

Including at-risk Populations in Urban 4-H After-school Programs

Melinda Garcia*, Manuel Piña and Darrell Dromgoole

Department of Agriculture, Leadership, Education and Communication, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, College Station, Texas, USA

*Corresponding author: Melinda Garcia, Department of Agriculture, Leadership, Education and Communication, Texas A&M AgriLife, Extension, College Station, Texas, USA, Tel: 1-210-954-3331; Fax: 1-210-631-0429; E-mail: melinda.garcia@ag.tamu.edu

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Abstract

While there are plenty of after-school programs to keep students busy, how many after-school programs are effective and truly meet the needs of students? Are there successful after-school programs that specifically target at-risk minorities in urban areas? An article by Protheroe, states that after-school programs look different from site to site and focus on child care and not academics. In a study of 138 published research articles, Scott-Little, Hamann and Jurs found that a mere fifteen after-school programs were designed well and generated data on student outcomes. Those numbers are a peek into the stark reality of the lack of effective after-school programs that students need to bridge the gap between home and school, especially at-risk minority youth. Durlak and Weissberg stated that evidence suggests when and how students spend their time outside of a classroom has implications for their development. A reflection on a successful collaboration for reaching at-risk minority youth in urban areas in San Antonio, Texas will shed light on how to engage this hard-to-reach youth population. While there are individuals charged with running after-school programs, it does not mean that the right individuals are being hired for the job. For example, hiring an African-American to lead an after-school program that is composed of predominantly at-risk Hispanic minority youth might prove to be counterproductive. While the African-American may have experience working with students, it does not mean that that person will be successful with the at-risk Hispanic minority population inability to speak Spanish or lack of knowledge of the culture which may be obstacles in communicating effectively. Hiring a person who fits the demographics of the targeted population will prove to be beneficial for the students and the after-school programming for at-risk minorities.

Keywords: At-risk minority youths; Urban after school programs; 4-H afterschool programs; Culture; Successful afterschool programs; Inclusion

Introduction

After-school programs seem to provide safe havens, busy work, socialization, and snacks, but if at-risk youth attend, are their needs being met? Parents are tasked with deciding what after-school program best suits their children's needs as after-school programs offered for participants is fierce, with Boys & Girls Clubs, Girls Inc., YMCA, Boy & Girl Scouts, and 4-H Youth Development programs. After-school programs can focus on specifics, e.g., academics, theater arts, tutoring, and robotics, but are evaluations in place to measure educational outcomes and impacts on youth? A study by Walker and Arbretton in San Francisco, about a program that aimed to garner participation from youths and adults through various activities, revealed that programming improves participation by youth, but that certain concrete steps need to be taken for this to happen [1].

Texas 4-H Youth Development Program (Texas 4-H) has been successful in taking these steps. Texas 4H is the Youth Development Program of our nation's Cooperative Extension System that served nearly 6 million youth in 2016 (All things Texas 4-H, 2017). 4-H programming occurs in rural and urban areas across Texas via the Cooperative Extension System, which in Texas is housed at Texas A&M University and Prairie View A&M University and local county Extension offices. The fact that this organization provides quality youth development programming and has been around for more than a century not only speaks volumes about the program, but also solidifies

the commitment it has to develop leaders among youth. Many programs rely on grant funding which means that there is buy-in from those who grant the awards and from the community for programs to develop and succeed. Grant funding does not diminish the types of programming that are provided to youth through Texas 4-H. In fact, grants provide many opportunities for minority youth who would otherwise not have opportunities for 4-H programming.

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service's 4-H Youth Development Program received a five-year Children, Youth, and Families At-Risk (CYFAR) grant from the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) in late Summer of 2015 for a Texas Sustainable Communities Project in Harris County (Houston) and Bexar County (San Antonio). Texas 4-H Foundation received a Juntos 4-H two-year grant from New York Life and the National 4-H Council in the summer of 2015. The Juntos 4-H grant was renewed for an additional three years. Both grants target urban at-risk minority teen populations. In this paper, an Extension 4-H Specialist, retrospectively and introspectively, reflects on her many efforts to include 4-H youth, parents/volunteers, school teachers, administrators, community leaders, faculty from local universities, and Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Agents and Specialists. The challenge was exacerbated by the simple fact that Extension programs, especially 4-H, were virtually unknown in the urban target areas in both cities. As a result, innovative ways to reach the target audience with quality mainstream activities through after-school 4-H chartered clubs, as opposed to often-used after-school enrichment programs that serve large numbers, but are not sustainable or effective, were undertaken. Examples of innovative approaches for achieving success to this point include: relationships, communication, language capability (bilingual,

English and Spanish), understanding culture, networking, accountability, and work of volunteers. Programming has taken place in two 4-H after-school urban programs that specifically identify, target and identifies at-risk minority youth.

