Factors Limiting Youth Participation in 4-H and Other Youth Development Programs in Underserved Communities

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Abstract

The purpose of the study described here was to identify factors limiting children's participation in youth development programs in underserved communities and ways to overcome those limitations. Findings are based on focus group interviews conducted with members of two underserved communities in North Carolina. Lack of awareness about the 4-H program, lack of affordability, program scheduling conflicts, lack of transportation, and felt exclusion were identified as the major limitations to children's participation in programs. Engaging with the community to win members' trust, informing the target audience of programming ahead of time, and making programs affordable are potential strategies for improving the situation.

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Introduction

Children who participate in 4-H programs develop life skills, academic skills, self-esteem, resiliency, and citizenship; lower risky behaviors (Garton, Miltenberger, & Pruett, 2007; Hedrick, Homan, & Dick, 2009; Li, Bebiroglu, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2008); and contribute to the development of their communities (Barnett & Brennan, 2006). Therefore, it is important to understand the role of youth development in the community development process (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007) related to using youths as catalysts for transforming communities.

However, youths in communities with the most need are not reached by youth development programs (Skuza, 2004). The voices and needs of underserved communities are often unintentionally overlooked (Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, 2013). Such findings suggest that youth participation in 4-H programs in underserved communities is not at the level it should be. The lack of youth participation in 4-H in underserved communities can have a lasting negative effect on how young people in those communities develop through adolescence into adulthood.

The term *underserved* can be defined as disadvantaged (Waterman, Kost, Lazzar, & Dobie, 2011). Underserved communities are typically identified by geographic location and are affected by limitations in resources such as income, transportation, employment, or educational services (Junge, 2000). Extreme poverty, geographic isolation, and ethnic minority populations are some of the typical characteristics of

underserved communities (Weitz, Freund, & Wright, 2001). Many underserved communities are located in rural, isolated areas (Rural Health Information Hub, 2014).

In North Carolina, the average time children spend in an afterschool program, such as 4-H, dropped from 10 hr per week in 2009 to 6 hr per week in 2014 (America After 3pm, 2015). Although North Carolina 4-H is attempting to serve the state's youths in some capacity, there is concern regarding whether North Carolina 4-H is serving youths in all communities throughout the state. For instance, a study conducted in the state showed that 4-H programs are not fully meeting the needs of the growing diverse population (Anton & Crutchfield, 2009).

It is well documented that underserved communities do not have access to out-of-school-time opportunities. However, little research has been conducted to understand the factors limiting youth participation in 4-H and other youth development programs in underserved communities. Therefore, we conducted a research study to fill this knowledge gap.

The conceptual framework for the study was based on the notion of inclusion. Inclusion can be described as the degree to which someone perceives that he or she is a member of a community through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011). Inclusion is a concept that goes beyond physical location and integrates basic morals and a belief system that encourages participation, belonging, and collaboration. Those who embrace the concept of inclusion seek to enhance the well-being of each person in a community through working together to strengthen and provide a foundation for a better future for everyone (Manitoba Education, 2015).

Organizations with inclusive cultures embrace people of all social identity groups, welcome their voices, and provide opportunities to participate (Wasserman, Gallegos, & Ferdman, 2008). Moreover, an inclusive community continually evolves to meet the changing needs of its members (Manitoba Education, 2015). 4-H programs are designed to help youths develop and gain necessary skills to be proactive forces in their communities. According to the concept of inclusion, individuals participate in programs in their communities to the extent that they feel they have been included in those programs. The unanswered question is this: To what extent do 4-H and other youth development programs in underserved communities practice the inclusive philosophy that encourages participation, belonging, and collaboration among youths in those communities?

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of our study was to explore the perceptions of parents regarding participation of youths in 4-H and other youth development programs in underserved communities in North Carolina. The following two questions guided the study:

1. What are the factors limiting youth participation in 4-H and other youth development programs in underserved communities in North Carolina?

2. What should be done to improve youth participation in 4-H and other youth development programs in underserved communities in North Carolina?

Methodology

We used the focus group interview method to conduct the study due to its exploratory nature. Qualitative

methods such as those involving focus groups are "intended to provide researchers with means for collecting data that can be used to construct a descriptive account of the occurrence being investigated" (Dollar & Merrigan, 2002, p. 6). Focus group interviews are particularly useful because they allow a researcher to uncover participants' subjective attitudes that generally are not identifiable through other means of research (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Our assumption was that implementing a focus group methodology would allow us to more deeply understand the situation we were exploring (Kidd & Parshall, 2000; MacDougall & Fudge, 2001).

Participants and Procedures

We purposefully selected two groups of parents with school-age children from underserved communities in two counties in North Carolina. The counties selected were from the eastern and western regions of the state. Each county was chosen because it had the highest level of poverty in its region. Data from the 2013 U.S. Bureau of the Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates were used as the criteria for selecting counties (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2015). We identified Halifax County in eastern North Carolina, at 31.6% poverty, and Watauga County in western North Carolina, at 27.3% poverty, as appropriate locations from which to select individuals for focus groups.

