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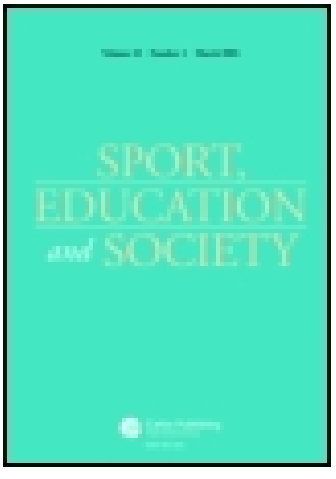

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Sport, Education and Society
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cses20

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Published online: 03 Nov 2014.

To cite this article: Catherine Plante, Nicolas Moreau, Annie Jaimes & Carole Turbide (2014): Motivational factors for youth recruitment in voluntary interventions: the case of a community sport program, Sport, Education and Society, DOI: 10.1080/13573322.2014.975115

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2014.975115

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Sport, Education and Society, 2014
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2014.975115

Routledge
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Motivational factors for youth recruitment in voluntary interventions: the case of a community sport program

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Recruitment is known to be a challenge for intervention programs targeting youths, including sports programs. Following the popularity of the *Alter-Action* program of the Montreal-based organization *DesÉquilibres*, we wanted to understand the motivations and barriers to youths' recruitment in this voluntary sports community program. A qualitative methodology was favored. We conducted 27 semi-structured interviews (n = 27) with participants, 5 (n = 5) with the partners, and we carried out a focus group with 5 (n = 5) of the organization's service practitioners. We also conducted a participant observation with youth cohorts and during preparatory meetings. Five factors influencing recruitment emerged: (1) socialization/belonging; (2) training/physical aspects; (3) 'extraordinary' dimension; (4) practicality of the program; and (5) social influences. Four key elements thus appear important to consider when promoting the recruitment of youths in voluntary community programs: (1) favoring social interactions; (2) insisting on the specific and beneficial elements of the program; (3) allowing youths to experiment a trial period; and (4) including testimonies of former participants in the information session. Further recommendations for psychosocial intervention programs targeting youths are discussed in this article.

Keywords: *Young people; Sports; Recruitment; Motivational factors; Community program*

Introduction

Studies have shown that sports programs for young people can have a positive impact on their social abilities (Bailey, 2005; Spaaij, 2012), self-esteem (Gendron, Royer, Bertrand, & Potvin, 2005), civil involvement (Donnelly & Coakley, 2002), etc. However, one of the major challenges of voluntary intervention programs for youth[1]

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is their low participation rate (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Lauver, Little, & Weiss, 2004; McCombs, Augustine, et al., 2010). More particularly, certain groups are more difficult to reach, such as youth coming from low-income families (Grossman, 2002; McCombs, Augustine, et al., 2010; Perkins et al., 2007; Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005), those experiencing challenges in school difficulties (Grossman, 2002) and older youths (15–20 years old) (Sipe, Ma, & Gabone, 1998). It is also difficult to gather participants from diverse social, economic or cultural backgrounds within the same program (Perkins et al., 2007). This article aims at better understanding factors facilitating youth recruitment in sports programs by focusing on a successful community initiative with vulnerable youth of diverse backgrounds. This article focuses on the specific factors influencing participation that can be modified and improved by program organizers.

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Factors influencing youth recruitment

In order to understand young people's motivations to get involved and participate in intervention programs, several studies have been conducted in the field of extra-curricular activities and intervention (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Lauver et al., 2004). Factors influencing program recruitment for youth can be grouped under two categories: (1) elements related to youth motivation and needs and (2) program characteristics.

Youth motivations and needs

Motivations and intentions of young people are crucial elements to take into account. Although they are still insufficiently studied (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005), several key elements influencing young people motivations have been documented in various literature reviews. First, in terms of barriers, Lauver et al. (2004) identified several barriers for youth who have not participated in programs: (1) preferring to stay amongst friends and relax, (2) the desire or the need to work, (3) family responsibilities, (4) disinterest in activities or boredom and (5) issues with transportation and security. In terms of factors facilitating recruitment, socialization seems to be an important factor influencing participation, as youths initially engage in an activity to, amongst other things, to be connected with others (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Keathley, Himelein, & Srigley, 2013; Lauver et al., 2004). Furthermore, young people's understanding of the possible benefits for them (Anderson-Butcher, 2005) like the development of new skills (Lauver et al., 2004) or personal efficiency (Lemieux & Thibault, 2011) is important. The impression of self-control is also at play (Anderson-Butcher, 2005). Moreover, the feeling of security and the possibility to spend time with adults, and positive models, is interesting to youths (Lauver et al., 2004). Finally, parents and peers' perception can have a lot of influence on the youth's participation hence the need to take their perceptions into account (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005). Kauh (2010) mentions, for instance, the relevance of involving adults who know and understand the details of young people's lives in and out of

the program as a factor for improving program attraction and retention, Keathley et al. (2013) show, in a qualitative study, that it is especially accurate in programs for girls.

