Abstract

A common practice in sport is to play-up youth athletes who are highly skilled against chronologically older peers. However, the potential effects of playing-up on youth’s athletic and personal development have not been explored. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate athletes’ perceptions of how playing-up may have influenced their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development. Seventeen athletes from four soccer clubs in Ontario, Canada, participated in semi-structured interviews where they described their playing-up experiences. An inductive thematic analysis was performed to capture athletes’ perceptions of playing-up and the ways in which it may have affected their development. Results showed that athletes perceived playing-up to involve a balance between two high-order themes: (a) challenge and (b) progress. Regarding challenge, athletes struggled most to cope with the intensity of practices and games and to fit in socially with older peers. Regarding progress, athletes felt most rewarded when they received recognition for their talent, experienced success, and had opportunities to develop expertise. Athletes also commented that their teammates and coaches played a pivotal role in facilitating their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development. Practical applications for sport practitioners are proposed and avenues for further research are identified.

Keywords: youth sport, soccer coaching, accelerated learning
Lay Summary
This study explored athletes’ perceptions of playing-up at higher age levels. Playing-up was challenging because it required athletes to cope with high-intensity competition and fit in with older peers. Playing-up was also rewarding for athletes who received recognition for their skill, succeeded against older peers, and developed expertise.

Implications for Practice
- Athletes were more likely to integrate socially within an older team when teammates introduced themselves and included them in sport and social activities.
- Constructive feedback from coaches that included clear strategies for improvement facilitated mutual trust and respect with athletes who played-up.
- Athletes who had opportunities to demonstrate their skill and share tactical knowledge with teammates perceived less challenge in proving themselves within an older team.
Athlete Perceptions of Playing-Up in Youth Soccer

Research has explored various factors that affect youth athletes’ engagement in sport, including personal (e.g., the accumulation of practice and play; Ford et al., 2009), relational (e.g., the dynamics of coach-athlete relationships; Vella et al., 2013), and contextual variables (e.g., the birthplace and relative age effects; Baker et al., 2009; Cobley et al., 2009). However, past studies have mainly focused on how engagement is affected when athletes participate with same-aged peers. There remains a need to explore factors that may affect athletes’ sport experiences when they participate outside of their chronological age groups. For example, when athletes show that they are more skilled than their same-aged peers, they may be encouraged or allowed to compete at higher age levels. This phenomenon is commonly known as playing-up. It is understood that playing-up occurs in sport programs because there are policies in place to help athletes move between age groups. Such policies are used, for example, to invite highly-skilled athletes from lower age groups to play-up on older teams that lack full rosters of players (Malina et al., 2019). It is also common for coaches to invite athletes to play-up if they are more physically mature than their same-aged peers. Coaches may group physically mature athletes with older peers to facilitate skill development and prevent them from relying on their physical attributes in order to succeed (Cumming et al., 2018).

There is a popular belief that athletes may improve performance as a result of playing-up (e.g., O’Sullivan, 2017). For instance, parents may see benefits in playing-up when their children are technically advanced compared to their same-age peers, as playing-up exposes them to a sport environment that is more appropriately competitive. However, Campbell and colleagues (2018) suggest that playing-up may not be enjoyable for athletes who like playing with same-aged friends or who dislike competitive play. Accordingly, Reeves and colleagues (2018)
proposed a hybrid model whereby athletes switch between bio-banded, ability-based, and psycho-banded groups. This model enables athletes to participate with their friends in addition to competing and forming new relationships with players in other groups (see also Hill et al., 2020). These suggestions are especially relevant in light of current trends toward early sport specialization (Erdal, 2018). As an example, if coaches of athletes who play-up prioritize their performance over personal development and continued participation, athletes may be more likely to experience injury or burnout (Myer et al., 2016). These findings, while limited, demonstrate that playing-up may have important implications for athletes’ continued engagement in a sport.

To study how playing-up may affect the youth sport experience, it is necessary to understand how youth develop through sport generally. One framework that outlines youth’s development in sport is the Personal Assets Framework (PAF; Côté et al., 2014; Vierimaa et al., 2017). The PAF proposes that three dynamic elements affect athlete development: personal engagement in activities, quality social dynamics, and appropriate settings. When the dynamic elements contribute to immediately enjoyable sport experiences, they may affect athletes’ personal assets such as competence, confidence, connection, and character. If improvements in the personal assets are sustained over time, athletes may increase performance, participation, and personal development. In the context of the PAF, playing-up may affect youth’s sport experiences by contributing to changes in athletes’ personal assets. The PAF emphasizes the need to explore how playing-up may influence athletes’ sport-specific skill and psychosocial development.

Previous studies have not explored how playing-up may contribute to athletes’ sport-specific skill and psychosocial outcomes. However, if playing-up is conceptualized as a method of grouping athletes based on skill level, there is a growing body of research on how other forms
of grouping may affect athlete outcomes. Current literature has mainly focused on the effects of grouping athletes according to chronological age and maturity (e.g., Cobley et al., 2009; Cumming et al., 2017).

In youth sport, athletes are commonly grouped according to chronological age to generate equity across competition. However, when practitioners create age groups using a cut-off date, athletes who are born just after the cut-off date end up being older than most of their peers. In addition, athletes in the same age group can vary in biological age by as much as five to six years (Johnson, 2018). Past research shows that when coaches assume that athletes’ physiological characteristics correspond to their ability, older and early maturing athletes in a given age group may experience performance advantages (Cobley et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2017). These advantages have been shown to be particularly relevant in youth soccer, whereby relatively older and early maturing athletes are consistently overrepresented in talent development programs (Cumming et al., 2017; Kelly & Williams, 2020). Researchers have also connected relative age and maturation effects to outcomes such as dropout, which reflects athletes’ motivation to participate in sport (Dixon et al., 2011). Moreover, researchers have observed connections between relatively later birthdates and dropout internationally and across sports (e.g., Helsen et al., 1998; Lemez et al., 2013). It has been suggested that relatively younger and late maturing athletes may be more likely to drop out when parents and coaches expect little of them, and as a result, athletes develop low self-expectations for success (Hancock et al., 2013). This evidence suggests that grouping athletes into age categories may hinder the sport-specific skill and psychosocial development of relatively younger and late maturing individuals within an age group.
Organizations such as football academies are structuring athlete groups according to maturity as well as chronological age to mitigate growth and maturation bias (MacDonald et al., 2009). One such example is bio-banding, which describes the grouping of athletes based on a combination of age, anthropometric measures, and maturation indicators (Cumming et al., 2017). Bio-banding is similar to playing-up because in both cases, athletes participate in mixed age groups. However, there is greater variance in maturity when athletes play-up compared to when they are bio-banded, which may increase the focus on physicality over sport-specific skill during games.

