

Factors Which Influence Participation And Non-Participation Of Ethnic Minority Youth In Ohio 4-H Programs

Jamie Cano, Assistant Professor
Joanne Bankston, Graduate Associate
The Ohio State University

The 4-H program has been one of the largest educational efforts in the United States. Sponsored by the Cooperative Extension Service through the United States Department of Agriculture, 4-H emphasizes youth development and leadership skills through educational projects and activities. Since program efforts are directed toward youth, it seems that all youth should be served. A closer look at the numbers of ethnic minority youth served by 4-H makes it uncertain whether or not efforts and strategies have been utilized to make 4-H programs accessible to all populations.

Problems related to serving minority youth were addressed in an Evaluation of Economic and Social Consequences of Cooperative Extension Programs published by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) (1980). USDA found "the definition of the target population as 'all youth ages 9 to 19' ignores the differential effects of 4-H educational treatments" (p. 125). USDA also asserted that since 4-H had not learned how to relate the most effective dimensions of the 4-H experience to the needs of minorities and the disadvantaged, an unconscious institutional, economic and racial discrimination pattern had developed.

Reaching and serving minority populations will require greater consideration in the future. Emerging demographic trends impact the Cooperative Extension Service and its 4-H component. The organization will face the challenge of becoming responsive to an increasing ethnically diverse population. The Task Force on Diversity sponsored by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) recognized that "the ability of the Cooperative Extension Service to play a pivotal role in meeting educational needs in the future is dependent upon its ability to expand its programs to access both diverse and traditional audiences, and its capacity to reflect diversity at all levels of the system (ECOP, 1990, p.1)."

The increasing number of ethnic minority youth provide a significant pool of potential members for inclusion in Ohio 4-H programs. Minority youth comprise approximately one-third of the youth in America. The number of minority youth has increased at a faster rate than nonminority youth. In 1987, 17.8% of youth in American ages 5 to 17 were white, while 23.6 were African American (United States Bureau of Census, 1989).

Ohio 4-H served over 151,00 youth during 1988 (Ohio Cooperative Extension Service, 1989). Of this total, approximately 12 percent were African American (60 percent of which were located in two Ohio counties), .05 percent were Native Americans, .50 percent were Hispanic American, and .40 percent were Asian Americans (Ohio Cooperative Extension Service, 1989). The demographic data for Ohio indicates that the population is approximately 12 percent African American (18% in the two counties previously referred to as serving 60% of the African American 4-H youth), .50 percent Native American, 1.5 percent Hispanic American, and 2.3 percent Asian American (United States Bureau of Census, 1989). Although the evidence clearly indicates that Ohio 4-H is attempting to serve ethnic minority youth, there is also evidence that Ohio 4-H is not serving these youth proportionately throughout the state.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore factors associated with participation and nonparticipation of ethnic minority youth in the Ohio 4-H program. The study also sought to identify the perception of minority parents regarding their childrens' participation and nonparticipation in Ohio 4-H.

The specific objectives of the study were to:

Determine those factors which were perceived by ethnic minority youth as positive influences for participating in Ohio 4-H programs.

Determine those factors which were perceived by ethnic minority youth as barriers to participation in Ohio 4-H programs.

Determine those factors which were perceived by the parents of ethnic minority youth as positive influences for their childrens' participation in Ohio 4-H programs.

Determine those factors which were perceived by the parents of ethnic minority youth as barriers to their childrens' participation in Ohio 4-H programs.

Procedures

Population and Sample

The population for this study consisted of ethnic minority youth and the parents of the ethnic minority youth in ten purposefully selected counties. The counties selected were those in each of the five Ohio Extension districts which had the highest percentage of ethnic minority youth served and the lowest percentage of ethnic minority youth served. Data from 1988 Extension 4-H enrollment figures (Ohio Cooperative Extension Service, 1989) were utilized to select counties. The following counties (cities) were selected: Hamilton (Cincinnati), Clermont (Batavia), Scioto (Portsmouth), Highland (Hillsboro), Muskingum (Zanesville), Coshocton (Coshocton), Lucas (Toledo), Hancock (Findley), Cuyahoga (Cleveland) and Geauga (Burton).

Two of the selected counties (Clermont and Geauga) were unable to participate because there were no minority youth enrolled in the program at the time the data were collected. Parents and youth in eight counties were interviewed. Youth involved in this study (n = 59) were current and former members of the Ohio 4-H program. Parents of ethnic minority enrollees and former enrollees (members of an Ohio 4-H program) made up the parent population (n = 44). The population of ethnic minority youth and parents in each of the eight participating counties were contacted through lists produced by the respective county extension agents.