Few studies have questioned young people directly regarding motivations and obstacles to participation (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Wright & Macdonald, 2010). A qualitative study in an American context by Perkins et al. (2007) analyses the reasons that ethnic minority youth give for sports programs participation, looking at youth who identified as Black, African-American, Latino, Arab or Chaldean. In the narrative of these youth, four main reasons were given for participation: (1) to stay off the streets, (2) to learn new skills, (3) to avoid boredom and (4) to have fun (2007). Four factors hindering participation were also evoked: (1) lack of time, (2) other interests, (3) negative opinions of the youth center and (4) lack of parental permission. These results are supported by other studies. A Canadian research based on interviews with 20 youth involved in a swimming program confirms the influence of friends, family members and trainers on participation (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008). A survey of youth (15–24 years old) motivation for sports activities also underlined the importance of pleasure and well, mentioned by 44% and 22% of respondents, respectively (Institut de la statistique du Québec et ministère de l'Éducation, 2006). Supporting previous studies such as Perkins et al. (2007) and Slater and Tiggemann (2010) analyzed focus group with youth (13–15 years old) and identified four other factors impinging participation: (1) lack of interest; (2) negative perception of their own competence; (3) lack of time; and (4) previous experience of intimidation by a team member.

Programs characteristics

Program characteristics can also have an important impact on youth recruitment. Access, location (e.g. school or community center), activity choices and program flexibility are important elements described in multiples reviews of literature. First, obvious factors related to program participation concern access, in terms of knowledge of the program's existence and characteristics (Anderson-Butcher, 2005) and physical access to program location (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005). Disadvantaged communities, such as low-income families or minorities might be particularly hindered where adequate public transportation is not be available or if programs are costly (Duffett & Johnson, 2004).

In terms of location choice, the environment where the activity is being held is important. Youth need to feel welcomed and included (Zambrana & Aguirre-Molina, 1987). The idea of offering an intervention program at school is debated. Although school is usually easily accessible, holding a program there is a problem when the youth considers school to be a 'hostile environment' (Dryfoos & Barkin, 2006). Moreover, when it comes to an intervention program, stigma related to the program may also be considered a barrier (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005), especially if the people have had negative experiences with social programs (Walsh & Donaldson,

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2010) and can be more easily identified and further marginalized. The choice of location might thus differ depending on the type of program and the targeted youth.

Several authors mention the importance of having a wide variety of activities in the same area to increase recruitment (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Lauver et al., 2004) and the necessity of concertation between the programs providers (McCombs, Orr, et al., 2010). The activity must not seem too formal either (Hanlon, Bateman, Simon, O'Grady, & Carswell, 2002). Anderson-Butcher (2005) focuses on the difficult balance between the attractivness of an activity and its relevance toward the psychosocial development of young people. Given the competition between various programs, each of them might benefit from putting forward its uniqueness and possible benefits (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005).

Flexibility in the program's modalities is also an important element facilitating recruitment. While some argue that programs with no minimum attendance requirement reach a wider range of youth and help diversify their activities (Grossman, 2002), others state that the program's intended effects are generally reduced when participation is not mandatory (Lauver et al., 2004). On the other hand, the fact that youths can choose to be present just one day a week for the activity increases the number of participants reached. Thus, disadvantaged youths participate more often when they have the opportunity not to come everyday of the week. Indeed, scheduling conflicts constitute an important factor explaining lack of participation in a program (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Grossman, 2002; Keathley et al., 2013).

In addition to temporal flexibility, the program's linguistic and cultural adaptation is also important, especially in an intercultural context. For instance, the presence of a bilingual and multiethnic staff has facilitated recruitment in an intercultural context of east Harlem (Zambrana & Aguirre-Molina, 1987). Hanlon et al. (2002) have also demonstrated how the inclusion of some important values of the African-American culture has led to the recruitment and retention of young people from that community. Grossman (2002) states that one of the main recruitment barriers is the access to information, especially for parents who have not fully mastered the country's official language.

Program flexibility is modulated by the institution managing it and its scope. The majority of studies on youth participation focus on institutional programs, such as national initiatives, while smaller alternative programs are often forgotten (Perkins et al., 2007). Yet, studies indicate that youths' sport practices are changing toward more individual and informal activities (Green, Thurston, Vaage, & Roberts, 2013). Skille (2007), in a Norwegian study, concluded that an alternative context based on unstructured activities attracts youths that are usually not interested in traditionnal sport activities (e.g. sport leagues and competitions). Furthermore, in her in-depth analysis of unicyclists' motivations, Bignold (2013) underlined the importance of individual challenge, unusual aspects and novelty of the experience as important aspects motivating athletes.

