

Out-of-School Programming: Assessing the Impact on Asset Development in Young People

Jill Walahoski
Program Director, YMCA of Lincoln
1100 South 48th Street
Lincoln, NE 68510-4899
jwalahoski@ymcalincoln.org

Kathleen Lodl (contact author)
Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development
University of Nebraska - Lincoln
114 Ag Hall
Lincoln, NE 68583-0700
klodl@unl.edu

Abstract

Current literature on youth development supports the theory that out-of-school programming has an effect on youth development. However, little research has been conducted on types of out-of-school programs and comparisons among involvement in various activities in relation to developmental assets. Hence, the purpose of this study was to analyze relationships between students' participation in out-of-school programs and the development of positive assets. Specifically, this study explored how 4-H participants differ from other students in their attainment of specific assets.

Findings support past research that indicate out-of-school programming is making an impact on the development of youth. Strong differences specific to 4-H participation were not found. Instead, findings indicate that asset development is not the result of one program; rather, it is important to provide a variety of options that ensure a good "fit" for the young person.

Introduction

Current literature supports the theory that out-of-school involvement has an effect on positive youth development (Afterschool Alliance, 2000; Carnegie Corporation, 1992; Dunham & Walker, 1994; National Institute on Out-of-School-Time, 2001). Recent studies suggest that quality out-of-school programs are built on and assessed by the assets they successfully create in their youth participants (Benson, 1990; Pittman, 1996; Search Institute, 1996). In fact, quality out-of-school programming is seen not only as deterrence for risk behaviors, but actually as a way to enhance positive, productive behaviors among young people

(Benson 1990; Duncan, 2002; Keith & Perkins, 1995; Perkins & Butterfield, 1999; Rutter, 1987; Werner, 1990). Hence, it is essential that out-of-school programs are focused on appropriate assets, and are effective in strengthening these assets, in an effort to create a positive youth development experience (Benson, 1990).

One program that has been noted for strengthening the assets of young people is 4-H. Involving over 6.6 million youths nationally, the mission of the 4-H program is to assist youth and the volunteer staff through non-formal education in acquiring knowledge, developing life skills and strengthening values that enable them to become increasingly self-directed, productive, contributing citizens (National 4-H Council Website, 2000). The purpose of this research was to examine how 4-H participants differ from non-4-H participants in their attainment of specific assets.

Importance of Out-of-School Programs

Out-of-school hours constitute the biggest single block of time in the life of a young person. In fact, young people spend only 20% of their waking hours in school (Carnegie Corporation, 1992); hence, there is a great need for quality out-of-school programs that help young people develop the assets they need to succeed (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2000). By using a positive youth development approach, out-of-school programs can focus on developing young people through the building of positive assets (Pittman, 1996).

Assets are defined as critical factors promoting young people's growth and development (Search Institute, 1996). Past researchers agree that asset-based approaches can make a difference in the lives of young people (Benson, 1990; Keith & Perkins, 1995; Pittman, 1996; Rutter, 1987; Search Institute, 1996). Hence, assets become legitimate criteria with which program impact can be assessed. For the purpose of this study, five assets were explored: (a) contact with adults, (b) self-confidence, (c) positive identity, (d) social competency, and (e) character. These assets were chosen because of their relevance to the 4-H program and their role in strengthening positive youth development.

4-H Youth Development

One national out-of-school program that focuses on the development of positive assets is 4-H. It is designed to help young people develop the kinds of skills needed to make positive, healthy decisions now and in the future. One way 4-H does this is through participation in 4-H clubs. These clubs offer a variety of subject matter learning where young people, ages nine through nineteen, participate in developmentally appropriate, experientially-based learning experiences. These experiences are conducted by an adult volunteer leader who meets with the group on a regular basis.

While several studies have addressed the impact of 4-H programming (Perkins and Butterfield, 1999; Astroth and Haynes, 2002), few have used a positive youth development approach to assess the impact of 4-H club work. The current study builds upon previous work in an effort to determine how 4-H participants differ from other students in attainment of specific assets.

