instead of facilitating positive youth sport participation outcomes (Coakley, 2021).

The voices of young people are rarely heard in research about sports and sports-based youth development (e.g., Brooks et al., 2018), especially in the United States (see MacPhail et al., 2003 for examples in Great Britain); further, youth are rarely engaged

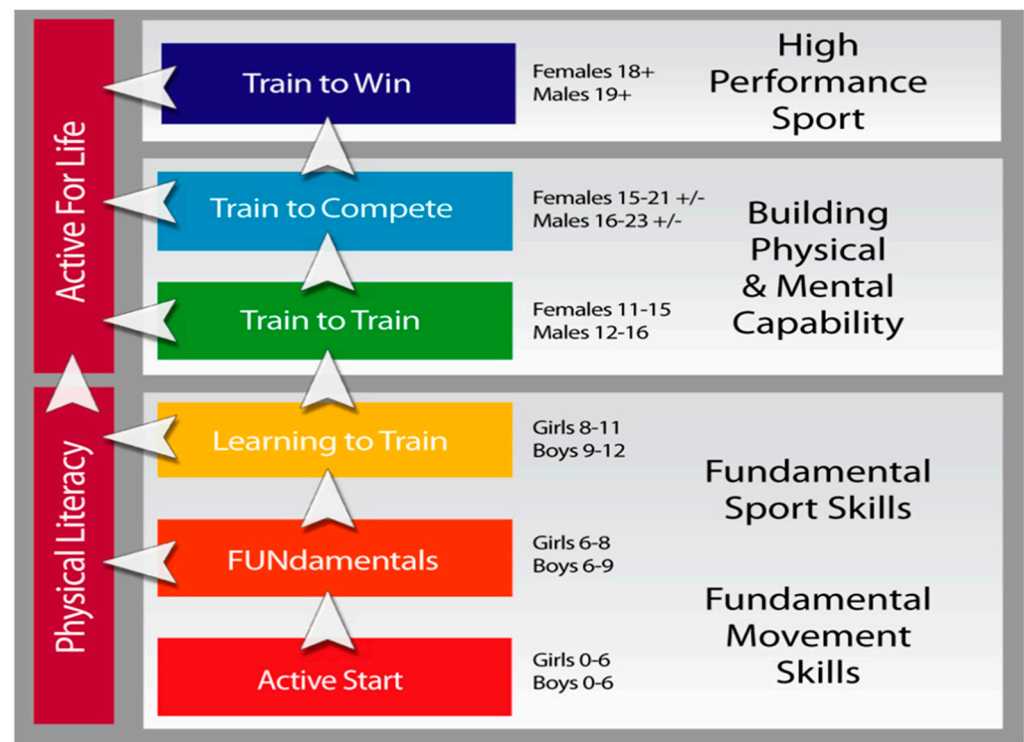
in education or action research related to youth sports. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is a method used to both engage youth in research and empower them to challenge the status quo and shape systems and institutions to meet their needs (Anyon et al., 2018; Enright & O'Sullivan, 2012). This study aimed to address the lack of student voice in sports research and used novel qualitative approaches to understand how high school students respond to information about youth sports and psychology, including problematic practices in the U.S. youth sports system. The methods included the use of student classroom reflections as data and a modified YPAR. The student reflections, which were analyzed by two high school students, came from 332 student reflections collected in response to a 75 min presentation about youth sports in a high school Introduction to Psychology class. The class was taught by the lead author, who has published research on the youth sports landscape, coaching best practices, and psychological considerations for coaches and parents, amongst other applicable topics. The class provided students with an overview of three main elements: (1) behavioral psychology and sport, (2) developmental psychology and sport, and (3) sport psychology or mental training tools. This study focused on student responses to the first two topics.