Bio-banding may offer an advantage by reducing inequalities in maturation between athletes in the same age category, and thus promoting more equal competition (Webdale et al., 2019). In a recent study, English soccer academies participated in tournaments where coaches used bio-banding to make teams (Cumming et al., 2018). Athletes who participated in these tournaments engaged in focus groups whereby they discussed their experiences with bio-banding. Overall, athletes with large body types perceived that their games were more physically challenging, while athletes with small body types reported less of a physical challenge, but found it easier to make an impact in games. Despite these perceived benefits for athletes’ sport-specific skill, in a different study, it was found that bio-banding had a potentially negative influence on athletes’ psychosocial development. Campbell and colleagues (2018) showed that youth rugby players in New Zealand were 46 percent more likely to drop out when they were bio-banded into an older age group. The authors suggested that an aggressive style of play or the inability to participate with same-aged friends potentially contributed to dropout. However, it was found that athletes with small body types who were bio-banded were actually less likely to drop out relative to the norm. While Campbell and colleagues (2018) did not comment on why they observed this
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effect, athletes with small body types may have been less likely to drop out because they perceived greater feelings of leadership in bio-banded games (Bradley et al., 2019). Since bio-banding impacted athletes with small body types more than those with large body types, the overall policy appeared to be beneficial, which limited the authors’ findings. Nonetheless, these findings emphasize that in order for bio-banding to facilitate positive experiences, the sport environment must be manipulated to suit athletes’ needs. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the needs of athletes who compete outside their age level and develop strategies for practitioners to support them.

Current evidence, while limited, demonstrates that athlete grouping may influence individuals’ sport-specific skill and psychosocial development. Due to the lack of research in sport, it may be helpful to gain a deeper understanding of how issues that are similar to playing-up have been studied within education. For instance, in the same way that coaches may play-up athletes who are more mature or who show advanced sport-specific skill relative to their same-aged peers, teachers may group high-achieving students with older peers who are similarly high-achieving to provide developmentally appropriate learning experiences (e.g., Gentry & Owen, 1999; Hill et al., 2020; Sayler & Brookshire, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978). A common example of this phenomenon is acceleration, whereby students enter into school early or skip a grade (Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016).

Previous research on the impact of acceleration on students’ academic achievement and psychosocial development has shown promising results. As an example, meta-analytic findings from Kulik and Kulik (1982) showed that across 26 studies, high-achieving students who were accelerated exhibited greater academic achievement than their same-aged peers and similar achievement compared to their older peers (see also Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011). With
regards to psychosocial development, a meta-analysis by Kulik (2004) which included 13 studies revealed that accelerated students were more likely than others to pursue high degrees of education. In addition, Sayler and Brookshire (1993) found that high-achieving students in Grade 8 who had previously skipped a grade had greater socio-emotional development and engaged in fewer problem behaviours compared to those who did not. These findings imply that accelerated students may improve their academic achievement and psychosocial outcomes by interacting with peers who are similarly high-achieving and emotionally mature. However, the social dynamics that exist in the school setting may not operate in the same way as those that pertain to athletes’ playing-up experiences. Thus, in the context of playing-up, there is a need to examine the specific factors that influence athletes’ holistic development.

The bodies of research on athlete and student grouping share important gaps in knowledge. While there is a general understanding of the outcomes of grouping as they relate to youth’s sport-specific skill, academic achievement, and psychosocial development, less is known about how these outcomes occur. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to investigate the processes by which playing-up influences the quality of youth athletes’ sport experiences and development in soccer. This study addressed two primary research questions: (a) what are athletes’ experiences of playing-up? And, (b) how do athletes perceive that playing-up may affect their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development?

Methods

Research Paradigm

To fulfill the purpose of this study, the first author conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with youth soccer players who played-up. Athletes were considered to play-up if they were registered as members of a team at a higher age level for at least one full season. The
researchers’ methodological approach was grounded in constructivism and followed relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology. According to relativism, reality is subjective, and people experience reality differently based on the context in which it is created (Ormston et al., 2014). To learn about reality, a subjectivist perspective suggests that one must explore how people understand and perceive their social world (Willis et al., 2007). Through the lenses of relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, the role of the researcher is to work together with participants to help them understand their subjective realities. The researcher must then interpret the participants’ perceptions and communicate how they think and feel about their experiences.

In the current study, the first author used semi-structured interviews to learn how athletes perceived their playing-up experiences and how they may have affected their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development. The semi-structured dynamic of the interviews gave athletes the freedom to discuss the issues that were most relevant to them (Yeo et al., 2014). At appropriate times during the interviews, the first author encouraged athletes to tell stories to describe key moments in their playing-up experiences (e.g., the decision to play-up). Athletes who narrated their experiences provided the first author with stories that spoke to their development over time.

**Positionality**

Bourke (2014) notes that researchers co-create knowledge with participants in different ways based on their positionality relative to the research questions. As such, the first author’s approach to understanding athletes’ perceptions of playing-up may have been affected by his background as a recreational soccer player, coach, and referee. At the time of data collection, the first author accumulated 20 years of experience playing recreational soccer. He had also worked for four years as a youth soccer coach, and for six years as a referee in adult soccer leagues. These experiences equipped the first author with an intimate understanding of the culture and
norms embedded within youth soccer. Overall, the first author’s unique positionality within soccer helped him to access a variety of interested participants for the study and engage them in deep conversations about their playing-up experiences.