The *Alter-Action* program is inscribed within this current of alternative sport activities. A study of this initiative can thus offer interesting solutions for institutional

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and traditional programs that struggle to recruit youth. Analyzing the narratives of youth participating in this program can help formulate recommendations for sports programs, taking into account the perspectives of a population that often has little space to express their views in society (Barry, 2004).

Research objectives

These studies lead us to consider the complexity of youths' recruitment in sport-based psychosocial programs, by taking into account their perspective. The aim of our article was to better understand the elements facilitating or hindering recruitment of youths by looking at the program *Alter-Action*. This article is part of a broader action research project with the program *Alter-Action*.

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Method

The Alter-Action program: an action research initiative

Alter-Action is an action research program (Crézé & Liu, 2006; Gauthier, 2006) that took place over two years, from October 2011 to October 2013, in Montreal (Quebec, Canada). The *Alter-Action* program is based on a cooperative model of sports intervention targeting troubled youths in Montreal (*DesÉquilibres*). Founded by former top amateur athletes and sports educators, *DesÉquilibres* puts forward interventions focused on civic and collective participation, in the form of sports challenges. Such programs are based on the premise that fostering positive experiences through social and sport adventure promotes positive development (Heinze, Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010). The studied project (*Alter-Action*) is not part of a therapeutic program. It intentionally targets youth in general, including but not focusing on troubled youths, in order to promote group diversity. *Eductrainers*[2] consult the service practitioners (in our study, the school) to facilitate the program adaptation to the specific environments and youths' needs, and to ensure that participants experiencing difficulties have priority access to the program. Such partnerships have been shown to be of great value (Cousineau, 2007). Moreover, the program planners have intentionally decided not to gather information on youths' specific difficulties in order to interact with each participant without stigmatizing him/her.

The project includes regular and mandatory training and progressively introduces challenges. Training happens three times weekly; it constitutes a central element of the 12 weeks program and an important preparation for the challenges. The two first weeks of training (selection phase) help ensure that the project is well understood by participants. During these two weeks, youths can decide whether to continue the program. One month after the beginning of *Alter-Action*, participants who have continued beyond the introduction phase are invited for a nocturnal walk in a forest (a 10-hour walk, between 8:00 pm and 6:00 am). A month later, a second intermediate challenge awaits them, namely a journey of 200 km by bike. The final

challenge is set a month later, at the end of the 12-week program. It consists of a 300 km relay race on foot during 30 hours, in which each participant travels 20–28 km, in five distinctive relays.

Youth recruitment for this research–action was conducted in school settings on a voluntary basis. Each recruitment session began with an information session that presented as follows: the organization (represented by two *eductrainers*) showed a video featuring young persons who had already taken part in a similar sports program. Afterwards, the formal framework of the program was presented: schedule, content of training, intermediate and final challenges as well as possible activities following the final challenge (social engagement). One week after the initial presentation, the interested youths were invited for a summary of the information and for formal project registration. Program recruitment for the different cohorts took place in grades 10, 11 and 12. These grades were chosen in collaboration with the school principals according to the needs expressed, and to the presence of vulnerable youth at risk of dropping out of school in these groups. For each cohort, 6 or 7 classrooms were generally visited, which represents a pool of about 125 youths. The initiative involved four cohorts, but only three are analyzed for this article.

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Data collection

In order to have a better understanding of youths' perspectives on motivations and barriers to recruitment, we favored qualitative methods. Our data were collected through semi-structured interviews with youth, focus groups with *eductrainers* and semi-structured interviews with partners of the program (two school principals and two 'pivot'[3]) and through participant observation of program activities and preparatory meetings. Moreover, a worker who followed the evolution of the organization since its beginning, without working directly with youth, was also interviewed. As illustrated in Tables 1 and 2, youth participation in the research differed from youth participation in the program. The pool of participants for the study was taken

Table 1. Number of youth from different cohorts

	Program participation			Research participation		
	Initial number of program participants	Program completed	Program incomplete	Total number of research participants	Program completed	Program incomplete
Cohort 1	22	14	8	20	14	6
Cohort 2	26	16	10	26	16	10
Cohort 3	40	19	21	7	0	7
Total	88	49	39	53	30	23

Table 2. Type of data collected by cohort

	Participant observations (preparatory meeting)	Participant observations (training and challenge)	Interviews with youths	Focus groups with *eductrainers*	Interviews with program partners
Cohort 1			X	X	X
Cohort 2	X	X			
Cohort 3	X	X	X		X

from three program cohorts, who participated in the research through different modalities.

