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Diversity Inclusion in 4-H Youth Programs: Examining the Perceptions Among West Virginia 4-H Youth Professionals

Abstract

The study reported here sought to examine the perceptions of 4-H youth professionals towards diversity inclusion in 4-H youth programs. A majority of professionals positively reported that there are benefits for youth of color and youth with disabilities in 4-H youth programs. Respondents indicated that the lack of information about 4-H youth programs was the biggest barrier to diversity-inclusive 4-H programs. As demographic populations shift, 4-H programs must continue to implement inclusive programs and assess current programs to ensure that historically marginalized groups are being encouraged to join.

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Introduction and Background

A core principle outlined by the National 4-H Learning Priorities Steering Committee states that: "for youth development professionals to be successful in our multicultural society, they must have a deep understanding of the impact of limited access and opportunities and inequities on the lives of many cultural groups living in the U.S. today" (National 4-H Learning Priorities Equity, Access, and Opportunity, 2008, p. 1). Although the cultural landscape of the United States (U.S.) has steadily changed, our ability to recruit and retain a diverse population in the National 4-H youth organization is still a work in progress. From educational content enrollment numbers to participants enrolling in summer enrichment activities, 4-H youth programs have struggled to produce membership numbers that reflect national demographic statistics. For example, data on elementary/secondary enrollment numbers indicate that while students of color make up 34% of all 4-H youth, the same population makes up 44% of the total U.S. population eligible for 4-H participation (Snyder & Dillow, 2011; 4-H National Headquarters, 2010).

As the ethnic diversity of school-age youth becomes progressively more reflective, another population that has been traditionally underserved is youth with disabilities. Nationally, the number of school-aged youth with disabilities represents over 13% of the public school population, with 31

states having an overrepresentation greater than the national average (Snyder & Dillow, 2011). In addition, nearly one of every five people in the United States ages 5 and older have some form of disability, with people of color having larger proportions as compared to non-Hispanic White Americans (Brault, 2012).

Given the abovementioned statistics, it is clear that Extension professionals will have to provide services to the growing nontraditional population. Therefore, it is critical for Extension to assess its outreach efforts to ensure that opportunities for these individuals are indeed provided. To accomplish this, it is necessary to understand what has been done thus far.

Studies associated with Extension professionals and diverse audiences within the last 10 years shed insight on the profession's charge to address marginalized populations. Through the implementation of a program to provide 4-H youth professionals with hands-on activities to improve their understanding of special needs youth, Goble and Eyre (2008) stated: "we've come to believe through our observations as Extension professionals that 4-H programs and trainings are a necessity for volunteers who will be assisting special needs youth in club settings" (p.2). Stumpf, Henderson, Luken, Bialeschki, and Casey II (2002) reported that Extension professionals need training and resources for the successful engagement of students with disabilities in 4-H programs. Boone, Boone, Reed, Woloshuk, and Gartin (2006) found similar findings and reported that although Extension professionals held positive attitudes toward the involvement of youth with disabilities in 4-H programs, over 75% of participants reported not having the proper training to work with special populations. Finally, in a study to determine North Carolina 4-H agents' perceptions toward minority youth participation, Alston and Crutchfield (2009) reported that 4-H agricultural programs are not fully meeting the needs of the growing diverse population and recommended that Extension professionals revise 4-H curriculum materials that incorporate the unique needs of its diverse audience.

The search for equity among the increasing diverse society must ultimately begin with the visionary thinking of 4-H program administrators. As Fehlis (2005) states: "the future of Extension is what we create through leaders who have a vision for what Extension might look like and how it will serve the needs of our customers" (p.1). This progressive thinking will require a new level of importance in building a diversity-inclusive atmosphere.

