

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

Theresa M. Ferrari
Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development
Ohio State University Extension
Columbus, OH
ferrari.8@osu.edu

Cassie L. Turner
Venturing/Exploring Executive
Black Swamp Council, Boy Scouts of America
Findlay, OH
cturner@bsamail.org

Abstract

Youth development professionals are interested in how to attract and retain participants in after-school programs. Seven adolescents in an urban after-school youth development program provided rich descriptive data in open-ended interviews and a focus group. There were many reasons why adolescents joined and continued to participate. Themes of caring adults, homework assistance, the 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.

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. Therefore, 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 this study was to explore adolescents’ perceptions of their experiences in a youth development organization. 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 in 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, approximately 50 youth, most of whom were African-American, participated. An after-school program operates from 2:00 to 6:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday during the school year and a day camp 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 can be found in other sources (Cochran, Arnett, Ferrari, & McNeely, 2003; Paisley & Ferrari, in press).

Methods

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 (see Turner, 2002). 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.

All interviews were taped recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed line-by-line using open coding (Straus & 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).

Participants

Seven youth qualified as study participants; all were members of the same program group.¹ 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. Each participant had been attending Adventure Central for at least one year. Youth received parental permission to participate in accordance with the university's human subjects procedures.

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.

| Themes | Joining | Continued Participation | Ideal Program |
|----------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| Caring Adult | 5 | 3 | -- ^a |
| 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 |

^a -- indicates theme not mentioned by adolescents in interviews or focus group

¹ See Turner (2002) for a description of the study criteria.

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 et al., 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, in press; Fredricks et al., 2002; Paisley & Ferrari, in press).

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 and structured activities seem to be key factors benefiting youth (Herrera, Sipe, McClanhan, Arbreton, & 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." 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, social games, and recreational games (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 is 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 & Arbretton, 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).

Youth development leaders can utilize 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. 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.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the staff and youth at Adventure Central for their willingness to participate in this study and their support throughout the process.

Portions of this research were presented previously at the October 2002 NAE4-HA annual conference in Norfolk, VA, in March 2003 at the *Hours of Opportunity* Conference in E. Lansing, MI, at the May 2003 CYFAR Conference in Minneapolis, MN, and at the Extension Galaxy II Conference in Salt Lake City, UT in September 2003.

References

- Anderson-Butcher, D., Newsome, W. S., & Ferrari, T. M. (2003). Participation in Boys and Girls Clubs and relationships to youth outcomes. *Journal of Community Psychology, 31*(1), 39-53.
- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., & Razaveih, A. (2002). *Introduction to research in education* (6th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Baumeister, R. L., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*(3), 497-529.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (1998). The ecology of human developmental processes. In W. Damon (Series Ed.) & R. M. Lerner (Vol. Ed.), *Theoretical models of human development*. Vol. 1 of *Handbook of Child Psychology* (5th ed., pp. 993-1028). New York: Wiley.
- Cochran, G., Arnett, N., Ferrari, T. M., & McNeely, N. N. (2003, September). *Lessons in partnerships, programs, and evaluation*. Presentation at the Extension Galaxy II Conference, Salt Lake City, UT.
- Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Ferrari, T. M., Anderson-Butcher, D., & Jackson, K. (2003, September). *Hours of opportunity or hours of risk: What are early adolescents doing in their out-of-school time and why is it important to know?* Research seminar presented at the Extension Galaxy II Conference, Salt Lake City, UT.
- Ferrari, T. M., & Sweeney, L. B. H. (in press). Building a collaboration for youth development: The "club-within-a-club." *Journal of Extension*.
- Fredricks, J. A., Alfeld-Liro, C. J., Hruda, L. Z., Eccles, J. S., Patrick, H., & Ryan, A. M. (2002). A qualitative exploration of adolescents' commitment to athletics and the arts. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 17*(1), 68-97.
- Gambone, M. A., & Arbreton, A. J. A. (1997). *Safe havens: The contributions of youth organizations to healthy adolescent development*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.
- Granger, R. C., & Kane, T. J. (2004, February 18). Improving the quality of after-school programs. *Education Week, 23*(23). Retrieved August 13, 2004, from http://www.wtgrantfoundation.org/usr_doc/EducationWeekCommentary.pdf

- Hall, G., Israel, L., & Shortt, J. (2004). *It's about time! A look at out-of-school time for urban teens*. Wellesley, MA: National Institute on Out-of-School Time. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from <http://www.niost.org/AOLTW.pdf>
- Herrera, C., & Arbretton, A. J. A. (2003). *Increasing opportunities for older youth in after-school programs*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from http://www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/146_publication.pdf
- Herrera, C., Sipe, C. L., & McClanahan, W. S., with Arbretton, A. J. A., & Pepper, S. K. (2000). *Mentoring school-age children: Relationship development in community-based and school-based programs*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from http://www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/34_publication.pdf
- Huebner, A., J., & Mancini, J. A. (2003). Shaping structured out-of-school time use among youth: The effects of self, family, and friend systems. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 32(6), 453-463.
- Jekielek, S. M., Moore, K. A., Hair, E. C., & Scarupa, H. J. (2002). *Mentoring: A promising strategy for youth development*. Washington, DC: Child Trends. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from <http://www.childtrends.org/files/mentoringbrief2002.pdf>
- Krueger, R. A. (1998a). *Developing questions for focus groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Krueger, R. A. (1998b). *Moderating focus groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Langhout, R. D., Rhodes, J. E., & Osborne, L. N. (2004). An exploratory study of youth mentoring in an urban context: Perceptions of relationship styles. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 33(4), 293-206.
- Lauver, S., Little, P. D. M., & Weiss, H. (2004). Moving beyond the barriers: Attracting and sustaining youth participation in out-of-school time programs. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/content/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief6.pdf>
- Lock, E., & Costello, J. (2001). *Determinants of youth participation in primary supports: What can be learned from research?* Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from <http://www.chapinhall.org>
- McLaughlin, M. W. (2000). *Community counts: How youth organizations matter for youth development*. Washington, DC: Public Education Network. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from http://www.publiceducation.org/pubs/pub_penreports.htm