### *1.1. Classroom Presentation: Development and Youth Sport*

The classroom presentation focused on how behavioral and developmental psychology show up in youth sports. Regarding developmental psychology, students were asked to consider child and adolescent physiological and psychological growth and readiness for sport (Coakley, 2021; Smoll & Smith, 1996; Vealey & Chase, 2016). Some of the key elements highlighted in the presentation focused on how young people's brains and bodies are growing tremendously as they participate in youth sports. Children and adolescents are developing self-regulatory skills, meta-cognition, causal attribution, and delayed gratification—all skills required for engagement in competition-level sports—well into adulthood (Muir et al., 2011; Patel et al., 2002; Vealey & Chase, 2016). Further, children's physical development impacts their coordination, improvement, and performance in sports (Muir et al., 2011), as well as making them more prone to injury and vulnerable to physical load and stressors (Caine et al., 2006).

Specifically, students were shown a version of the Canadian Long-Term Athlete Development Framework (LTAD; Balyi et al., 2013), which outlines a pathway for sports participation, training, and competition based on psychological and physiological readiness (see Figure 1). The LTAD model acknowledges that patterns of sport participation change as athletes move through the stages of development (Balyi et al., 2013). Positive sport participation outcomes, including longevity and injury prevention, can be achieved by integrating developmentally appropriate physical and psychological coaching objectives and practices into sports programming across all stages of LTAD (Sport for Life, 2019; Balyi et al., 2013).

Current literature provides some reflections of coaches and parents on their experiences with LTAD (e.g., Beaudoin et al., 2015; Black & Holt, 2009; Costa et al., 2021); however, there are limited accounts of the athletes' perceptions and experiences with LTAD, especially in the United States. A pair of studies of Wisconsin athletes showed that youth believe early specialization improves performance and increases the likelihood of making their high school team and receiving a college scholarship (Brooks et al., 2018; Hernandez et al., 2021).



**Figure 1.** Long-term athlete development model (Balyi et al., 2013).

### 1.2. Classroom Presentation: Behaviorism and Youth Sport

Along with LTAD, the classroom presentation included a segment on behaviorism and sport, as students had just completed a module on behaviorism. Students were asked to consider where behaviorist principles show up in sport, including through the use of positive and negative reinforcements. In all classes, students mentioned the use of running or other exercise as punishment for failure to perform or behave. According to a wide range of authorities on best practices in youth sport, physical education, and the promotion of healthy behavior, the use of physical activity as punishment is inappropriate and detrimental to developing a positive relationship with physical activity (Albrecht, 2009; Burak et al., 2013; SHAPE America, 2021). In some states, it is a form of corporal punishment and is illegal (Burak et al., 2013). More generally, the use of punishment as a pedagogical tool with children is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes, including increased risk of poor mental health, erosion of relationships, and increased anxiety, anger, and fear (Battaglia et al., 2017). Yet, it is still a ubiquitous practice; most studies exploring the use of exercise as punishment from the athlete's perspective find it extremely common (Battaglia et al., 2017; Burak et al., 2013; Kerr et al., 2016). Exercise as punishment is "typically administered by the head coach in public training settings as a result of poor athletic performance and behavioral infractions, and are reportedly associated with negative consequences for the athletes" (Kerr et al., 2016, p. 34), including damaging the relationship between the coach and athlete (Albrecht, 2009) and creating overall negative experiences for youth (Brooks et al., 2018; Dworkin & Larson, 2006; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009).

### 1.3. YPAR and Youth Sport

Researchers in Europe have begun to recognize the importance of including young people as essential participants in constructing sporting and physical education policies and practices that will keep them safe and engaged (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2012; MacPhail et al., 2003; O'Sullivan & MacPhail, 2010). In the U.S., while the sport and physical education

sector has been slower to adopt this methodological approach, YPAR is more routinely used in public health research to improve the health and well-being of youth (Anyon et al., 2018; Turuba et al., 2023). Kimberly Oliver (2010) has authored one of the few YPAR studies of youth physical activity in the United States, and she notes how the exclusion of youth and student perspectives in health and physical activity limits the possibility of challenging cultural practices that impact their engagement in health-supportive activities and behaviors.

