



REVIEW ARTICLE

LEADING THE TEAMS: ROLE OF CAPTAINS IN FOSTERING TEAMWORK IN BASIC SCHOOL SPORTS

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ABSTRACT

Team captains in basic school sports play a central role in cultivating teamwork and peer cooperation, yet their influence is often overlooked in research compared to coaches and older athletes. This study explored how captains foster teamwork in basic school sports teams, focusing on their strategies, challenges, and the perceptions of both captains and teammates. Guided by transformational leadership and social learning theories, a qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted. Sixteen participants consisting eight captains and eight teammates from four public basic schools were purposively selected using maximum variation to ensure diversity in gender, sport type, and leadership experience. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2022) framework. The findings revealed five major themes: captains serving as communication bridges, providing motivation and emotional support, mediating conflict with fairness, modelling sportsmanship and inclusivity, and navigating the challenges of leadership at a young age. Captains were viewed as role models who encouraged collaboration, but they also faced difficulties in balancing authority and friendship. The study concludes that captains, when properly guided, can significantly foster teamwork and positive peer dynamics in basic school sports. It is recommended that schools provide structured leadership training, mentorship from coaches, and implement rotational captaincy to expand leadership opportunities.

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INTRODUCTION

Research consistently shows that participation in organized sports at an early age contributes not only to children's physical fitness but also to their social, emotional, and cognitive development (Bailey et al., 2013; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Donkor, 2025). In Ghana, studies equally highlight that school-based sports serve as platforms for instilling discipline, cooperation, and leadership among children, while also promoting inclusivity and social cohesion (Ammah & Kukubo, 2017; Tetteh-Ahumah et al., 2023). These findings underscore the broader developmental role of sports, especially when peer leadership is embedded within team structures. Within these team environments, the role of the captain is particularly significant. While coaches provide technical instruction and strategic direction, captains operate as peer leaders who influence the daily dynamics of teamwork. Captains are often responsible for motivating teammates, clarifying instructions during games, mediating conflicts, modelling sportsmanship, and ensuring inclusivity (Gould & Voelker, 2012; Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017). Through these activities, they foster cohesion and help teammates navigate both the physical and relational demands of sport. Despite the evident importance of captains, much of the research on youth

sports leadership has concentrated on the coach's role, often neglecting peer leaders who interact most closely with teammates on and off the field (Horn, 2015; Fransen et al., 2017). In Ghana, this gap is even more pronounced: while youth sports programs are recognized as vehicles for nurturing resilience, teamwork, and entrepreneurial mindsets (Nyanyofio et al., 2024), little is known about how captains at the basic school level shape these outcomes. This lack of empirical attention is problematic. Basic school is a developmental period during which children are acquiring socio-emotional abilities such as empathy, responsibility, and communication. The role of the captain may therefore be especially significant, unless there is a clear insight into how captains contribute to teamwork, schools can inadvertently underestimate or underprepare them for leadership positions. This not only limits their potential for promoting cooperation and inclusivity but also reduces the potential development benefits that structured leadership roles could bring. There is a need to bridge this research gap in order to improve the potential for sport to act as a tool for holistic education in Ghana and beyond.

Purpose of the Study: The study examined the role of captains in fostering teamwork in basic sports, highlighting

their responsibilities, strategies, challenges, and the perceptions of their teammates.

Research Questions

The research questions were:

- How do captains in basic sports perceive their role in fostering teamwork?
- What strategies do captains use to promote cooperation and resolve conflicts among teammates?
- What challenges do captains face in balancing leadership and peer relationships?
- How do teammates perceive the captain's influence on teamwork and inclusivity?

Theoretical Framework: This study is anchored in Transformational Leadership Theory and Social Learning Theory, two perspectives that together provide a strong lens for understanding the captain's role in fostering teamwork in basic school sports. Transformational Leadership Theory, as articulated by Bass and Riggio (2006), emphasizes leaders' ability to inspire, motivate, and elevate followers to achieve goals beyond their immediate self-interest. Unlike transactional leadership, which is based on compliance and reward, transformational leadership focuses on vision, inspiration, and individualized consideration (Northouse, 2018). In the context of basic school sports, captains demonstrate transformational qualities when they encourage teammates after mistakes, motivate peers to persist in the face of challenges, and create a sense of unity around collective goals. Research (Bass, 1999; Fransen et al., 2015) shows that transformational leaders build higher levels of trust, cohesion, and satisfaction among followers. Captains, by virtue of their peer position, can inspire teammates in ways that resonate more deeply than adult-led authority figures like coaches (Voelker, Gould, & Crawford, 2019). In Ghanaian schools, where sports participation is closely linked to moral education and teamwork (Ammah & Kukubo, 2017), transformational leadership qualities in captains may serve as powerful mechanisms for cultivating discipline, inclusion, and mutual respect.

