

Perceptions of parents on factors preventing youth participation in the 4-H program and other youth development programs within underserved communities in North Carolina

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Introduction/Need for Research

The idea of 4-H is to help youth gain the skills they need to be proactive forces in their communities and develop ideas for a more innovative economy (Tempel, 2010). However, youth participation in 4-H programs within underserved communities is not up to the level it should be. The term "underserved" is defined as disadvantaged (Waterman, Kost, Lazzar, & Dobie, 2011). "Underserved communities" are typically identified by geographic location, and are affected by limited resources such as income, transportation, employment or educational services (Junge, 2000). These communities are usually located in rural, isolated areas. The National Institute of Food and Agriculture defines underserved as vulnerable, demonstrating that these are groups exposed to high risk of developmental, emotional, mental, physical, and social needs (Campbell, 2013). The lack of youth participation in 4-H in underserved communities can have a lasting negative effect on how young people develop through adolescents and into adulthood.

In North Carolina, the average time children spend in an afterschool program, such as 4-H, dropped from 10 hours per week in 2009 to 6 hours per week in 2014 and contributed to North Carolina's falling below the national average for afterschool programs (America After 3pm, 2015). Although North Carolina 4-H is attempting to serve its youth in some capacity, there is a concern whether North Carolina 4-H is serving youth in all communities throughout the state. There is very little research conducted to understand the factors preventing youth participation in the 4-H program and other youth development programs within underserved communities. This research study was conducted to fill this knowledge gap.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is built upon the concept of inclusion. Inclusion is "the belief that all people should feel they are included in society, even if they lack some advantages" (Macmillan Dictionary, 2016, para. 2). Inclusion is a concept that goes beyond physical location and integrates basic morals and a belief system that encourages participation, belonging and collaboration (Manitoba Education, 2015). The concept of inclusion seeks to enhance the well-being of each person in a community by working together to strengthen and provide a foundation for a better future for everyone (Manitoba Education, 2015). According to Manitoba Education (2015), an inclusive community continually evolves to meet the changing needs of its members. 4-H programs are designed to help youth develop and gain necessary skills to be proactive forces in their communities. According to the concept of inclusion, community members participate in programs in their communities to the extent they feel they have been included in those programs. The unanswered question is, to what extent 4-H and other youth development programs in underserved communities practice the inclusive philosophy that encourages participation, belonging, and collaboration of youth in these communities?

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of parents about the participation of youth in 4-H and other youth development programs in underserved communities in North Carolina. The specific objective of the study was to determine the factors limiting children's

participation in 4-H and other youth development programs in underserved communities in North Carolina.

Methodology

This was a qualitative research study. Focus group interviews were conducted with parents from two purposefully selected counties representing the underserved community. One county from the east and one from the west region of North Carolina were selected to represent the State. Focus group interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for emerging themes.

Results and Conclusions

The results of the two focus groups revealed that out of twelve participants, only one was familiar with the 4-H program. Research findings indicated several emerging themes and commonalities repeatedly discussed by participants in both counties. Limited or no access to information about programs and lack of transportation were commonly cited as the two main barriers preventing youth participation in youth development programs in these communities.

The results call for increased communication efforts and advertising the 4-H program in these communities through traditional and non-traditional methods to help assist with recruitment. Advertising should appropriately describe the 4-H program, express the benefits of the program, and explain the positive development opportunities youth gain from participating in the program and let them feel those programs are for them as the inclusion concept states. The research findings call for the exploration of alternative ideas to address the need for transportation.

Recommendations and Implications

Youth development programs should be developed in such a way that every community member should feel they are inclusive of the program. This can be achieved by inviting representative community members to serve in advisory committees and building youth development programs to embrace communities in all segments to feel they are inclusive in programs. Also, it is important to advertise and market programs to inform all the members in the community using community leaders and other communication channels. Programs should be offered in locations where community members can depend on public transportation and other available means of transport.

If we want to reach youth in underserved communities, it is necessary to educate their parents on available youth development opportunities and make them feel that the programs are offered to them, so that they will be informed and feel inclusive in the programs. This is the implication of this study for planning programs to serve youth in underserved communities.

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