Analysis and coding of data for the research component

The coding and analysis of our data were based on a thematic approach (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2008; Quivy & Campenout, 1995). The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews and participant observation were thematically analyzed using the software NVivo. The core of our analysis relied on the youth narratives. Themes arising from them were identified using characteristics such as recurrences, discordances, complementarity and opposition. Thematic analysis was done vertically by looking at each interview in depth and transversally by comparing youths' narratives. After identifying basic themes, thematic categories were progressively clustered in overarching categories that merged and structured subthemes (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2008).

We thus progressively merged the initial 74 subthemes into 5 overarching themes or categories. Participant observation, interviews with different adults as well as group discussions with *eductrainers* were used to increase the credibility of the data and are therefore not present in the results section but in the discussion section in order to enable dialog with the youths' speech.

Data confidentiality and ethics protocol for the research component

Our research protocol was examined by the Ethics Committee at the University of Ottawa and met their prerequisites.

Results

Socio-demographic characteristics

The study participants' socio-demographic characteristics are presented in Table 3 (cohorts 1 and 3).

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Table 3. Participants' socio-demographic profiles (n = 27)[a]

		N	%
Sex	Men	16	62
	Women	10	38
Average age	14.9 (SD = 1.31)		
Average number of siblings	2.1 (SD = 0.97)		
Native language[b]	French	16	62
	Haitian Creole	5	17
	English	3	12
	Spanish	3	12
	Other	2	7
Professional situation (during school year)	Studying full-time and working part-time	3	12
	Studying full-time and not working	23	88
Parents' country of birth[c]	Canada	7	27
	Central America	12	46
	South America	3	12
	Asia	2	8
	Eastern Europe	1	4
	North America	1	4
Parent's civil status	Married or common-law partners	18	69
	Divorced or separated	7	27
	Widowed	1	4

SD, standard deviation.

[a]27 youths were interviewed (20 in cohort 1 and 7 in cohort 3), but only 26 completed a sociodemographic questionnaire.

[b]Some youth reported having several native languages.

[c]If only one parent was born in Canada, the participant is categorized in the other parent country of birth. Two participants are in this situation.

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Factors influencing recruitment of the program were grouped into five dimensions: (1) socialization/belonging; (2) training/physical aspects; (3) extraordinary dimension; (4) practicality of the program; and (5) social influences.

Socialization/belonging. Socialization and belonging appeared as crucial elements for youths. Indeed, participants mentioned engaging in the activity for the sake of being with their friends, while others shared how they might tolerate the anxiety created by the challenge because they are with peers. Steven[4] mentions, for instance, the willingness to live the experience with a particular person, and the support that can be offered by friends when it gets more difficult: 'And then [my friend] convinced me by saying (…) that he was gonna do it with me and that he was gonna encourage me (…). That helped me. (…) That's when I registered.' The desire to meet new people and to make new friends is also mentioned by a number of youths: '[I wanted] to *meet other people who are also at school (…), make new friends*' (Kathy).

These opportunities to socialize with friends and the team spirit fostered by the program are actually elements depicted in the introduction videos, which might contribute to the recruitment process:

> The video, like, it had people running around, doing relay-races in the snow (…) I thought it was interesting, like, I wanted to do that challenge, and then I was like: 'why don't I try (…) [this program] to see how it affects me?'. (…) When I would see the team spirit (…) [in the video], it like inspired me to get in, and like, because of [*Eductrainer*] said that everyone encouraged others. (Pietro)

Training/physical aspects. According to young people's narratives, interest in training and in improving their physical health is also a factor influencing recruitment. For them, this mainly involves improving their *cardio* through training. Peter links the interest to increase his physical skills with the importance of socializing with others in the program. According to him, the desire to increase one's cardio is not a sufficient motivation to join the program if it is not accompanied by a group experience:

> If he wants cardio, he can do it but especially if he has friends, if he doesn't have friends in it, it'll be boring, but if he wants cardio, if he has friends he can do it and all that, it's almost a family experience. Well, we're (…) a kind of family experience.

Specifying their remarks on the relevance of developing physical skills as a motivation, several youths mentioned the opportunities offered:

> I wasn't sure if I was gonna do it (…) In the end, I'm gonna do it 'cause I wanted some cardio, 'cause all the activities. I like need cardio (…). But for me, it's good, 'cause like, if I ever want to do another sport, sometimes they won't accept you 'cause you don't have enough cardio, so I'll just increase my cardio if ever I want to do other sports to have fun. (Guy)

Similarly, Caroline mentions the general physical improvement brought by the program, which she related to an increase of confidence in her abilities:

> I've told myself that it was a project, and that I wanted to run, so I told myself, like, I should try it. If I know that I can do [this program], I'll be able to do other things, because I was lazy, my mom enrolled me for a lot of activities: ballet, karate, skating, drawing club. Then I'd stop and say: 'No, and basket too, (…) it's too hard, like I want to stop.'

