

BOWKER, ANNE

Carleton University

S. Gadbois, L. Findlay, L. Rose-Krasnor

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Extracurricular Activity Involvement in Canada: Relationships with Youth Development and Variations by Age, Gender and Context

Project Summary

The purpose of this research was to study extra-curricular activity (ECA) involvement in a broad range of Canadian youth, and to examine how this might vary by age, gender and geographical context (e.g. rural vs. urban settings). Of additional interest was how this participation contributes to positive youth development (PYD) and what intervening factors might exist. Results highlight the role of organized activity involvement, in particular sports involvement, as a longitudinal predictor of positive youth development. While youth engaged in a broad range of activities, sports participation was the most frequently cited activity, and appeared to yield the most activity engagement. Activity engagement was a particularly critical mediating factor, with relationship factors (with parents and peers) playing a significant role in the engagement process

Research Methods

In Phase 1, 1827 youth, aged 10-18 years, completed a survey about their ECA involvement, and indicated the activity with which they were most engaged. We examined age, gender and geographical context (rural vs. urban) variations.

In Phase 2, we followed 759 youth from Phase 1, aged 11-18, representing approximately 42% of the original sample, and they again completed a series of questionnaires about their most engaging activity, describing the role of significant others in those experiences, as well as their level of motivation for their ECAs. Youth completed measures of self-esteem and perceived competence (indices of PYD) and also completed a measure of child temperament. We looked at ECA involvement at Phase 1, as a predictor of PYD outcomes at Phase 2.

In Phase 3, 125 youth were interviewed, using a semi-structured interview protocol, asking them to describe their experiences with their most engaging activity, and to describe, in their own words, what made the activity involvement so significant. Youth also discussed specific positive and negative experiences in that activity. We identified key themes, using a qualitative analytic framework.

Research Results

Phase 1 results highlight the fact that the majority of youth from middle childhood through adolescence are involved in a variety of ECA. Although the level of involvement decreased with age, the average number of activities was still quite high in Grades 11/12. Girls and rural youth tended to be more involved than boys and urban youth. Girls tended to report a greater breadth of ECA involvement (participate in both sport and non-sport activities) however both boys and girls were most likely to choose a sport as their most meaningful activity. Sports activities were the most common type of activity and when asked to choose their favourite, or most engaging activity, 62% chose a sport. Sports were also rated as the most engaging activities. The rate of sports involvement decreased with age, whereas activities such as volunteering and more unstructured leisure activities increased with age. However, these other types of activities were significantly less common,

and structured non-sports activities, such as music, dance and theatre, were mentioned by only about half of the participants. In addition, if youth were participating in these non-sport activities, they were typically only engaged in one specific activity (e.g. piano), in contrast to sports activities where many youth were involved in multiple sports.

In Phase 2, we looked at how ECAs during Phase 1, predicted PYD outcomes in Phase 2. Youth who chose structured organized activities during Phase 1 (as opposed to unstructured activities) had significantly higher self-esteem at Phase 2 than those individual who did not. Organized sports involvement was the strongest predictor of general and domain specific self-esteem over this one-year period. What seemed to be particularly important, however, was how engaged the individual was in their favourite or most meaningful activity (e.g., This activity is an important part of who I am). This seemed to be more important, in some cases, than the specific type of activity involvement. In addition, social relationships played a key role, and regardless of age or geographical location, having parental support and involvement was an important predictor of activity engagement. Being involved in a stable favourite activity over time was also a significant predictor of activity engagement, leading to an increased feeling of belonging to the team or group, which also was related to activity engagement.

In Phase 3, we identified several themes that will help us to better understand youth engagement and the role of activity involvement and PYD. These activities were highly enjoyable, and typically involved social interaction, as well as a high degree of self-growth. Youth talked about developing clear goals and purpose in the activity, and of learning important life lessons such as perseverance and persistence. It seems necessary to have an activity that is challenging, but do-able, requiring concentration, skill development, and providing lots of immediate feedback. Structured sports activities include all of these attributes, perhaps offering a partial explanation for the popularity of sports activities and the high degree of engagement reported by youth in these activities.

Policy implications

Results highlight the importance of youth engagement in sports activities (simply participating may not be enough to yield positive outcomes) and the important role of social relationships in this engagement. Youth are particularly interested in the social interactive opportunities with peers, and the role of peer relationships in sport appears to be a crucial one. Results also highlight the important role that adults (parents, teachers and coaches) play in successful sports experiences.

For programs such as ParticipAction, whose aim is to ‘get Canadians moving’, these results stress the important role that social relationships play in this endeavour. If we are going to encourage physical activity in youth, we need to be aware of the critical role that peers and parents play. For many youth, it is the social opportunities that draw them to the activities, not the activity itself.

Given issues of accessibility, greater efforts should be made to facilitate sports participation in school settings, where parental income is less of a limiting factor. An example of a municipal level of involvement is illustrated at one of the Manitoba sites for data collection. The City of Brandon, in collaboration with the Brandon School Division, have signed a *joint use of facilities* agreement to share facilities more effectively for youth groups and organizations. For sport, this type of agreement is vital in that it provides venues for sport that are within all community neighbourhoods, decreasing accessibility costs (e.g., related to transportation) for youth of all income levels. At the provincial and federal levels, continued support of organizations that support families are vital. Though tax breaks for athletic participation are beneficial, the barriers of initial cost still remain for many youth.

Next steps

Given the high levels of sports participation, future research should include an examination of the different types of sports experiences (e.g., individual vs. team sport; recreational vs. competitive) and the importance of 'fit' between characteristics of the individual and his/her sports experience.

Clearly there are individual differences in engagement, and we would be interested in examining why some youth are generally more 'engaged' than others, regardless of the specific activity.

Future research should also examine the role of the coach and how the coach-youth relationship contributes to sports engagement and how this might interact with the parent-youth relationship.

Key stakeholders and benefits

Key stakeholders include community sports organizations at the municipal, as well as provincial level. Any amateur athletic organization could benefit from an understanding of the importance of youth engagement and the social relationships that could contribute to activity engagement over time.