
“Push” and “Pull”

A Qualitative Study of Factors that Contribute to Older Youth Leaving the 4-H Program

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Abstract: For years, 4-H has struggled with the complex issue of membership retention, especially among older youth. However, little research has been done concerning why 4-H members choose to leave the program. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the reasons for leaving 4-H with the ultimate goal of improving retention of older members. Specific objectives of the study were to (a) explore reasons why youth chose not to re-enroll in the program, (b) identify barriers to participation, and (c) determine what conditions would facilitate participation.

Focus group participants consisted of older youth ($n=16$) who were enrolled in 4-H in a community club in 2007 in Erie County (Ohio), but who did not re-enroll in 2008. Significant findings from the study concerning the retention of older 4-H youth were related to (a) experiences with adult leaders, (b) experiences with competition, and (c) conflicts with other activities. Recommendations for theory, research, and practice are offered.

Introduction

Retaining members in youth programs is an issue faced by youth development professionals. It raises concerns because youth will not experience the benefits of youth development programs if they do not continue to participate (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Lauer, Little, & Weiss, 2004). Declining participation during adolescence is not a new phenomenon (Quinn, 1999), nor is it unique to 4-H youth development programs.

Although the overall success of 4-H youth development programming depends, at least in part, on the ability of the program to retain its members, studies about 4-H retention have been limited. Those that have been conducted have varied greatly in their methodology and in their source of data. It appears that studies involving youth who no longer participate in the program are lacking. Understandably, program dropouts are a hard audience to reach, and they may be reluctant to share their reasons for discontinuing their membership in the program. The question remains: Why are youth leaving the 4-H program in adolescence?

Hollister (2003) stated that studies conducted to isolate better strategies for boosting and sustaining participation in youth programs can make a major contribution to the field. As few of the studies investigating 4-H retention asked the youth themselves why they chose not to re-enroll, the present study sought to investigate this question. The 4-H program in Erie County, Ohio, was chosen as the location of the study described in this paper.

Review of Literature

Theoretical Framework

The study was grounded in two specific theoretical frameworks. First, from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1979, 2005), the environment in which youth development occurs is viewed as a set of nested contexts ranging from families and peer groups to the culture and government; the theory proposes a series of hypotheses about how these contexts or systems interact. In the current study, the focus was on the way in which factors in the different environments impacted a youth's 4-H experience and hence their decision not to re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program.

The second theoretical framework was Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) Theory of Flow, which contends that when individuals experience meaningful challenges that are matched to their skills, they experience sustained enjoyment or "flow," which is repeated each time they participate in the activity (Larson et al., 2004). Therefore, according to this theory, if youth do not feel challenged through their 4-H experience, they will not wish to repeat the experience and will likely choose to discontinue their involvement with the program.

Adolescents' Participation in Youth Programs

The existing research concerning adolescents' participation in and commitment to youth activities demonstrates that young people engage in activities that foster their identity exploration and development (Ferrari & McNeely, 2007; Fredricks, Alfeld-Liro, Hruda, Eccles, Patrick, & Ryan, 2002), and that these activities can offer distinct learning experiences not available in other contexts of their lives (Larson, 2000; Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006; Lewis, 2008; Vandell, Shernoff, Pierce, Bolt, Dadisman, & Brown, 2005). Researchers suggest that older youth may prefer different program offerings and different patterns of participation than younger youth (Harris, 2008; Herrera & Arbreton, 2003; Marczak, Dworkin, Skuza & Beyers, 2006; Vandell et al., 2006). That is, they want activities suited to their interests, to have a choice of activities, to be with friends, and to have some flexibility in structure. Also, studies show that youth desire new and challenging activities, as well as opportunities for leadership, to hold meaningful roles, and to carry out real responsibilities (Arbreton, Bradshaw, Metz, Sheldon, & Pepper, 2008; Chaskin & Baker, 2006; Hansen & Larson, 2007; Harris, 2008; Pearce & Larson, 2006).