Beyond the challenges, several mentioned the concept of pleasure associated with the training. The program includes a weekly component of training, and the recruitment would benefit to emphasize those advantages according to several youths. Mike believes that the presentation of the training sections by video would be a good means of getting youth interested to take part in the program:

> Well, I think they should've filmed a training session and showed it on video. (…) Like to show how young people do it and how much fun they have. (…) Well, like we have trainings at school and it's on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, like film a part of the training.

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Philippe had a prior interest for racing and the program gave him an opportunity to put it to practice:

> 'cause I'm like, how could I say it, someone who really likes running, 'cause when I have the chance to run a little, I do it. I'm not going to my friend's house and walking a bit, it's: 'I run.'

Extraordinary dimension. The attraction of youths for the program seems to be based on the 'out of the ordinary' aspect that the challenges represent in terms of both the race conditions (climate, location and temporality) and the perceived opportunities to go beyond one's physical and psychological abilities. David states:

> Well, they told me we were gonna run on the road at night, and all that, the bus following us, we could go sleep for a bit, wake up, run a little more, for maybe eight kilometers? And it was fun.

When asked on what motivated his registration, Ramon stated it was the forest challenge. He added that it is 'the fact that it's at night, in the woods with a group of kids, it's so cool!' The challenges' attractiveness is also related to its physical dimension, the possibility of attaining new limits and the pride of accomplishing something unique:

> The challenge they showed at the end of the video really got to me and really made me want to do it … 300k run, made me think, '(…) if I do this, I'll accomplish something that's, that's sporty that … I might be able to talk about it with others afterwards'. Especially to my grandpa who was sporty when he was young … and who always wanted, always told me to do something to make him proud. (Kathy)

For some, the way in which the challenges are described in the *eductrainers*' presentation of program activities may discourage participation. The unusual conditions and the possibility of going beyond one's physical limits could impede recruitment according to Mike, even if in the end he decided to register:

> But when, when you tell someone, you're going to miss your, your Saturday night, that you're gonna be in the woods, it's really dark and all that, it's really cold, there's mud over there, there's snow and everything, we won't sleep, we'll be awake. (…) Well, at the beginning they would tell us, huh … we'll start a race from Trois-Rivières all the way to Lac St-Jean. When I got home, I went online to lookup where Lac St-Jean was and when I saw it, I told myself oh God, no!

The uncertainty with regard to the progress of the experience created a curiosity and thus encouraged registration to 'see what it was all about' (Guy):

> It was just 'cause I wanted to, really see what it was. (…) Yeah, I was curious to know what will follow, what we were gonna do, what we're … how we were, how do I say it. The steps that we were gonna have to overcome. (Ramon)

Balancing challenge and feasibility is complex. In fact, too much risk may increase fear, which can discourage the participation of some youths. 'Well first, I think there's a, a little problem, since the eductrainers, they misrepresented [the program],

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in my opinion, 'cause they showed like the scariest parts (…) that's why [some participants] abandoned (…)' (Mike).

Another youth adds that if the difficulty of the challenges had been made more precise, he would not have registered and does not think his friends would have joined either:

> My friends are like me. And, if I was explained everything, all of [the experience], I'm not too sure that I would've done it, I would've missed out on something, but I'm sure I wouldn't have gone (…) Well 'cause first of all, in the forest challenges, they weren't specific (…) No, [it wouldn't have convinced me] and you know what the *eductrainers* said when I asked him if there was hills? He said: 'Little hills', (…) when I saw it, I was like: 'A little hill?' 'Cause, you know, you go up then you think it's done, but it goes up like this you know, it turns all the time, 'cause of trees you know you don't see that it's high. (Peter)

The fact the program had no fees was also an incentive for many to participate. It is not only the absence of fees that seems attractive and extraordinary, but also the perception of the value associated with the actual cost of the program as presented by the *eductrainers* during recruitment:

> And then, they told us it costs $2000. (…) There was a big silence. Then, bam, everyone said 'Nope, I'm not going'. We all said it. And after that, he mentioned that there were people who paid to allow us to participate. And then I told myself: 'If there are people who pay for me, why not give it a try'. And I started going to practices. (Frank)

Practicality of the program. Several participants mentioned the importance of accessibility in their choice to participate in the program. For instance, Edward mentioned the advantages of the location:

> I thought it was nice there. Like … on top of … like we do sports plus it's at school, so you know, we don't really need to travel everywhere and well, I found it nice.