Keys to Success

Relationships, communication, positive attitude, language capability (bilingual, English and Spanish), understanding the culture, networking, accountability, and work of volunteers have proven to be the keys to success. Establishing relationships with students and stakeholders is fundamental so that everyone involved can see the commitment from those who manage the after-school programs. In Paisley's article that focuses on the extent of positive youth-adult relationships, she stated that in order for youth to achieve their full potential, relationships with caring adults are vital [2]. After school staff attendance at school meetings and community functions helps to strengthen partnerships and builds relationships. Keeping administrators, teachers, students, parents, volunteers, counselors, and janitors in the loop allows for transparency which demonstrates great leadership as observed by program coordinator at both grant schools. For example, informing school administrators and janitors about a change in a family night can allow for changes to be made to keep everyone involved abreast of the 4-H programming. Overtime, trust is built and administrators are more likely to provide needed items and space for events and/or activities. For example, for the CYFAR School in San Antonio, St. John Berchmans' (SJB), and a classroom was secured and designated for weekly 4-H programming. Out of the nearly 120 enrolled 4-Hers and Clovers (PK-3rd graders) at SJB, between 60-80 are active weekly participants. The secured 4-H classroom solidified partnerships with the school and CYFAR grant program coordinator and opened doors for Extension to conduct programming at SJB as well. Having that relationship allows for successful quality 4-H programming to be delivered. In Houston, the part-time assistant program coordinator was provided a shared space to work at Cristo Rey Jesuit College Preparatory which permitted a constant presence to develop and establish relationships with students, teachers, and administrators. These two recognitions by the schools speak volumes for the type of after-school programming taking place that promotes positive youth development.

Communication is key: It is better to over communicate than to not communicate at all. Documenting attempts at communication is helpful. When calls are made, reminders can be made that the call is a follow-up to a previous conversation or failed attempt. It is recommended to not hesitate to call, email, and/or text the school administrators of changed plans or ideas to collaborate. Administrators embrace collaboration when they witness the impact of the after-school programming. Often, administrators are busy running a school and do not have time to explore new innovative approaches, but when presented with ideas, they are more apt to agree and give permission to undertake novel and productive approaches. Pictures and reports about 4-H after-school programming tell the story of the positive impact the 4-H program has on the at-risk students so be sure to share with appropriate individuals. Meeting face to face is probably the preferred method of communication, but again, once communication has been established, determining the best method to use will become evident. For example, calling parents the day after permission slips were handed out for an agricultural related field trip to ensure that they received the permission slip allows the parent's time to digest information and make a decision if they can chaperone the event.

Protheroe concluded, based on literature that formal and consistent specific communication between staff from after-school programs and day schools needs to take place since communication was a measure of effective programs [3]. This finding solidifies the importance of communication between key personnel for school administrators, staff, and after-school programming that needs to take place on a regular basis.

A **positive attitude** in those involved in the 4-H after-school programming sets the tone. A positive attitude starts with a smile that allows trust to be gained which allows the ability to engage, nurture, and encourage at-risk minority youth to believe in themselves. Positive attitudes reflect self-confidence. In the article by Durlak and Weissberg, which focuses on the impact of after-school programs while promoting social and personal skills, one of the findings showed is that in three major areas (feelings and attitudes, indicators of behavioral adjustment and school performance), youth were significantly impacted [4]. Many times, at-risk youth question the sincerity of one's approach because they may not be used to having people care and take a vested interest in them. At-risk minority youth may tend to remain guarded at first, but once constant communication and a relationship has been built, at-risk teens become transparent and allow coaching and mentoring to take place. Youths as well as adults will benefit from having a positive attitude. For example, in Bexar County, at SJB, the program coordinator can be seen walking the hallways working on 4-H programming for the week and students see her and observe that she is happy and eager to share the activity for the week. The program coordinator's excitement and positive attitude make the students excited about the weekly 4-H after-school programming because a positive connection was made.