Social Learning Theory, as it was created by Bandura (1977), highlights the reality of the fact that behaviour is learned by imitation, modelling, and observation. Children are more likely to acquire the behaviours they see their peers or role models performing, provided that these behaviours are reinforced by the values of the group. On sports teams, captains are highly visible models of behavior. As captains practice positive sportsmanship, cooperation, and fairness, their teams will learn from these practices and highlight teamwork and togetherness. Empirical evidence confirms the modelling function in youth sport. Gould and Voelker (2012) set out that players have the propensity to mimic captains' communication and attitudes, highlighting that captains set norms for behavior that define team culture (Cotterill and Cheetham, 2017). Within Ghana, where peer role models exert a powerful role in shaping children's learning attitude and discipline (Kyei & Agyemang, 2020), Social Learning Theory works to identify the ways in which captains' behavior may directly translate into broader team culture. The two theories complement one another. Transformational Leadership Theory explains the why and how of leadership by captains by way of inspiration, motivation, and role modelling and Social Learning Theory explains how the mechanism works in the process of

transmission by observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Applied to this study, the theories explain how the captains inspire and model team behaviours that are internalized by peers and teammates to build the collective experience of playing sport at the basic level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teamwork and Child Development in Sports: Literature has historically established the importance of teamwork for children participating in sport. Bailey et al. (2013) argue that sport participation is developmentally worthwhile beyond being physically healthy, for example, socio-emotional development and mental challenge. In a team environment, children develop the ability to work cooperatively, share tasks, and manage conflict constructively. This supports Fraser-Thomas, Côté, and Deakin (2005), who assert that sport is a "life laboratory," whereby young people learn transferable skills such as communication, leadership, and responsibility and transfer these to school and broader community life. Ammah and Kukubo (2017) highlight, in the context of Ghana, that sports in school are a microcosm of broader values in society. Through sports, the children learn about collective responsibility, discipline, and collective achievement, reflecting the collective ethos that exists within Ghanaian culture. Anokye and Acheampong (2019) further add that cooperation built through sports helps with social integration and prepares children for leadership and community engagement skills in the future. These studies affirm that working together in youth sports is more than an ancillary byproduct of participation but a prime development goal with long-term effects on collaborating and leading.

Youth Sports Leadership: Sports leadership has been framed frequently around the role of the coach. Horn (2015) depicts coaches as the primary leaders responsible for team strategy, discipline, and performance outcomes. Whereas this perspective emphasizes the dominance of coaches, it can underestimate peer leadership, which is also central to establishing team culture. Fransen et al. (2017) challenge this "coach-centred myth," demonstrating that peer leaders, especially captains wield considerable power because they are rooted in the team. Gould and Voelker (2012) underscore that captains occupy the leading position in youth sport leadership as they combine formal power with informal peer pressure. Unlike coaches, who are often perceived as external authority figures, captains interact daily with teammates, enabling them to encourage, inspire, and negotiate with individuals whose styles of communication are most salient among peers. Voelker, Gould, and Crawford (2019) also assert that sport leadership roles provide fertile ground for young people's development through responsibility, decision making, and social confidence. For Ghana, youth leadership through sport needs to be conceived of as a school for participatory leadership in society as a whole, highlighting its worth in the education agenda, according to Kyei and Agyemang (2020).