The prevailing notion is that because they have more freedom as they get older, youth "vote with their feet" and will leave youth programs if their needs are not met. Several studies have

documented a general decline in organized activity participation during adolescence (Bamberger, 1982; Gould, 1987; Hustman, 1992; Theokas, Lerner, Phelps, & Lerner, 2006). Although much attention has focused on understanding the dropout phenomenon, many adolescents do remain involved in youth programs, some even increasing their involvement during this period and experiencing high levels of achievement. Again, because youth benefit from programs only if they remain in them, it is important to understand when changes in participation occur and what motivates a decline in participation.

Negative Experiences

Although the literature is replete with studies of positive outcomes associated with youth programs, negative experiences have been documented and are of particular concern (Dworkin & Larson, 2006; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Mahoney, Eccles, & Larson, 2004). Though such negative experiences can eventually lead to positive outcomes (e.g., when youth are able to reflect on what they have learned and grow from their experience), in the meantime they can interfere with youth development goals, particularly if young people drop out of activities as a result (Dworkin & Larson, 2006). Dworkin and Larson (2006) found that these negative experiences were related to peers, adult leaders, oneself and other parts of one's life, parents, and community members.

Retention in 4-H

Relatively little research has examined the retention of 4-H youth. Overall, the studies of 4-H member retention reveal that older youth are difficult to attract and retain in the 4-H youth development program. Several trends are apparent from reviewing this body of literature. First, it is evident that older youth find 4-H less appealing and are less likely to join 4-H than younger youth (Harder, Lamm, Lamm, Rose, & Rask, 2005; Homan, Dick, & Hedrick, 2007; Russell & Heck, 2008). If older youth do join the 4-H program, they are more likely to discontinue their involvement when compared to those who joined at a younger age (Hartley, 1983). However, it is also apparent from reviewing the literature that retention is not only a challenge when dealing with older 4-H youth, but a challenge for 4-H youth of all ages (Astroth, 1985, Russell & Heck, 2008).

Several studies revealed the importance of adult club advisors to a participants' satisfaction with the 4-H program (Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Hartley, 1983; Wingenbach, Meighan, Lawrence, Gartin, Woloshuk, 1999), while one study found members' relationship with adults to have little effect on retention (Lauxman, 2002). Other studies indicated that satisfaction with the 4-H club experience influenced members' decision not to re-enroll (Norland & Bennett, 1993; Ritchie & Resler, 1993; Wingenbach et al., 1999). It should be noted that there is likely an overlap when discussing the displeasure with adult club advisors and displeasure with 4-H clubs, as adult advisors play an important role in a member's 4-H club experience. In short, positive or negative experiences with club advisors would likely impact a member's overall club experience.

The extent to which members' parents were involved and supportive of their participation in 4-H emerged as a factor in the retention of 4-H youth (Astroth, 1985; Cano & Bankston, 1992; Hartley, 1983; Homan et al., 2007; Norland & Bennett, 1993, Ritchie & Resler, 1993). Several authors also discussed the importance of incorporating "fun" into a members' 4-H experience (Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Homan et al., 2007; Nutt, 2008; Ritchie & Resler, 1993; Wingenbach et al., 1999; Wolfe & Carroll, 2003).

Despite the research discussed above, there is still much to learn about the complex issue of 4-H retention. Studies concerning 4-H retention have varied greatly in their methodology and in

who has been included as participants. Interestingly, only a few studies on 4-H retention have utilized focus group methodology (Cano & Bankston, 1992; Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Nutt, 2008). Few of the studies that investigated 4-H retention asked the youth themselves why they chose not to re-enroll in the program.

Methodology

To address gaps noted in the literature, a qualitative study was designed to explore factors related to older youth discontinuing their involvement with the Erie County 4-H program. Specific objectives of the study were to

- a) explore the reasons why youth chose not to re-enroll,
- b) identify the barriers to participation, and
- c) determine what conditions would facilitate participation.