The selected parents in Halifax County were part of a local church, and the selected parents from Watauga County were part of a local nonprofit organization. We concentrated on these community congregation sites to ensure inclusion of members of the targeted underserved low-income audience in the focus groups. Focus group interviews were held during October and November 2015. Two focus group sessions were conducted. There were six participants in each focus group, and each interview lasted 1 hr. Of the 12 focus group members, six were African American, five were Caucasian non-Hispanic, and one was Hispanic. Eleven focus group members were female.

We used an open-ended interview protocol to guide discussions, and interview questions were designed to address our specific research questions. All focus group discussions were audio-recorded with the consent of participants. We established credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Dooley, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of qualitative data by following standard procedures as specified in the literature.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

We transcribed the audio recordings of the focus group interviews and conducted several phases of analysis. Specifically, we summarized the qualitative data by using content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and thematic coding to identify major themes (Creswell, 2013). We began with a preliminary analysis to get a general sense of the data and reflect on its meaning. Next, we performed a more detailed analysis and grouped data into identifiable themes that reflected specific opinions, feelings, and experiences of participants. By the conclusion of our analysis, a list of themes had emerged, and we compiled those themes into categories aligning with our research objectives: factors preventing youth participation in 4-H and other youth development programs in underserved communities and suggestions for overcoming these factors.

Findings and Conclusions

Barriers

All focus group members except one were unfamiliar with the 4-H program. The analysis of focus group

members' responses regarding factors that limit their children's participation in 4-H and other youth development programs revealed several themes: (a) lack of awareness about the 4-H program, (b) lack of affordable youth development programs in their communities, (c) conflicts between program schedules and parents' work schedules, (d) prohibitive distances involved in traveling to program sites and lack of transportation, and (e) community members' feelings of being excluded from youth development programming ("felt exclusion").

Lack of awareness about available youth development programs, including the 4-H program, was identified as the major barrier preventing children's participation in youth development programming. For example, one focus group member said, "If it was easier to find information about youth development programs, many people might be willing to participate." Another participant said, "My involvement is mainly what goes on in the school system. Why? Because they send communication home. They send it through your phone, and without that information, I wouldn't know what was going on. As far as the community stuff, if I knew more about it and got the notifications, then I would do more."

Another important barrier preventing children's participation in youth development programs was high costs of programs. For example, one participant noted, "There are some opportunities available for people who have the financial means. Flyers come home every day, so if you have the money to put your kids into it [you can]." Another parent said, "My daughter's school provides some youth development opportunities, but parents have to pay, so we have opted not to put our daughter in any of those."

Logistics related to schedules and transportation to distant events were issues as well. For instance, one participant said, "A barrier is the time they have the events. People that work [a] certain schedule cannot get to events at 2:00 p.m. during the day, so the programs don't fit parents' schedule[s]." Another participant noted, "Transportation is a big issue here. A lot of people don't have the ability to get into town."

Community members' felt exclusion from 4-H programs also was a notable barrier. This felt exclusion contributed to a sense of mistrust that prevented parents from allowing their children to be involved in 4-H. Stressing this point, one participant said, "You would send your children out more if you trust people in these programs."

Alternatives

The analysis of answers related to what should be done to improve children's participation in 4-H and other youth development programs led to the identification of six themes. These themes emerged as potential actions that could be performed by those working in youth development programming: (a) engage with community leaders and members to gain their trust and increase their feelings of inclusion, (b) inform the target audience about programming ahead of time to allow them to make arrangements to ensure that their children can participate, (c) make programs free or affordable for limited-income children, (d) schedule programs to align with work schedules of parents, (e) provide transportation to program sites or organize programs in places where public transport is available, and (f) use social media to reach youths.

Engaging with the community was identified as a critical strategy for gaining community members' trust and promoting their feelings of inclusion, thereby encouraging them to have their children participate. One participant explained, "You have to have the trust. Once the programs build that trust in the community with the parents and with the children, then that will lead [the community members] back to that program. Once

the kids start to trust, they will spread the word to others, and the program can build and begin to grow. Gaining community trust should take place before the program can grow."

Ultimately, reaching community members through their community leaders is the key to linking inclusively with an underserved community. When the community members start to feel that they are an included part of youth development programs, Extension educators and others will be able to work with them to find ways to inform the community about youth development opportunities, make programs affordable for the target audience, avoid conflicts with parents' work schedules, arrange transportation for children to participate in programs, and use social media to educate youths about available programs.

Recommendations, Implications, and Limitations

Youth development programs should be created in such a way that all community members feel that a program is inclusive of them. This goal can be achieved by inviting representative community members to serve on advisory committees, recruiting community members to serve as 4-H volunteers, and building youth development programs to embrace communities that are in isolation, thereby helping members of those communities feel that the programs are inclusive of them. Such actions will help program developers place programming needs in community contexts so that they can tailor programs to meet community needs and expectations realistically.

Also, it is important to advertise and market programs to inform all members in the community, using community leaders and other communication channels accessible to members in underserved communities. Moreover, programs should be offered in locations where community members can depend on public transportation and other available means of transport.

The primary implication of our study is that if Extension wants to reach youths in underserved communities, it is necessary to educate their parents on available youth development opportunities and make them feel that those opportunities are available for their children so that they will be informed and feel included. A limitation of the study may be that the findings are based on interviews with members of only two focus groups; consequently, further research is warranted.

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