Role of Captains in Teamwork: Scholars are increasingly finding captains to be more than mere figureheads. Cotterill and Cheetham (2017) call them "bridges" linking coaches and team-mates, where communication is facilitated and greater team ethos is encouraged. Their research brings to light how captains influence both the task-oriented aspect of performance and the socio-emotional team environment. Similarly, Gould,

Voelker, and Griffes (2016) confirmed that captains serve in multifaceted roles as motivators, conflict managers, and sports-personship role models. As such, captains encourage teamwork directly by encouraging cohesion, conflict resolution, and ethical behavior filling. However, issues come up. Teenage captains find it challenging to reconcile authority with peer relationships. Most captains are not trained, and thus they do not understand how to deal with interpersonal conflicts or leadership pressures, according to Gould et al. (2016). This is even more so at the basic level since children are still developing socio-emotional skills and may perceive leadership as something threatening or not comprehensible. In Ghana, where sports leadership training is usually not systematic within schools, captains may be appointed on the basis of sports ability rather than leadership ability, with concerns regarding their preparedness to satisfy the wider expectations of peer leadership (Ammah & Kukubo, 2017).

Ghanaian Perspectives on Peer Leadership in Sports:

Ghanaian scholarship over the recent years has begun to establish the potential of sport for development. Tetteh-Ahumah et al. (2023) show that sport programs instill resilience, cooperation, and communication skills in Ghanaian youth, demonstrating that participation extends far into the physical to encompass socio-emotional growth. Similarly, Nyanyofio et al. (2024) found that Ghanaian sports training programs instill entrepreneurial mind-sets and leadership, once more showing the transformative effect of sport. Nonetheless, much of the Ghanaian literature has been focused on broader youth development outcomes rather than captains' leadership roles as peer leaders in basic schools' sports. Ammah and Kukubo (2017) and Kyei and Agyemang (2020) have touched on the importance of connecting leadership development and sports education but not much in tracing how captains influence teamwork at the grassroots level. This is an indication of the need for research on captains' and their team members lived experience in Ghanaian schools. Without it, the developmental potential of captaincy is likely to be overlooked in policy and practice. International research and that conducted in Ghana indicates that sports are powerful environments for developing teamwork, leadership, and social responsibility. However, while the coach's role has had extensive coverage, captains who have direct effects on peer interaction are not well researched, particularly in Ghanaian basic schools.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed qualitative phenomenological design for collecting lived experiences of captains and teammates during basic sports. Phenomenology is equally well established as the appropriate approach when it is needed to identify and account for how individuals understand a phenomenon in their everyday life (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016). This approach was particularly appropriate to discovering the way captains perceive their roles, exercise leadership, and establish teamwork in real sporting contexts through experiencing lived reality rather than theorizing. Unlike quantitative approaches that concentrate on measurement, phenomenology welcomes participants' voice and therefore is in support of the research goal of bringing the children's captaincy perspectives to the limelight. The research was conducted in four public basic schools within the Effutu Municipality that had purposively been chosen because they had planned for sports activities as

part of their co-curricular interventions. Context matters in phenomenological studies since it affects participants' experience (Patton, 2015). School inclusion with active sports programs ensured participants tangible contact with the phenomenon of study. Selected sports football, volleyball, basketball, and athletics were indicative of a broad spectrum of team dynamics, enabling the study to record various types of leadership and teamwork expressions. Sixteen participants were sampled using purposive sampling, comprising six team captains and six teammates. Purposive sampling is commonly adopted in qualitative research as it enables researchers to select participants in a deliberate manner who are most likely to give the most informative and relevant data (Palinkas et al., 2015). In a bid to ensure data richness, maximum variation sampling was used with consideration of gender variation, sport, and experience in leadership. This diversity is recommended for gathering a wide variety of perspectives and ascertaining sharedalities across different experiences (Patton, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were employed as the data collection instrument. Semi-structured formats are highly prevalent in qualitative research because they provide a strong balance between structure and openness, allowing the researcher to dig deeper into issues emerging while opening up on crucial areas that are aligned with the research questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). All interviews lasted 9-12 minutes and were conducted in English with a little use of local languages to facilitate clarification and the inclusion of all members. Questions during the interviews addressed participants' perceptions of the captain's role, the strategies captains used to foster cooperation, the challenges in dealing with leadership and peer relationships, and teammates' perceptions of inclusiveness and teamwork. With permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to maintain accuracy, while field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. Data analysis followed thematic analysis framework, which is considered both flexible and rigorous for identifying patterns within qualitative data.

The six-phase process involved familiarization with the data, generating codes, constructing and reviewing themes, and producing a coherent account. Thematic analysis was appropriate as it allows both inductive searching for emergent patterns and deductive working with existing ideas such as teamwork and leadership (Nowell et al., 2017). The continuous iterative process made sure findings remained close to participants' narratives while advancing more holistic theoretical knowledge regarding peer leadership. In order to ensure research credibility, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were employed.