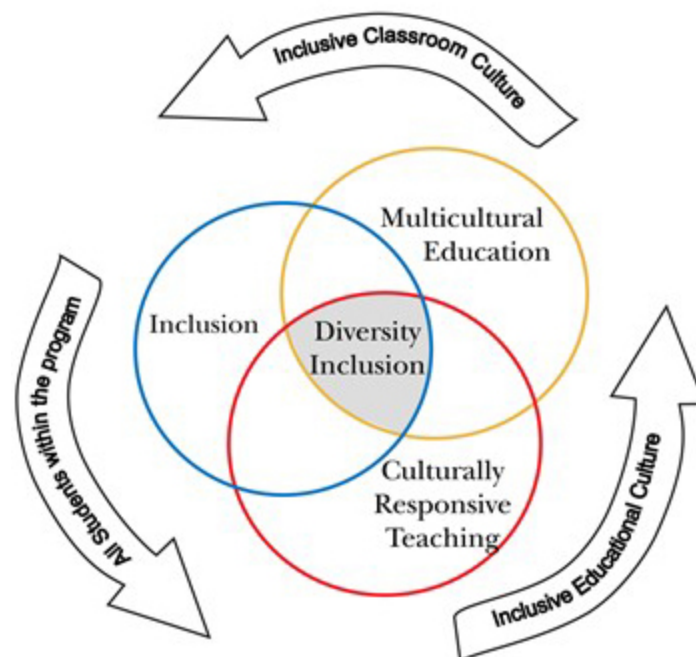
Conceptual Framework

The Diversity Inclusive Program Model (LaVergne, 2008) served as the conceptual framework for the study reported here and is based upon the philosophical foundations of Salend's (2008) principles of inclusion, Bank's (2008) dimensions of multicultural education, and Gay's (2000) culturally responsive teaching theory. LaVergne (2008) states: "diversity inclusion is an educational philosophy that welcomes all learners by engaging them actively in educational programs regardless of their race, ethnicity, or exceptionally" (p.5). In LaVergne's model (Figure 1), professionals and programs that exist within the diversity-inclusive area: (1) hold positive attitudes towards diversity inclusion: (2) understand that, because of past perceptions, pre-existing barriers may be the reasons why these particular groups are underrepresented: and (3) have an awareness of possible solutions to increase underrepresented group participation.

The researcher also postulates that professionals who are open to diversity-inclusive programs are supporters of those who understand that program success is determined by how well prepared the workforce is in working with youth of color and youth with disabilities. The overarching goal of the program model is to formulate an inclusive educational culture, classroom culture, and all students being included in programs (LaVergne, 2008). The Diversity Inclusion Program Model was chosen because of its collaboration of important philosophical foundations that encompass the changing demographic shift among youth in this country. Incidentally, due to the newness of this concept, diversity inclusion research among underrepresented groups in Extension has not been conducted. However, because the organization is charged with ensuring the future success of developing youth for the agricultural profession, diversity-inclusive research is warranted.

Figure 1.

The Diversity Inclusive Program Model (LaVergne, 2008)



As 4-H programs continue to explore the needs of nontraditional youth, an extremely important task for Extension professionals will require creative thinking that reflects an organization that is fully accepting and embracing, and promotes diversity inclusion at the county, state, and national level. As Schaubert and Castania (2001) state: "extension educators need to establish open lines of communication with prospective audiences and become attuned to how they can meet the needs of all people."

Purpose and Objectives

Based upon the premise of diversity inclusion in 4-H youth programs, the purpose of the study reported here was to analyze West Virginia 4-H youth professionals' perceptions toward diversity inclusion in 4-H youth programs. To achieve this purpose, the following objectives guided the study:

1. Describe West Virginia 4-H Extension professionals' perceptions of the benefits of diversity inclusion

in West Virginia 4-H youth programs;

2. Describe West Virginia 4-H Extension professionals' perceptions of the barriers to diversity inclusion in West Virginia 4-H youth programs.

Methodology

Following Dillman's (2007) Tailored Designed Method for survey implementation, the researchers distributed a questionnaire using a sequence of email correspondences with SurveyMonkey.com as the host Web site. The instrument used in the study was based on a previously used instrument concerning agricultural science teachers studying diversity inclusion in agricultural education programs (LaVergne, Larke, Elbert, & Jones, 2011). The instrument was also modified to have language appropriate for 4-H and Extension audiences. Part one (*Benefits*) consisted of 12 statements designed to gauge participants' perceptions of diversity inclusion in 4-H youth programs, and part two (*Barriers*) contained 12 statements designed to measure participants' perceptions of the perceived barriers to diversity inclusion in 4-H youth programs. Part three consisted of nine items designed to collect demographic information on respondents.

