Exploration of a College and Career Readiness Leadership Program for Urban Youth

Samantha Bates
Texas Christian University
s.bates@tcu.edu

Dawn Anderson-Butcher
The Ohio State University
anderson-butcher.1@osu.edu

Jera Niewoehner-Green
The Ohio State University
niewoehner-green.1@osu.edu

John Provenzano
The Ohio State University
provenzano.13@buckeyemail.osu.edu

Abstract

Urban youth living in poverty are less socially and academically prepared to access postsecondary education compared to their more affluent peers. College and career readiness (CCR) programs traditionally focus on skill-building to assist with college and financial aid applications, test taking, and career exploration. The Youth Leadership Academy (YLA) program includes these components, but also incorporates positive youth development (PYD) and leadership skill development strategies to further prepare urban youth for college and career through internship, service, and leadership opportunities. Using a mixed methods approach, this study explored youth perceptions of the YLA, evaluating the influence of the program on youth outcomes and distilling what, if any, program design components contributed to their growth and learning. Qualitative findings suggest participation in the YLA was perceived to support growth in communication skills, social skills, readiness for leadership roles, and preparation and knowledge for future college and career opportunities. Additionally, quantitative results demonstrate positive, significant increases from pre- to post-program test in leadership, communication, problem-solving, and teamwork skills for youth. Program design components shown to support positive outcomes included positive relationships with peer and adults, skill-building sessions, and applied internship experiences. Findings suggest that PYD approaches with CCR and leadership skill development

programming may promote positive social outcomes for vulnerable youth. Implications for intervention, practice, and future research are discussed.

Key words: college and career readiness, leadership development, positive youth development, urban youth

Introduction

Over the last decade, high school drop-out rates have declined and the number of youth entering higher education has increased (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016), yet there are still opportunity gaps among youth of color and those living in poverty especially in urban settings (DePaoli, Balfanz, Atwell, & Bridgeland, 2018; Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; NCES, 2016). Youth living in urban communities, namely overrepresented as those of color, living in impoverished neighborhoods, and attending under-resourced schools, often have fewer opportunities to participate in programs that promote their healthy development, graduation from high school, and matriculation into higher education (Ayscue & Orfield, 2016; Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011; Wolf, 2007). As a result, youth in urban communities are particularly vulnerable to lower educational attainment and poor developmental outcomes (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004; Howard, 2010; Kazis, Vargas, & Hoffman, 2004).

Positive youth development (PYD) programs that aim to address multiple risk factors and support success in school and in life are of increasing importance in urban communities. Outcomes linked to participation in effective PYD programs include improved interpersonal skills, self-efficacy, academic achievement, school attendance, and school engagement, along with fewer risks for substance misuse and delinquency (Anderson-Butcher, Stetler, & Midle, 2006; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). In turn, effective PYD programs that combat risks for low social engagement or negative peer interactions are particularly relevant for addressing educational inequalities, promoting equitable health and social outcomes, and combating economic risks such as unemployment (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010; Lundberg & Wuermli, 2012; Masten, 2014; Rumberger, 2011).

Gaps exist, however, in our understanding of how to design effective PYD programs, especially for youth living in urban communities. More research is needed to identify what program design components promote positive learning, growth, and healthy development for youth in urban contexts (Knaggs, Sondergeld, & Schardt, 2015; Lerner, 2005). Additionally, there is a need to

examine whether holistic programmatic approaches that build skills and mitigate risks are effective in promoting positive outcomes for these underserved youth (Anderson-Butcher & Cash, 2010; Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003; Kress, 2006; Redmond & Dolan, 2016). As such, the current study uses a mixed methods approach to evaluate outcomes and program design components associated with a PYD program focused on college and career readiness (CCR) and leadership skill development among youth living in an urban community.