**Participants**

Following institutional ethics approval, the first author used purposeful sampling to recruit 17 participants aged 13-17 years ($M_{age} = 15.2 \pm 1.3$ years). Initially, the first author emailed the parents of 34 athletes who played-up to invite them to participate in the study. Parents of 21 athletes responded to his email to express their child’s interest in completing an interview. Out of 21 athletes, two athletes participated in pilot interviews and 17 others participated in interviews that were transcribed for thematic analysis. The remaining two athletes did not participate in interviews because of logistical reasons (e.g., the first author moved to a different city and could not meet them in person).

The 17 participants were soccer players who played-up within one of four soccer clubs in Ontario, Canada. There were five female participants aged 13-16 years ($M_{age} = 14.4 \pm 1.1$ years), and twelve male participants aged 13-17 years ($M_{age} = 15.5 \pm 1.3$ years). Participants had accumulated 1-8 years of experience playing-up ($M_{experience} = 2.7 \pm 1.8$ years). All of the participants played-up by one year, except for one participant who played-up by two years. In addition, two participants played-up but returned to same-aged play prior to data collection. Specific demographic information related to the participants’ racial and ethnic background was not collected, however, all of the participants were Canadian and Caucasian.

Across all participants, eight players shared one coach, two players shared a second coach, and the remaining seven players all had different coaches. Due to the focus of the study
on players’ experiences of playing-up, the researchers proceeded with this sample as the players were all in a position to provide rich accounts of their playing-up experiences.

Data Collection

Interview Guide and Reflexive Journal

The first author assembled an interview guide with other members of the research team to ensure that the interviews yielded rich data that were relevant to the research questions. The complete interview guide is available in the Appendix. The questions included in the interview guide were informed by the PAF (Côté et al., 2014; Vierimaa et al., 2017), whereby they encouraged athletes to discuss the activities, social dynamics, and settings involved in playing-up. After conducting two pilot interviews, the first author added three probes to the interview guide. These probes prompted discussion about athletes’ background information (i.e., “For how many years have you played up?”) as well as the roles of teammates (i.e., “What advice would you give to teammates of athletes who play-up?”) and coaches (i.e., “What advice would you give to coaches of athletes who play-up?”) in supporting athletes’ playing-up experiences. The first author asked additional probing questions when athletes’ responses to previous questions lacked depth. These additional probing questions varied across athletes, but in general, they encouraged athletes to describe anecdotes and tell stories about their experiences (e.g., “if I watched one of your games, what would I see?”; “Tell me a story about when you tried out for an older team.”). The first author used this approach to facilitate athletes’ introspective capacities.

The first author conducted and audio-recorded 17 interviews as part of the data collection process. The interviews were conducted in the last three months of the outdoor soccer season so that athletes could reflect on their experiences over the course of the season. The average
interview length was 56:32. Later, the first author transcribed the interviews verbatim using ExpressScribe transcription software. He maintained confidentiality by assigning a participant number to each athlete using a random number generator.

To supplement the interview transcripts, the first author kept a reflexive journal in which he clarified his assumptions relative to the data. He began the journaling process by writing out his philosophy on playing-up. During each interview, he took notes on athletes’ body language, tone, and the ease or difficulty with which they responded to questions. When each interview was complete, he documented his reactions and the athletes’ key messages in an audio recording. He assembled a reflexive journal by synthesizing data from his notes and audio recordings.

**Data Analysis**

After all the interviews were transcribed, the first author performed inductive thematic analysis of the transcripts. Inductive analysis provided data-driven results that addressed the topics that were most important to the participants (Braun et al., 2017).

The first author conducted thematic analysis using Quirkos software and completed a six-step process as outlined by Braun and colleagues (2017). First, he read over the interview transcripts until he was familiar with the data. He also began assembly of his reflexive journal at this stage. Second, he identified meaningful units (MUs) of information in each transcript and assigned one or more codes to each MU. Third, he sorted codes into low-order themes. He organized the low-order themes in a separate document and added commentary and supporting quotations. He then edited participants’ supporting quotations to make them easier to read.

Fourth, he grouped the low-order themes together into high-order themes. He built a skeleton for his results once he finalized the high-order themes. Fifth, he defined and named the high-order themes. Finally, he integrated the analytic writing into a final report.
Methodological Rigor

The research team employed a study design that followed effective qualitative research practices. Tracy (2010) reviewed indicators of “excellent qualitative research” and proposed eight criteria through which to assess rigor. In accordance with relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, the research team selected a subset of these criteria to highlight the unique aspects of the current study (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The criteria of worthy topic, significant contribution, sincerity, meaningful coherence, and credibility contributed to rigor in this study.

This study covered a worthy topic, as playing-up has received limited attention in previous literature, and Canada Soccer explicitly requested that this research be undertaken. Canada Soccer did not fund this study, but its representatives identified playing-up as a topic of research interest, and they gave feedback on the study design and written manuscript. In addition, this study advanced knowledge of how playing-up may have affected athletes’ sport-specific skill and psychosocial development. This knowledge could spark future research on skill acquisition in youth and may inform changes to sport policy that target improved athlete outcomes. Collectively, the theoretical and practical implications of this study indicate that it significantly contributes to current literature.

The first author also demonstrated sincerity by using a reflexive journal to recognize his biases relative to the data. He referred to the reflexive journal throughout the data analysis phase to question and dispel personal reactions to athletes’ perceived experiences. This process aided in reporting athletes’ perceptions of playing-up with minimal bias.

From a different perspective, the research team established an interview guide in a way that demonstrated meaningful coherence. The first author collaborated with other members of the
research team to develop a list of interview questions that yielded rich and relevant data. In addition, he conducted pilot tests to identify probes that facilitated athletes’ critical thinking. Lastly, the data obtained from the interviews was credible in the sense that knowledge of playing-up was derived from youth who experienced it directly. The first author also achieved multivocality by exploring the experiences of multiple athletes within the same age range.

**Results**

Participants perceived that playing-up involved a balance between challenge and progress (see Table 1). First, participants discussed factors that made playing-up more difficult than playing at their age level. For example, participants believed that differences in size and skill between themselves and their older peers led them to make mistakes, which lowered their competence and confidence. Second, participants explained that when they were successful, or when they received support that made them feel that they were making progress, their competence and confidence rose to a higher level than they experienced from same-aged play. It should be noted that the thematic analysis did not indicate prominent differences in athletes’ experiences of playing-up based on gender.