Focus group methodology was selected and practices recommended by Krueger (1994; 1998) were followed. Focus groups are useful for uncovering factors that influence individuals' opinions, behaviors, and motivations (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Focus Group Questions

Nine questions were developed for interviewing youth (Appendix A). The questioning route focused on barriers to participation involving older youth and the 4-H program. To establish face validity, the questions were reviewed by a panel of experts to determine appropriate content and structure. External validity was not a major concern, as generalizability is typically not a goal of studies employing focus group methodology (Krueger, 1994; 1998).

Procedures

The university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted approval for the study. Erie County's 4-H member database was used to obtain a listing of the names and contact information of youth ages 12 to 18 in 2008 who were members of Erie County 4-H in 2007, but who did not re-enroll for 2008. This age group was selected because previous research has shown that around the age of 11 or 12, member dropout begins to outpace new enrollments (Russell & Heck, 2008). The study did not include 4-H members enrolled only in 4-H through their involvement in 4-H school enrichment or special emphasis programs as of the same dates. From this list, individuals were contacted through their parent or guardian and invited to participate in focus group interviews. Parents provided permission per the IRB's requirements.

A moderator team consisting of a moderator and an assistant moderator facilitated all of the focus groups. The same moderator and assistant moderator participated in all focus group sessions. Pizza and drinks were provided at the conclusion of each focus group meeting. This provided an incentive for participants to attend the focus group sessions. In addition, a ten dollar gift certificate to the local mall was given to each youth participant as another incentive to attend the focus group session. Additional details regarding the procedures are provided by Albright (2008).

Participants

From an initial list of 65 youth who met the study criteria, 16 youth participated in one of three focus groups. There were 13 females and 3 males between the ages of 12 and 18 ($M=15.3$). They had participated in 4-H for 3 to 11 years ($M=5.7$).

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data, transcripts were reviewed line-by-line and themes were developed for each question. For each question in each of the three focus groups, major themes, minor themes, and unique responses were identified. After each focus group transcript had been analyzed, an overall analysis was performed for each question by identifying major themes, minor themes, and unique responses for each question for all three focus groups combined. Finally, the transcripts were reviewed for any common themes across the responses to all interview questions. An initial categorization of themes was then created. As a validity check, a state youth development specialist with experience in focus group methodology reviewed this categorization and agreed with the overall conceptualization of the data.

Results

Significant findings from the study concerning the retention of older 4-H youth related to the following themes:

1. experiences with advisors
2. experiences with competition
3. conflicts with other activities

Because of the qualitative nature of the data, each theme is presented followed by a discussion of the findings in relation to the related literature.

Experiences with Advisors

While some youth discussed positive relationships with their club advisors, many youth discussed inappropriate behavior exhibited by adults and parents, uninvolved and unsupportive advisors, as well as advisors who were overly involved. One youth stated that in her club "it was a family-type advisor thing and they were always fighting constantly; you couldn't focus on one thing because they were always fighting."

Several youth mentioned advisors who were uninvolved or unsupportive. One youth discussed an advisor who left it up to the club president to do everything, while another described an advisor who expected the club members to coordinate all club meetings and activities, but then didn't step in to offer assistance when the club wasn't meeting. Another youth remembered being extremely disappointed when her club advisor would not let her lead any games or activities for the club after being elected recreation leader. One youth expressed frustration that her 4-H club never met. Because her club never met, she assumed her advisors didn't care. She left the 4-H club program with the sentiment "If you don't really care, I don't really care."

In contrast, focus group participants also discussed over-involved advisors and parents. One youth said that she thought that "throughout the years...parents have gotten too involved in the meetings. I know advisors are supposed to help out with the little details, but it always seemed like the parents took over and it was sort of frustrating." Similarly, another youth described her first 4-H club as being "run by advisors."

From several perspectives, results from this study indicated that one of the primary reasons youth did not re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program was because of negative experiences with advisors. The large volume and variety of discussion in the current study related to participants' experiences, both positive and negative, with club advisors reflects the central role that these adults play in organizing and setting the climate of 4-H clubs. The relationship

between a club advisor and a member clearly had an influence on a youth's satisfaction with their club, and their satisfaction with the 4-H program as a whole. 4-H club advisors also play a pivotal role in establishing how a 4-H club will function, which in turn affects youth satisfaction with the club, and again, with the entire 4-H program.