Positive Youth Development

PYD programs, in general, are of increasing importance for youth living in urban communities, as these youth often experience greater exposure to risks and other stressors. For instance, youth living in urban communities are increasingly at risk for lower educational attainment and poor developmental outcomes. Barriers to postsecondary education are interrelated for youth in urban communities who often attend under-resourced schools, live in households with lower educational attainment, and have less access to supports that assist them in preparing, applying to, and matriculating to postsecondary settings (Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Ward, 2006). Moreover, studies indicate approximately 20 percent of youth have not developed age-appropriate social skills and socio-emotional risks are becoming more prevalent among urban youth living in poverty (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Blumberg, Carle, O'Connor, Moore, & Lippman, 2008). Given these compounding risks, comprehensive PYD programs for youth in urban communities may be one strategy to combat the aforementioned educational and developmental challenges.

Critical design components important to embed in programs for urban youth are grounded in principles of effective PYD such as the "Big Three" (Lerner, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). In addition, the incorporation of college and career readiness activities (CCR) and leadership development opportunities can further address risks and promote positive life and social skill development for youth in urban communities.

Essential PYD Components and the "Big Three"

Quality, evidence-based PYD programs often include the "Big Three" effective design components (Catalano et al., 2004; Lerner, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003):

- positive and sustained relationships among youth and adults,
- activities that build important life skills, and
- opportunities for youth to use these life skills in various community activities.

Sustained relationships among peers and youth are critical for creating the foundation for learning to occur. Skill building, especially in relation to life skill development, is necessary for arming youth with the tools they need to navigate stressors and plan for their future. Engagement in community activities allows youth to apply their skills in real-live settings and develop a sense of belonging, social responsibility and autonomy. All three are critical components in PYD programs.

College and Career Readiness

In addition to promoting PYD, a college education is viewed—and continues to be viewed—as the gateway to economic, social, and personal success for youth (Tough, 2014). Programs designed to target CCR are therefore increasingly important for urban youth, as they can help youth develop the skills, knowledge, and experiences necessary to complete high school and be successful in college and the workforce. CCR program strategies often include four key dimensions, including key cognitive strategies, content knowledge, learning strategies and skills, and transition knowledge and skills (Conley, 2012). Key cognitive strategies are behaviors such as problem formation, research, and communication. Content knowledge is the academic skills youth have prior to college entry in core academic subjects (Conley, 2012). Learning strategies and skills resemble nonacademic factors that contribute to success in social and academic life such as the ability to study, manage time, set and achieve goals, as well as high degrees of self-efficacy (Conley, 2012). Finally, transition knowledge and skills encompass information about how higher education operates as well as workplace and college norms (Conley, 2012).

To date, metrics such as grade point averages and standardized test scores are routinely used to determine CCR, yet several notable dimensions require nonacademic knowledge and skills (Maruyama, 2012; Somerville & Yi, 2002). For instance, supports such as campus visits, information about admissions, and assistance with financial aid can help build transition knowledge and skills. These nonacademic supports are especially important when trying to level the playing field for many urban youth whose parents may not have attended college or whose schools lack resources promoting college-going behaviors (Fann, McClafferty Jarsky, & McDonough, 2009; Knight-Manual et al., 2016; Loza, 2003). Thus, there are opportunities to leverage out-of-school time through PYD programming to build on the nonacademic dimensions of CCR. Furthermore, preparation for college and career is one approach to mitigate risks and build protective factors in alignment with the purpose of PYD.

Youth Leadership

Engaging youth in activities to develop their leadership skills also is shown to be highly protective in relation to learning, career readiness, and overall development (Kress, 2006; Thomas, Larson, Solberg, & Martin, 2017). Key leaderships skills of importance include critical thinking, communication, decision-making, problem-solving, team-building, and self-awareness (Kress, 2006; Redmond & Dolan, 2016). To develop leadership skills among youth, programs require not only the cultivation and teaching of these skills, but also must include opportunities for youth to apply skills and reflect on their decisions and application (Hernez-Broome & Hughes 2004; MacNeill 2006). Engaging youth in community service and youth-led civic initiatives can support leadership skill development (Wheeler & Edleback, 2006). For instance, when programs focus on leadership through civic engagement and community service, youth are afforded additional opportunities to build their skills, and use their competencies to benefit their communities at large (Redmond & Dolan, 2016; Wheeler & Edleback, 2006).