Methodology

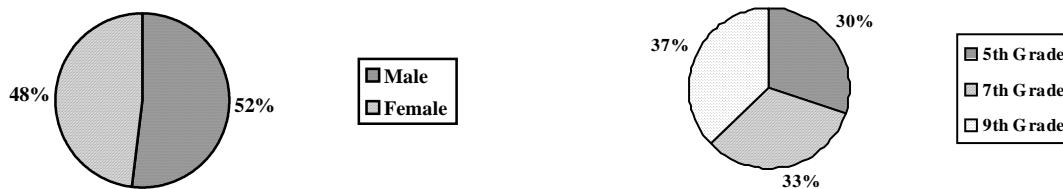
The population for this study was public school students in fifth, seventh and ninth grades throughout the rural areas of a mid-western state. Twenty-five counties were randomly selected to participate. In those counties, two school districts were randomly selected.

Of the 50 schools contacted, all but one chose to participate. All fifth, seventh and ninth graders in selected schools were surveyed using an instrument adapted from the out-of-school time study conducted by Montana State University in 2000 (Astroth & Haynes, 2002). Within classrooms, student response rate was 98%. The instrument included 74 items: (a) demographic questions, (b) questions representing developmental assets, and (c) qualitative questions targeted to respondents who had participated in 4-H.

Findings

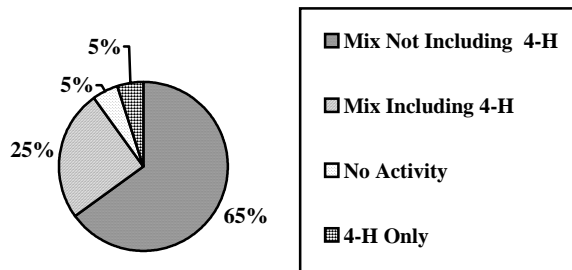
Surveys were returned from 1,761 fifth, seventh and ninth grade students. The sample included 521 fifth grade students, 581 seventh grade students and 659 ninth grade students. Demographic responses indicated that 52% of the respondents were female and 48% were male (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Demographics for grade and gender



The responses indicated 65% (1165 students) of the participants in a combination of activities not including 4-H, 25% (440 students) involved in a combination of activities including 4-H, 5% (88 students) in 4-H only and 5% (88 students) of the participants in no activities (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Demographics for Involvement



For the purposes of this study, five assets were studied: contact with adults, self-confidence, positive identity, social competency, and character. Indices for each of these assets were developed by combining responses from questions identified as being indicative of each asset. Chi-square analyses were used to determine which questions were significantly related to each asset. The average inter-item correlation was used to determine reliability for each index. Reliability scores ranged from .18 to .30. Lower reliability values are expected for indices where the questions included are designed to capture various aspects of the same concept (Salvucci, Walter, Conley, Fink, & Saba, 1997). Such was the case in this study. The principal components procedure was utilized to produce the mean, standard deviation and principle components index coefficients for each significant question (see Table 1).

Table 1. Principle components table - development of indices.

Index	Mean ¹	Standard Deviation ²	Index Coefficient ³
Contact with Adults			
Good conversation with parent	1.26	0.44	0.71
Good conversation with adult	1.36	0.48	0.71
F = 6.67; df = 3, 1768, p < 0.0002			
Self-Confidence			
Make own decisions	1.69	0.86	0.71
Set goals	2.05	1.03	0.71
F = 6.54; df = 3, 1798, p < 0.0002			
Positive Identity			
Making things better	2.41	0.89	0.36
Little control over life	3.31	1.32	-0.20
I'm glad I'm me	1.85	0.98	0.55
My life has no purpose	3.54	1.31	-0.48
Good adult life	2.00	0.95	0.55