Instrumentation

Focus group interviews were conducted in the eight Ohio counties between February and May, 1990. Questions were developed for interviewing youth and parents. The questioning route for both youth and parents focused on influences and barriers to participation involving minority youth in the 4-H program. The questions were reviewed by a panel of experts consisting of teacher educators, state level extension personnel, county extension personnel, and minority leaders to determine appropriate content, structure, and face validity.

Data Collection

The researchers traveled to selected counties to conduct focus group interviews in locations designated by county 4-H agents. Youth and parents had been notified of the meeting through a personal letter and a personal phone call. All parent interviews were conducted by one of the researchers while another researcher interviewed all youth.

Analysis of Data

Focus group interviews were audio taped for the purpose of analysis. The data were transcribed and summarized based on the interview questions.

Results

Focus group sessions were conducted in eight Ohio counties which included both urban and rural areas. While the majority of the youth and parents at most locations were African American, other ethnic minorities were represented including Hispanic Americans, Phillipino Americans and Asian Americans. Both male and female youth participated in the sessions. The majority of adult participants were female, however, several males participated in some sessions.

A summary of focus group findings indicated several themes, issues and commonalities repeatedly discussed by both youth and parents at many of the sessions. The interview questions focused on the following issues; knowledge and perception of the 4-H program; factors that influenced youth to join; factors that encourage youth to remain in the program; projects and events that youth enjoy most; factors that youth and parents particularly dislike; instances of discrimination; and suggestions for advertising 4-H.

Youth Findings

In general, minority youth found 4-H to provide a positive experience. The youth indicated that many of the 4-H activities were meaningful and educational. The awards and recognition program helped to build self-confidence while making youth feel good about themselves. At the same time, projects provided an opportunity for youth to utilize their time constructively which kept them off the street. Youth responses to questions regarding the program included: "Well, I remember joining 4-H because I liked the things that they would do to help the community." "I think that 4-H not only helps you while you are in school, but later on in life." "I think 4-H offers a place for you to learn and do better in education." "I think 4-H gives you confidence and makes you feel good about yourself." "It keeps us off of the streets."

Youth reported that they were most often influenced to join through a parent; a relative who served as an agent, assistant, or leader; or a friend. "The thing that influenced me to join is my mother. She got a 4-H group started." "I got involved because of my Grandma." "We learned about it because my Aunt is a 4-H person." "The first time I learned about 4-H was when my friend invited me to a meeting to see if I liked it." "I got started by my Auntie Carla. She's the 4-H agent." Moreover they remained in the 4-H program because they enjoyed the projects, activities, and events. Some youth found 4-H to be a place to learn new things, have fun, and at the same time develop leadership skills. Others enjoyed camps, events, and the trips. And one Hispanic young man stated that he wanted to "Prove that a minority could excel in 4-H." When asked what is the number one reason why you stay in 4-H, youth responded: "The achievements." "The projects and activities." "Making new friends." "The thing I like about 4-H is the trips and when you go on trips you can learn about things you haven't learned before." "One thing that 4-H has offered me is leadership skills."

Projects and events most frequently discussed were food projects, sewing and style review, arts and crafts, 4-H speaking contests and demonstrations, and 4-H camp. Youth in one urban area were unusually interested in the speaking contests and demonstrations because of the leadership skills and self-confidence promoted by the events. "There are quite a few things I like about 4-H. One is 4-H camp and 4-H camp weekend." "This year I participated in clothing, speech, and cooking." "I like the arts and crafts." "The other reason besides the speaking skills, it is also a lot more than that when you get into a contest and you win and you get a ribbon or you just get recognized for what you do." Urban youth also expressed a desire to learn more about farming and farm animals which are inaccessible to them. "I have seen two farms since then and that was a big learning experience for us. In one 4-H project, we made a miniature farm and several of the kids studied up on it and that was a good learning experience." While a number of projects and events were discussed, it was evident that minority youth were unaware of all the opportunities available through the 4-H program -- dimensions of the program offering competition for national and international trips and awards.

Youth perceived several factors as barriers to participation. Occasional conflict with other activities was a problem cited. A general concern was noted regarding the inequity of judging activities exhibited through criteria and treatment during events. Urban youth were unable to participate in some activities that required farm animals unavailable to them because of residence. Yet, these activities were perceived as priority activities in judging events by minority youth. One young lady stated: "Another thing is a lot of minorities live in cities and a large part of 4-H are animal projects and things like that, and 4-H doesn't take into consideration that we don't have the farmland and the animals and the materials that we need to raise animals. We may enter into an event and get blown out by other 4-H clubs who have animals and farms and things like that." Some minority youth expressed feelings of isolation experienced at the state fair and other events. They explained that very few minority youth were present at some events and they had limited interaction with whites. "There are not a lot of minority groups. So a lot of times a member will enter into a certain project or event and be the only minority and feel uncomfortable."