- Miller, B. M. (2003). *Critical hours: Afterschool programs and educational success*. Quincy, MA: Nellie Mae Educational Foundation. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from [http://www.nmefdn.org/uimages/documents/Critical_Hours\(4\).pdf](http://www.nmefdn.org/uimages/documents/Critical_Hours(4).pdf)
- Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Morgan, D. L., & Scannell, A. U. (1998). *Planning focus groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Morrow, K. V., & Styles, M. B. (1995). Building relationships with youth in program settings: A study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters. In *Mentoring: A synthesis of P/PV's research: 1988-1995* (pp. 55-62). Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from http://www.ppv.org/publicaions/assets/40_publication.pdf
- National 4-H Impact Assessment. (2001). *Prepared and engaged youth*. Washington, DC: CSREES/USDA. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from <http://www.national4-headquarters.gov/impact.htm>
- Noam, G. G., Biancarosa, G., & Dechausay, N. (2002). *Learning beyond school: Developing the field of afterschool education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education, Program in Afterschool Education & Research. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~afterschool/publications/pdf/Learning_Paper_1.3.pdf
- Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(3), 323-367.
- Paisley, J. E., & Ferrari, T. M. (in press). Extent of positive youth-adult relationships in a 4-H after-school program. *Journal of Extension*.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). Qualitative interviewing. In *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*, (2nd ed., pp. 227-359). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Pittman, K. J., Irby, M., Yohalem, N., & Wilson-Ahlstrom, A. (2004). Blurring the lines for learning: The role of out-of-school programs as complements to formal learning. In G. G. Noam (Ed.), *After-school worlds: Creating a new social space for development and learning* (*New Directions for Youth Development*, no. 101, pp. 19-41). New York: Wiley.
- Pittman, K., Yohalem, N., Wilson-Ahlstrom, A., & Ferber, T. (2003). *Policy commentary #2: High school after-school: What is it? What might it be? Why is it important?* Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from <http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/comment/ostpc2.pdf>
- Quinn, J. (1999). Where need meets opportunity: Youth development programs for early teens. *The Future of Children*, 9(2), 96-116. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from http://www.futureofchildren.org/usr_doc/vol9no2Art9done.pdf

- Rhodes, J. (2004). The critical ingredient: Caring youth-staff relationships in after-school settings. In G. G. Noam (Ed.), *After-school worlds: Creating a new social space for development and learning (New Directions for Youth Development, no. 101, pp. 145-161)*. New York: Wiley.
- Rhodes, J. E., Grossman, J. B., & Resch, N. L. (2000). Agents of change: Pathways through which mentoring relationships influence adolescents' academic adjustment. *Child Development, 71*(6), 1662-1671.
- Rosenthal, R., & Vandell, D. L. (1996). Quality of school-age child care programs: Regulatable features, observed experiences, child perspectives, and parent perspectives. *Child Development, 67*, 2434-2445.
- Schilling, T. A. (2001). An investigation of commitment among participants in an extended day physical activity program. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, 72*(4), 355-365.
- Shortt, J. (2002). Out-of-school time programs: At a critical junction. In G.G. Noam & B.M. Miller (Eds.), *Youth development and after-school time: A tale of many cities.(New Directions for Youth Development, no. 94, pp. 119-124)*. New York: Wiley.
- Sipe, C. L. (2000). Mentoring adolescents: What have we learned? In J. Grossman (Ed.), *Contemporary issues in mentoring*, (pp. 10-23). Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from http://www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/37_publication.pdf
- Straus, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Tierney, J. P., & Grossman, J. B. (with Resch, N. L.). (2000). *Making a difference: An impact study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures. Retrieved August 13, 2004, from http://www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/111_publication.pdf
- Turner, C. L. (2002). *Factors contributing to adolescents' commitment to Adventure Central, a 4-H after-school program*. Unpublished master's thesis, Ohio State University, Columbus.
- Weiss, M. R., & Ferrer-Caja, E. (2000). Motivational orientations and sport behavior. In *Advances in sport psychology*. (2nd ed., pp. 1-78). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Wolfe, K., & Carroll, J. B. (2003). Hooks and anchors in youth development program delivery. *Journal of Extension [on-line], 41*(3). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2003august/iw2.shtml>
- Wynn, J. (2003). High school after school: Creating pathways to the future for adolescents. In K. J. Pittman, N. Yohalem, & J. Tolman (Eds.), *When, where, what, and how youth learn: Blurring school and community boundaries (New Directions for Youth Development, no. 97, pp. 59-74)*. New York: Wiley.