In the scope of opportunities available in urban communities, there is a need to offer and engage youth in programs and activities designed to build their leadership skills. High-achieving, middle-class youth are often overrepresented among youth leaders, perpetuating better educational and employment opportunities for more affluent groups (Kress, 2006). To combat this overrepresentation, youth leadership programs that use targeted recruitment tactics are needed. In the end, programs focused on youth leadership connect with the goals of PYD by building competencies for the future and addressing the challenges of adolescence by creating activities and experiences that help youth learn and grow (Edelman, Gill, Comerford, Larson, & Hare, 2004). One leadership program of interest is the Youth Leadership Academy (YLA).

Program Description

The YLA is part of a sport-based PYD initiative at The Ohio State University called Learning in Fitness and Education through Sports (LiFE*sports*). LiFE*sports* is a PYD program which uses sport as a medium to teach social skills to over 600 youth each year at a 19-day tuition-free summer camp. The YLA is an extension of this nationally recognized summer sports camp and offers year-round programming for past campers who are now high school youth aged 15 to 18. Annually, approximately 20 to 40 youth join the YLA and stay involved for all 4 years of high school. The YLA program is comprised of three phases that youth engage in every year, including the CCR and leadership development phase (i.e., skill-building sessions), an applied internship phase, and a culminating service event phase. The YLA program is grounded in the Big Three principles of PYD (Blum, 2003; Lerner, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). For

example, life and social skills are targeted via the sustainment of ongoing relationships with adults and peers in the program. Moreover, intentionally designed skill-building sessions focus on the nonacademic dimensions of CCR, and the applied internship and culminating event provide youth with opportunities to apply leadership skills through civic and community service activities.

To briefly overview the program, the skill-building sessions help youth prepare for college and the workforce by offering sessions focused on creating resumes, completing mock college applications, and learning about different college majors and career paths. In addition, youth engage in discussions, experiential activities, and team-based learning lessons focused on leadership skills. Notably, the skill-building sessions vary by cohort. For example, youth in their first year of the program attend introductory leadership skill-building sessions, whereas older youth in their second year receive more tailored leadership and CCR content. All youth attend the annual college visits, complete the applied internship, and participate in the culminating event each year.

During the second phase, youth are involved in an applied internship during the annual LiFEsports Summer Camp. Youth work approximately 32 hours a week for 4 weeks as junior staff members who implement programming and provide support to camp staff. Youth are not paid during the internships, but receive community service hours. During the final phase of the program, youth design and implement a youth-led culminating project focused on volunteering in their community. To provide an example, youth organized a clothing drive during the LiFEsports Summer Camp. Youth then chose one day after camp to transport the clothes to a local homeless shelter where they distributed clothes and served lunch to those utilizing the shelter. Table 1 details the overall YLA design and related program activities.

Table 1. YLA Program Overview

Phase of program	Goals of phase	Activities of phase/focus of sessions	Time period
Phase I: College and career readiness and leadership skill-building sessions	• Life and social skill development • College readiness • Leadership skill development	• Self-identity and awareness, leadership, goal-setting, communication, time management, teamwork, and problem-solving • College applications and preparatory tests, financial planning for college (i.e., FAFSA, scholarships, financial aid), career exploration events (speakers, visits to local businesses), preparation for internship experience (working with youth and other staff), campus tour(s) of universities	Approximately 9 sessions for 2 hours once a month (September-May)
Phase II: Applied internship experience	• Life and social skill development • Career readiness • Leadership skill development	• Youth work alongside camp counselor who oversees 25 youth participants at annual LiFEsports Summer Camp • Youth leaders assist counselor to teach life and social skills through sport with youth participants	32 hours a week for 4 weeks (month of June)
Phase III: Culminating event	• Life and social skill development • Leadership skill development • Civic engagement	• The event is youth-led and youth leaders work to determine ways to give back to community and implement a service activity.	One day of service spent giving back to the community (end of July)

