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Gathering Wisdom from 4-H Youth Development Clubs

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Gathering Wisdom from 4-H Youth Development Clubs

Abstract

The article proposes a series of elements that are essential to a positive 4-H Club experience. It builds on a list previously elaborated by the National 4-H Impact Design Implementation Team but complements and illustrates it with the testimonies of 4-H members, volunteer leaders, and parents. The qualitative inquiry was conducted in New York State to draw out the voices of young people and the wisdom of the adults who work with them. The lessons learned can be used to stimulate discussion and reflection in other states so as to improve the quality of clubs everywhere.

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Throughout its hundred years of existence, 4-H Youth Development has accumulated a wealth of experience in creating opportunities through which young people can build their capacities. 4-H has engaged children and teenagers in "learning by doing" through fun and hands-on learning environments, such as the 4-H Clubs. Through the dedication of its staff and volunteers, as well as its privileged access to research knowledge, the program has evolved to adjust to changing needs. Still it remains rooted in certain enduring elements, which have been essential to youth's positive development.

The young people who have been a part of 4-H Clubs and the adults who have guided them have some important lessons to teach us. In an attempt to find out what the essential elements of 4-H Clubs were in the eyes of teenagers, their volunteer leaders, and parents, a qualitative study was undertaken in New York State in 2001. This article provides an overview of the methodology and findings of the project and suggests implications for youth development programs throughout the country.

Methodology

The literature points to various ingredients of successful youth development programs (Carnegie, 1994; Peterson et al., 2001; Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 1999; Scales, 1999) but suggests a lack of systematic qualitative inquiries that feature the voices of youth. In New York State, a 4-H Club Study (Mead, Rodriguez, Hirschl, & Goggin, 1999) concluded that 4-H club participation does make a difference in the lives of youth. Yet narrative accounts of youth and adult experiences in 4-H Clubs were needed to enrich our understanding of what makes that difference.

This article reports on a research project that was initiated in June 2001 to complement the Club Study (Mead et al., 1999) with testimonies from 4-H members, their parents, and volunteer leaders. This qualitative inquiry sought to draw out the voices of young people and the wisdom of adults to deepen our understanding of the elements that make 4-H Clubs deserving of the "youth development" title. Thanks to the collaboration of 4-H educators, 48 teenagers participated in focus groups (at fairs and on-line) and 25 parents and volunteer leaders took part in semi-structured interviews. The study participants came from 20 of the 57 NY counties.

While the interview guides were informed by the literature review--in particular by the report of the Critical Elements Work Group from the National 4-H Impact Assessment Project (Peterson et al., 2001)--questions were open-ended. This allowed the participants to bring up the elements that

they considered essential to the club experience. The author analyzed the transcripts and pulled out the recurring elements.

Findings

The experiences of New Yorkers are fairly consistent with the list of eight critical elements of 4-H put together by the above-mentioned work group (Peterson et al., 2001). Their list will be used as a framework to present the findings, starting with the six elements that best fit the 4-H reality in NY and continuing with two that are not as easily discernable but nevertheless existent. Additional elements not part of the national list, but integral to the club experience according to respondents, will also be presented.

A Positive Relationship with a Caring Adult

The findings confirm that in NY positive relationships with caring adults (Benson, 1997; Hamilton, 1999; Peterson et al., 2001; Scales & Gibbons, 1996) are an important part of the 4-H experience. The answers provided a picture of what positive relationships between youth and adult leaders look like. When asked what qualities they think it takes to work well with young people, club members answered that they like leaders who:

- Do not take over but are there to help,
- Have a sense of humor,
- Are easy-going and friendly,
- Provide guidance and support,
- Trust them and can be trusted,
- Are patient,
- Respect them,
- Are affectionate and accepting,
- Work *with* youth rather than do things *for* them,
- Listen,
- Treat youth as equals,
- Are willing to learn from youth, and
- Do what they said they would.

Parents of 4-H club members expressed appreciation for similar qualities in their children's leaders:

- Commitment,
- Listening,
- Ability to follow through,
- Patience,
- Warmth,
- Expectations,
- Encouragement, and
- Positive attitude.

Volunteer leaders believe that to be good club leaders and work well with young people you have to:

- Be willing to learn from young people,
- Make yourself available,
- Admit that you don't know everything,
- Find that special thing that each young person has,
- Get to know the children,
- Show them that you care,
- Give them the freedom to think for themselves,
- Be flexible, and
- Back off a little!

A Safe Environment

Previous research has indicated that youth programs should provide a space where youth feel physically and emotionally safe (Carnegie, 1994; Peterson et al., 2001; Pittman, 1991). Again, the descriptions that NY 4-H members offered about their clubs reflect that feeling of being in a safe place. Some of their thoughts regarding 4-H clubs are paraphrased below.