The possibility to experiment workouts during the 'trial period,' without formally engaging in the program, also seems to have had a significant impact:

> That's when I told myself, well it interested me a bit. So I decided to go see a workout, see what it's all about, I went to see it and it was fun. I told myself: 'good I'll go again to another workout'. That was on a Tuesday 'cause they didn't have it on the Monday. So I went on the Thursday… And so on Thursday I was like no way, it's really too cool (…) I'm for sure staying here. (Edward)

Social influences. Four categories of people in the youth's surroundings influenced their decision to register for the program: friends, *eductrainers*, school personnel and family. Some stated that it was a friend who convinced them to enroll: 'But my goal was … well at the beginning, I didn't really have one. It was just because my friend told me to try it out with him' (Steven). If friends can be a gateway to enroll to the program, Michelle, however, argues that it is not a sufficient reason to participate in the long term: 'I wanted to leave but the *eductrainer* came to get me and just said that

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I couldn't leave. (…) before, I didn't come to, like … stay, I just came 'cause of my friend.'

The *eductrainers*' personality is also a factor influencing the youths' decision to participate:

> We watched the video, at first I was like ok, it's not too bad. But after that, they like really, you know, people asked questions, and then, the coaches seemed fun, they looked like easy going people, like that it's fun being around them. (Ramon)

School personnel's influence, in an indirect way (that is to say through the influence of a friend) is also apparent in the youth's speech:

> My friend told me that he wanted to come with me, it would be fun, he heard one of the school personnel say that it was fun and all that we were gonna do, and I went. I stayed but he decided to not come. (David)

The following excerpt demonstrates the complexity of the different relationships surrounding the youth and the difficulty in determining which one the choice to join is based on. In fact, the environment's influence may reduce interest to enroll in the activity. However, one person can be enough to motivate each youth:

> At first when I was introduced [to the project], I didn't really believe it, I told myself that I couldn't do it, that it's something crazy, my friends, my entourage discouraged me. It's like my dad, he thought it was some crazy plan since we're from Haiti, a tropical country. It's hotter in Haiti, but here in Quebec, it's really cold and when they mentioned the temperature in which we were going to participate, it was pretty scary. But, I don't feel alone at all, with [a friend]' s help who would tell me: 'let's go, let's go, you can do it'. (Mike)

Discussion

Social interactions: the heart of the recruitment process

The majority of the interviewed youth who register in sports programs mention doing so for socialization reasons according to Lauver et al. (2004). Our results allow us to confirm the importance of friends' presence in the decision to participate. During the participant observation, a young person has confirmed that she registered solely to be with friends. However, it is interesting to note that she decided to complete the project even though her friends subsequently abandoned the project, highlighting the changes in incentives through participation (Ferrari & Turner, 2006).

Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2009) argue that the presence of friends in a program can be beneficial for youth retention. However, this willingness of youth to be amongst friends can encourage the reproduction of dynamic relationships present at school. For instance, Spaaij (2012) has rightly shown the willingness of youth facing ethnic discrimination, to get away from these tensions in their leisure activities.

This issue of social exclusion has been taken into account by the assessed organization. Wishing to encourage social diversity, the program has put in place strategies to reach young people that are experiencing exclusion issues and that are difficult to

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reach by traditional intervention programs. For example, during recruitment sessions for the second cohort, the *eductrainers* insisted on the fact that 'in the program, everybody works as a team' which could go with the importance of inclusion of all participants in the operation of the program. As mentioned in the program description, *eductrainers* also consult service practitioners to identify vulnerable youths and ensure priority access for them.

The importance of friends' perception in regard to the youth's participation clearly emerged from our results. Young people are more eager to participate if they have heard good comments about the program from their peers. On the other hand, roles and influences of the other actors surrounding the youths are less present in our results (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005). Nevertheless, the complexity of the youth's network explained in their discourse highlights the needs for the involvement of a diversity of people in the recruitment process. Cousineau (2007) insists on the importance of concerted actions between the youth's different personal and institutional networks during an intervention.

When one of our key informants, a service practitioner, was speaking about the program's collaboration with partners (service practitioner, principals, teachers), he noted the importance of convincing those already involved in the youth's life regarding the relevance of the program. Partners can and should be central players in the recruitment for the most vulnerable young people given their privileged relationship with them at times. However, the fact that certain youth can be put in a situation of failure due to participation in the program (exclusion and abandonment) can constitute a barrier for service practitioners:

> We have to watch how we sell something like this, because your partner does not know what to expect when you say: 'I'm not doing this [avoiding the youth to fail].' There, you have the partner who tells himself: 'Yes, but my kid will be pulled out …' So, you have the 'superprotector' side of the service practitioner who will not want to let their little duckling in something of the sort. Thus, we have to be careful as to how we sell ourselves. (School service practitioner)

Between dreams and pragmatic benefits

In our analysis, we presented results pertaining to all initial program participants, including those who abandoned the program, without distinguishing them. A detailed analysis of their differences indicates that the majority of youth who did not complete the program sought, by means of their participation, the general characteristics of a sports program: socialization, physical dimension, accessibility and peer influence. It is therefore possible that the participant's completion of the *Alter-Action*'s sports program can be explained in part by elements related to the program, such as: the 'out of the ordinary' side, the trainings' playfulness, the challenge and the *eductrainers*' personalities. Our results fall within Bodilly and Beckett's (2005) recommendations which emphasize the importance of mentioning the added value of a program and to put forward its uniqueness in comparison to other opportunities offered in the same environment.

