Promoting the Essential Elements of 4-H Youth Development Through an Experiential Learning Model

Abstract

The purpose of the project reported here was to apply Experiential Learning Theory to a context involving middle and high school aged youth while assessing the four concepts (belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity) in relation to the 4-H youth development essential elements. The conclusions of the project's evaluation suggest implications for further youth programming, as this project demonstrated promise in all (concept) areas. Youth indicated the acquiring of specific life skills as well as opportunities to apply those skills through various opportunities. The authors suggest recommendations for those who wish to incorporate experiential learning models within youth development programs.

Shelley Meyer
4-H Youth
Development Agent
shelley.meyer@uky.edu

Kenneth R. Jones
Associate Professor
kenrjones@uky.edu

University of Kentucky
Lexington, Kentucky

Introduction

In order to attain experiences that aid in positive development, it is important for youth to be engaged learners. Researchers and practitioners have identified core competencies for quality programming (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; National 4-H Impact Assessment, 2001; Search Institute, 2004). In addition, Experiential Learning Theory has been applied to a variety of contexts. Although a number of models exist, the common foundational theme is that the human experience aids significantly in the learning process (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984). However, it is critical to note that learning is enriched when educators provide learning environments that allow reflection and application (Enfield, Schmitt-McQuitty, & Smith, 2007).

At the national level, 4-H promotes eight essential elements as the cornerstone for positive youth development principles (Table 1). However, youth development professionals still need guidance on applying the concepts. This article offers insight on how youth can be engaged in learning through the essential elements, which are often categorized under four key concepts: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Kress, 2004). Table 1 illustrates how the elements are associated with the four concepts.

Table 1.

Four Key Concepts

Belonging	Mastery
Positive Relationship with a Caring Adult An Inclusive Environment A Safe Environment	Engagement in Learning Opportunity for Mastery
Independence	**Generosity**
Opportunity to See Oneself as an Active Participant in the Future Opportunity for Self-Determination	Opportunity to Value and Practice Service for Others

Purpose

The purpose of the project reported here was to determine if an experiential learning model would create a venue for youth to gain exposure to concepts that promote positive youth development. The objectives include providing participants with: a sense of *belonging*; opportunities for *mastery*/skill development; formed levels of *independence*, and/or contributing to their community through acts of *generosity*.

Methods

A purposive sample of youth was selected for this project based on participants' involvement in a local county 4-H program. Youth participated in the 4-month implementation and maintenance of a garden project. A series of educational topics were used throughout each month to generate the skills needed to effectively plant and raise a garden and then develop a marketing plan to sell their produce. These topics included maintaining raised garden beds, rain barrels and irrigating systems, marketing produce through farmer's markets, weeding and tending gardens, and nutritional components of vegetables. Additionally, youth engaged in citizenship by planting a flowerbed to enhance the aesthetics around the local Extension office as a way to give back to a community facility.

A pre-survey was co-designed by the authors to take a qualitative assessment of youth perceptions of the four key (4-H) concepts in regards to the gardening program. The survey was administered to all participants involved in the project prior to the start of the first meeting date. Items on the survey assessed: youth perceptions toward sense of belonging as a result of participating; whether youth mastered particular skills; if youth developed a new-found degree of independence; and if youth increased their desire to give back (i.e., generosity). At the conclusion of the gardening project (4 months later), youth were asked to complete a post-survey. Although pre and post mean scores were compared to determine changes in perceptions or actions, more emphasis was placed on analyzing the qualitative experiences reported by the participants.

Findings

Results from the pre- and post-surveys did reflect an increase in youth perceptions. Mean scores were comprised from the number of those starting out as participants (n=16); a total of 12 individuals completed the project, along with both pre- and post-surveys. The survey items were on a scale of 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The items related to *belonging* revealed a small increase in perceptions from the pre-survey to post-survey (4.14 compared to 4.38). Youth participants responded to items such as "being able to relate to other youth". The level of *mastery* was a key factor for youth participants, with survey results showing an increase in mean scores, indicating that youth had improvements in their gardening skills and the marketing of their produce (3.94 vs. 4.29). Several noted that this was due to hands-on learning afforded by the garden project. Mean scores revealed an increase between pre and post (3.90 vs. 4.33), indicating that youth felt they had gained *independence* by feeling confident in doing things on their own. The assessment of the project revealed that when youth have an opportunity to engage in community service, this may promote *generosity* in their desire to want to maintain this behavior as an adult (Promoting Active Youth Citizenship, 2007). This was true when it came to their experience with this project as the mean scores (for generosity) showed the largest increase from the pre-survey (3.46) to the post survey (4.00), in comparison to the other concepts.

Conclusions

Items assessing *belonging* showed a minimal, yet positive evaluated responses, indicating that this construct plays a role in offering youth access to opportunities that connect them to positive peers. It was also communicated to the authors through conversations and observations that teamwork was evident. Youth expressed the highest change in *mastery*; hence, such projects can help youth develop those employable skills that are critical to the workforce. Also, with the project offering a chance for youth to display *independence*, it can be inferred that youth gained a sense of autonomy from their experience with hands-on involvement. Finally, in regard to *generosity,* favorable responses were offered and actions put forth to show how youth valued this experience. When asked to rate how often they "feel good about themselves when giving back to others," youth reported how critical it was to help others. This project emphasized that youth can develop a nurturing spirit that is willing to contribute to society now, as well as in adulthood.

This and similar projects can benefit youth professionals and programs embracing the 4-H Essential Elements. By "doing" and then reflecting, youth could adequately process their thoughts and further generalize or relate the events of the garden and knowledge of nutrition to their everyday lives. Finally, youth reported being able to apply these concepts to real-life situations. More emphasis should be placed on the 4-H Essential Elements to ensure that programmatic efforts are successful in helping youth achieve critical life skills and positive youth development. As youth enter adulthood, such strategies could help acquire stronger attributes that mimic the four key concepts.

References

Catalano, R. F., Berglund, M. L., Ryan, J., Lonczak, H. S., & Hawkins, J.D. (2004). Positive youth development in the United States: Research findings on the evaluations of positive youth development programs. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Retrieved from: http://ann.sagepub.com/content/591/1/186.extract

Czuba, C., & Anderson, S. A., & Higgins, S. (2006). Evaluation of the people rmpowering people program within a prison population. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 44(4) Article 4RIB4. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2006august/rb4.php

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. (2002). Community programs to promote youth development. *National Research Council and Institute of Medicine*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

Essential elements of 4-H youth development: Key ingredients for program success. (2009). Retrieved from: http://www.national4-hheadquarters.gov/comm/esselements.pdf

Enfield, R. P., Schmitt-McQuitty, L. S., & Smith, M. H. (2007). The development and evaluation of experiential learning workshops for 4-H volunteers. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 45(1). Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2007february/a2.php

Hensley, S. T., Place, N. T., Jordan, J. C., & Israel, G. D. (2007). Quality 4-H youth development programs: Belonging. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 45(5) Article 5FEA8. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2007october/a8.php

Kolb, D. A. (1984). Experiential learning; Experience as the source of learning and development.*New Jersey: Prentice-Hall*. Retrieved from: http://academic.regis.edu/ed205/kolb.pdf

National 4-H impact assessment. (2001). Retrieved from: http://ag.arizona.edu/icyf/evaluation/critical_elements.htm

Promoting active youth citizenship. (2007, December). Retrieved from: Nokia and International Youth Foundation: http://www.whatkidscando.org

Search Institute. (2004). *40 developmental assets*. Retrieved from: http://www.search-institute.org/assets/40assets.pdf.