This current study was not designed from its inception as a YPAR project; however, it was guided by the same values that generally underlie the inclusion of youth as researchers. This includes a belief in the importance of seeing young people as subjects of their own lived experiences and a desire to empower them—especially within systems, like sports and education—that are supposedly designed for them but are generally disempowering in practice (Anyon et al., 2018; Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012; Stride et al., 2022). Further, it follows the three primary YPAR principles outlined by Anyon et al. (2018):

First, YPAR is inquiry-based; topics of investigation are grounded in youths’ lived experiences and concerns. Second, it is participatory; youth are collaborators in the methodological and pedagogical process. Finally, it is transformative; the purpose of YPAR is to actively intervene in order to change knowledge and practices to improve the lives of youth and their communities. (p. 865)

Finally, the study reflects other primary characteristics of YPAR: it was an iterative process in which youth and adults shared power (Ozer & Douglas, 2015); youth learned and applied research methods (Anyon et al., 2018); and it was somewhat messy and non-linear (Stride et al., 2022).

The use of classroom assignments or reflections is not explicitly mentioned in literature as a youth participatory method; however, it is in keeping with the notion that participatory methods are typically practical, relevant activities that generate data (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012).

## 2. Materials and Methods

Over four years, 2019–2023, all students who took an Introduction to Psychology class at one private, co-ed high school in a large West Coast city received a presentation about topics at the intersection of sports and psychology with particular attention to areas of psychology already covered in the class. This included physiological and psychological developmental stages as they related to sports training and competition and the relationship between behaviorism and sports. After each presentation, the students’ assignment was to write the presenter a reflection in which they described their main takeaways. In total, 332 students submitted reflections. Demographic data were not collected on the students, but they ranged in grade level from freshmen to seniors. To prepare these reflections for analysis, the high school teacher redacted any identifying information. The Institutional Review Board determined this to be an exempt project.

Data analysis was conducted by two student researchers: high school seniors who had taken the psychology class and opted to work with the lead researcher to further explore the topics for a year-end project. The students received training in basic research practices, including qualitative research methods and coding strategies, using a series of modules the lead researcher had created for a previous YPAR project. A thematic analysis approach was used that involved examining the data for common topics and patterns of meaning that recur (Braun et al., 2016). This type of analysis was used because it is ideal for beginning researchers and groups of researchers (Braun et al., 2016) and, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), provides the theoretical freedom to provide a rich and complex account of the data. The coding of the reflections was an iterative and collaborative process that

included multiple rounds, conversations, and checks with the lead researcher to discuss the process and facilitate the analysis. Throughout, students and the lead researcher kept analytic memos consisting of questions, comments, and ideas about emerging themes and categories (Creswell, 2007); the memos and discussions aided in the iterative process and helped track and enhance the interpretive process.

In round one, the students worked independently to inductively code the 332 reflections into 3–5 topical categories. Then, through discussion, the students compared and contrasted their categories, coming to an agreement on three main emergent topics: physical activity as punishment, early specialization/competition, and mental training. Each student chose one topic to code a second and third time for themes. Before the second round of coding, the lead researcher provided literature to review regarding the topical areas. Using supporting knowledge from the literature reviews of these topics but still working inductively, students used semantic coding to identify themes (Braun et al., 2016). In the third round, students worked with the lead researcher to deepen their work by identifying latent codes. Jointly, the research group conducted a thematic analysis to move from descriptive, summative codes to clusters to a coherent commentary on the topics (Braun et al., 2016).

The student researchers each posited a thematic narrative in their topical area and then supported that narrative with a series of direct student reflection quotes. Those findings, along with the literature review and an overview of methods, were used by the students to write the abstract for this manuscript. The student researchers are co-authors of this article.

### 3. Results

The primary findings were that (1) students were surprised to learn about the connection between sports and developmental psychology, including age-appropriate athlete development; many reflected on how the information was dissonant with their experiences in the U.S. youth sports system; (2) many students had experienced the use of physical activity as punishment and grappled with the notion that it might not have facilitated a positive learning environment or mindset about sports and conditioning. Related to both topics, students used language in their reflections, which indicated that this information was new to them and required them to look at their experiences from a different perspective. Phrases such as “it made me think”, “it really opened my eyes”, and “this gave me new perspective” were common openers to many of the reflections. Students then, generally, wrestled with the new ideas and weighed how the classroom information was resonant or dissonant with their own experiences.