Participants responses were measured on a Likert-type scale consisting of four categories: 1 = *strongly disagree* (SD), 2 = *disagree* (D), 3 = *agree* (A), and 4 = *strongly agree* (SA). Faculty and administrators from the state land-grant university formed the panel of experts and reviewed the instrument for face and content validity. Construct validity confirmed that the questionnaire's scores actually reflect the conceptual area that it intended to measure. Evidence of construct validity was collected from the responses and suggestions from the panel of experts and from a pilot test of 10 Extension professionals not included in the survey population. The groups provided input regarding the content and direction of the statements, which improved the questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha coefficient were calculated for internal consistency of the two subscales (*Benefits* = .95, and *Barriers* = .82).

The target population consisted of all West Virginia 4-H youth Extension professionals as listed through the West Virginia University Cooperative Extension Office during 2011-12. Because of the unavailability of accurate personal information (e.g., missing email addresses, incorrect home/work addresses) from the three sources, access to all professionals was not feasible. The accessible population of the study consisted of all Extension professionals who had email addresses listed through the West Virginia University Cooperative Extension Office ($N = 1,400$). Using a sampling formula from Bartlett, Kotrlik and Higgins (2001), researchers randomly selected 276 participants ($n = 276$).

Participants received a pre-notice/introductory mailed letter outlining the purpose of the study and informing them that they would receive an email in 1 week with instructions on how to complete the Internet-based questionnaire. From the preliminary selection, 24 email addresses were invalid. To obtain valid email addresses and to maintain number of participants, the researchers randomly selected additional participants from the total population pool. After this update, the email addresses

were deemed valid. For the data-collection phase, the researchers sent reminder emails every Wednesday until the study was concluded. Nonresponse error was addressed by comparing respondents' questionnaire return rate prior to the closing date ($n = 93$) with respondents' questionnaire return rate after the closing date ($n = 24$) (Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001). Using the cutoff date as the independent variable and mean scores as the dependent variable, independent sample t-tests revealed that no statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) between mean scores on the two constructs; therefore, the responding sample was deemed a representative sample of the accessible population. The final return rate was 42%.

Results

4-H youth professionals were asked to respond to questions that described selected personal characteristics. The questionnaire revealed that the majority of respondents were female (75.7%) and of White/European American descent (93.4%). About one-third (30.2%) of the participants were 50-59 years of age, and about one-fourth were (24.5%) between the ages of 41 – 49. Most of the respondents had received diversity/multicultural training at the high school/college level (60.2%), and over three-fourths of the participants received diversity/multicultural training at the career/work level (78.5%). Regarding years of 4-H service, nearly one-fourth (24.1%) of respondents had over 25 years of service, while 19.4% had 6 – 10 years of service (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Demographic Characteristics of Participants ($n = 117$)

	n	%
Gender^a		
Male	26	24.3
Female	81	75.7
Race/Ethnicity^a		
Biracial American	2	1.9
Black/African American	2	1.9
Hispanic/Latino American	1	0.9
Native American	2	1.9
White/European American	100	93.4
Age^b		
18 – 25 Years of age	5	4.7
26 – 32 Years of age	16	15.1
33 – 40 Years of age	13	12.3

41 – 49 Years of age	26	24.5
50 – 59 Years of age	32	30.2
60 + Years of age	14	13.2
Diversity/Multicultural Training at high school/college level^c		
Yes	65	60.2
No	43	39.8
Diversity/Multicultural Training at the career/work level^a		
Yes	84	78.5
No	23	21.5
Years of 4-H service (Adult)^a		
0 (< 12 months) – 5 Years of service	19	17.6
6 – 10 Years of service	21	19.4
11 – 15 Years of service	19	17.6
16 – 20 Years of service	9	8.3
21 -25 Years of Service	14	13.0
25+ Years of service	26	24.1
^a 10 participants did not to respond to question. ^b 11 participants did not respond to question. ^c 9 participants did not respond to question. ^d 12 participants did not respond to question.		