Youth felt that more extensive, targeted efforts to advertise 4-H would make more minority kids aware of 4-H. One young man suggested advertising 4-H in conjunction with activities involving music and concerts. "Music is a big thing. If you could get someone to come to some kind of music concert that involved 4-H and stuff, and display things that 4-H'ers have done and share with others how much fun and what you could learn, I mean you could probably get more people involved." Other suggestions included holding meetings in neighborhoods where minority youth live, displaying projects that 4-H'ers have made and displaying posters advertising 4-H in schools and community centers. "Make posters and have more meetings close to where black people live -- like this center right here. Hang them up and have meetings here and learn about it."

Adult Findings

Parents expressed strong interest in the educational opportunities and activities provided through the 4-H program. Parents were pleased with the leadership skills developed by their children through 4-H. In addition, parents perceived that 4-H activities helped their children to develop a sense of responsibility and self-worth while offering opportunities for youth to interact with people of other cultures. Overall, 4-H was viewed as an organization that provided beneficial educational activities that encouraged youth development while assisting them in making constructive use of their time. As a result, 4-H kept youth off the streets and out of trouble. Parents repeatedly expressed benefits derived from the 4-H program. "I think probably the most important thing for me when my kids started was the fact that it was to learn responsibility and to carry through with something once it was started." "What I thought that they could get out of it was the

speaking skills, and to be able to write.” “It gives children a feeling of self-worth. It keeps a lot of kids out of trouble..” “My daughter is a result of 4-H. She used to be very shy.” “I knew 4-H had quite a few leadership programs. With leadership comes responsibility.”

Prior to being approached by an agent or leader, most minority parents had limited knowledge of the 4-H program. Many parents viewed the program as something for rural white kids that involved farm animals. “I first heard about 4-H when I was in high school. They had a Future Farmer Association. What I understood at that point twenty years ago, was that 4-H was for kids who lived in the country, because they raised pigs and rabbits and things like that.” “I have known about 4-H for a long time and I grew up on a farm. At that time, all the 4-H I was involved with had to do with farm animals and if you didn’t have livestock, you didn’t belong. We didn’t have livestock, so I didn’t belong.” “The first time I ever heard about 4-H was in high school, but it never applied to us. It was a white organization so we never thought much about it.”

While some parents had heard of the 4-H organization while growing up, most became involved in the program through personal contact. “I heard about it through one of the members at church, Jean. She asked me if I would be a 4-H leader, and I was scared to death. And after she explained some of the things to me, it’s been a lot of fun. I’ve been in it for 10 years.” “I first heard of it from one of my neighbors. Eventually I got involved in a community service club working with the children and that gave me the opportunity to get into 4-H with one of the agents here. Carla gave me an overview of what 4-H was about and our primary objective.”

Lack of advertising was cited as a barrier to participation. Furthermore, the parents concluded that the advertisements depicting 4-H programs did not generally include minority youth, nor were they written so that urban parents could understand program offerings. “I think most blacks just don’t know about 4-H. There is a lack of advertisement.” “As far as the publicity, I see the commercial on TV. When you see it, it’s the white kids you see in a commercial. They are on animals and black kids feel it has to do with farming, and no one is going to try for animals.” “Public or community center workshops is another way to promote, and the material you use should be comics. It should not be complex, that way you can get the kids and the parents.”

Parents suggested several methods of advertising 4-H to other minority parents and youth to increase participation. Suggested methods included; having speakers explain 4-H in minority churches; having public or community center workshops for youth and parents in areas where minorities live; advertising on public broadcasting TV stations; advertising on minority radio stations (there are several in Ohio) or on white radio stations that minorities most frequently listen to; promoting 4-H in black newspapers through articles and photos of minority youth participating in events; and having mall shows and booths that demonstrate 4-H activities and events. “The churches are one way. The community leaders there and the ministry are ways to reach minorities.” “Most minorities go to church. Have a speaker to make the different churches and explain 4-H.” “For minorities, use Black newspapers. Then you would want to touch on Hispanics -- maybe radio stations -- Black, and Hispanic radio stations, etc.” “Even the radio stations can promote it, not just the Black stations, but white radio stations can promote it also. Blacks listen to white radio stations too.” “I don’t know how much free advertising you could get out of it, but if you had something like they do in the malls where each group could have a booth on public speaking or whatever.”

Another significant barrier to participation cited by parents was the lack of minority adult role models involved in 4-H (agents, assistants and leaders). These role models helped to involve parents and youth in the program. Following involvement, once parents learned about all of the opportunities provided by 4-H, many were disappointed

that they themselves were unable to participate as youth. "If you really want to know how to get minorities, then you have minorities for yourself to get in these communities and get these children." "I think I would like to see more black involvement. Carla is the only person we have. She's really been involved with 4-H and she has been very helpful. In fact, if it wouldn't have been for Carla, we probably wouldn't have got involved."