**Perceptions of Challenge**

Playing-up posed physical and psychosocial challenges for the participants. The most challenging conditions involved in playing-up were coping with intensity and fitting in.

**Coping with Intensity**

Participants believed that playing-up was more intense than playing at their age level because they competed against older peers who were faster, stronger, and more skilled. However, participants felt they could improve fitness and skill by competing with older peers. Participant 5 (male, aged 17 years) suggested that because his opponents had a wide range of
skills, he was exposed to diverse experiences that were conducive to skill acquisition. According to Participant 5, “every time you play somebody, it’s different. That’s the greatest part [about playing-up]. You’re not facing this mainstream player that you know you’re going to get around. . . and that’s definitely made me better.” For other participants, the immersive aspect of playing-up influenced performance-related adaptations:

Everyone’s faster and stronger, and some people say the best way to learn another language is to surround yourself in it. So, putting yourself in a stronger, faster age group, it really just makes you faster and stronger, because you have to keep up. (P6, male, aged 14 years)

These examples highlight that participants felt challenged by competing against older peers who were faster and stronger. Participants perceived an increased intensity of practice and competition because their older peers set higher standards for performance. Several participants adjusted their self-expectations to match the standards of an older team. When participants achieved their self-expectations, they perceived benefit in terms of their sport-specific skill.

Playing-up was also perceived to be intense because it required participants to engage in higher volumes of training compared to when they played at their age level. Some participants believed that high training volumes helped them improve fitness and skill. Conversely, high training volumes occasionally left participants feeling exhausted and susceptible to injury.

Moreover, Participant 14 (male, aged 16 years) had issues with overtraining, whereby his passion to work hard kept him from telling his coach when he was exhausted. From a different standpoint, several participants struggled with work-life balance due to the increased time demands of training. Participant 7 (male, aged 17 years) explained that playing-up meant that “you don’t get to spend a lot of time with your friends, ‘cause you’re doing a lot more stuff to
improve your physicality.” He went on to say that “one of the biggest sacrifices [of playing-up] is that you gotta decrease your friendship time.” Overall, playing-up demanded that participants make sacrifices in their social and academic lives to focus on training and competition. Playing-up was especially challenging for those participants who felt that this sacrifice was not worthwhile.

Due to the increased intensity that participants associated with playing-up, they perceived that they made more mistakes when playing-up compared to when they played with same-aged peers. Participants responded to making mistakes in different ways. Generally, participants felt an initial decrease in competence and confidence when they made mistakes. Some participants changed their performance to prevent individual mistakes, but in ways that were detrimental to team success. For example, Participant 3’s (female, aged 16 years) fear of making mistakes affected her strategy as a defender:

I’m on defense, so you always wanna get rid of the ball. But if you hold onto the ball and make plays—when I’m more confident, I’ll do that. But when I’m low on confidence... I just wanna boot it down the field. I find I make more useful plays when I’m confident.

Participant 3 commented that when she was worried about making mistakes, she played with less confidence and hindered her team’s performance. In this example, she minimized the risk of making a mistake (i.e., by conceding a goal) at the expense of keeping possession for her team.

However, other participants associated the act of making mistakes with more positive outcomes. For instance, Participant 14 (male, aged 16 years) suggested that making mistakes allowed him to “develop a confidence that no matter how many times you get put down, you’re always gonna pick yourself back up.” Regarding performance, Participant 16 (male, aged 15 years) disagreed with Participant 3 and reflected that he channeled the pressure he felt not to
make mistakes into creativity. Participant 16 avoided making mistakes by looking for his opponents’ weaknesses and coming up with ways to exploit them. He said: “there are kids who are almost double my size, you have to find a way around it. You have to say to yourself: ‘he definitely has a weakness. I have to exploit it.’ You have to be creative in that sense.” Taken together, while participants’ competence and confidence were challenged when they made mistakes, some participants learned from their mistakes to adapt to the standards of playing-up. Participants did not discuss why making mistakes had varying effects on their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development.

Fitting In

From a social perspective, playing-up was challenging for participants because they found it difficult to connect with older peers. Social fault lines (e.g., differences in level of schooling, emotional maturity, team commitment, and city of residence) contributed to a lack of common ground between participants and their teammates. As Participant 11 (female, aged 14 years) highlighted:

I don’t know the girls that much, they know each other from a while and understand each other more. They talk about high school and exams. I’m not in high school, so I don’t really understand what they’re talking about. I don’t get along with their conversations.

Participant 11 felt socially isolated because it was hard for her to relate to teammates who were at a different stage in school. In general, social fault lines challenged participants by contributing to varying levels of social isolation and a perceived lack of peer support.

Participants also felt pressure to perform well to prove their worth to an older team. If they performed badly, they perceived that they would lose their teammates’ trust and respect, which would impair their ability to fit in. Some participants were frustrated by a lack of
opportunity to earn teammates’ trust and respect. For one, Participant 5 (male, aged 17 years) struggled to show his skill because he felt his teammates rarely passed to him:

People were like “maybe I won’t pass to this guy [i.e., P5], maybe I’ll pass to somebody else that I know is good,” right? Especially if he is one of the newcomers to the team. . . some people are like “I’m gonna trust the guys I know for a long time,” even though they might not even be playing that great.

When Participant 5’s teammates did not pass to him, he perceived a lack of trust and respect, and his competence and confidence decreased. He also reflected that a lack of trust and respect within his team could hinder performance, because his teammates would not use the space he occupied on the field. Overall, several participants gauged the level of trust and respect between themselves and their teammates based on how often they received the ball. This example illustrates that time on ball may indicate the extent to which athletes who play-up fit in with their older peers.

With regards to the coach, playing time was a key factor that influenced participants’ ability to earn coaches’ trust and respect. However, when Participant 14 (male, aged 16 years) received playing time from his coach and did not play well, he questioned if he deserved to play-up:

Say a coach gives you an opportunity, and you’re playing 80 minutes. . . But you lose the game and miss a lot of chances. And you’re taking it hard on yourself, because you think “do I deserve this?” And “I finally got my chance to prove myself, and I messed it up.”