The first objective of the study was to describe West Virginia 4-H Extension professionals' perceptions of the benefit of diversity inclusion in West Virginia 4-H youth programs. Participants rated 10 statements in terms of how much each statement was a benefit to diversity-inclusive 4-H programs regarding youth of color and youth with disabilities. In addition, two statewide initiative questions were posed to determine the potential benefits beyond the 4-H youth program. Data Table 2 summarizes their responses. Overall, respondents agreed on all statements regarding the benefits of diversity inclusion in 4-H youth programs. Regarding youth of color and youth with disabilities, a majority (72%) of respondents reported that 4-H youth programs can provide leadership opportunities, improve social relationships, and offer career exploration opportunities for underrepresented youth in 4-H. To a somewhat lesser extent, respondents agreed that 4-H programs could assist youth of color (49%) and youth with disabilities (47%) in academic improvement. Regarding statewide initiatives, 71% of respondents strongly agreed that diverse populations in 4-H youth programs benefit the entire community (Table 2).

Table 2.

Perceived Benefits of Diversity Inclusion in 4-H Youth Programs

Diversity Inclusion	% SD	% D	% A	% SA
Youth of Color				
There are benefits for the inclusion of youth of color in 4-H programs.	1	--	27	72
Providing youth of color with 4-H leadership opportunities will have a positive impact on 4-H programs.	1	3	25	71
Diversity inclusion can improve social relationships between White youth and youth of color in 4-H programs.	1	3	28	68
Providing youth of color with career exploration opportunities will have a positive impact on 4-H programs.	1	3	33	63
I believe 4-H can help youth of color improve academically.	1	3	47	49
Youth With Disabilities				
There are benefits for the inclusion of youth with disabilities in 4-H programs.	1	--	27	72
Diversity inclusion can improve social relationships between youth with and without disabilities in 4-H programs.	1	1	32	66
Providing youth with disabilities career exploration opportunities will have a positive impact on 4-H programs.	1	3	32	65
Providing youth with disabilities 4-H leadership development opportunities will have a positive impact on 4-H programs.	1	2	33	64
I believe 4-H can help youth with disabilities improve academically.	1	2	50	47
Statewide Initiatives				
The inclusion of diverse populations in 4-H youth programs is a benefit for the entire community.	1	2	26	71
Diversity inclusion in 4-H youth programs can have a positive impact on other youth programs in the state.	1	3	33	63

The second objective of the study was to describe West Virginia 4-H Extension professionals' perceptions of the perceived barriers to diversity inclusion in West Virginia 4-H youth programs. Participants rated 11 statements in terms of how much each statement (perceived barrier) prevented diversity inclusion in 4-H programs regarding youth of color and youth with disabilities. In addition, one parental attitude question was listed to determine if participants believed that parental attitudes

factored in preventing diversity-inclusive 4-H programs. Data in Table 3 summarizes their responses. Regarding both youth of color and youth with disabilities, a majority of respondents (56%) indicated "The lack of information about 4-H youth programs" as the factor that they believe was the greatest perceived barrier to diversity-inclusive programs. Fifty-one percent of respondents indicated that "A lack of role models" hinders the participation of youth of color participation in 4-H, while only 44% of respondents indicating the same barrier for youth with disabilities (Table 3).

Table 3.

Perceived Barriers Towards Diversity Inclusion in 4-H Youth Programs

Diversity Inclusion	% SD	% D	% A	% SA
Youth of Color				
The lack of information about 4-H youth programs have an impact on youth of color participation in 4-H.	3	21	56	20
A lack of role models hinders the participation of youth of color in 4-H programs.	5	38	51	6
The perception of 4-H alone influences the participation of youth of color in 4-H programs.	4	41	49	6
Rejection by peers is a barrier to diversity inclusion by youth of color in 4-H.	17	44	31	8
Negative stereotypes of people of color are a primary reason why youth of color do not participate in 4-H programs.	24	63	11	2
Youth With Disabilities				
The lack of information about 4-H youth programs have an impact on youth with disabilities participation in 4-H.	2	22	56	20
A lack of role models hinders the participation of youth with disabilities in 4-H programs.	5	43	44	8
The perception of 4-H alone influences the participation youth with disabilities in 4-H programs.	5	45	42	8
Improper program materials is a barrier to diversity inclusion for youth with disabilities in 4-H youth programs.	13	50	30	7
Rejection by peers is a barrier to diversity inclusion by youth with disabilities in 4-H.	14	53	27	6
Negative stereotypes of people with disabilities are a primary reason why youth with disabilities do not participate in 4-H programs.	18	68	11	3