Current Study

The current study used a mixed method approach to examine the effectiveness of YLA, a PYD program grounded in the Big Three, CCR, and leadership skill development. The study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, the potential for programs which integrate

PYD program design components and strategies to build CCR and leadership skills simultaneously warrant additional exploration, especially for vulnerable populations of youth (Durlack & Weissberg, 2007; Frasier et al., 2004; Kress, 2006). Additionally, research focused on distilling what, if any, program design components contribute to positive outcomes for youth are especially relevant. PYD and CCR programs exist and incorporate evidence-based mechanisms, but it is often unclear what program design components contribute to growth and positive outcomes for youth participants (Knaggs et al., 2015; Lerner, 2005). Further, there is a need to utilize mixed methods approaches when evaluating PYD programming (Barcelona & Quinn, 2011; Kurtines et al., 2008).

The aims of the study were twofold: (a) to explore youth perceptions of a PYD program focused on foundation PYD essential components, CCR and leadership skill development, distilling what, if any, outcomes and program design components contributed to their growth and learning; and (b) to evaluate the influence of the PYD program on youth outcomes.

Methods

Qualitative methods utilized individual interviews to examine perceived outcomes among the youth, as well as distilled insights from the youth about essential program design components used to promote outcomes. Quantitative methods employed pre- and post-program surveys to explore youth perceptions of various outcomes pre- to post-participation. All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Qualitative Methods

Participants

Recruitment materials for individual interviews were sent during the skill-building phase to 17 youth who had completed their first year in the YLA and continued participating in their second year. Upon return of parent/guardian consent and youth assent forms, youth participants were interviewed to examine the effectiveness of the PYD program. As recommended by Guba & Lincoln (1994), interviews were continued with youth until saturation was met (i.e., little to no new information was being generated through the addition of new interviewees). Saturation was met after ten individual interviews. In total, six youth were male and four female. Nine youth were African American, and one youth was mixed race. The average age of participants was 15.9 years with participant ages ranging from 15 to 17 years. Youth participating in the

study were representative of the entire YLA program in terms of race/ethnicity and age (with a slightly higher representation of female participants).

Procedure

Upon receiving consent and assent, interviews were coordinated and followed a semi-structured interview guide. Questions from the semi-structured interview guide were brief and open-ended, allowing youth to describe the program in their own words, as well as allowing for additional time to probe for specific examples. Example questions included the following:

- Tell me about the YLA.
- What, if anything, have you learned from participating in the YLA?
- In what ways, if any, does the YLA give you a chance to be a leader?
- In what ways, if any, is the program preparing you for life after high school?

A trained research assistant conducted and transcribed all interviews. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and occurred in youths' homes or at conveniently located, semi-private community meeting places. Upon completion of each interview, youth were given a $20 gift card incentive.

Data Analysis

To analyze the qualitative data, interview transcriptions were initially reviewed for overall themes. The raw data were then analyzed using inductive procedures and grounded theory, allowing for the themes to emerge within each area through data coding, as recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Data were coded into mutually exclusive classifications and language was adapted to further clarify emergent themes. To enhance credibility and rigor within the coding process, a peer reviewer assisted with coding and promoting validity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As noted by Strauss and Corbin (1990), grounded theory requires processing of concepts and relationship with a researcher who has expertise in the field. Therefore, an expert in the field of PYD read the interview transcripts, engaged in the coding process, and assisted in triangulating emergent themes.