Participant 14’s comment exemplified the pressure he felt to perform well or risk losing the trust and respect of his coach. He also mentioned that this pressure could contribute to self-doubt and decreased competence and confidence. Collectively, when participants did not have opportunities
to foster mutual trust and respect within an older team, they perceived negative implications for
their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development.

Participants perceived that constructive feedback from coaches helped to foster mutual
trust and respect. This type of feedback reduced the level of challenge participants associated
with proving themselves as members of an older team. Participant 1 (female, aged 14 years)
believed that constructive feedback from coaches included demonstrations or explanations of
strategies to improve skill. When she discussed how coaches should give feedback to athletes
who play-up, she said:

[As a coach,] you want to be strict, but you don’t want to show it too much. . . at the same
time, you’ll be fixing their [i.e., athletes’] mistakes. You’ll come up and take the ball, and
you’ll show them what they can do. But you won’t be yelling at them.

However, when coaches gave corrective feedback without explaining how to improve,
participants perceived a lack of trust and respect. They were also more likely to lose interest in
the game or drop out. Thus, Participant 14 (male, aged 16 years) recommended that feedback
from coaches should include both “criticism and encouragement.” In sum, it was challenging for
participants to earn the trust and respect of older teammates (i.e., as competitors) and coaches
(i.e., as selectors). Participants felt that constructive feedback and opportunities to show their
skill facilitated trust and respect between themselves and others, which helped them to fit in.

**Perceptions of Progress**

Beyond the challenges of playing-up, participants described experiences that facilitated
progress with regard to their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development. Playing-up
conjured feelings of progress because it involved being recognized, experiencing success, and
developing expertise.
**Being Recognized**

When coaches invited participants to play-up, they complimented them on their performance and communicated that they believed in them. As a result, participants felt recognized for their sport-specific skill and perceived an increase in confidence because they were “wanted” by coaches despite their younger age. Moreover, Participant 7 (male, aged 17 years) implied that recognition from his coach was a driving force behind his decision to play-up. He explained that after he tried out to play-up, his coach said that he “watched how he [i.e., P7] played and believed that he should be a part of his team.” This comment made Participant 7 “want to try hard to show him [i.e., the coach] that he could become the best player on the team.”

Indeed, several participants perceived greater motivation to improve fitness and skill when coaches voiced their belief in them. For some participants, this motivation manifested in the form of doing extra practice at home, working out, or watching previous games on film to self-evaluate performance. However, according to Participant 14 (male, aged 16 years), recognition from others did not give him a sense of progress when he did not believe that the recognition was justified. Participant 11 (female, aged 14 years) similarly experienced a loss of confidence and motivation to play-up because she disagreed with her coach’s feelings that she was good enough to do it. Overall, Participants 14 and 11 emphasized the importance of self-belief for positive playing-up experiences.

Participants also perceived that playing-up improved their social capital and contributed to recognition from same-aged peers. When Participant 12 (male, aged 16 years) discussed how it felt to be an athlete who played-up, he described feeling proud “when people went up to him and he said ‘oh, I play a year up,’ and they were like ‘oh, wow!’” The pride participants felt when they told others that they played-up increased their confidence and motivated them to give
their best effort in practices and games. Conversely, Participant 15 (male, aged 16 years) warned that if athletes played-up only to gain social status, they might become discouraged by the difference in quality between themselves and their teammates, and they might lose confidence. According to Participant 15: “it’s not good to go straight to playing a year up just to have the status of playing a year up.” Therefore, while the recognition garnered by participants could instil feelings of progress, it could also attract athletes to play-up for the wrong reasons.

**Experiencing Success**

Participants conceptualized success in terms of improvements in sport-specific skill and the quality of intra-team social relationships. When participants experienced success with older peers, they perceived that they were making progress and gained competence and confidence. Some participants attributed progress to the fact that they competed at a level where they made mistakes but also succeeded. Participant 16 (male, aged 15 years) felt that any decreases in competence and confidence due to his mistakes would be offset by increases in these outcomes when he succeeded:

> You have to think positively as that you’re younger, and these kids are older than you, and you’re still competing with them, you’re still besting them at some points. Yes, you’re losing to them, but when you win, it makes it all that much better.

Participant 16 implied that the competence and confidence he gained from succeeding against older peers outweighed the discouragement that came from his failures. Moreover, he perceived greater feelings of progress by succeeding against older peers versus same-aged peers because he felt that he was overcoming adversity (i.e., in having less time to develop) to achieve success.

Teammates and coaches played an important role in facilitating participants’ successful experiences. According to some participants, the exchange of information between themselves
and their teammates and coaches was vital for improving competence and confidence. For example, Participant 5 (male, aged 17 years) credited his teammates for teaching him how to decide “when to play a pass, when to shoot, and when to look up,” and Participant 17 (male, aged 14 years) acknowledged his coach for demonstrating “different skill moves to get around a defender.” Some participants were also involved in teaching their older teammates. When Participant 14 (male, aged 16 years) gave constructive feedback to older teammates, he perceived an increase in confidence. He explained: “the second you correct someone, it’s kind of like they think ‘okay, this kid knows what he’s talking about.’ And then you get the confidence to talk more.” These examples demonstrate how participants experienced success by learning from and teaching others. When coaches encouraged athletes who played-up to share tactical knowledge with older peers, their learning experiences were rewarding and contributed to feelings of progress.

Another way in which participants perceived success was by making friends and integrating socially into an older team. By spending time and connecting with older teammates, participants learned which behaviors were socially acceptable at older ages. Participant 15 (male, aged 16 years) suggested that playing-up helped him “to adapt to the way [older peers] talk. . . and the way they act.” He added: “[playing-up] makes you used to dealing with different kinds of people. . . so then the social awkwardness isn’t really there.” In this sense, playing-up offered Participant 15 a range of peer interactions that contributed to social adaptability. These interactions led to feelings of progress when he perceived that he could more easily foster social connections inside and outside of sport.