Language capability, in this case, speaking Spanish, helps break barriers. Oftentimes, students and parents do not engage due to the inability to communicate; therefore, lose interest. Once the language barrier has been broken, parents are willing to allow their child (ren) to take part in urban 4-H after-school programs. Success for programming depends on the provider's investment in preparing for events. In a study that focused on understanding Latino parental involvement, by Zarate, the biggest barrier for participation that parents claimed was language and the barrier grew larger as their children progressed through school and the academics became more rigorous [5]. Once teachers reach out to parents and make efforts to communicate, parents become more comfortable with advocating for their children. More often than not, bilingual parents will volunteer as they now have someone to engage with and speak their language. In observations of Latino women, they tend to be shy as their husbands are often the ones who are the spokespersons for the families. When given the opportunity, the women, will get involved as they see it as not only an opportunity for their child (ren), but also as an opportunity to learn English. Unexpected outcomes would be that some mothers end up asking for assistance with community programs because they are now aware of the resources available and want to take advantage of what is offered education wise. The students and parents become empowered knowing that leaders of the programs speak their language and are more apt to participate, lead, and recruit other families.

Understanding the culture is as critical as is speaking the language. In Ogbu's article, which focused on learning and understanding cultural diversity, he stated that minorities have greater difficulty with crossing cultural barriers when it comes to learning because their cultural frame of references is in opposition to the American mainstream culture [6]. Ogbu's article makes sense in that minority

youth already struggle to keep up in school and not understanding the culture exacerbates the academic learning curve. If most at-risk students are Latino, make sure that programming includes references to their culture so they can feel a sense of belonging. If music is played during programming, ask the students what they want to hear. The music selection for Latino populations will be different from African-American and Anglo populations' selections. While one can assume that all youth enjoy hip-hop music, not all students prefer hip-hop music. Some Latinos prefer listening to cumbias, bachata, and hip-hop. If at-risk students have been assimilated to another culture, they are comfortable with listening to music from other cultures. An example would be Latino at-risk minority students attending a 4-H camp where participants are mostly Anglo youth from rural areas across Texas as observed from 4-H Prime Time 1 Summer Camp 2016. The Latino students will observe that they do stand out as they are the minority. During dance class, country and some hip-hop dance is taught. The Latino students feel awkward, but make the most of it and learn to dance country. The Latino students, grown in confidence, ask the camp counselors to play some cumbias and bachata. The camp counselors oblige. Something as insignificant as the type of music played can be a world of a difference to those Latino students because they now fit in, but the tables turned as the Anglo youth are now faced with hearing music unfamiliar to them. Both groups embraced each other's culture and that was a great teachable moment.

For Juntos 4-H, the Extension 4-H Specialist and Principal Investigator (PI) is a product of the Harlandale Independent School District (HISD) and former teacher, where the project is being carried out, and can relate to the students' culture and speaks Spanish. Being bilingual is a necessity for many of the at-risk youth minorities and their families because their parents speak the language. The parents already feel intimidated, but speaking the language breaks barriers and allows for communication, trust, and accountability to take place. Once the students and families know the background of the leaders, the cultural divide can be removed. The leader understands the dynamics of the at-risk minority youth and their families. For the Juntos 4-H PI in San Antonio, having attended the same school eases the tension for both the students and parents and allows for relationships to flourish.

Networking is another key for success. When working with grant funded programs, sooner or later, funding will cease. It is up to those charged with leading the program to seek additional funding. This is where networking comes into play. Wolff and Moser define networking as: behaviors aimed at building, maintaining and using informal relationships to facilitate work related activities to access resources and maximizing advantages [7]. This is where business cards can be crucial to building and maintaining relationships one has made in order to maximize the benefits of networking. Always carry your business cards! Those charged with networking should always give out business cards when meeting others at conferences, meetings, events, and school sponsored activities. One never knows who is in attendance that is a potential donor or simply has connections to individuals that can provide the means to support programs involving at-risk minority youth. Opportunities can present themselves and/or the opportunities can be sought. Wolff and Moser, reported on their longitudinal study that aimed to show the effects of networking which provided a dynamic perspective on career success [8]. It seems logical that when relationships have been built as a result of networking, the relationships can only become stronger when there is communication about updates on activities and the opportunities that programs provide the at-risk minorities. It is recommended to be confident,