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The results also bring to light two features of the physical dimension of recruitment. On the one hand, it can lead to direct benefits in practice (improved endurance for the given activity) and, on the other hand, it can also serve as a pretext to improve certain physical skills (endurance, having more training in a week) that will further benefit other aspects of their lives (future sports participation). These results confirm what several studies argue: the importance in demonstrating to youth the concrete benefits and the connections made with the opportunities the programs offer (Anderson-Butcher, 2005).

During the participant observation of two recruitment sessions, we noted the presenters described the third challenge more specifically, including the possibility to run 250 km in relay. The importance of the challenge attraction and more precisely, the 'out of the ordinary' aspect of the program mentioned by youth in our interviews seem to support this method of presenting the program. Qualifying the importance given to the challenges in the presentation, several youths, however, shared with us the lack of motivation to participate in the challenges at the beginning of the program. Thus, challenge attraction before completion seems less than the attraction mentioned in the interviews, once the challenge has been met successfully. It is possible that the positive experiences associated to the challenges transform the youths' perception in regard to their initial motivation (Ferrari & Turner, 2006).

Ambivalence is visible in youth with regard to the attractiveness of the challenge and the fear of the unknown, identified as a potential barrier to participation. For other, the fact of not knowing the real difficulty of the challenge has positively influenced his enrollment. If Lemieux and Thibault (2011) underline the importance of self-efficiency as a motivation for participation, our results also encourage an emphasis of dreams associated with the project.

Our results show that by emphasizing different aspects of the program during recruitment activities (speaking of game originality, fun during the trainings, etc.), the diversity of youth may increase. However, we noticed during our participant observations of the recruitment session that trainings are mainly described in a practical way. The *eductrainers* specify the participation days, the duration of the program and workouts, but do not mention their composition.

Beyond discourse: experimenting and taming risk

Although this analysis focuses mainly on youth motivation from the recruitment activities of the organization, it has allowed us to observe the importance of the 'trial period' in youths' decisions and motivation to participate in the long term. In fact, participants' experience during the first two weeks is central for long-term involvement. In response to fear expressed by a participant after watching the recruitment video, the *eductrainer* advised him to accomplish one challenge at a time, to dissect the overall project into smaller goals. For this individual, the apprehensions were largely around physical achievements, and taking challenges one at the time made it possible for him to stay involved in the program. It is in this perspective that a program partner says it would be perferable to offer the possiblity to stop the

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program after each challenge by emphasizing on successful completion. This way, if a young person does not follow through, the perception of failure could be reduced:

> I told myself that there were three steps, three challenges: at each challenge, youth needs to decide again to continue. It's to avoid that there is failure. Often times, vulnerable youth will not 'fit in', they will exclude themselves, often denying it, and everything. I do not want [this experience] to be yet another failure for these kids.

Contrast with classic interventions and institutions

The program is aimed to all youths in targeted grade levels, with particular attention for those experiencing various psychosocial difficulties. However, it is important not to frame the program in terms of an intervention in order not to stigmatize the participants and discourage further marginalization of the program. (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Walsh & Donaldson, 2010).

It is also relevant to specify that the recruitment activities take place during youths' physical education classes in their high school. If accessibility is improved in this way, the downside is that this method of recruitment lessens the separation between the proposed program and the educational institution. Given that the program wants to target youths with learning and social difficulties, the association between the school environment and the program could potentially be less successful for youth who perceive school as a hostile environment, or for those who are at risk of dropping out (Dryfoos & Barkin, 2006). Our results lead to a nuancing of this assertion, as our participants mentioned the advantages related to the school's accessibility.

Limits

This article on factors affecting youth recruitment for community sports program has mainly focused on elements that programs can influence. Despite the importance and the necessity of political, economic and social measures to encourage youth toward an active lifestyle (Lemieux & Thibault, 2011), these issues have not been discussed here. Second, all data were collected from youth who participated at least in parts of the program. Our results thus do not allow us to highlight the perspective of those youths who have not been interested at first by the program. Bodilly and Beckett (2005) specify the importance to acknowledge the differences between participants and non-participants. Unfortunately, we do not analyze those questions here which can lead to biased results and overrepresent the positive aspects of youths' experiences. The difficulty in reaching youth less included in the institutional networks mentioned by several studies has also been ours (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Zambrana & Aguirre-Molina, 1987). In this context, it would be interesting to conduct additional interviews with youth who have not participated in the program to determine whether program recruitment and content could present an additional attraction and would thus influence their registration. Additionally, testimonies on the negative aspects of the program could have been

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minimized by the social desirability bias of youths toward the group and toward the organization (Moreau et al., 2014).