Participants commented that their teammates and coaches influenced their social success. Teammates and coaches contributed to successful social experiences by introducing themselves
and engaging in bonding activities. First, participants appreciated when their teammates and coaches welcomed them into the team because it communicated that they “were willing to take in a new [and younger] player” (P5, male, aged 17 years). Moreover, participants preferred informal to formal introductions. Participant 16 (male, aged 15 years) believed that when coaches told athletes to introduce themselves, the interactions felt forced and instilled less support than would have been achieved if the teammates stepped forward on their own. For instance, a teammate of Participant 3 (female, aged 16 years) stepped forward by asking to be her partner for a drill. This connection helped Participant 3 to feel cared for as a member of her team and it also made it easier for her to connect with other teammates (i.e., by talking casually with her teammate’s friends during a break). Second, it was enjoyable for participants to engage in bonding activities such as team dinners and fundraising events because they could socialize with older peers. Participant 2 (female, aged 15 years) suggested that bonding activities also helped to minimize subgroup formation because “when you’re doing those activities, there’s no groups. . . you just get to know everyone more.” Taken together, participants perceived that they were making progress when they successfully connected with older peers. It was easier for participants to succeed psychosocially when their teammates and coaches introduced themselves and facilitated bonding activities.

Additionally, some participants appreciated when coaches showed them special attention. For example, when the coach of Participant 1 (female, aged 14 years) gave her feedback in an especially gentle tone, she was receptive to her coach’s advice and was not discouraged by his criticism. However, most participants advised that coaches should avoid behaviours that could be interpreted as favouritism. Participant 13 (female, aged 13 years) felt that coaches who favoured athletes who played-up took the fun out of practice:
Coaches should not go easy on them... [or] give them special treatment on the team, ‘cause that’s never fun. Because the other people will be like: ‘oh, she gets special treatment ‘cause she’s a year younger.’

Participant 13’s comment was echoed by Participant 14 (male, aged 16 years), who argued that when coaches did not offer equal treatment to every team member, athletes who played-up became socially isolated and their teammates were more likely to see them as inferior. To provide individualized coaching without showing favouritism, Participant 2 (female, aged 15 years) suggested that coaches could offer one-to-one interactions to all athletes. One-to-one interactions would allow coaches to satisfy athletes’ needs in a discreet manner, without compromising the social status of athletes who play-up.

**Developing Expertise**

Finally, playing-up contributed to participants’ perceptions of progress because it represented a milestone on their developmental pathway. Participant 7 (male, aged 17 years) mentioned that “it gets to the point [in playing-up] where you can see yourself at this competitiveness, playing in a higher standing.” In this way, participants were motivated to compete with older teammates to acquire a foundation of fitness and skill that could help them attain expertise. This central factor inspired several participants’ decisions to play-up.

As a result of playing-up, participants also gained opportunities to advance to higher levels of competition. As an example, Participant 6 (male, aged 14 years) mentioned that competing against a wide range of opponents benefitted his sport-specific skill because he learned to “see different playing styles and... how players are in different regions.” The presence of scouts further increased participants’ perceptions that playing-up could help them advance in soccer. Participant 2 (female, aged 15 years) mentioned that playing-up “allowed her
to go to international tournaments, which got university scouts to notice her and then offer her a scholarship.” In contrast, when Participant 11 (female, aged 14 years) considered the potential to be scouted, she felt torn; she could earn a scholarship to university, but playing varsity soccer was a major time commitment she did not want. She ultimately questioned whether or not she should play-up if she did not want to advance in soccer. Overall, these examples demonstrate that playing-up influenced participants’ perceptions that they were making progress toward becoming competitive athletes. However, for those who had less desire to develop expertise, they sometimes doubted if they belonged in a team with athletes who did.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore youth athletes’ perceptions of playing-up in soccer and its perceived implications for their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development. Participants perceived that playing-up involved a balance between challenge and progress. They associated playing-up with challenges such as coping with a high intensity of competition and fitting in with older teammates. These challenges threatened participants’ competence and confidence, but when participants overcame them, they perceived improvements in fitness, skill, social capital, and social adaptability. In addition, participants perceived playing-up to be rewarding when they received recognition, experienced performance-based and social success, and gained opportunities to develop expertise. The extent to which participants perceived progress depended on the influence of their teammates and coaches. Overall, participants’ perceptions of playing-up did not differ fundamentally based on gender.

This study presented two key findings related to participants’ playing-up experiences. First, participants perceived playing-up to benefit their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development when it involved diverse sport experiences with athletes who had varying skill sets.
The influence of within-sport diversity on athletes’ skill acquisition and motivation to participate has been illustrated in past studies (e.g., Berry et al., 2008; Côté, 1999; Ford et al., 2009). It has also been suggested that greater diversity of experience may stimulate youth’s interest in a specific activity (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). In the current study, competition against opponents who used a wide range of skills may have facilitated participants’ skill acquisition and intrinsic motivation to engage with older peers. These findings are supported by those of Cumming and colleagues (2018), who found that early-maturing athletes who participated in bio-banding perceived a more diverse set of learning experiences that fostered their technical and psychosocial development. Tucker and colleagues (2016) suggested that aged-related differences in psychological maturity represent arguments against bio-banding. While these arguments also apply to playing-up, results from the current study indicated that several athletes who played-up perceived exposure to new challenges as a learning opportunity (Martindale & Nash, 2013). Further study is needed to understand the influence of practice and play activities on athletes’ perceptions of challenge when they play-up.

Some participants also attributed improvements in sport-specific and psychosocial skills to their immersion in an environment where they perceived higher standards for performance. The underdog hypothesis may help to explain these perceptions (Gibbs et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2020; Krogman, 1959). The underdog hypothesis states that in competitive environments, the challenge that less skilled athletes face may benefit their performance, however, this type of competitive environment could also be detrimental. For example, Duda (1987) warned against excessive social comparison in sport, explaining that athletes were more likely to burn out when they defined their sport success based on peer comparisons rather than goal achievement. In the current study, participants’ perceptions of playing-up were somewhat supported by the underdog
hypothesis. Some participants reflected that their immersion with older peers helped them to adapt their fitness, skill, and social behavior. Playing-up may have contributed to these adaptations because athletes confronted a relatively high level of challenge and responded by developing positive habits of self-regulation (Cumming et al., 2018). However, for participants who experienced negative peer comparisons that were especially salient, playing-up may have impaired development because athletes felt that they could not measure up to the standards of an older team, and they lost the will to try. Overall, the complex relationship between playing-up and athlete development exemplifies that athletes do not perceive playing-up to be a homogeneous or *one-size-fits-all* experience. Thus, it may be interpreted that playing-up is not simply good or bad for athletes’ sport-specific skill and psychosocial development.