The literature on attachment, social development, and social control all highlight the importance of connectedness to non-parental adults in the positive development of adolescents (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Grossman & Bulle, 2006) and therefore support the findings of the current study. Adults walk a fine line when it comes to giving the right amount of support; neither too little nor too much is good, and what is needed changes as youth become more skilled (Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005). While the literature supports the notion that providing youth with positive, non-parental relationships can be a powerful preventative and stabilizer, the literature also reveals that a negative role model can be detrimental (Dworkin & Larson, 2006; Grossman & Bulle, 2006). Dworkin and Larson (2006) concluded that one of the most frequent types of negative experiences in youth activities was aversive behavior attributed to the adult leaders of the activities, which is congruent with our findings.

When specifically comparing the current study with other studies concerning the retention of 4-H youth, there is a good deal of congruency regarding the important role adult advisors play in the retention of 4-H youth. Teens who choose to participate in youth organizations often do so because of the support provided by the staff and adult leaders (Ferrari, Lekies, & Arnett, 2009; Ferrari & Sweeney, 2005; Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Heinshon & Lewis, 1995; Rhodes, 2004; Rivera-Caudill & Brander, 2008). Quite simply, they like the adult or what the adult is providing. In addition, Hartley (1983) found that 4-H club leaders with higher rates of first-year member re-enrollment also received more positive ratings for leader effectiveness than did club advisors with lower re-enrollment rates, which also supports the findings in the current study. Finally, recent research has shown that support from volunteer leaders mediates the relationship between 4-H club context and youth outcomes (Fogarty, Terry, Pracht, & Jordan, 2009).

Experiences with Competition

Negative experiences with competition were also established as a theme across research questions. While some participants described positive experiences with competition, many youth described perceived favoritism during judging, unclear expectations for judgments, problems with organization during judging, and poor sportsmanship exhibited during competition. As one youth stated:

It's frustrating whenever you put in all of this time and energy into your projects and you do it for fun. You're supposed to be excited about it and everything and it's just frustrating when the parents make it so competitive just like over placings. It's just a downer because it's supposed to be fun. Yeah, it's great when you win first or second, but that's not everything. It's about the project itself.

Many youth described perceived problems related to judging. Project judging is the capstone experience for most 4-H youth because it provides youth with the opportunity to share what they have learned through their project work and to get constructive feedback on the quality of their project. Therefore, it makes sense that perceived negative experiences with judging would influence a youth's decision whether or not to re-enroll in the 4-H program.

Unlike the current study, little research on 4-H retention has found competition to be a factor in youth's decision not to re-enroll in the 4-H program. However, a 1992 study by Cano and Bankston that explored factors associated with participation and nonparticipation of ethnic minority youth in the Ohio 4-H program identified inequality of judging experiences as a factor affecting the participation of minority youth in 4-H. Similarly, a more recent study by Radhakrishna, Everhart, and Sinasky (2006) that investigated youths' perceptions of competitive 4-H events found youth to be somewhat concerned with excessive parent involvement, unethical practices, and unhealthy characteristics that are prevalent in competitive events. However, it should be noted that in this same study, several youth also reported many positive effects of competition as well. Although negative experiences with competitive 4-H activities was found to be a major theme in the current study, the majority of previous studies have not identified competition as a factor in the retention of older 4-H youth.

Conflicts with Other Activities

Participation in other activities was also a theme found across research questions. Several participants said that 4-H was time consuming and interfered with other activities in which they were involved. For example, one youth stated that, "I'll be attending college in August and I sort of wanted to have the summer before I go to college to not have to worry about judgments and interviews and stuff like that and 4-H meetings."

Because of the importance our society places on organized sports and other activities and because of the demands placed on youth who are involved in these activities, it is not surprising that youth feel pressure to make a choice between these activities and involvement in 4-H. One youth stated that:

I just think people sometimes choose sports over 4-H 'cause it's within their school and they're with all their friends they've grown up with all their lives, so they're used to being with those people and they've become really close with them. That's probably why some people choose that.