#### 3.1. LTAD: Not My Experience

Regarding age-appropriate athlete development, many students noted the discrepancy between the LTAD framework that they were shown in the presentation and their own experiences and observations of the U.S. youth sports system. One said, “I found it really interesting when we talked about what different levels of competition are appropriate for kids and teens from a developmental standpoint because it was just so far from what I’ve experienced growing up”. Another reflected,

Something I found particularly interesting was the age range for sports and how late the chart recommended being competitive compared to what actually happens in real life. For example, in my gymnastics career, I started competing when I was six which seems ridiculous because when looking at the chart a six-year-old doesn’t understand the point of training.

For some, the LTAD model did not make sense since it suggests that athletes should not “train to compete” until the age of 16. Several students questioned the validity of this

approach since they felt they, or their friends, had been competitive from a young age and had no problematic experiences because of it. One said, “I was competitive long before I was 12. How is the way I process competition/winning/losing different now than it was when I was a third grader? I don’t feel like it’s really changed that much”. Others noted that they had friends who were training to compete well before they were 16 and “now are very good at what they do”.

Other students, however, found the information validated their experiences, especially concerning burnout or quitting sports. One said,

I played a lot of soccer and tennis as a young kid, but I didn’t like the environment and eventually stopped participating. This (lesson) helped me explain why and removed some of the stigma I’d felt about it. I would like to know why it is so common for people to think that participating in sports at high levels, even for kids, is automatically good.

Others noted, similarly, that they could relate to the psychological impacts of early specialization, including “burnout”, “wanting to quit”, sports “becoming a chore”, or being turned off by being “pushed too hard physically, focused too much on winning”. One student described pushing for changes in her dance studio to make it more developmentally appropriate and less intense and said, “It was nice to be reassured. . . that what I have been fighting for at dance recently with the administration is backed up by some science”. Other students could relate to the more physiological impacts of early sports intensity and competition. One athlete involved in dance, cheer, and gymnastics reflected,

I have seen a lot of coaches pushing little girls way too far, and the result is some kids- as little as 5 years old- have shin splints, growth plate issues, stress fractures, and other overuse-related injuries. This is detrimental to their health and I have seen many of my friends quit gymnastics because their coaches push them too far and they don’t have time to rest.

Lastly, many wondered whether the adults in their lives, coaches and parents in particular, understood athlete development. While many focused on their parents’ choices to have them start swimming or soccer at very young ages, others wondered about coach knowledge. One athlete wrote,

It makes me wonder why most coaches don’t know about this, or choose to ignore it. . . I have been training to win since about 13–14 years old because that’s what all my coaches have focused on. What that means is that I had to train harder so that I wouldn’t be benched, as the players who were less experienced usually sat out in games in order to protect an arbitrary win streak.

### 3.2. *“I Do Get a Lot of Negative Reinforcement”*

Regarding physical activity as punishment, students reported its use as ubiquitous in their sports experience. Illustrative comments included, “I play sports and almost all of my coaches use running as a punishment”, and “I have never really experienced coaching where this was not the motivation technique”. A dancer described her experience: “I do get a lot of negative reinforcement like if I do not get the combination right the first time I have to hold a plank or a wall sit for the whole song which could be up to 5 min”. Another added that physical activity as punishment is used so “casually” that it’s hard to believe it could be problematic.

Learning that this technique may not have helped facilitate a positive learning environment allowed students to wrestle with their own feelings about its use. Many recalled the negative impact this type of punishment had on their mindset. One said, “I could feel myself cringing internally at the lines the girls were running because, on my volleyball



team, that's one of our main punishments". Others noted that "Running as a punishment made me avoid risk-taking"; punishment "makes me less likely to try new things because I'm scared", and having to run "ruins my growth mindset".

Lastly, students grappled with the impact this approach had on their relationship to fitness and conditioning, with many noting that physical activity as punishment meant they had been "conditioned to dislike running". In particular, students noted how doing something for punishment instead of their own volition changed their relationship with running. One student said, "I actually really like running and doing fitness for soccer, except for when it is as a punishment because then I feel like I am doing it for someone else rather than myself". Another said, "I've been running of my own volition, and I actually love it—but running 'lines' or 'suicides' or whatever else in the context of a sport still feels awful. Honestly, it made me wonder if that's part of the reason I 'hated' running for so long".