As a second central finding, participants’ integration into an older team depended on support from teammates and coaches. Participants most needed support in the form of welcoming introductions, constructive feedback, and opportunities to show skill. Previously, researchers found that similar strategies may improve task cohesion, social cohesion, and social identity in sport teams (De Backer et al., 2011; Eys et al., 2009). For instance, Eys and colleagues (2009) revealed that coaches could improve task cohesion through effective communication with athletes, and teammates could improve social cohesion by engaging athletes in outside activities. Furthermore, De Backer and colleagues (2011) showed that coach behaviors related to perceived justice and need support (i.e., support for autonomy, competence, and belongingness) were positively associated with athlete perceptions of team identification. The consistency in results between the current study and past works implies that familiar strategies may be used to establish cohesion and social identity when athletes play-up. In addition, the current study adds to existing literature by offering ways to improve cohesion and social identity.
that apply specifically to playing-up. With regard to task cohesion, coaches may ask athletes to
teach skills to older teammates. With regard to social cohesion, older teammates may have casual
conversations with athletes. Finally, with regard to social identity, coaches may provide
individualized feedback to each athlete, so that older teammates perceive athletes who play-up
similarly to themselves.

Results from the current study highlight the important role that the coach plays in
facilitating athletes’ playing-up experiences. When coaches’ behaviors suited athletes’ specific
needs (e.g., when coaches provided constructive feedback and opportunities to demonstrate
skill), several athletes perceived benefit with regard to their developmental outcomes. Past
research has identified coaches’ ability to tailor to athletes’ individual needs as a strong predictor
of positive sport experiences (Vella et al., 2013). Additionally, Erickson and colleagues (2011)
used state-space grids to show that an effective synchronized swimming coach directed more
behaviors toward individual athletes, whereas an ineffective coach directed more behaviors
toward the whole team. In the current study, coaches’ tailored behaviors may have supported
athletes’ autonomy by conveying trust and respect for their abilities, and thereby increasing their
perceptions of competence (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Thus, coaches may be more likely to
enhance the holistic development of athletes who play-up through the use of tailored behaviors.

In the context of the PAF, the interaction between the dynamic elements of quality social
dynamics and appropriate settings appeared to play a key role in athletes’ playing-up experiences
(Côté et al., 2014; Vierimaa et al., 2017). Previous research in child development and education
noted the importance of social and environmental influences on youth’s physical and
psychological development (e.g., Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, the works of
Bruner (1977) and Vygotsky (1978) implied that in the context of playing-up, teammates and
coaches may foster athlete development by helping athletes to apply new knowledge (i.e., scaffolding). When athletes who play-up collaborated with teammates and coaches, they learned from activities that they might not otherwise have been able to complete (Gray, 2011). In this way, playing-up exposed athletes to peer and coach interactions that occurred within a sport environment that supported their zone of proximal development (ZPD; Gray, 2011; Hill et al., 2020; Vygotsky, 1978). Similar to Hill and colleagues (2020), who commented that bio-banding provided athletes with the resources needed to stay within their ZPD, findings from this study imply that the social and environmental factors implicated in playing-up affect athletes’ sport-specific skill and psychosocial development by situating them within their ZPD. Further research may advance knowledge of playing-up by exploring how social and environmental factors impact athletes’ perceptions of competence, confidence, connection and character (i.e., the 4C’s; Côté et al., 2014; Vierimaa et al., 2017).

**Practical Applications, Limitations, and Future Directions**

This study is the first to explore athletes’ perceptions of playing-up. A key strength of this study is that it presents new knowledge regarding the factors that contribute to positive and negative playing-up experiences. Practitioners may use this knowledge to improve the playing-up experiences of future athletes. As such, teammates and coaches might consider four strategies to facilitate positive playing-up experiences. First, teammates and coaches may get to know athletes who play-up as people. They may also offer to include them in team activities that occur inside and outside of sport (e.g., practice activities that involve small groups, casual conversations, bonding activities). This behavior would communicate a desire to help athletes who play-up to integrate into the team’s social dynamics. Second, coaches may provide constructive feedback to athletes who play-up while recognizing the pressures they may feel to
prove their worth and relate socially to older peers. In one-to-one interactions, coaches may offer a combination of encouragement and corrective feedback to help athletes improve sport-specific skill while also facilitating mutual trust and respect. Third, teammates and coaches may encourage athletes to share knowledge during tactical discussions. As a result, athletes may gain competence and social acceptance, which would make them more likely to attend to others’ advice. Fourth, coaches may structure the sport environment to allow athletes to show their skill in front of their older peers. Coaches may change the structure of the sport environment by introducing activities that require older peers to cooperate with athletes who play-up in order to be successful.

The current study’s findings also shed light on factors within playing-up that may be indicative of youth development. For example, sport practitioners may gauge the extent to which athletes who play-up are establishing mutual trust and respect with teammates based on how often they receive the ball in training and competition. Coaches may facilitate trust and respect between athletes who play-up and their older peers by providing them with playing time and allowing them to demonstrate activities for the rest of the team. In addition, this study showed that athletes who play-up may exhibit independent motivation to improve fitness and skill by practicing at home, working out, or watching film of past games. Sport practitioners may inspire athletes’ independent motivation by complimenting them on their play and communicating that they believe in their ability to achieve athletic and personal success on an older team.

Beyond this study’s practical implications, its results must be interpreted in light of some important limitations. For instance, eight out of the 17 participants shared the same coach, and they thought favorably of this coach’s ability to develop athletes who play-up. In addition, the final sample included 15 participants who played-up at the time of data collection, but only two
participants who withdrew from playing-up. These factors collectively imply that this study may be subject to selection bias (Norris, 1997). As a result, this study may present an overly positive account of playing-up in youth soccer, despite the inclusion of participants who played-up and then returned to same-aged play.