Parental Attitudes				
Parental attitudes about 4-H play an important role in diversity inclusion among all youth.	1	6	45	48

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study reported here examined the perceptions of 117 4-H youth professionals concerning diversity inclusion in West Virginia 4-H youth programs. Although other 4-H Extension professionals working with similar populations may have comparable perceptions, caution must be exercised when generalizing the results of the study beyond the population. The questionnaire's statements regarding the benefits and barriers of youth of color and youth with disabilities highlight the three constructs outline in LaVergne's theory on Diversity Inclusion (2008). The program model postulates that positive perceptions toward multicultural education, inclusion, and culturally responsive teaching will influence the motivations and actions of adults towards creating a diversity-inclusive environment. Therefore, the results of the study should be viewed as descriptive indicators that determine the preparedness of 4-H professionals towards fostering such an environment. LaVergne concludes that the basic concept of a diversity-inclusive program must indeed emulate practical real-life techniques (2008).

4-H youth professionals positively reported that there are benefits for youth of color and youth with disabilities in 4-H youth programs in West Virginia. Findings of the study about including youth of color and youth with disabilities in 4-H youth programs are similar to previous research studying the attitudes of Extension professionals towards the incorporation of underrepresented populations in 4-H programs (Boone, Boone, Reed, Woloshuk, & Gartin, 2006; Goble & Eyre, 2008; Ingram, 1999; Stumpf, Henderson, Luken, Bialeshki, & Casey, 2002; Schaubert & Castania, 2001). A diversity-inclusive 4-H program is needed to effectively serve the diverse communities across the country (Ingram & Radhakrishna, 2002). Diversity-inclusive Extension professionals must strive to provide positive learning environments to every youth interested in joining 4-H. Additionally, 4-H youth professionals perceived that the inclusion of diverse populations in 4-H youth programs benefits the entire community. Participants indicated, in the open-ended responses, that if 4-H programs were to accommodate diverse audiences, information about 4-H would eventually spread, thus creating a call for more incorporation.

According to the respondents (Table 3), the lack of information about 4-H youth programs is the biggest barriers to diversity-inclusive 4-H programs regarding youth with disabilities and youth of color. This is a critical barrier as Alston and Crutchfield (2009) stated that 4-H programs are not meeting the needs of a growing diverse population. Extension offices must answer the call to provide an inclusive recruitment program that has the capability to reach diverse audiences. In addition, these efforts should be collaboratively developed with other community-based organizations to maximize the limited financial and staff resources that exist within the profession.

Respondents strongly agreed that a benefit of youth of color and youth with disabilities in 4-H programs would be the increase in positive social relationships among the different groups. One of the most effective ways to promote an inclusive organization is to allow individuals to bring out their

gifts and talents in an environment that is opening and welcoming (Schauber, 2001). As demographic populations shift, 4-H programs must continue to (1) implement inclusive programs and (2) assess current programs to ensure that historically marginalized groups are being encouraged to join. Research indicates that when new ideas are shared, everyone benefits (Hoorman, 2002).

Respondents agreed that 4-H youth programs could assist youth of color and youth with disabilities in academic improvement. Similarly, in a study of 1,047 middle school youth that examined organized activity participation, Fredricks and Eccles (2008) discovered that student participation in out of school recreational activities was linked to higher grades, self-esteem, resiliency, and lower risky behaviors. Marsh and Kleitman (2002) also discovered that extracurricular school activities contribute to higher school grades among upper grade level students. If participation in an extracurricular activity such as 4-H increases academic competence, Extension professionals should seek to identify those activities that contribute to the academic success of 4-H participants.

In the present study, the barriers to diversity inclusion in 4-H youth programs were developed from a methodical review of literature involving past research and personal experience with youth of color and youth with disabilities. Although statistical procedures may prove that we achieved a satisfactory measure of reliability, the actual barriers as to why these groups continue to be underrepresented in 4-H programs must be determined by those who are involved at the personal level. Further, qualitative research should be conducted to determine the specific barriers to diversity inclusion. As such, the foundation of the research reported here should support honest efforts by 4-H youth professionals who value diversity and focus on the overall goal of fostering inclusive programs. Finally, researchers are encouraged to determine the usefulness of the Diversity Inclusive Program Model for outlining, understanding, and supporting equity programs within the broader scope of Extension.

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