Finally, parents cited that participation was further limited by an inability to get enough parents interested and involved. There was a critical concern regarding 4-H enrollees lack of funds for supporting projects and events. This economic factor prohibited full participation. "The only thing I can think of is the lack of participation from the parents. I found that to be involved in everything, not just 4-H." "Some kinds' parents in the urban area don't have the money to buy material." "We are working with a set income for minorities. One year Carla was promoting camp for 4-H which was not bad, just that the set income the people are on. it's impossible to send their kids to camp."

Parents also reported discrepancies in judging at events. Parents at several focus group sessions discussed inconsistencies in judging at the state fair; inequitable treatment by other parents and leaders at the state fair; and lack of interaction between minorities and whites at events. "I've never seen a black kid win at the state fair." "I will take my daughter there and help her get what she wants, but I won't be involved that much anymore, because of some of the inconsistencies in judging and the way people handle things during the fair." "We took some children to the state fair last year for demonstrations, and they were told by a lady in another 4-H group that they weren't going to win before they did the demonstrations."

Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

Baaed on themes and commonalities reported in the study, ethnic minority youth and parents found several positive influences for participation. The experiences, activities and opportunities for youth development were cited as positive influences for participation. The Cooperative Extension Service should continue to emphasize the aspects of youth development in its effort to recruit and retain minority youth.

Youth and parents cited the lack of role models as a barrier to participation. The presence of minority agents, assistants, and leaders served as a catalyst for getting youth involved and retaining them in the program. The Cooperative Extension Service should make a conscious effort to recruit minority agents and leaders in an effort to fulfill a void of necessary minority role models for minority youth. The recruitment of minority agents and leaders is especially critical in urban areas where a higher percentage of minority children reside.

Since many minority parents and youth were unaware of the 4-H program, increased advertising through nontraditional methods would assist in better recruitment efforts. Advertising on minority radio stations, in minority newspapers, and perhaps through minority churches would make more youth and parents aware of the program. Advertising should adequately describe the dimensions of the program including the activities, events and projects. Furthermore, advertisements should include minority youth in photos and TV ads. Certainly the most effective advertising tool is the "personal touch" promotion through agents, youth, and leaders already involved in the program.

Since youth in some counties were involved in the EFNEP (Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program) designed for limited resource families, the nature of the program may limit the subject matter, projects and potential for experiencing many dimensions of 4-H. The Cooperative Extension Service should make every effort to involve youth beyond the EFNEP program in counties where EFNEP activities are the predominate vehicle for enrolling minority youth.

Youth and parents perceived 4-H as an organization for rural white youth with farm animals since many of the competitive events at the fair involved animals. It is recommended that 4-H review project offerings and provide equal opportunities for nonfarm youth in the high consequence areas (areas involving competitive events and awards) with projects other than those involving animals.

Since the cost of participation (funds for project supplies, refreshments for meetings, camps, and traveling to events) was another factor of concern, methods and potential funding sources should be explored. Perhaps programs could be devised whereby youth could perform community work in exchange for funding for projects and activities.

It should be recognized that in some urban areas, the materials and activities must be adapted and in some instances, new material might be developed to address concerns and social circumstances of urban youth. Perhaps funding provided by the state legislature for urban 4-H assistants can incorporate monetary resources for material and equipment.

Methods of equalization for recognition in judging events should be reviewed. The limited tenure, involvement and resources of some minority youth limit their level of sophistication in competitive events.

Concern was noted by both youth and parents in the lack of equitable treatment and criteria for judging activities. Urban minority youth discussed the inability to participate in some special projects (animal judging) that were geared specifically for rural youth. The Cooperative Extension Service should make a critical analysis of the project judging procedures and guidelines for training judges to sensitize them toward fairness to all. White youth and parents must also become sensitized to the fact that the 4-H program is open to all individuals regardless of race or color. As more minority youth and leaders become involved, this transition may take place.

Certainly the Cooperative Extension Service should become aware of exposing minority youth to all dimensions of 4-H. Informing and encouraging youth to take necessary steps for competition for national and international trips and awards would move toward promoting full participation.

References

- Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (Report of the Task Force on Diversity). (1990). Addressing diversity in the 1990's and beyond: CES can make a difference. Strategic Planning Council. ES-USDA
- Ohio Cooperative Extension Service. (1989). 1988 Annual Report
- United States Bureau of the Census. (1989). Current population reports. Series P-25.
- United States Department of Agriculture. (1980). Evaluation of economic and social consequences of Coonerative Extension Programs. Science and Education Administration · Extension, Washington, D.C.