Future research is warranted in several areas to advance current understandings of playing-up. First, the processes involved in playing-up may be simpler or more complex than those described in this study. Future studies may explore differences in key stakeholders’ perceptions of playing-up based on contextual factors such as sport, sport type (e.g., individual or team), level of competition, age of participants, gender, ethnicity, race, and sociocultural status (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Second, research is needed to explore how the sport-specific and psychosocial skills of athletes who play-up compare to those of athletes who play at their age level. Quantitative studies may help to shed light on sport-specific and psychosocial factors that may indicate athletes’ suitability to play-up. This research could offer recommendations for practitioners regarding when it is appropriate for coaches to play-up youth athletes. Third, in accordance with the PAF, future research may contribute to a richer understanding of playing-up by exploring its influence on athletes’ competence, confidence, connection, and character (i.e., the 4Cs; Côté et al., 2014; Vierimaa et al., 2017). Finally, once sufficient evidence is accrued, data from athletes who play-up may be used to reform playing-up policies so that athletes might benefit from their own recommendations. In bridging the research-to-practice gap, further study may elucidate the best methods to translate knowledge about positive playing-up experiences for athletes, teammates, coaches, and parents.

Conclusion
This study provides a foundation of research on athletes’ experiences of playing-up. Researchers used a qualitative interview approach rooted in relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology to explore how athletes perceived playing-up to influence their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development. Generally, participants perceived playing-up to involve a balance between challenge and progress. Participants also offered guidance to teammates and coaches on how to provide support. Namely, participants found that when teammates were welcoming and involved them in group activities, and coaches gave constructive feedback and encouragement, they were more likely to reap improvements in areas such as fitness, skill, confidence, social capital, and social adaptability. Further study is warranted to advance knowledge regarding how playing-up affects athletes differently based on context, and when it is appropriate for youth athletes to play-up.

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References


YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF PLAYING-UP IN SPORT


### Table 1

High- and low-order themes describing participant perceptions of playing-up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High-order themes</th>
<th>Low-order themes</th>
<th>Example quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of challenge</td>
<td>Coping with intensity</td>
<td>“putting yourself in a stronger, faster age group, it really just makes you faster and stronger, because you have to keep up.” (P6, male, aged 14 years)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fitting in</td>
<td>“I don’t know the girls that much. They talk about high school and exams. I’m not in high school, so I don’t really get along with their conversations.” (P11, female, aged 14 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of progress</td>
<td>Being recognized</td>
<td>“I like it when people go up to me and I say ‘oh, I play a year up,’ and they’re like ‘oh, wow!’” (P12, male, aged 16 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experiencing success</td>
<td>“these kids are older than you, and you’re still competing with them. Yes, you’re losing to them, but when you win, it makes it all that much better.” (P16, male, aged 15 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developing expertise</td>
<td>“it gets to the point [in playing-up] where you can see yourself. playing in a higher standing.” (P7, male, aged 17 years)</td>
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</table>
Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

General Introduction and Research Purpose

Thank you for participating in my research project. The purpose of this research is to understand what playing-up (i.e., playing sports at a higher age level) looks and feels like to you, and how it affects you as an athlete and a person. By sharing your experiences with me, I hope to use your knowledge to make playing-up even better for future athletes.

During our discussion, you will be able to discuss how you think and feel about playing-up. Please note that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions I will ask you. In addition, your participation in this discussion is voluntary, in that you do not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering. If you would like to stop the discussion at any time, there will be no consequences.

I would like to remind you that the information you share in our discussion will be kept in confidence. Your responses will not be shared with your parents, coaches, or teammates. When our discussion is over, if there is anything you would like to add or remove from the interview transcript, please contact me and I will make the necessary changes. Finally, I would like to ask if you are comfortable with my taking an audio recording of our conversation. This recording would allow me to check that I have understood and written out your comments correctly. Do you have any questions or concerns about this? If not, I will start the audio recording. [Start the audio recording if the athlete consents.]

Do you have any final questions before we begin? If not, please confirm your consent to participate by saying: “I consent to participate in this study.” [Proceed if the athlete consents.]  

Participant Introduction
Thank you for your cooperation. I would like to start by asking you a couple of questions about your sport background:

1. Tell me a little bit about how you got involved in soccer. - What do you enjoy the most about playing soccer?

2. Describe the team you play with right now. - How does it make you feel to be a member of this team?

**Introduction to Playing-Up**

Thank you for telling me about your involvement in soccer and the team you play with right now. I would like to move on to the main focus of our discussion, which is your experience of playing-up. My next question relates to the decision for you to play-up:

3. Tell me how you learned about the opportunity to play up. - Who was the most important person in making the decision for you to play-up for the first time?

   - Describe how the decision was made the first time you played-up.

   - Describe how the decision was made in other cases when you played-up.

   - For how many years have you been playing-up?

**General Discussion**

At this stage, I would like to discuss what playing-up means to you and how it may have affected your development. When answering the following questions, you can think about your overall experience of playing-up, consider one specific season when you played-up, or compare different seasons if you had different experiences.

4. Tell me about what it feels like to be an athlete who plays-up. - What do you think playing-up is?
What does playing-up mean to you?

What do you enjoy the most about playing-up?

What do you enjoy the least about playing-up?

What do you think are the benefits of playing-up?

What do you think are the drawbacks of playing-up?

Conclusion

As we approach the end of our time together, I have some final questions to round out our conversation and offer closure:

5. Looking back, what would have made your playing-up experiences better?

6. What advice would you give to other athletes who may be thinking about playing-up?
   - What advice would you give to the coaches of athletes who play-up?
   - What advice would you give to the teammates of athletes who play-up?
   - Would you recommend playing-up to other athletes? Why or why not?

7. As we end the discussion, do you have any final thoughts about playing-up that you feel are important and that we did not already cover?

8. Do you have any questions for me?

We will end the discussion here. Thank you very much again for participating in my research project and sharing your thoughts and feelings about playing-up. I will remind you that if you would like or add or take away from the information you shared during the interview, you can contact me by email and I will make the required changes.