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An Exploratory Study of Adolescents' Motivations for Joining and Continued Participation in a 4-H Afterschool Program

Abstract

Youth development professionals are interested in how to attract and retain participants in after-school programs. In open-ended interviews and a focus group, seven adolescents in an urban after-school youth development program provided rich descriptive data regarding their participation and potential barriers. There were many reasons why adolescents joined and continued to participate. Themes of caring adults, homework assistance, program environment, program opportunities, fun, learning, friends, character development, and life skills emerged from the data. Although these themes are consistent with those from past research, the process of soliciting youth input is itself important. Implications for youth programs are discussed.

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Introduction

After-school programs have attracted considerable attention as a way to enhance positive youth development. Obviously, youth need to participate in programs before positive outcomes are possible. Participation is important because sustained engagement is thought to lead to more positive outcomes than casual or irregular participation (Miller, 2003; Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005). The introduction to a recent volume dedicated to participation issues noted that it is "very important to shed light on this 'showing-up phenomenon'" (Noam, 2005, p. 1). Clearly, youth development professionals are interested in how to attract and retain program participants.

Youth may be motivated to participate in programs for a variety of reasons. Studies have noted factors such as fun and enjoyment, wanting to learn and improve skills, and future usefulness (Ferrari, Anderson-Butcher, & Jackson, 2003; Fredricks, Alfeld-Liro, Hruda, Eccles, Patrick, & Ryan, 2002; Weiss & Ferrer-Caja, 2000). Youth are able to meet needs for relatedness, belonging, and mastery through their participation (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Recently, studies have examined strategies for recruiting and maintaining participation (Lauver, Little, & Weiss, 2004). For example, in an effort to retain and increase teen participation in Boys & Girls Clubs, the time, variety, quality, and intensity of program offerings were increased (Herrera & Arbreton, 2003).

Interest is growing in programs that address the needs of middle school and high school youth (Hall, Israel, & Shortt, 2004; Miller, 2003; Pittman, Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, & Ferber, 2003; Wynn, 2003). Programs, however, must be "compelling enough to compete with the lure of 'hanging out' with friends and other opportunities available in the community" (Miller, 2003, p. 80). Experience suggests that teens desire more flexible program options. Given the importance of regular participation, research about what attracts youth and what keeps them coming back is needed.

Purpose

The purpose of the study reported here was to explore adolescents' perceptions of their experiences in a youth development organization. Specifically, we wanted to identify reasons for joining and continued participation, as well as potential barriers and elements that might comprise an "ideal" program. Miller (2003) noted that programs offer intangibles that are hard to quantify. Thus, we chose to employ qualitative methods. We chose this age group because participation in youth organizations tends to drop off during early adolescence (Quinn, 1999).

Program Context

Adventure Central is an urban education center developed in 2000 as a partnership between the Ohio State University Extension, 4-H Youth Development and Five Rivers MetroParks in Dayton, Ohio. It provides youth ages 5 to 18 with a positive youth development setting. At the time of this study, approximately 50 youth, most of whom were African-American, were participating.

The after-school program operates from 2:00 to 6:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday during the school year, and a day camp is held in the summer. The youth are organized into five different groups, based on age and maturity level. The daily schedule includes social time, snack, homework assistance, and activity programming. Further descriptions of Adventure Central and the evaluation of its programming can be found in other sources (Cochran & Arnett, 2005; Cochran, Arnett, Ferrari, & McNeely, 2003; Ferrari, Futris, Smathers, Cochran, Arnett, & Digby, 2006; Paisley & Ferrari, 2005).

Methods

Questions

Open-ended interviews were the primary data collection method (Patton, 1990). Questions were modified from Schilling's (1999) study of an extended day program. We included questions about why adolescents joined, why they still participated, and what they wanted in an "ideal" youth program (Figure 1).

Youth participated in a focus group after the interviews were completed. We used Morgan (1997; Morgan & Scannell, 1998) and Krueger's (1998a; 1998b; Krueger & Casey, 2000) recommendations to plan the process and to construct the focus group interview questions. Questions involved checking the accuracy of the information obtained from the interviews. For example, we asked, "In the interviews we talked about why you stayed in the program. The following were given as reasons . . . Are these accurate? Is there anything else you want to add?" Similar questions were used to check out the other themes identified in the interviews.

Figure 1.
Interview Questions

1. You have a friend who is thinking about joining Adventure Central.
 - a. How would you describe the program?
 - b. What would they need to know before they come to the program?
2. Why did you start coming to Adventure Central?
3. Why do you keep coming back?
4. Do you plan on attending Adventure Central in the future? Why?
5. Why do you think some people your age stop coming to Adventure Central?
6. To you what is the most important thing at Adventure Central?
7. How committed are you to Adventure Central? What makes you say that?
8. What things might prevent you from becoming committed to Adventure Central?
9. You are given some money to design an after-school program for kids in your school. The program would help them become better people. You don't have to use anything that Adventure Central does, but you can if you want to.