F = 8.78; df = 3, 1739, p < 0.0001

Social Competency

Think before deciding	2.71	1.03	0.28
Care about others	1.84	0.87	0.31
Feel sad for others unhappiness	2.24	1.03	0.29
Make and keep friends	1.98	0.97	0.29
Stay away from dangerous people	2.28	1.11	0.31
Volunteer to lead in class	2.80	1.20	0.34
Meet and greet easily	2.41	1.09	0.31
Comfortable in new situations	2.68	1.04	0.30
I feel I set an example	2.54	1.15	0.32
Elected to a leadership position	1.98	0.60	0.12
Held a leadership position	1.93	0.60	0.14
Served as a committee chair	2.15	0.56	0.08
Served as a committee member	2.10	0.63	0.10
Helped others in school	1.09	0.29	0.20

F = 20.6; df = 3, 1709, p < 0.0001

Character

Involved in efforts to improve life	1.45	0.50	0.60
Given time or money to charity	1.42	0.49	0.57
Helped those in need	1.54	0.50	0.57

F = 23.57; df = 3, 1626, p < 0.0001

¹Means for each question in an index represent the average for all participants on one to five scale with one being strong agreement and five being strong disagreement.

²Standard deviation illustrates the measure of variation in scores about the mean.

³The index coefficients indicate the weight for a particular question to in the index to illustrate if questions are equally weighted.

The means for each question in an index represent the average for all participants on a one to five scale with one being strong agreement and five being strong disagreement. Standard deviation illustrates the measure of variation in scores about the mean. The index coefficients indicate the weight for a particular question. Similar index coefficient values indicate similar relevance of each question's contribution to the index.

Relationships between Out-of-School Involvement and Assets

To compare relationships between students' out-of-school involvement and the five indices developed, a General Linear Model was run for each index. This technique compares the mean index values for students in four identified levels of involvement (Trochim, 2002). Levels of out-of-school involvement were identified as: (a) a mix of activities not including 4-H, (b) a mix of activities including 4-H, (c) 4-H only, and (d) no activities.

When a significant difference in mean index values was found ($p < 0.05$), a mean separation technique was used to determine which group means were significantly different from others based on the least squares means. The least squares means are model-based estimates of the mean index values for the groups. Smaller least squares mean values indicate a low level of development of the asset, while greater values indicate a higher level of development of the asset.

Table 2 illustrates the least square means for the four involvement levels in each of the five asset indices. A significant variance among levels of involvement is illustrated by a change in the letter in the designated column. Results of the General Linear Model Test follow.

Table 2. General linear model – asset-index relation to level of out-of school involvement.

OUT-OF-SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT	CONTACT WITH ADULTS LSMEAN ¹	SELF CONFIDENCE LSMEAN ¹	POSITIVE IDENTITY LSMEAN ¹	SOCIAL COMPETENCY LSMEAN ¹	CHARACTER LSMEAN ¹
Mix of Activities	-0.05 b	0.04 a	0.09 a	0.19 a	-0.14 c
Mix with 4-H	0.01 b	0.02 a	-0.06 a	-0.22 a	0.16 b
No Activities	0.34 a	-0.35 b	-0.63 b	-1.22 b	0.77 a
4-H Only	0.51 a	-0.47 b	-0.73 b	-0.86 b	0.82 a

¹Means with the same letters in column group are not significantly different ($P > 0.05$).

Contact with Adults

Ranking the least square means for the contact with adults index indicates that “4-H only” and “no activity” are the strongest of the four groups in encouraging the contact with adults index (LSMeans = 0.51 and 0.34 respectively). The P-value indicates no significant difference between these two levels of involvement. The data also show a “mix of activities including 4-H” and a “mix of activities not including 4-H” rank significantly lower, with no significant difference between these two levels.

Self-confidence, Positive Identity, and Social Competency

Findings for the self-confidence, positive identity, and social competency indices are similar. Rankings of the least square means for each of these indices indicate that a “mix of activities not including 4-H” and a “mix of activities with 4-H” rank significantly higher than the other two levels of involvement in encouraging the development of self confidence in youth. The P-values indicate no significant differences between these two levels of involvement for any of these indices. “No activity” and “4-H only” rank significantly lower, with no significant differences between these two levels of involvement for any of these indices.