passionate, and concise when sharing the message of your program. Oftentimes, business leaders are pressed for time, but can be impressed significantly with how leaders of programs present their programs. Let your passion speak your convictions and the rest will follow. Going the extra mile is required and rewarded for those leaders that choose to be advocates for their program as they seek additional funds. Networking with local colleges and universities helps build stronger 4-H programming so the at-risk minority youth can be positively influenced by other experts in the field who have much to contribute and share best practices. The experts understand the need to conduct community outreach to at-risk minority youth who have potential when given the opportunities and resources to excel.

Accountability is another key to success. As observed by the program coordinator in Bexar County, the students need to feel a sense of self-worth and how they can contribute to the success of a 4-H after-school program. A solid work ethic is what separates the at-risk Hispanic minorities apart from the general population as observed by the Bexar County program coordinator. The at-risk minorities youth are always willing to help prepare for activities, run errands, and are genuinely eager to receive the one-on-one attention that they desperately seek to fit in. Raising the bar and expectations is called holding the at-risk minority youth accountable. Seeing the at-risk minority teens smile when they are told that they too can succeed because someone believes in their abilities and are provided with the necessary resources to succeed is worth the effort in holding them accountable. More often than not, the at-risk Hispanic minority youth rise to the occasion and are quite creative, determined, and passionate about a project they spent time on in order to compete and complete.

Providing resources, funding, a positive atmosphere, and leaders who speak and understand the language and culture, allows for the at-risk minority youth to rise to the occasion. A study for high school dropout prevention for at-risk 9th graders by Somers, Owen & Piliawsky, regarding educational attitudes and commitment behaviors indicated that while the at-risk students "agreed" and "strongly agreed" with these, it would be difficult to detect their ratings [9]. The article stated that at-risk students did have a desire to do well in school which means that the students held themselves accountable when taking part in tutoring programs and wanted to pursue higher education, but they did not necessarily know how to achieve those goals. When leaders charged with leading the after-school programs raise the bar, it sets an environment conducive for success. Be consistent, thorough, transparent, and continue praising the at-risk minority youth with positive reinforcement to change their lives. Meeting the needs of the demographic provides an atmosphere that is safe and conducive for success. By the same token, holding individuals who are charged with leading the 4-H after-school programs accountable also sets the tone for success. When the necessary resources are provided for both the leaders and the at-risk students, there are no limitations (Table 1).

Work of volunteers is perhaps one of the greatest assets to any successful effective after-school program. Volunteers can mean the difference between programs dissipating or flourishing. Halpern stated that while some programs are minimally funded and serve to fill the gaps, the after-school programs still rely on volunteers [10]. Boyd stated that in the U.S., delivery of educational programs by Cooperative Extension relies heavily on the role of the volunteers. Volunteers, when properly trained, can lead 4-H after-school programs [11]. At CYFAR SJB grant school in Bexar County, volunteers have lead 4-H after-school programming in the absence of the program coordinator. Trust established and relationships were built as a result of

volunteers stepping up to assist the program coordinator. Due to the effectiveness of parent volunteers, there is an increase in interest for the new school year 2017-2018. The interest is a result of many activities,

events, field trips, family involvement, and word of mouth. Any time word spreads, it speaks volumes of the leaders, programs, and volunteers.