Some students questioned whether physical activity as punishment might be useful in some instances. One said, for example, that he thought some punishments for some students, "like sprints for missing a pass, can decrease the undesired behavior", while in other athletes, it might "increase anxiety". Others asked questions like "is there a way for coaches to use reward and punishment effectively" and "is there anything positive to physical activity as punishment".

### 3.3. YPAR: Move to Action

Regarding the YPAR aspect of the project, the two student researchers, along with leading the analytic process for the study, presented their findings and learnings to an audience of their peers and teachers. Their primary takeaways were less about the content of the reflections and more about the process of qualitative research. One student noted that she was amazed you could take over 300 comments and synthesize them into a few themes. They were surprised by the consistency of the content of the reflections over the four years of the course and across such a broad sampling of their peers. The timing and time limits of their project did not allow them to move the findings from research into action as a true YPAR would require.

The following school year, the lead researcher presented their findings to 60 students taking either the Introduction to Psychology or an Advanced Psychology class to solicit their ideas about moving these findings into action. Students struggled to identify solutions or ways to address the findings. Their discussions about the next steps centered on a number of areas: first, they wondered what other behavior management techniques coaches could use in lieu of exercise and what positive, as opposed to negative, reinforcement might look like. Some students, upon seeing the findings, also pushed back against the notion that exercise was problematic. Second, they suggested more training and/or certification be required for coaches to learn more about long-term athlete development. However, they struggled to articulate who, where, and how that training could take place. Students had a number of other actionable ideas, including access to sports psychologists for both athletes and coaches and limiting competition and rankings for younger athletes.

## 4. Discussion

This review of over 300 high school student reflections revealed that many young people experience youth sports practices that are not aligned with their developmental needs. Further, many were relieved to know that their negative experiences in sports were not necessarily their fault. The primary findings were that students were surprised to learn about the connection between sports and developmental psychology, including age-appropriate athlete development; many reflected on how the information was dissonant

with their experiences in youth sports. They felt like their coaches needed training on how to create a positive learning environment consistent with age-appropriate athlete development principles. This finding is consistent with research that links negative experiences to unknowledgeable leaders and coaches (Dworkin & Larson, 2006).

A number of students questioned the sport experiences they had grown up with and reflected on how they or other young people around them were ill-suited for the degree of competition and intensity they faced. Since most children do not develop the capacity for understanding competition and utilizing it to build skill until about the age of 12 or 13 due to a lack of abstract thinking, knowledge of cause and effect, and perspective taking (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Patel et al., 2002), it is not surprising that some felt reassured to know that their concerns and experiences with early specialization were legitimate. Others, however, in keeping with research on early-specialized athletes (cite), expressed confusion about why competition should not begin earlier and how they might miss out on opportunities for advancement in sport if they started training to win later.

Students grappled with the notion that physical activity as punishment might not have facilitated a positive learning environment or mindset about sports and conditioning. Research suggests the use of physical activity as punishment “constitutes an unsound education practice because it inhibits the development of a positive attitude toward physical activity” (SHAPE America, 2021). Using physical activity as punishment is often associated with inappropriate coaching behaviors, intimidation, and favoritism: these negative coaching characteristics cause athletes to experience feelings of unease, fear, and, in some cases, resentment towards the sport (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). The students’ reflections about how punishment made them fear mistakes and limited their ability to play freely also align with findings about the impact of coaches who create a mastery climate versus those who create an ego climate (Burak et al., 2013). Athletes have been found to prefer those who create a mastery climate by giving encouraging, instructional, task-oriented feedback and positive reinforcement as opposed to those who foster competition, comparison, and utilize punishment for losing (Burak et al., 2013; MacPhail et al., 2003; Smoll & Smith, 1996). Mastery coaching and refraining from a comparative climate have also been linked to improved intrinsic motivation for athletes (MacPhail et al., 2003; Vella & Perlman, 2014). Athlete reflections were quite similar to those in Culver et al.’s (2014) classroom assignment in which “It appeared that coaches who instilled fear were robbing their athletes of the ability to express creativity and enjoyment in sport” (p. 17). In that study, students described coaches punishing and humiliating players on the team for not executing plays or being yelled at so frequently that all they could think of was to “not make any mistakes” (Culver et al., 2014, p. 17).