Character

Ranking the least square means for the character index indicates that “4-H only” and “no activity” are the significantly strongest of the four groups in encouraging the development of character in youth (LSMeans = 0.82 and 0.77 respectively). The P-value indicates no significant difference between these two levels of involvement.

A “mix of activities including 4-H” ranks significantly lower, followed by a “mix of activities not including 4-H.” A significant difference is indicated between these two levels of involvement.

Conclusions and Discussion

Findings indicate significant differences among the identified groups for each asset analyzed. For example, students involved in “4-H only” or “no activities” have the highest rating for developing contacts with adults and character traits. This finding indicates that 4-H offers opportunities for having meaningful contact with adults that may not be as prevalent in other out-of-school offerings. While adults are involved in other activities (parents go to sports events, adults serve as coaches or teachers, etc.), perhaps they more often serve as spectators and teachers versus partners. 4-H is unique in that it focuses on learning experiences where young people work in partnership with adults to complete a project. It is possible that those students involved in “no activities” have jobs where they are in contact with adults, or spend more time at home with the adults in their families. It is not surprising that character is also a positive asset for these two groups for the same reasons. Strong relationships with adults, enhanced by spending more time together, has been shown to support the development of positive character traits (National Research Council, 2002).

Students involved either in a “mix of activities including 4-H” or a “mix not including 4-H” had the highest ratings for the assets of self confidence, positive identity, and social competency. This finding indicates the power of involvement in some kind of out-of-school activity in developing these assets.

In general, the results of this study support past research that indicates that out-of-school programming is making an impact on the development of youth (Benson,

1990; Perkins & Butterfield, 1999). The results of this study expressed positive effects of 4-H participation; however, strong differences specific to 4-H participation were not found. These findings are somewhat different than those of Astroth and Haynes (2002). Their studies showed that 4-H'ers were more likely than non-4-H'ers to hold leadership positions and less likely than non-4-H'ers to take part in high risk behaviors. While the current study focused on developmental assets, not risk behaviors, further work is necessary to determine the differences in these results.

In further examining the results, one could surmise that as youth become more involved in more different activities the development of positive adult relationships and the development of character lessens. This raises interesting questions about involvement in terms of the presence or absence of activities as opposed to the level of involvement. It is possible that when involved in too many out-of-school activities, young people sacrifice the time for meaningful relationships. These relationships could include individuals that might serve as character role models. Both parents and youth development professionals should identify and capitalize on teachable moments for building strong moral character in youth and analyze the level of involvement in activities.

In contrast to what was expected, results of this study did not produce strong differentiation among the specific activities explored. They did, however, lead to general conclusions about the overall success of out-of-school programs in developing assets in youth. Educators, schools, and program leaders could use the findings as criteria to evaluate out-of-school programs. Individual programs should be carefully analyzed to ensure that they focus on each of the assets; this could result in changes in the way an activity is organized or in how time is allotted.

These results could also be used to enhance parent education. Parents could be educated as to what types of out-of-school involvement would be best for their children. Parents, who recognize a lack of specific assets in their child, such as a low level of self-confidence or lack of character, could help their child select appropriate activities. For example, they could encourage their child to become involved in experiences where they are exposed to both challenges and support that will help raise their confidence level and gain a stronger sense of self-control. Positive youth-adult relationships might best be strengthened by minimizing the number of out-of-school activities and providing more time for meaningful relationships with parents.

Results of this study provide strong evidence that out-of-school programming is making an impact on the development of youth. The data indicate that success is not the result of just one specific program. Rather, it is important to provide a variety of program options so a good "fit" between the program and the young person can be found. Out-of-school programs must be an integrated component of the entire process of youth development and should be purposefully coordinated

with in-school-time and additional out-of-school hours (family-time, free-time, work, etc.) to assure an overall life balance.

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