In addition, several youth discussed their jobs and the conflicts working created with other activities such as 4-H. One youth stated that her job was very willing to work around her schedule, while another participant stated that, "Since I work two jobs, I basically work everyday and you're kind of like physically and mentally exhausted and you're just like I don't want to do anything but go home and lay down and sleep."

Results of the current study revealed that opportunities for participation in other activities, such as athletics and the arts, influenced the retention of older 4-H youth. Although conflicts with other activities are typically viewed as a common reason that youth discontinue their involvement with the 4-H program, this has not been well documented in previous research. The current study found that conflicts with other activities were indeed a major factor in the retention of older 4-H youth, but only three previous studies specifically involving 4-H youth have found conflicts with other activities as influencing re-enrollment (Lauxman, 2002; Ritchie & Resler, 1993; Thompson, 1998). As well, competing interests and conflicts with other activities, work, and family have been identified as barriers to participation in other youth programs (Bodren, Perkins, Villarruel, & Stone, 2005; Okeke, 2008). Given the findings of the current research, the issue of conflicting activities appears to warrant further investigation.

It is also important to remember that research has shown that the typical pattern is to participate in more than one structured out-of-school activity (Theokas et al., 2006; Vandell et

al., 2006). Authors suggest that participation in multiple activity contexts might actually be desirable, as activities meet different needs (Theokas et al., 2006,). Furthermore, certain participation patterns (e.g., sports plus youth development) may produce more positive outcomes (Zarrett, Peltz, Fay, Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2007).

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the reasons why older youth do not re-enroll in the 4-H program after multiple years of participation. Using focus groups with teens who had discontinued their 4-H club participation, three major themes – experiences with adult leaders, experiences with competition, and conflicts with other activities – were discovered.

This study supported the notion that adult leaders play a critical role in the experiences young people have in programs and organization such as 4-H. Youth discussed their encounters, both positive and negative, with their 4-H club advisors, and it was evident these experiences impacted their decision not to re-enroll in the 4-H program. While several youth discussed positive experiences with competition, the current study clearly revealed negative experiences with competition as influencing a youth's decision to re-enroll in the program. Finally, conflicts with other activities such as sports and work ultimately led some members to leave 4-H and direct their time elsewhere. These youth were still engaged in constructive pursuits; none of them indicated that they were leaving to simply hang out.

On the other hand, barriers to participation found in other studies of youth program participation did not surface in our focus groups. Other research has found uninteresting activities (Herrera & Arbreton, 2003), boredom (Weisman & Gottfredson, 2001), lack of program fidelity (Okeke, 200), transportation (Nutt, 2008; Weisman & Gottfredson, 2001), and negative opinions of peers (Borden et al, 2005; Homan et al., 2007; Nutt, 2008) as reasons that interfere with youth program participation.

