Provocative Thoughts on 4-H

School achievement scores declined noticeably for those boys studied who stayed in 4-H the longest

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FOUR-H CONTINUES to win accolades for its lofty ideals, and its continuous striving to make these ideals a reality. Can any movement have a more laudable goal than to enhance those attributes of *Head, Heart, Hands,* and *Health* which embody the very *raison d'etre* of the nation? Indeed, it is a comfort in this changing world that these clearly visioned beacons persist to draw us on to the heights. Yet can anyone state with certainty the degree to which the movement has been sucessful in these endeavors?

From tributes to the various accomplishments of successful 4-H Club members who have been cheered to the empyrean for their hard-won triumphs, the uninitiated may have concluded, pardonably, that all 4-H Club members win prizes; yet sober reflection must reveal that not everyone can be a winner of awards. Out of the annual membership of some 2,000,000 in the U.S.A. and 73,000 in Canada there must be many who have not won prizes, trophies, cups, and trips, or gone on pilgrimages to Chicago, Toronto, Ottawa, or Washington, D.C. But is success for a 4-H member to be measured only by these kinds of awards, or are there other criteria of success to be considered?

A recent study involving a sample of 4-H Club members in Wisconsin[1] does not answer the question just raised but it does suggest

[1] Echo L. R. Lidster, "An Analysis of Certain Educational and Socio-Economic Factors as They Relate to the Nature, Number of 4-H Projects Selected, and the Project Progression Shown by 4-H Members at Grades One, Six and Nine in Ten Wisconsin Communities" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1963). This was part of a larger study which is reported in Burton W. Kreitlow and Echo Lidster, *Who Joins 4-H Clubs?— Part 2,* Research Bulletin 254 (Madison: Agricultural Experiment Station, University of Wisconsin, November, 1964).

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some areas of concern that deserve further attention. This study focused on kinds and numbers of projects, the level of progression attained in projects, and the relationship of these project factors to academic performance and socio-economic factors. (Progression describes the degree of advancement in project responsibility undertaken by the 4-H Club member during his tenure of membership.) This article explores findings in the two broad areas of academic performance and family socio-economic status.

The group studied consisted of 67 girls and 75 boys enrolled in grade 12 in ten Wisconsin communities. Their inclusion resulted from their being part of a larger, long-time study concerning school reorganization in these ten communities.[2] Boys in the group studied participated in dairy, electrical, garden, sheep and woodworking projects. Girls were enrolled in clothing, food, and livestock projects. Although frequently enrolled in more than one 4-H project, these members were identified in the 1963 study by those projects in which they were most active throughout their 4-H career.

Socio-Economic Factors

Certain socio-economic factors were explored as the basis for understanding the circumstances in which these 4-H members' project activities were carried out.[3] The findings indicated a relationship between socio-economic background and choice of projects. They also indicated that the program was reaching mainly those whose living standards were high. More specifically, boys enrolled in sheep projects were from larger families than those enrolled in dairy or garden projects. There appeared to be no difference in family size for girls enrolled in clothing, food, and livestock projects. As would be expected, boys and girls enrolled in dairy projects were from families which owned more dairy cows and whose socio-economic status was higher.

Higher socio-economic scores for the families of girls in livestock projects appeared to be consistent with a similar finding for boys in dairy projects. Such findings suggest that boys and girls in animal projects belong to a more affluent segment of the rural community than do the members taking other projects. Usually the parents of

[2] See B. W. Kreitlow, *Long-Term Study of Educational Effectiveness in Newly Formed Centralized School Districts in Rural Areas,* Department of Agricultural and Extension Education Cooperative Research Project 375 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, September, 1962).

[3] Sewell's short form for measuring family socio-economic status was used. See William H. Sewell, "A Short Form of the Family Socioeconomic Status Scale," *Rural Sociology,* VIII (June, 1943), 161-70.

boys who had dairy projects belonged to more organizations than those in this study who chose electrical, sheep, garden, or woodworking projects. This finding is expected since the socio-economic status of the dairy farmer may require more participation in community activities than is required of those in other types of agricultural pursuits.

Overall, in this sample more 4-H members came from rural families with higher levels of living. Based on this finding, the question can be raised: Do poorer families believe that the cost of the project —or of that project which brings the most glamorous material reward—is beyond their means? If so, do some 4-H members drop from the program because they believe that the quality of the project is the important criterion for success? Do they believe that they cannot afford agricultural projects which can compete with those of the more affluent members?