- a. Where would your program be? (university, school, YMCA, park, etc.)?
- b. What kinds of activities would your program include?
- c. What would you spend your money on?
- d. What would be the most important stuff that goes on in your program?

Source: Turner, 2002

The interviews were conducted by the second author, who was not affiliated with the program. Earlier program observation visits had been made prior to the interviews, so that the interviewer was familiar to the youth, which facilitated building rapport. All interviews were taped recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed line-by-line using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The authors consulted to develop the categorization. To address validity, two peer reviewers read the transcripts to ensure an accurate interpretation (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). The follow-up focus group also served as a check of validity.

Participants

Seven youth qualified as study participants; all were members of the same program group. In order to participate, they had to have attended the program for at least 1 year and have completed a program survey (survey data are reported elsewhere; see Ferrari, Paisley, Turner, Arnett, Cochran, & McNeely, 2002). There were five girls and two boys ranging in age from 11 to 13 years old ($M = 12.42$). The youth were African American and in the sixth, seventh, or eighth grade. Youth received parental permission to participate in accordance with the university's human subjects procedures. Questions were pilot tested with youth who did not qualify for the study and minor modifications were made.

Results and Discussion

Similar themes emerged across the research questions, although the specific content differed somewhat. For example, one participant said, "First, it was because my granddad made me Now it's because they have, like, opportunities that I wouldn't be able to get anywhere else." Thus, as Lock and Costello (2001) suggested, we can view joining and continued participation as a sequential, but dynamic, process. Table 1 displays major themes, and a discussion of each follows.

Table 1.
Patterns of Themes Across Research Questions

Themes	Joining	Continued Participation	Ideal Program
Caring Adult	5	3	--*
Homework Assistance	1	2	7
Environment (Physical)	--	3	7
Environment (Psychosocial)	--	3	--
Program Opportunities	2	3	--
Fun	--	3	6
Learning	--	2	--

Friends	--	2	--
Character Development	--	2	--
Life Skills	--	--	1

Caring Adults

Five youth discussed how an adult (either a family member or an Adventure Central staff member) encouraged them to join. Parents often are responsible for youth joining and persisting in activities (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003; Huebner & Mancini, 2003; Lock & Costello, 2001). Other adults outside the family may also play this role (Lauver et al., 2004).

Additionally, three youth reported that staff members were a reason they continued to participate. They were "helpful," "respectful," and "nice." They also "let you do stuff" and "they trust you." It was different from school, because "here you can pull to the side and talk to them." However, in the focus group, there was some discussion that adults could be "mean"; it appeared this was related to discipline situations. All did agree that the adults at the program cared for them ("Oh, they love us."). Thus, continued participation may be the result of positive relationships with program staff (Ferrari & Sweeney, 2005; Fredricks et al., 2002; Paisley & Ferrari, 2005).

Caring youth-staff relationships may be the most critical element to program success (Rhodes, 2004; Shortt, 2002). Research supports that adult relationships with youth are associated with positive outcomes if they are high-quality relationships. Duration of the relationships and structured activities seem to be key factors benefiting youth (Herrera, Sipe, McClanhan, Arbretton, & Pepper, 2000; Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002; Langhout, Rhodes, & Osborne, 2004; Morrow & Styles, 1995; Sipe, 2000; Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). Participation in mentoring relationships is associated with more positive academic behaviors (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2002; Sipe, 2000). Therefore, it is not surprising that homework assistance emerged as a theme.

Homework Assistance

One youth stated that homework assistance was the reason she joined Adventure Central. She would tell others to join because "they stay on you about homework." This theme remained important as the youth discussed why they returned and what they wanted in an ideal after-school program. When describing their ideal program, all seven youth reported some sort of academic support as a necessary part. They noted how academic supports in an after-school program could one day lead to attending college and being a successful person. However, they did not want to do what they considered busy work.

Consensus is emerging that after-school programming can contribute to academic success, but that this contribution is more indirect, by increasing student engagement in learning (Granger & Kane, 2004; Miller, 2003). Clearly, youth viewed the homework support as an important part of the program.

Environment

Ecological theory conceptualizes the environment as more than physical space; it also comprises the relationships that occur within it (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Thus, it is not surprising that characteristics of the environment appeared as reasons for participation and as components of an ideal after-school program.

An important aspect of the program was that it was a safe place; being there was an alternative to "getting caught up" in other things. Others acknowledge the importance of both physical and psychological safety (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Gambone & Arbretton, 1997). Regarding their ideal program, the theme of safety continued, and two additional themes were mentioned. The youth wanted a large space to house the program and basic supplies such as books, food, and suitable furniture. They were very specific about what they would want, which reinforces the importance of soliciting adolescents' input into programming.