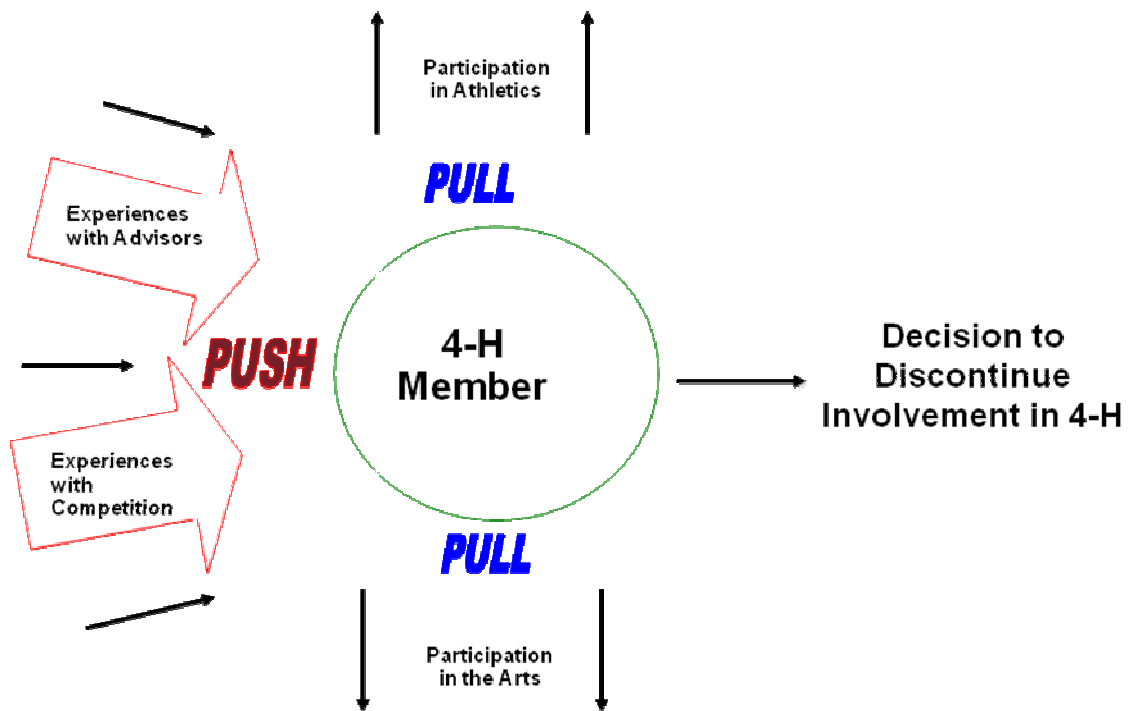
Conceptual Model

Qualitative research is useful in building rather than testing theory (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). It appears that two distinct processes may be at work here. Results from the study indicated that negative experiences with 4-H club advisors and negative judging experiences may be "pushing" youth out of the 4-H program, while the lure of participation in other activities may be "pulling" youth from 4-H and propelling them to pursue other interests, such as athletics and the arts. Figure 1 represents a model of the process we believe happens regarding the retention of older 4-H youth, based on the themes derived from this study's data. Additional research will be needed to more fully understand these dynamics.

Certainly both negative experiences and competing interests are of concern to youth development professionals. However, from a developmental perspective, we view the "push" created by negative experiences as more problematic than the "pull" of other activities. This is the case only if the youth end up choosing to spend their time in other constructive activities rather than hanging out or other unstructured pursuits. It is possible that youth not interviewed in this study had such an activity profile. Unstructured time has been shown to be problematic because youth report more boredom (Larson, 2000) as well as more problem behaviors (Li, Bebiroglu, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2008) when their time is spent hanging out. Ultimately, the goal for healthy development is to engage young people in ways that support their current development and help them transition to a productive adulthood.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model: Factors Influencing Older Youths' Re-enrollment Decisions



Source: Albright (2008)

Implications

This study has many implications for theory, future research, and practice. These implications are important as those engaged in youth development research continue to investigate the complexities of retention in youth programs and are important as youth development professionals discern how the findings of the current study relate to their own youth programs.

Implications for Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Human Development (1979, 2005) is useful for understanding the 4-H club experience. This model helps us realize the importance of roles, activities, and interpersonal relationships within the multiple settings where youth spend their time. Furthermore, it helps in recognizing how the other systems within the ecological model interact with one another in an effort to create positive or negative experiences for youth within 4-H club delivery system.

Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) Theory of Flow is useful when discussing how the 4-H club experience is related to the retention of older 4-H youth. According to Csikszentmihalyi, when individuals experience meaningful challenges that are matched to their skills, they experience sustained enjoyment or "flow," which is repeated each time they participate in the activity, which in turn creates the desire to repeat the experience. The theory is useful in recognizing the importance of providing meaningful, challenging experiences for youth within the context of their 4-H experience and most specifically, within their 4-H club. This is especially important since some youth indicated they are not being challenged through their participation in 4-H.

The concept of flow helps youth development professionals realize how youth who are members of leader-directed clubs or youth who have adult advisors who are uninvolved or unsupportive may become discouraged and chose not to re-enroll in the program. These types of club experiences do not provide challenges for the youth involved and therefore do not create the desire to repeat the experience.