Quantitative Methods

Participants

The 35 youth registered for the YLA program were recruited to participate in pre- and post-program surveys to examine their outcomes over time. Of these 35, 24 completed the pre-

program survey during the first skill-building session the YLA. Nineteen of these youth completed the post-program survey on the last day of the YLA program. Notably, attendance to sessions can vary depending on involvement in sports, school events, and extracurricular activities during the school year. In addition, attendance to the last week of the applied internship is often lower than year-round programming due to the July 4th holiday. These survey completion challenges influenced data collection at both pre- and post-program time periods. Of the 19 youth with complete data, a majority of the sample were male (53%). In addition, the majority were African American (84%), and 60% reported receiving free or reduced lunch. The average age of participants was 15.5 years old, ranging from ages 15 to 18.

Measures

Participants completed quantitative pre- and post-program surveys to determine if perceptions of their skills and competencies changed over the course of their participation in the YLA. The following outcomes were included on the survey measures: leadership, communication, problem-solving, teamwork, self-efficacy for learning, future self-efficacy, and emotional regulation. To keep the evaluation measures brief for youth, subscales or scales with a relatively small number of items were compiled to create the pre- and post-program surveys. A brief overview of each measurement scale is explained in Table 2.

Data Analysis

Pre- and post-program data were first checked for normality. Levine's test was then used to explore if the variances between pretest and posttest data were equal. To analyze outcomes, a series of paired sample t-tests was used to examine whether the youth scores differed significantly on pretests and posttests. Statistical significance was determined at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 2. Youth Outcome Measures

Construct	Definition	Measure	Response	Items	α
Leadership	The subscale assesses self-perception of leadership skills.	Leadership Self Perceptions Subscale (Rutherford, Townsend, Briers, Cummins, & Conrad, 2002)	(1) Strongly disagree to (5) Strongly agree	23	.84
Communication	The subscale assesses communication as a life skill.	Skills for Everyday Living Scale (Perkins & Mincemoyer, 2003)	(1) Never to (5) Always	6	.70
Problem-solving	The subscale assesses the ability to confront difficult situations and to utilize positive problem-solving skills.	Problem Solving Inventory (Maydeu-Olivares & D'Zurilla, 1997)	(1) Strongly agree to (6) Strongly disagree	9	.80
Teamwork	The scale assesses the ability to collaborate and work with others to achieve a common goal in the group or team context.	The Teamwork Scale (Lower, Newman, & Anderson-Butcher, 2015)	(1) Not true at all to (5) Really true	7	.86
Self-efficacy for learning	The scale assesses the ability to learn and accomplish tasks in school.	Self-Efficacy for Learning Scale (*CAYCI, n.d.)	(1) Not at all true to (5) Really true	11	.72
Future self-efficacy	The scale assesses the ability to overcome obstacles and achieve goals.	Future Self-Efficacy Scale (*CAYCI, n.d.)	(1) Not at all true to (5) Really true	6	.84
Emotional regulation	The subscale assesses capability to express positive affect and to regulate negative affect.	Modified Regulatory Emotional Self-Efficacy Subscale (Caprara & Gerbino, 2001)	(1) Not well at all to (5) Very well	8	.82

Note. *CAYCI is abbreviated for the Community and Youth Collaborative Institute. Higher scores indicate stronger agreement or self-perception of the skill on each scale or subscale.

Results

Qualitative Program Outcomes and Design Components

Outcomes

Participants were asked to describe what, if anything, was learned as a result of participating in the YLA. They reported several outcomes, including communication skills, social and life skills, preparation for leadership roles, and preparation and knowledge for future college and career opportunities.

