

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN SPORT CONTEXTS IN FLANDERS

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Aim

A study, investigating the field beyond the traditional organized sports context, was conducted to explore to what extent this sector can learn from other organizational forms. More specifically, we want to obtain a better understanding of contextual factors (such as the way in which a sports offer is being organized - in terms of the location, timing, organizational formats, type of sports activity, etc ... - as well as with regard to guidance approaches) and individual or personal factors for quality youth (sports-based) developmental programs where youngsters are stimulated to develop and build up their competences. Besides that, we want to gain more insight in the way disadvantaged youngsters experience such developmental programs.

Theoretical background

Sports participation in general and in sports clubs in particular among (disadvantaged) youngsters is a challenge the Flemish sports sector faces (e.g. Dēmos, 2010). Today, limited understanding exists of the reasons why certain groups do or do not participate within an (organized) sports context. In addition, there is a lack of understanding regarding the impact of (organized) sports participation on youth, both in terms of the promotion of sustainable sports participation, as in relation to the development of personal and social skills (e.g., taking up responsibility and volunteering). Furthermore, it is indicated that the willingness of many young people to participate in an organized leisure setting decreases from the pivotal age of about 16 years. This phenomenon of decreased willingness to participate is mainly situated in specific structured contexts (such as sports clubs) (Elchardus & Herbots, 2010). Many young people are characterised by a short temporary club engagement (by some referred to as 'shopping' or 'zapping' behavior), which is regarded by some to pose a threat to a sustainable (lifetime) sports involvement (Van Lierde et al., 2006). Because of this drop out of adolescents, their possibilities with regard to involvement in competence-enhancing tasks and taking up responsibilities within this traditional club organized sector are compromised. Recent Flemish data show that the group of young people in general (De Martelaer et al., 2011) and disadvantaged youngsters in particular is clearly underrepresented among the volunteers in sports.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

A qualitative research design was used to analyse two youth sports developmental programs that focus on disadvantaged youngsters in Flanders. One is situated in a neighbourhood sports context, another in youth welfare work. Expert witnesses (n=19) and participating disadvantaged youngsters (n=40) were interviewed. The first project runs in eight Flemish municipalities and the two main organizers of each project (n=16) were interviewed through semi-structured in-depth interviews. In addition, six focus group interviews with disadvantaged youngsters were conducted. Within the second project, three expert witnesses were interviewed as well as nine disadvantaged youngsters (both through semi-structured in-depth interviews). The latter were interviewed twice making it possible to cover a certain period of the running program and to ask the youngsters about their experiences with regard to this period. Content analysis was used to analyse the interviews.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

This study provided insight into the underlying mechanisms and methodology of two youth (sports-based) development programs, as well as into their outcomes and the way youngsters experienced these programs. Among other things, findings highlight the importance of time-investment of the key players within the program, the crucial role guidance can have and the relevance of the knowledge about and the contact with the target group. The importance of this results for the field in general and program developers in particular will be discussed. As well as the lessons learned for the traditional organized sports sector This research will lead in the first place to recommendations for the organizers of the two investigated programs of this study and will furthermore lead to recommendations for (future) program developers in different contexts.

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