Academic Factors

A pattern appeared when boys were studied according to their academic performance with respect to the number of 4-H projects they took during the span of their 4-H membership. The number of projects for which they enrolled during their 4-H careers ranged from 1 to more than 13. There was an understandable fluctuation of academic achievement scores through the range of project participation. Not so readily understandable was the striking tendency for those boys who stayed in Club work long enough to take 13 or more projects to have the lowest academic scores. This was true when these boys were tested at grade 1 and was equally marked when the same boys were tested in grades 6 and 9.

Academic achievement was also compared with the progression in their 4-H projects. Boys who showed maximum progression in projects were poorer achievers in school than those whose membership tenure was shorter and whose progression in projects was just over or less than half that of the maximum progression group. In fact, boys who attained maximum progression in their projects not only had the lowest scores for school achievement when compared with those who showed less project progression, their achievement scores had actually dropped as they had been tested over the period from grade 1. Thus, these two analyses (number of projects *vs.* achievement scores and project progression *vs.* achievement scores) revealed similar tendencies.

Girls' school achievement in relation to numbers of projects carried and project progression was also studied. Differences that oc-

curred were much less pronounced than for boys. There was no evidence that girls' achievement scores had declined during the testing period for those carrying 13 projects and over or those showing maximum project progression. Boys did not perform academically at the level girls did. When boys' and girls' scores on standard school tests were compared at grades 1, 6, and 9, there were only 5 instances out of 123 where boys obtained higher scores than girls.

Why the Difference

This discrepancy raises questions as to why this difference in performance between boys and girls may have occurred. Are these differences that could typically be expected between the way boys and girls perform? Could it be that differences in the nature of projects taken in agriculture and home economics may have some bearing on school scores achieved? It has been the author's experience that home economics programs for girls, en toto, are much less production-oriented than are agricultural programs for boys. This type of program for girls may attract higher achievers or produce higher achievement. Or is the school program structured to capture the interests and efforts of girls more than of boys the same age?

The tendency for low academic-achieving boys to be associated with maximum number of projects and the maximum project progression leads to this question: Do low academic achievers flock into 4-H or does an extra load of 4-H activity disperse their energies in a way to make them low academic achievers? It might be appropriate to ask the following of the 4-H program itself: Is maximum membership tenure sought for its own sake rather than for the purpose of providing increasingly challenging experience? Do young people seek membership simply because 4-H is a prestigeful organization?

These data suggest that high achievers among boys may deliberately leave 4-H early. This leads one to seek the motives. It must be kept in mind that the young people in this study have remained in one community throughout their membership tenure; the evidences were not affected by in- or out-migration. Also, companion studies (involving some of the same Club members) have suggested that young people dropped 4-H membership because, in their estimation, the 4-H program was weak.[4]

Evidence to date does not provide the basis for conclusions re-

[4] See Burton W. Kreitlow, Lowell Pierce, and Curtis Middleton, *Who Joins 4-H Clubs?*, Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin 215 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, October, 1959).

garding such questions as the following; it does provide a tentative basis, however, for raising them. Such questions as these may be appropriate for those concerned with 4-H: Did those who remained in the program also find the program weak? If they did, why did they continue? Do only those continue who win in competitive activities? Are those who continue more or less competition oriented? Do those members who have won the most awards in 4-H accomplish this by simply staying in? Do they outlast rather than outwin their competitors? If long-term members did not believe that 4-H was weak, was it because they were less or more perceptive than those who believed that their needs were not being met by the 4-H program? Were the aspirations and expectations of those who continued different than for those who desired changes in the program? Are the 4-H dropouts also the school dropouts? Are school dropouts more or less likely to be low achievers?

Conclusion

These findings, along with the fact that school achievement scores declined noticeably for the boys in this study who stayed in 4-H the longest, should stimulate 4-H authorities to ask questions about the performance of boys who remain in the 4-H program, the kinds of 4-H programs available to them, and the kinds of school curricula available to them as well.

Why is there less variability in academic scores among the girls who took home economics projects than among boys who took agricultural projects? Do the more academically competent boys exhaust their interest in 4-H at an earlier stage and move to other activities before reaching the maximum possible years of membership in 4-H? Is the prospect of a few days at local exhibitions more appealing than the possibility of sustained learning experiences? Do members and parents actually know as little about the real objectives of 4-H work as has been indicated in one study?[5]

The 4-H record over the years has been so impressive that any questioning of its effectiveness is frequently looked upon with doubt, disfavor, and even suspicion. This report of findings with the resulting questions has been attempted in an effort to prompt some penetrating and objective thinking in order that 4-H may become a more effective force for change according to the objectives set for its program.

[5] See Joseph C. Brownell, "Concepts of the Role of the 4-H Project Held by Members of Monroe County, New York" (unpublished Master's thesis, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1958).