- A place where you can experiment and make mistakes
- A place where you can be yourself
- A place where you can say what you think
- A place where you feel supported
- A group of people that you trust
- A group of people with whom you can discuss issues that concern you
- A respectful atmosphere
- Adults who remind you of necessary safety precautions

Interestingly, few parents brought up safety during interviews, but one mother who did

emphasized the non-judgmental, non-threatening, and supportive atmosphere of 4-H. The volunteers who talked about safety mostly referred to it in terms of the youth being able to say what they think and feel.

Opportunity for Mastery

"Learning by doing" has long been central to the 4-H philosophy (Smith, 1935). As young people engage in 4-H projects (whether in entomology, rocketry, or theater) or take part in community service, they develop an endless array of skills and attitudes. Although the term "mastery" itself is not so commonly used, a large number of study participants, both youth and adults, pointed out the confidence that young people have gained and the level of comfort they have achieved using certain skills. Public speaking is one of the acquired competencies most often cited by all groups of respondents. Other skills included organization (record-keeping and time management), running meetings, leadership, problem solving, teamwork, independent thinking, interpersonal relations, as well as cooking and nutrition, sewing, and woodworking.

Here is what 4-H members have found useful in developing skills:

- A hands-on process
- Repetition
- Setting goals and trying to reach them
- Having fun
- Encouraging each other
- Feeling a sense of accomplishment when completing projects
- Receiving constructive criticism from leaders and judges
- The younger you start, the more comfortable you get

Naturally, the level of mastery is dependent on developmental ability and is a long-term process (Peterson et al., 2001). The sense of accomplishment and pride that young people obtain through the process of mastery was consistently reported by members and observed by parents and leaders. Various respondents remarked that opportunities to feel good about oneself strengthen self-esteem and confidence.

Service

Peterson et al. (2001) also indicate the centrality of having opportunities to value and practice service to others. "Community service" was mentioned by nearly everyone interviewed. There are numerous ways in which NY 4-H club members practice service. Not only do many of them serve in leadership positions in their own club or county and help out younger children, they also reach out to their community. Study participants indicated that in the process of engaging in community service youth they:

- Learn new skills,
- Get a sense of belonging to a community,
- See a role for themselves and learn to care for their community,
- Gain awareness of what is going on around them and of people who live in different conditions,
- Feel personal satisfaction for having helped,
- Develop relationships across generations,
- Have fun working together, and
- Transform the image of youth in their community.

An Inclusive Environment

The national team lists the inclusiveness of the environment as another critical element of 4-H (Peterson et al., 2001). A large number of the NY club members interviewed expressed that 4-H clubs constitute an environment where:

- No one is judged and everyone is accepted for who they are;
- Members receive constructive feedback, particularly through public presentations and judging contests; and
- They feel a sense of belonging.

In addition to those points, various volunteer leaders remarked on how much club members encourage and congratulate each other.

While club members depicted a definite sense of inclusion, the author is careful not to conclude that 4-H is necessarily inclusive. Those interviewed were selected from the current membership of 4-H and as such were not necessarily representative of the diversity of the NY population. Many leaders do appear to have a genuine desire to embrace all youth, but this aspiration will require continuous reflection about how clubs can be made more accessible to, and likely to benefit, those who most need it.

Engagement in Learning

This study confirmed that 4-H'ers engage in learning through play, reflection, and hands-on projects. Youth respondents and their parents did not directly address the learning process as much as volunteers did, but members did talk about how much fun they have in 4-H. Perhaps they are having so much fun that they do not always realize they are learning! The youth also mentioned the numerous opportunities they have to try out different activities. Even the clubs that focus on a particular area of interest (e.g. horses or llamas), usually incorporate multiple projects.

The learning process was aptly described by two volunteers.

- "You learn by doing, you try different things and you meet so many people. You get so many ideas from that that you can take in any directions. . . . It's really a neat way for them to see how things interrelate. It's not just a sewing project, it might connect to this, and woodworking connects to gardening. The kids can see it's not just planting flowers, I can build a planter for it. Or if I'm cooking, I can plant herbs to use in my cooking. It gives them a broader sense of how . . . everything connects. When they start to see this, they get so excited! . . . It's different from school in that it's not a lecture where you take notes. . . . You get right into it. You try things and experience them. It's a whole different way of learning and you're not even realizing it." (Club Leader, Seneca County)
- "Once a child starts in the 4-H program, you can just see how all of a sudden their interest peaks, they are much more inquisitive, they question a lot more. . . . They say, 'I'd like to lead this' or 'this always interested me.' . . . It gives them a lot of self-confidence because we put a lot of the hands-on and the planning onto the children. . . . They learn to look at something and think: 'Ok, this might work or it might not. . . . Let's try it.' Sometimes it doesn't work. So . . . how could we make this work? Their creative process starts and they come up with some great ideas. They learn how to do it and then they see: "Oh, my God! Look what we did! We made it work and it was our idea!" (Club leader, Ontario County)

