

The Influence of 4-H on Positive Youth Development

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Introduction/Need for the Study

Civic engagement is a crucial component of positive youth development (PYD) as it provides opportunities for youth to develop the skills, knowledge, and values that are essential for positive outcomes (Crosetti et al., 2014). Youth who lack civic engagement can experience a lack of belonging within their communities, tolerance, and political unawareness (Kirshner et al., 2003). This can have adverse effects on PYD and can also transition from adolescence to adulthood (Petersen, 1988). Interacting with others and developing a sense of belonging has been suggested as a basic human need (Maslow, 1962). It is during this timeframe within an individual's life that they start asking what kind of person they are and where they fit in within the world (Erikson, 1968). Youths who fail to achieve this sense of belonging can fail to thrive in the world and can hinder their PYD (Jose et al., 2012). Adolescents who are civically involved through community service can experience positive outcomes such as improved empathy and increased intent to continue to serve their community (Lakin & Mahoney, 2006). Adolescents who are civically engaged in their communities through service learning can learn how to identify problems within their community, find solutions, and implement problem-solving strategies (Finn & Checkoway, 1998).

Theoretical Framework

Lerner et al.'s (2005) PYD is a framework that focuses on nurturing the strengths of the youth to help them reach their full potential. The PYD framework is a significant shift from the deficit model, which has been one of the more prevalent in different areas within the study of adolescence, such as development, education, and psychology in the past (Lerner et al., 2005). This new approach differs from the deficit model in that instead of focusing on identifying and treating the negative aspects of adolescence, it shifts the focus more toward the psychological strengths that youth can possess (Lerner et al., 2005; Phelps et al., 2009).

Methodology

A preexisting instrument (i.e. the Positive Youth Development Inventory or PYDI) was used for the quantitative collection process. This 55-item instrument was designed by Arnold et al. (2012) to evaluate how a program has impacted the growth and development of a youth. The development of this instrument was based on the 6Cs of positive youth development (competence, confidence, character, connection, caring, and contribution; Arnold 2012; Lerner et al., 2005). The participants were asked to rate how much they agreed with the statements about the particular youth development program being studied (i.e. 4-H). The participants were shown a list of statements pertaining to the study and were asked to rate their agreement on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Agree*, and 4 = *Strongly Agree* (Arnold et al., 2012). The instrument was designed so that items 1–14 focused on competence, items 15 through 23 focused on character, items 24 through 31 focused on connection, items 32 through 39 focused on caring, 40 through 48 focused on confidence, and items 49 through 55 focused on the contribution (Arnold et al. 2012). Data collected, analyzed, and reported in this research manuscript were a part of a larger study.

Findings

Research objective one sought to discover the PYD scores of Ferguson College of Agriculture (FCoA) students based on their experience in a 4-H program. The participant's PYD score was generated by calculating a mean score for each of the 6Cs of PYD. The 6Cs of positive youth development are as follows: (a) competence, (b) confidence, (c) character, (d) connection, (e) caring, and (f) contribution (Arnold et al., 2012; Lerner et al., 2005). Eighteen FCoA students finished the PYD instrument on a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 4 = *Strongly Agree* for each of the 6Cs (Arnold et al., 2012). The data revealed the *confidence* domain possessed the lowest mean score out of the six ($M = 3.25$; $SD = 0.66$). Adversely, the data revealed the *character* domain to have the highest mean ($M = 3.59$; $SD = 0.52$). The overall average PYD score was calculated ($M = 3.44$; $SD = 0.59$). The minimum and maximum range, mean, and standard deviation for each of the PYD domains can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1

PYD scores for 4-H program participants from the FCoA (n = 18)

Domain	Minimum	Maximum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Competence	1.00	4.00	3.37	.61
Confidence	1.00	4.00	3.25	.66
Connection	1.00	4.00	3.46	.58
Character	1.00	4.00	3.59	.52
Caring	1.00	4.00	3.54	.57
Contribution	1.00	4.00	3.40	.63

Note. Likert-type scale of 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree). Ranking scale for the PYDI are *Low* (0.0 to 1.5), *Low to Average* (1.6 to 2.5), *Average to Medium* (2.6 to 3.0), *Medium* (3.1 to 3.5), and *High* (3.6 to 4.0).

The data revealed that all six of the domains fell in the *medium* range, exhibiting that FCoA students *most likely feel comfortable* within that domain (Arnold et al., 2012). A combined PYD score was also calculated to assess the overall effect of positive youth development in 4-H, using the same four-point scale established by Arnold et al. (2012). The composite score for FCoA students resulted in a mean of 3.25 ($SD = 0.59$), revealing that participants fell in the *medium* range, thus showing that they are *most likely comfortable* within all six domains.

Conclusions and Discussion

It was concluded that 4-H programs fostered the development of all 6Cs of PYD for students within the FCoA who participated in this study. Overall, participants reported that their experiences within the 4-H program had a positive impact on their adolescence. The 4-H program is designed to allow students to get involved with their communities, be civically engaged, and make positive influences on themselves and society. The 4-H program allows members to be able to thrive by providing opportunities to get involved in their communities, which will not only better the members by growing into adults who are engaged and concerned with the communities but also make the community a better place. It is recommended that county 4-H educators use the PYDI to assess club members' PYD scores. Being aware of where club members rank within the 6Cs could assist club leaders in making specific goals and steer clubs in a direction that will help members become stronger in domains which they may rank lower.

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