Conclusion and recommendations

Difficulties in mobilizing youth in various intervention programs encouraged us to look at the elements that attract this population to participate in a specific sport program. Motivations for participation are complex. The main themes that emerged from our analyses are: (1) socialization/belonging; (2) training/physical aspects; (3) extraordinary dimension; (4) practicality of the program; and (5) social influences.

Four key elements seem important to consider in setting recruitment initiatives for youths. First, social interactions are central to the motivation of youth to participate in an intervention program. In contrast with Freitag (2006), who insists on the risks associated with teenagers' negative peer influence, our anaylsis shows the positive impact that friends can have on youth involvement in a collective project (Patrick et al., 1999; Smith, 2003). Having former young people share their experience in recruitment sessions as encouraged by Lauver et al. (2004) can help, as well as sharing the promotional video on the program. Moreover, our results confirmed the relevance of involving other key actors and fostering good communication with teachers and parents to improve the circulation of information (Cousineau, 2007). Nevertheless, it would be relevant for the *eductrainers* to distance themselves from the educational institution during the presentation of the program activities, clearly stating that they are independent. Especially because, as Spaaij (2012) explains, Western sports programs intended for youth often have an objective of control and social regulations.

Second, sharing the program's uniqueness seems essential to foster youth' participation. It is important to present the aspects that differentiate a program from others (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005), including the expected benefits (Anderson-Butcher, 2005). They may be physical, social or psychological and consist of special events or the weekly meetings. Diversification of the benefits presented is a promising approach to reach a diversity of participants given the plurality of youths' realities (Gauthier, 1993; Lesko, 2012).

Third, the program needs to have a 'dreamlike' or 'extraordinary' quality and to be able to bring youths out of their ordinary lives. The final challenge of the program *Alter-Action* embodies this, providing a venue where youths can be challenges in a safe environment, explore their limits and exceed them in a collective experience. Indeed, this is one of the main reasons why participants registered, according to their narratives. However, some participants may be afraid of the challenges that their participation represents. Focusing on the program's adaptability to its member's capacities during the recruitment process could help foster youth retention in sport activities (Lemieux & Thibault, 2011). We also suggest that information sessions cover the playful aspects of the training sessions as well as their practical particularities.

Lastly, access to the program and its flexibility should be important preoccupations for program planners. Youths are known to be difficult to reach, so localization, cost of

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the program, as well as adaptability of the program schedule should be well thought. For instance, our results showed how creating a space for experimentation through a 'trial period' allowed participants to become gradually less ambivalent and to engage in the program. Thus, experimentation allows youths to affix the signification of their choice to their journey and to collect benefits that apply to their individual situation.

Further questions remain when addressing the retention of youths in such programs. As mentioned in our methodological section, a number of youth did not complete the program during the sessions. Why is that so? What would be the best ways to ensure that youths registered in psychosocial programs remain motivated and invested in the activities? It's in this perspective, but also to better assess the social and psychosocial impact of sports-based programs that further research on this topic need to be conducted (Moreau et al., 2014).

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Funding

This work was supported by MDEIE (Ministère de l'Économie, de l'Innovation et des exportations du Québec, Canada).

Notes

1. There is no agreement in the literature on a clear definition and delimitation of *youth*. If several authors consider this category as pertaining to those of school age (6–18 years old) (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Grossman, 2002; Lemieux & Thibault, 2011), others will rather consider people between the ages of 12 and 17 (Cousineau, 2007; Zambrana & Aguirre-Molina, 1987). Sometimes people under 25 years old are also considered as youth (Duval & Molgat, 2001). However, a number of authors refer to youth without specifying which range of age this term applies to. The purpose of this article is not to redefine the term. In our review of literature, we included articles looking at young people from these previously mentioned age ranges. It should be noted that we consider youth as a heterogeneous group and that young people can be differentiated by many characteristics such as gender, socio-economical class, race, etc.
2. The concept of "*eductrainer*" has been coined by the program designers of *DesÉquilibres*, as they consider themselves to be both trainers and educators.
3. In the context of *Alter-Action*, the service practitioner made the link between the *eductrainers*' interventions (generally with a particular youth) and the different actors of the structure in order to facilitate complementarity clinical interventions and their longitudinal monitoring.
4. All names are fictitious.

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