4-H and Its Relevance in the Era of #Moments in Urban Communities

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Abstract

Meeting the needs of today's urban youth requires a shift in how organizations work with and view this socially driven population. National youth organizations, such as 4-H, must reposition themselves to remain relevant and relative to this ever-changing group. This repositioning requires the development of more culturally relevant programming and training and a keener eye toward how to reach and keep engaged these youth and their communities.

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Introduction

Turn on the television these days, and the screen is peppered with images of young people challenging the current political culture and climate in their neighborhoods. They are dissatisfied with the handling of policies and issues that repeatedly affect the economic and social discourse of their population. These primarily Black and brown youth continue to challenge systems in their communities to become more responsive to their needs. Their actions are a direct call for local and state officials to stop glossing over issues that affect the quality of their lives and their communities. In some instances, anger has turned violent and resulted in negative behavior, but such a response by no means represents the actions of the majority. Youth groups from local high schools, colleges, universities, and community centers are chanting not only for justice but also for an intimate look at the policies and politics of racism and inequality in their communities (Ginwright & James, 2002; Zeldin, 2004). Rather than focus on the overarching issues of race and riots that have been positioned as the news stories of the day, many urban youth note that a shift in the types of conversations needs to happen at the community level. Their peaceful or sometimes charged protests are bringing attention to the disparities that exist and to the need for positive outlets for young people in their communities.

Modern Youth Movements and 4-H

Youth movements such as #blacklivesmatter (Garza, 2014) and the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act movement (Zimmerman, 2011) can be likened to modern forms of the civil rights marches of the 1950s. These highly organized, social media–driven platforms shed light not just on social issues but also on the need for more youth programming and exposure to allow young people to thrive in local contexts and the larger society.

What is required is a resurgence of high-quality programming to meet the needs of youth (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007), especially those in urban areas. Programs that reflect a culturally relevant perspective must be developed and supported at state and national levels. Literature from the field of education fully supports the idea that culturally relevant and responsive educators working in urban contexts have higher levels of classroom participation and management. Organizations such as 4-H, although in the nonformal sector, also must adhere to these nuances and become more culturally responsive to the needs of youth—especially those in urban communities.

Relevance and Relativity

Youth organizations must shift their thinking to properly address urban youth, in particular Black and Latino youth. 4-H is in a prime position to begin this shift in states having large populations of Black and brown youth living in urban communities. 4-H programming must push the envelope with training and in-services that ensure that staff and volunteers better understand modern-day urban youth (Cochran-Smith, 2004). More inclusive training must provide support for state specialists and educators working in urban contexts to develop curricula that speak to this population (Banks & Banks, 2003). More important, there must be a cohort of national administrators who understand that 4-H youth in urban contexts are not an anomaly. They are part of the 4-H system, no matter how urban, brown, or Black they are.

Given the loss of funding at state and local levels, dwindling staff, and an attitudinal change about 4-H programming in urban areas, many youth have not experienced the "learning by doing" model. Often, those who do not work in these environments are unaware of historical and systemic issues that prevent or circumvent the participation of urban youth in programs such as 4-H. Despite low rates of involvement by urban youth, 4-H can make itself relevant to this population by creating opportunities that enhance skills and experiences and adhere to a culturally relevant pedagogy.

Conclusion

Considering the issues of relevance and relativity leads to a fundamental question: Is 4-H preparing itself at all levels to be culturally responsive, especially when working with youth in urban communities? If one looks at the preparation of urban school teachers, it is clear that this preparation speaks to meeting young people where they are and being cognizant of their environment and culture inside the classroom (Banks & Banks, 2003). Are we doing the same in our 4-H programs? Are we developing culturally relevant curricula, programs, and opportunities at state and national levels? Are programs reflective of the needs of socially charged and social justice–minded youth in urban contexts? Perhaps taking a more critical view of how 4-H positions itself as a youth program will help increase the program's visibility and participation levels in urban

environments. 4-H has an opportunity to be at the forefront of youth programming in the urban context but can do so only by critically questioning how to reach this particular population.

This is an era in which youth are questioning their place in society through words and actions. As educators and proponents of one of the oldest youth development programs in the country, we need to ask ourselves whether we are doing enough. Are we fully preparing our youth to become agents of change, or are we reinforcing the stereotype that it is hard to reach urban youth and keep them engaged?

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