The YPAR follow up was not deep enough to fully explore actionable change or engage with student reactions to the findings. Both of these constraints are resonant with other YPAR projects, particularly those conducted within schools (Stride et al., 2022). As Oliver (2010) notes, “scholars who hope to focus on student voice need to be prepared to spend a great deal of time working with young people if they hope to see below the obvious surface” (p. 45). As such, it is unclear the degree to which the youth-led components of this research project itself met the YPAR goal of improving the lives of youth and their communities (Anyon et al., 2018) or of changing practices.

However, the fuller project, which included the classroom presentation and an opportunity for youth to reflect on their sports experiences, may have opened an important dialogue that young people have the right to expect developmentally appropriate and evidence-based approaches in sports programming. Early specialization/competition and exercise as punishment are examples of the way the youth sports system is built around practices that have the potential to create abusive environments (Duru, 2021; Mountjoy



et al., 2015; Richardson et al., 2012). This is because the predominant model, the Skills and Excellence Model, positions sports as a means to an end for young people: a college scholarship or professional contract being some of the more coveted “ends” (McCleery & Burton, 2023). With these prizes being available only to a small fraction of youth sports participants, the coach, sports programs, and leagues often become power brokers for the aspirations of young people and their families. This creates a power imbalance that means youth and families will comply with coach demands even if those demands are not evidenced-based or appropriate (Duru, 2021). Some of the student comments reflected this sentiment that early specialization and physical activity as punishment must not be wrong because they are so commonly and “casually” used. Other comments questioned why coaches would be using developmentally inappropriate or dangerous practices and ignoring evidence-based approaches.

The ubiquity of these issues and the power imbalances that create youth/family willingness to accept them is what makes youth sports a site of high rates of abuse. While there is little data about the prevalence of abuse in U.S. youth sports (Johnson et al., 2020), a report from the United Kingdom found that 75% of young people who participated in sports experienced some type of emotional abuse (Stafford et al., 2015). Reporting of emotional and physical abuse to the U.S. Center for SafeSport has increased by 300% in the last two years (U.S. Center for SafeSport, 2022).

Substantial gaps exist in athlete and parent knowledge related to these issues (Johnson et al., 2020). Educating youth about this landscape and giving them tools and language to reflect on their experiences can empower them to improve for themselves and their peers. Adults in youth sports have been slow to change despite evidence of the need (Commission, 2024), and youth advocacy is needed to change the status quo. Future research could investigate the U.S. youth sports experience more fully by centering the voices and experiences of young athletes. This could be through more YPAR investigations that allow youth to shape the question and drive action with their results. A YPAR with athletes on the same team or competing in the same sport or league could offer valuable insight that could not be captured through a classroom-based sample. Increased use of qualitative methods in sports research, through ethnographies, interviews, or focus groups, could also help adults build a more nuanced understanding of youth experience in sport. Approximately two-thirds of youth in the U.S. play sports (Johnson et al., 2020), making it an important topic for investigation and for understanding the lived experiences of young people.

### *Limitations*

Because this study did not originate as a YPAR study, the initial research question was not one generated by the students themselves and may or may not reflect their primary concerns within youth sports and coaching. The reflections they wrote were constrained to the universe of topics raised in the initial presentation, which was developed by the lead author and not by the students. Another methodological limit was not being able to have the students move the findings into action. Without an ongoing contact point with the students, researchers were limited in their opportunities to engage in dialogue about what the findings meant to them and how the adults around them could address the issues raised. Lastly, the qualitative findings reflect the experiences of high school students at one private high school and are not generalizable.

## **5. Conclusions**

As researchers and advocates seek reforms to coaching practice and programmatic approaches in youth sports in support of healthy and safe engagement for young ath-

letes, youth voice is a missing and essential component of change. Engaging youth in participatory action research—and arming them with information about developmentally appropriate practices in sports—can help them advocate for actionable change that will protect them and other young athletes from unnecessary and unintentional harm.

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**Data Availability Statement:** Due to the nature of the data, it is not publicly available.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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