Three youth discussed some aspect of belonging as reasons they continued to participate. They felt "connected" and "comfortable." This perception was supported by survey data (Ferrari et al., 2002). Previous research points to the importance of a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gambone & Arbretton, 1997; Osterman, 2000).

Program Opportunities

Homework assistance, discussed earlier, specifically encouraged one youth to join. Attending the summer camp was another such opportunity. After previously participating as a camper, this youth anticipated the opportunity to be a teen assistant. He viewed this opportunity as a chance at

"having my first job" and to "help kids if they don't understand things like I didn't." Another youth described participating on the Youth Board as an opportunity to "not be just a youth talking, but [to] feel like I'm an important businesswoman." The Youth Board reviews proposals and distributes funding for community projects. These activities appear to foster a sense of what Eccles and Gootman (2002) have described as "mattering". The importance of having a meaningful role cannot be overstated.

Fun

Three youth cited fun as a reason they continued to participate. When probed regarding what fun meant, each youth listed different activities, including computers, arts and crafts, games, and recreation (e.g., kickball). When describing an ideal program, six youth reported fun as important. Similar to the activities reported as reasons for continued participation, they described athletic, social, and educational games as ways to have fun.

Fun is an often-overlooked dimension in youth programming. Opportunities to have fun allow adolescents to broaden and deepen their interests (Wynn, 2003). Fun can be the "hook" that brings youth into an activity (Wolfe & Carroll, 2003). Exploring what youth find fun and how to embed fun in youth development programming seems to be a necessary step. A variety of activities are needed to maintain youths' interest (Lauver et al., 2004; Rosenthal & Vandell, 1996).

Friends

Two youth reported the friends they have made at Adventure Central were the reason they continued to participate. Similar research revealed that peers play a role in the kind of activities youth choose or choose not to participate in (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003; Gambone & Arbreton, 1997; Huebner & Mancini, 2003; Lock & Costello, 2001).

Learning

Learning was another theme that emerged as a reason youth continued to participate at Adventure Central. They discussed specific activities focused on nature. Beyond providing homework help, programs can incorporate what is called "enriched learning" (Noam, Biancarosa, & Dechausay, 2002) or "embedded learning" (Pittman, Irby, Yohalem, & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2004). This type of learning is important because the activities "produce many transferable skills . . . [that can] enhance learning preparedness and school attachment" (Noam et al., 2002, p. 8; see also Miller, 2003). These learning activities require intentionality and innovative delivery to be effective. Furthermore, they are often fun!

Character Development

One youth stated that learning respect for others was important, and another discussed how the program had helped her become more mature. Several youth mentioned the code of conduct when describing what someone would need to know before coming to Adventure Central. These behavioral expectations are consistent with calls for establishing positive social norms in youth programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Life Skills

The theme of life skills emerged from the comments of two youth as important program element in their "ideal" after-school program. Life skills have been described as the "anchors," as they provide outcomes that can be measured (Wolfe & Carroll, 2003).

Conclusion and Implications

Overall, there were many reasons why adolescents joined and continued to participate at Adventure Central. These youth felt a sense of belonging and safety, received the academic support they wanted and needed, and had fun. They also had developed relationships with adults, were engaged in learning, and fulfilled meaningful roles. These are among the elements considered necessary for effective youth development programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000; Miller, 2003; National 4-H Impact Assessment, 2001).

While the reasons that adolescents join and remain in youth programs may seem to be self-evident, recruitment and retention continue to remain as issues for youth development professionals because low attendance is the norm (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Lauver et al., 2004; Little & Lauver, 2005). Further, participation is more than merely being there--"being there keeps youth safe, but being engaged helps them to grow" (Weiss et al., 2005, p. 20). Nor can program quality be taken for granted, because there is evidence to suggest that quality is not a given (Miller, 2003).

Because participation is "inextricably linked" to program quality (Walker & Arbreton, 2005, p. 11), youth development professionals must take steps to ensure that they have addressed such features. It appears that no one factor can be singled out, but rather, there is a certain synergy that is created by the setting, the activities that take place in the setting, and the people involved

in leading the activities. The curriculum of such programs is not just the tangible subject matter resources. Curriculum must be viewed from a holistic perspective that includes relationship building and social norms that contribute to program climate as well as intentional delivery strategies (e.g., experiential learning). Issues of participation and program quality represent areas for staff development and training.

Youth development leaders can use the information revealed in this study to strengthen their programs. Although themes similar to past research emerged from this study, the process of soliciting youth input is in itself important. Adolescents want to feel as though they have a voice and a choice. Listening to what the youth are saying and what they describe as "ideal" may provide insight into how to attract them and engage their commitment. Youth development leaders need to walk the line between providing structured activities that create positive outcomes and providing the youth with what they want. Fortunately, both goals are achievable.

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