Variables	Students	Parents	Administrators
Relationships	PRESENT: Students feel comfortable and participate MISSING: Lack of interest, only show up for field trips	PRESENT: Identify with 4-H program coordinator MISSING: Parents do not help 4-H program coordinator with after-school activities, programming, and events, field trips	PRESENT: Trust 4-H programming, creates environment conducive for success, secure space for programming and Extension events MISSING: One person does most of the work, lack of interest in after-school program
Communication	PRESENT: Genuinely interested in 4-H activities MISSING: Complaints about programming, students drop out of program	PRESENT: Genuinely interested in 4-H activities MISSING: Complaints about programming, students drop out of program	PRESENT: Genuinely interested in 4-H activities MISSING: Complaints about programming, students drop out of program
Positive Attitude	PRESENT: Excitement for programming, compete in 4-H competitions, create spin clubs to meet the needs of students MISSING: Overwhelmed as there are too many activities	PRESENT: Excitement for programming, willing to volunteer, receive training MISSING: Derogatory comments are made about programming	PRESENT: Excitement for programming, use as selling point to recruit prospective students MISSING: Blame 4-H for students not participating in school related events
Language Capability (Bilingual)	PRESENT: Reaching out to bilingual students to MISSING: Students do not relay information to parents	PRESENT: Reaching out to bilingual parents MISSING: Parents lose interest because lack of communication in native language	PRESENT: Reaching out to bilingual parents MISSING: Use it as an excuse to not include students whose parents are not bilingual for 4-H programming activities
Understanding Culture	PRESENT: Recognize differences/similarities MISSING: Lose audience, disinterested	PRESENT: Recognize differences/similarities MISSING: Cannot make connections, low participation rates	PRESENT: Recognize differences/similarities MISSING: Little administrative support
Networking	PRESENT: Grows program, opportunities for sustainability MISSING: Program does not grow, funding ends	PRESENT: Share the program with family members MISSING: No new possible parent volunteers	PRESENT: Opportunities for sustainability, secure funding, share with other schools and districts MISSING: Program ends when funding stops
Accountability	PRESENT: Growth in self-confidence, self-esteem, grades improve, participation increases MISSING: Bully other students, lose interest, banned from 4-H programming	PRESENT: Growth in self-confidence, more likely to participate and take necessary training to assist 4-H program coordinator MISSING: Easily become frustrated, blame others	PRESENT: Growth in self-confidence, self-esteem, allows Extension events to take place at school MISSING: Can decide to not allow after-school programming, take away 4-H room,
Work of Volunteers	PRESENT: Help spread the word about 4-H after-school program to grow the program MISSING: Hard to grow the program	PRESENT: Help with sustainability, conduct 4-H after-school programming in program coordinator absence MISSING: Abuse leadership role in program coordinator's absence, want to take over, play favorites, avoid rules	PRESENT: Help with sustainability, take a vested interest in program and advocate for 4-H after-school program MISSING: Feel overwhelmed when dealing with after-school programming, collecting permission slips during the week

Table 1: Keys to success for at-risk urban youth populations in 4-H after-school programs.

Conclusion

Despite the many after-school programs available, it would seem ideal for parents to consider Texas 4-H since it has been around for more than a century and continues to lead the state in the number of youth reached. Servicing at-risk minority youth can be a challenge, but obstacles can be overcome when those leading the program have the right tools for success. Combining relationships, communication, positive attitude, language capability (bilingual), understanding the culture, networking, accountability, and work of volunteers are the factors that are creating two successful grant funded 4-H after-school programs in Texas that target at-risk minority youth and can be replicated. With knowledge, skills, attitudes, and abilities, at-risk minority youth have been positively affected and have shown visible

increases in self-confidence/self-esteem and are proactive for their education. Once the ability to understand the importance of effective communication and networking to provided resources for at-risk minority youths in urban areas has been established, everything else will fall into place. The ability to collaborate with key stakeholders to develop, articulate, and sustain successful 4-H programming in an urban after-school program is vital not only to continue programming for at-risk minorities, but also vital to the community as the students grow to become the leaders in their communities.

The principles deduced from this experience may be of interest and applicable to pediatricians whose patients and their parents may be from a different ethnic group and are seeking out of after-school care. More specific, creating relationships that fosters communication,

having a positive attitude, trying to speak their language, understanding their culture, networking with other doctors from patients, holding at-risk minority patients and parents accountable, and perhaps recruiting volunteers to create a welcoming and safe environment in doctors' offices or to interpret the needs of patients can create a positive atmosphere that slowly breaks cultural barriers. The first thing families see when they walk in an office can either be positive or a turnoff which can be intimidating for those families whose language might be Spanish. The keys to success can be applied to many settings, but those tasked with being leaders need to make a concerted effort in conducting their due diligence to ensure that the needs of the at-risk minority youth and their parents are met. It is easy to say what cannot be done and harder to implement the keys to success because leadership starts at the top. If those tasked with leading share their vision to help the greater good, then everyone else understands the shared vision.

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