Opportunity to See Oneself as an Active Participant in the Future

A first glance at the data collected does not necessarily suggest that 4-H'ers and volunteers see 4-H experience as an opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future. At least they did not use the terminology put forth in the national report (Peterson et al., 2001). Analysis of the interviews, however, reveals that there are at least four ways through which 4-H helps young people develop into active participants:

- A majority of the teens interviewed highlighted the numerous leadership opportunities that they have had. Leadership takes many forms in 4-H, from holding officer positions or a special role within the club, to teaching and helping younger members, or participating in the Teen Ambassador Program.
- Teens showed appreciation for the increased opportunities to organize and plan activities as they get older. The level of youth input varies across clubs, but most volunteers interviewed agree at the very least that young people need to have a say in what projects they will do.
- The importance of teaching and learning responsibility in 4-H Clubs was regularly brought up in interviews. Throughout the 4-H experience, members develop a capacity to care for themselves and for the well-being of others around them and to follow through on projects. As put by a volunteer, caring for an animal is one way that children develop a sense of "responsibility for a life beyond their own."
- A few study participants (volunteers and members) referred to citizenship activities. These include trips to Washington, DC, that help teens understand how the government works and how to make change happen.

Opportunity for Self-Determination

The national report indicated that youth should have opportunities to develop their potential to become self-directing and autonomous adults and realize that they can have an impact over their life's events (Peterson et al., 2001). Participants in this study never used the term "self-determination," but teens expressed a very similar idea in different ways when talking about 4-H.

- "It has helped me realize that people believe in me, in who I am and what I can do. So I become more independent and who I am as a person. So I'll be out there and do projects. Or even at school . . . I won't drive with the flow; I'll do what I like. I have more self-confidence because of 4-H." (Teenage girl, Tompkins County)
- "It makes you a lot more independent. You can't depend on other people to get you through, it makes you want to go for your own goals and achieve them -- It opens up a lot of doors of opportunity for you that you want to reach for." (Teenage girl, Allegany County)
- "4-H really gives people a voice. And it teaches you how to use your voice. . . . Everything we do, everybody has a say." (Teenage girl, Onondaga County)

Additional Elements of 4-H Clubs

In addition to these eight elements, other features of 4-H enhance its members' experience. The family is central to 4-H, and this at two levels. First, all three types of interviewees saw the family orientation of 4-H as a real strength because it allows intergenerational relationships to develop (both between adults and youth and between teens and younger children) and gives parents and children an opportunity to do something as a family.

Second, it was clear from interviews with volunteers that parental involvement is necessary to the effective functioning of the clubs. Many clubs rely on parents as resources for projects. The author would like to warn, however, that care must be taken not to engage only children whose parents are willing and able to commit, but also children who do not have adults who take significant interest in their lives.

A highlight of teenagers' experience in 4-H is the opportunity to travel and to make friends in other clubs throughout the county and the state. Finally, various parents mentioned the compatibility of 4-H with home schooling, and many volunteers expressed how beneficial 4-H's link to Cornell Cooperative Extension had been.

Implications

It proved enlightening to listen to the voices of the youth and adults involved in 4-H Clubs and to find out what is making their experience so positive. 4-H has great strengths, and it is important to get the word out as to what these are if we are to promote the program and continue to improve its quality. 4-H Educators can use the findings of this study to show funders and administrators what 4-H is about and how valuable it is for young people so that they will better support the program.

The elements considered essential by NY participants can be used to stimulate reflection and discussion in 4-H Clubs throughout the country. While the list might need to be adjusted to mirror the specific needs of each club, it can serve as a guideline for program design and monitoring to ensure that new and established clubs have the ingredients necessary for positive youth development in place. A club might not be strong on all aspects at all times, but it would be beneficial for the club to evaluate how it is doing at regular intervals. The idea is not to impose compulsory elements on clubs, but rather to offer them tools for their own reflection and planning.

The list can also be used for volunteer development, training, and support. For instance, knowing that positive relationships with caring adults is an essential element of 4-H Club indicates to 4-H educators that they should support volunteer leaders in developing the qualities that are needed to relate well to young people.

Conclusion

Who best to ask about youth development practices than youth themselves and the adults who work with them? Many of the teens who participated in this study demonstrated a remarkable capacity to reflect on their experiences. They are aware of how they have changed over the years, and they know what they appreciate in their programs and their leaders. Listening to their voices and to the wisdom of practitioners will help us design spaces where youth and adults can work in partnership to build their strengths and their communities.

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