Communication Skills

The first theme focused on communication skills. Several of the comments were broad; however, seven YLA participants suggested improved communication skills. For example, when asked what was learned in the program, a male YLA participant reported, "Being assertive and standing up for what you believe in, and having goals, and being focused." Other youth specifically reported their communication skills were strengthened during the internship experience and working with younger youth. To provide an example, one female YLA participant reported the YLA helped her overcome her fear of public speaking. She stated,

> *I am terrified of talking in front of people, but like it helped*
> *because when you are there and your coach needs help you're*
> *just by yourself and you can't be afraid to talk or they [the*
> *campers] are not going to take you serious.*

Social and Life Skills

A second theme focused on learning social and life skills as a result of YLA participation. For example, seven YLA participants reported positive social and life skills, including improved relationships with peers and self-control. One female YLA participant stated, "Actually making new friends. I have become more friendly [since] I started the YLA program because before I was really mean." Similarly, youth reported learning how to control their emotions and subsequently their reactions and behaviors. For example, a male YLA participant reported that he learned, "To not always yell, not always get mad first. Stay calm; find a different direction to go in before you start getting mad."

Preparation for Leadership Roles

A third theme identified from youth interviews focused on feeling more prepared for leadership roles. Notably, several skills were interrelated to this theme, including improved social skills, communication skills, and career readiness. In total, six YLA participants described how the skills learned in the program transferred to taking the lead in group situations when they might have otherwise acted differently. For example, one male YLA participant discussed his role at camp and stated,

> Well they get our minds ready for the kids because sometimes it is
> hard to deal with them and we may get a little hotheaded. But
> they teach us how to stay calm, how to connect with the kids,
> how to try to understand them and their position.

Another male YLA participant stated how he was prepared for his role to lead others during the internship experience, "They prepare you on how to handle your kids. How to be more responsible because you have a lot of responsibility. Patience, also teaching patience." A third female YLA participant described that her peer mediation skills improved by demonstrating several leadership qualities such as problem-solving and communication in group situations. She reported, "They do help us learn how to solve situations because I think before I wouldn't be able to solve a situation between two campers or two groups."

Preparation and Knowledge for Future College and Career Opportunities

Another theme reported by three YLA participants focused on preparation and knowledge for future college and/or career opportunities. The theme included youth describing how activities focused on making a resume made them feel more prepared for college or a job. Similarly, two youth reported feeling more prepared for specific career paths as a result of learning about different professions. To demonstrate, one male participant described how a career exploration event with a banker from a local bank opened his eyes to challenges in the field of finance and banking. He stated, "Banking is a really hard thing." When asked what lesson he learned from the career exploration event, he responded, "The lesson I learned was to not become an accountant."

Program Design Components

Participants also were probed to describe in what ways, if any, the program was contributing to their development. Three themes emerged, including the skill-building sessions, relationships with peers and adults, and the applied summer internship.

Skill-Building Sessions

Notably, when asked *in what ways* the program was influencing them, seven youth alluded to the skill-building sessions and career exploration events as program design components that supported their growth and learning. While youth did not specifically describe any one skill-building session, youth reported "they taught us" or "I learned." Reports from youth suggest the skill-building sessions helped prepare them for specific activities such as their leadership roles during the summer internship, as well as for creating resumes and identifying specific career paths of interest.

Relationships With Peers and Adults

In addition to the skill-building sessions, six YLA participants reported that the ways the YLA was contributing to their learning was their relationships with adults and peers in the program. When asked what ways the YLA was preparing her for life after high school, one female YLA participant reported, "The friendships and bonds that you make with people." Another female YLA participant described she felt more prepared by "just being with the older age group, being around the same age group as me." Finally, a third female YLA participant discussed how the relationships she built in the program and skill-building sessions contributed to her growth and learning. She stated,

> YLA . . . meeting new people, especially in the beginning,
> especially if it's your first time and not a repeat YLA member. I
> mean you meet new people and grow relationships. Then you
> learn how to be, how to apply all of the skills we learned to do
> during the sessions into real life and that's going to help you later
> in the future so, yeah.