Credibility was enhanced through member checking, where members read and validated transcripts and initial themes to ensure validity. Transferability was provided by presenting detailed descriptions of research settings and participants so that others can consider the possibility of applying it in similar settings. Dependability was ensured through peer debriefing with staff well-versed in qualitative research, and confirmability was provided through maintaining an audit trail of coding-related decisions, field notes, and reflexive memos. Ethics approval was provided by [insert institution/ethics review board], and parental consent and child assent were obtained. Pseudonyms were employed for participants to ensure confidentiality, and identifying details were anonymized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Captains' Perceptions of Their Role in Fostering Teamwork: Captains in this study perceived themselves as essential facilitators of teamwork, identifying communication, organization, and encouragement as central to their role. They saw their position not only as a symbolic title but as a responsibility to ensure cohesion and understanding among teammates. One football captain explained:

"When the coach gives instructions, I make sure my friends understand it. Sometimes I explain it in a way they will get."

A volleyball captain added:

"I repeat what the coach says and demonstrate so that everyone understands."

Teammates reinforced this perception, with one commenting:
"Our captain always repeats what coach says. If he doesn't, some of us get lost."

These accounts show that captains see themselves as bridges between authority and peers, a role that reflects Cotterill and Cheetham's (2017) description of captains as mediators of communication within teams. Moreover, their constant encouragement aligns with transformational leadership qualities, where leaders motivate others beyond self-interest (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, some captains admitted the role was demanding. A basketball leader confessed:

"Sometimes I feel tired because I must always keep them together."

This highlights the dual nature of the captain's role, empowering but also emotionally taxing.

Strategies for Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Conflicts: Captains employed diverse strategies to sustain cooperation, including encouragement, fairness, and mediation during disputes. Encouragement was the most common approach, as a basketball captain illustrated:

"When my teammate misses a shot, I tell them it's okay, we can try again."

A football captain similarly said:

"Even if we are losing, I keep telling them we can still win."
Teammates found this support invaluable. One remarked:
"When the captain cheers us up, we don't feel bad for failing."

Another stated:

"Sometimes I want to give up, but when he claps and says we can do it, I continue."

Conflict resolution was another strategy. An athletics captain explained:

"Sometimes two players argue about who should run first. I talk to both and make them agree."

A volleyball captain added:

"If people fight about positions, I make them take turns so everyone is happy."

Teammates highlighted fairness as critical, with one noting:

"Our captain doesn't take sides. He listens to everyone before deciding."

These findings support Gould, Voelker, and Griffes (2016), who argue that youth captains often act as motivators and mediators, even without formal training. Yet captains admitted difficulty, especially when correcting friends.

One basketball captain reflected:

"It is hard to correct my best friend when he makes a mistake. If I shout, he will be angry with me."

This echoes Ammah and Kukubo's (2017) Ghanaian study, which observed that captains often rely on improvisation because schools rarely provide leadership training.

Challenges of Balancing Leadership and Peer Relationships: A consistent theme was the challenge of balancing authority with peer acceptance. Captains reported feeling conflicted when teammates resisted their leadership. One basketball captain explained:

"Sometimes they say I am behaving like a teacher when I ask them to listen."

Another shared:

"It is hard to correct my best friend when he makes a mistake. If I talk too much, he will say I am proud."

Captains also struggled with role ambiguity due to a lack of preparation. A volleyball leader stated:

"Coach just made me captain but didn't tell me what to do. Sometimes I am confused."

This left many to "learn on the job." Teammates were aware of these struggles, as one noted:

"Sometimes you can see he is worried, but he still encourages us."

These findings highlight the tension between authority and friendship at the basic level. Voelker, Gould, and Crawford (2019) describe this as role strain, where young captains must lead without alienating peers. In Ghanaian schools, where captaincy is often based on athletic performance rather than leadership ability (Ammah & Kukubo, 2017), the absence of structured training exacerbates this challenge.

Influence on Teamwork and Inclusivity: Teammates consistently described captains as role models who shaped team culture through sportsmanship and inclusivity. A football teammate said:

"Our captain always greets the other team and shakes hands. We also do the same because of him."

A volleyball player added:

“Even if someone is not good, our captain gives them chance to play. Everyone should feel part of the team.”