Applied Summer Internship

A third theme focused on the applied summer internship where youth are asked to be leaders and responsible for younger youth. Four YLA participants mentioned getting to be a "role

model," "mentor," or "leader" to the youth during the summer internship at the camp were reasons they felt more prepared as leaders and for life after high school. One female YLA participant described being a role model to the younger participants. She stated,

> Just interacting with the kids. I feel that they may not get the
> attention that they need at home or they're just interacting with
> other kids and seeing what they are doing with their lives. So
> interacting with them, playing sports, letting them experience new
> things, giving them knowledge that I already have and being a
> role model. I think that's a great aspect of it.

Another male YLA participant also reflected on how the applied summer internship afforded him the opportunity to be a leader, but acknowledged the challenges associated with the internship. He reported, "Being a leader [at camp] is my favorite and my least favorite. Sometimes it is hard to be assertive without being mean. So I think just trying to find that balance is difficult."

Quantitative Program Outcomes

In total, 19 youth completed both pre- and post-program measures. Data were normally distributed and Levine's test revealed equal variances between time intervals (pre- and post-program). As shown in Table 3, findings from the paired samples t-tests indicated significant increases from pre- to post-program surveys in leadership, communication, problem-solving, and teamwork skills ($p < .05$). Self-efficacy for learning, future self-efficacy, and emotional regulation also increased, but were not significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 3. Program Outcomes From Pre-Program and Post-Program Surveys ($N = 19$)

Scale (Range of the scale)	Pretest Mean (*SD*)	Posttest Mean (*SD*)	Mean Δ	*p*
Leadership (1-5)	3.90 (.96)	4.48 (.55)	.57	.02*
Communication (1-5)	4.06 (.53)	4.40 (.49)	.34	.02*
Problem-solving (1-6)	4.77 (.77)	5.39 (.55)	.61	.00*
Teamwork (1-5)	4.22 (.63)	4.65 (.38)	.43	.00*
Self-efficacy for learning (1-5)	4.58 (.41)	4.71 (.43)	.13	.22
Future self-efficacy (1-5)	4.42 (.45)	4.56 (.36)	.15	.17
Emotional regulation (1-5)	4.06 (.91)	4.30 (.68)	.23	.35

Note. *$p < .05$.

Discussion

This study used a mixed method approach to explore outcomes associated with participating in a PYD program focused on CCR and leadership skill development, as well as to examine what, if any, program design components contributed to growth. Findings provide preliminary evidence to support the value of this PYD program for promoting positive outcomes. Qualitative findings suggest participation in the YLA program was perceived to support growth in communication skills, social skills, preparation for leadership roles, and preparation and knowledge for future college and career opportunities. Qualitative findings were corroborated by the quantitative findings as results demonstrated improvements in youth perceptions of their leadership skills, communication, problem-solving, and teamwork. Additionally, program design components identified by the youth point to the importance of skill-building sessions, positive relationships built over time with peers and adults, and an applied internship experiences for overall growth.

There are several notable implications for practitioners, program directors, and others in the field of PYD. First, coupling PYD approaches grounded in evidence-based practices (i.e., the Big Three) and focused on CCR and leadership skill development have the potential to contribute to positive social outcomes for vulnerable populations of urban youth. Indeed the YLA youth in this study reported positive outcomes (such as increased communication, enhanced readiness for college, etc.), and quantitative data corroborate these findings. High-achieving, middle-class youth are often overrepresented among youth leaders (Kress, 2006), so increasing engagement among urban youth, many of color and/or living in poverty, may afford new opportunities for different youth to serve in leadership positions. As such, practitioners and program directors may consider inviting youth from urban communities to participate in PYD programming and strategize in relation to ways to engage these young people further in the program (for instance by decreasing barriers such as applications, entry interviews, or fees). By providing youth and their families accessibility without structural barriers for participation, urban youth may be more likely to attend and participate in PYD programs such as the YLA or to remain involved during the school year after summer programming ends.