These behaviours illustrate how captains modelled respect and fairness, in line with Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes that individuals learn by observing and imitating others. A basketball teammate explained:

“Because the captain respects the referee, we also don't argue with him.”

Another noted: “

Our captain makes sure weaker players get to play. That makes us all feel happy and united.”

Captains themselves acknowledged the tension between inclusivity and performance. One football captain admitted:

“Coach sometimes tells me to choose only the strong players, but I also want the others to play.”

This tension reflects the broader challenge of balancing competitiveness with inclusivity in youth sports (Fransen et al., 2017). Teammates valued captains not just for tactical leadership but for creating an environment of fairness and belonging.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of captains in fostering teamwork in basic school sports. Findings revealed four interrelated themes:

- Captains perceived themselves as vital communication bridges and motivators;
- They employed strategies such as encouragement, fairness, and mediation to promote cooperation and resolve conflicts;
- They faced challenges in balancing authority with peer relationships and struggled with role ambiguity due to lack of training; and
- Teammates viewed captains as role models who shaped team culture through sportsmanship and inclusivity.

These findings corroborate the reality that captains are not only symbolic leaders but dynamic facilitators of team work, whose influence extends beyond tactical guidance to social and emotional team cohesion. Through transformational behaviors such as encouragement, individualized support, and role modeling, captains inspire teammates and create unity (Bass & Riggio, 2006). On the other hand, they have their behavior observed and emulated by others, thus maintaining Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. The Ghanaian context offers both prospects and challenges: although sport provides fertile grounds for leadership and team-building skills development (Ammah & Kukubo, 2017; Tetteh-Ahumah et al., 2023), captains receive very little formal training and have to improvise against difficult conditions.

The research presented here is that junior sports captaincy is an extremely powerful but untapped window of initial leadership development. Far from being a straightforward sporting role, captaincy is an experiential learning site where children learn about responsibility, empathy, and teamwork. Theoretically,

captains' experiences illustrate how transformational leadership qualities such as inspiration and individualized consideration may emerge even in young students, whereas Social Learning Theory elucidates how their behavior builds team culture by modelling. This implies that youth sports ought to be viewed not merely as bodily conditioning but rather as a social laboratory where life skills are built. In Ghana, where schools are central to civic and moral values education, the captains' role could serve national educational objectives of discipline, teamwork, and inclusivity.

Yet, inadequate preparation of captains' questions whether opportunities for wholesome education are being lost. Investing in structured captaincy schemes would be capable of transforming sports into meaningful leadership nurseries, equipping children with skills that can be applied in classrooms, families, and society. The research concludes that empowering captains at the grassroots level is not all about improving the performance of the team but about establishing the groundwork for collective, ethical, and open-minded future leaders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research, several recommendations are made to support the captains' contribution to teamwork in primary sport. Physical education departments and schools should introduce formal leadership training to equip captains with communication, conflict management, and motivational skills. Coaches can also serve as mentors and counsel captains in balancing authority and peer relationships by having regular check-ins that reduce role ambiguity and enhance confidence.

For more opportunities for leadership, rotational captaincy must be implemented so that more students have an opportunity to exercise responsibility and leadership. Leadership and teamwork modules must also be integrated into the PE curriculum so that all students, including captains, gain collaborative and leadership skills. Finally, parent and community engagement has to be cultivated in order to promote values of fairness, inclusivity, and discipline that transcend the school setting and offer a framework for children's general development.

Contribution to Knowledge and Implications for Physical Education: This study contributes to knowledge regarding how captains facilitate team building in core sports by demonstrating that their work involves much more than arranging games. Captains are peer leaders who have an impact on communication, cooperation, and inclusion and, therefore, are at the center of team social and emotional development. For this reason, physical education should not only be a way to enhance physical fitness but also a platform for developing leadership skills and team values among children. Providing captains with reflective guidance can help transform sports into communities where responsibility, justice, and teamwork are made operational daily.

Integrating leadership development into physical education guarantees students develop transferable skills such as confidence, resilience, and conflict resolution, readying them for challenges outside the playing field. Within the Ghanaian framework, where schools are key to teaching moral and civic duty, assisted support for captains is able to reinforce overall educational objectives towards discipline, inclusiveness, and respect. Leadership training for captains strengthens team

dynamics on school sports while developing future young leaders who will contribute positively within their communities.

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