Second, the YLA program uses a PYD lens and the Big Three effective design components to promote positive outcomes for youth (Lerner et al., 2005). However, the YLA more specifically tailors programming to urban youth, including targeting CCR and leadership skill development through skill-building sessions, an applied internship, and a community service activity. Practitioners and program directors in the field may consider supplementing the Big Three with the program design components embedded in the YLA. Heifetz's model of adaptive leadership

(Klau, 2006) supports supplementing the Big Three design elements; the model suggests pedagogical approaches such as "below-the-neck learning" and "reflective practice" are critical in leadership education. In the model, 'below the neck learning' is facilitated when youth are taught to recognize the experience of leadership is considerably more intense than the experience of simply talking about leadership. Heifetz's model also suggests 'reflective practice' happens when youth are given opportunities to serve as leaders and move from simply learning skills to developing the courage and the ability to apply and reflect on their experiences (Klau, 2006). In the YLA, youth are engaged in skill-building sessions, but then are provided an applied internship opportunity. The applied internship experience seeks to support the application of skills and ongoing reflection of growth and learning over time. Therefore, coupling skill-building sessions with an applied internship experience similar to the model of the YLA may facilitate effective leadership education and positive outcomes for youth participants.

Another program design component of the YLA that may be of interest to practitioners is the way the YLA recruits and seeks to retain youth in the program. For instance, practitioners may consider using summer programs offered to younger youth as platforms to recruit high school youth into PYD programs. The LiFE*sports* Summer Camp proceeds the YLA and brings youth together during their elementary and middle schools years prior to transitioning them into high school programming. Leaders in the field advocate PYD programs offered during out-of-school time, as well as opportunities to develop positive relationships with peers and caring adults, can increase access to protective assets which may result in positive educational and development outcomes (Curran & Wexler, 2017; Deutsch, Blyth, Kelley, Tolan, & Lerner, 2017). The overarching PYD initiative seeks to promote the long-term engagement of youth and may be increasingly protective in their ongoing development of prosocial relationships.

Finally, there are several broader design elements that may build protective factors not only for youth participants, but also that support positive leadership and social change in the urban community. For instance, the YLA brings youth from different high schools in the urban community together to participate in the PYD program focused on leadership and CCR. Engaging youth from different schools may help youth to develop positive, prosocial peer relationships or informal mentoring relationships, as well as contribute to youth leaders returning to their various schools and serving as role models in to other youth in the community. Moreover, the YLA program is designed for high school youth to serve as leaders and role models to younger youth in the community. This program design component may facilitate positive long-term outcomes for youth such as success in the workforce or retention in postsecondary education. However, in addition, younger youth may build skills and develop

aspirations to serve as leaders in their schools and communities much like their older YLA peers. Practitioners and program leaders may consider replicating several program design components specific to the YLA to promote positive prosocial relationships and to build the protective factors of youth living in urban communities.

Although findings from this study are informative, results should be interpreted with caution. The study included a small sample of youth involved in one evidence-based PYD program focused on CCR and leadership development. Not all youth participants participated in the research. Attrition rates when gathering pre- and post-program surveys from youth participants also limited the amount of data available for analysis. Further, more rigorous research designs will be able to distill the true effectiveness of these expanded PYD programs. Additional research also is needed, however, to further explore the value of programs like the YLA on the long-term outcomes of youth participants, especially for youth living in urban communities.

Conclusion

Findings demonstrate initial support for the YLA, a PYD program focused grounded in the Big Three design components and focused on CCR and leadership skill development. Programs such as the YLA are especially needed in urban communities in order to mitigate risk factors and build skills for vulnerable youth. Results provide insight into the ways out-of-school time can be maximized and how opportunities for leadership and CCR experiences may result in positive outcomes for youth participants. Findings also point to several program design components embedded in PYD programs that may promote learning and growth for youth participants. In the end, PYD programs focused on CCR and leadership skill development may result in urban youth being better equipped to graduate from high school, to succeed in college and career, and to contribute as leaders in their PYD programs, schools, and communities.

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