One unique response during the focus group interviews came from a young lady who revealed that although she had chosen to discontinue her involvement with the 4-H club program, she remained a 4-H member because of her involvement with the 4-H CARTEENS program, which is a leadership development program where teens are responsible for the development and implementation of a traffic safety program for their peers. The question then becomes, what prompted this teen to remain in 4-H CARTEENS but to discontinue her involvement in her 4-H club? The answer likely, at least in part, lies within Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) Theory of Flow. This young lady probably remained involved in 4-H CARTEENS because, unlike her former 4-H club, 4-H CARTEENS provided her with meaningful, challenging experiences with a small group of other teens. Opportunities for progressive learning and leadership are important because they allow youth to maintain their interest and continue their involvement as they get older (Walker, 2006). Further attention to understanding the concept of flow would be beneficial to youth development professionals.

Other theories might also prove useful in understanding the processes underlying re-enrollment decisions and developing appropriate programming for older youth. These include Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (Fusco, 2007), Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory (Duerdin & Gillard, 2008), Eccles et al. (1993) stage-environment fit (Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Ferrari & McNeely, 2007), and Walker's (2006; Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005) developmental intentionality (Ferrari et al., 2009).

Implications for Future Research

Limitations

It is important to note that the sample used in this study was limited to those who agreed to participate from the list of youth who were Erie County 4-H club members ages 11 to 17 in 2007 but who did not re-enroll in the 4-H club program during the 2008 program year (25% of those who met the study criteria). Although the data obtained were rich in detail, the results cannot be generalized beyond the group who participated in the study. However, given that only three focus groups involving 16 former 4-H club members were held, the individuals who participated were a fairly representative group in terms of age and years of participation in 4-H. Furthermore, these data are believed to be valid, because steps were put into place for a peer review analysis. In order to reach a broader population, a different research method, such as a survey, would need to be used.

Additional Studies

The study generated additional questions to be explored that would add to the body of research about the retention of older 4-H youth.

1. Replication of focus groups: First, the current study could be replicated in other counties to see if the major themes are consistent across counties. This would address the limitation of the small sample size in the current study, as it is possible that there are other reasons that youth choose not to re-enroll that were not identified.

2. Survey: Next, based on the findings of the present study and possibly subsequent studies in other counties, a survey research study could be designed to ask older youth who chose not to re-enroll in the 4-H program questions about their experiences. Themes generated from the current study could form the basis for questions on such a survey. A survey would allow more former 4-H members to participate, which would create additional data and help researchers learn more about why older youth chose to discontinue their involvement in the 4-H program. Furthermore, a survey provides more anonymity than a face-to-face method, which would lessen concerns about youth giving socially desirable responses in interviews.

3. Current members: A similar focus group study could be performed with older youth who are current 4-H members, as current members may also be having negative experiences through the 4-H program. Current members are enrolled in some of the same 4-H clubs as those who participated in the focus groups interviews, and current members were evaluated at the same judging events and activities as those who chose not to re-enroll. Current members may also be experiencing the *push* stemming from negative experiences with adults and negative experiences with competition and are very likely experiencing the *pull* of participation in other activities; nevertheless, they have chosen to remain involved. What is it that is keeping these members in the 4-H program, while some of their peers are choosing to discontinue involvement? What is it that tips that balance for some, but not for others?

In fact, although we were unaware of it at the time, such a study was being conducted simultaneously with current 4-H members in Wisconsin, and it identified some of the same themes (Nutt, 2008). Interestingly, Nutt (2008) concluded that further study should examine negative experiences, a theme brought out in our study.

4. Volunteer training: Because some of the negative experiences were related to club advisors, another area of research that needs to be addressed is how 4-H club volunteers are trained. Research questions could look at the content of the types of training offered in counties and how that training prepares volunteers to provide a positive club experiences for 4-H members. Do club advisors recognize the importance of allowing members to lead the club? Are they skilled in techniques to do so? Do 4-H club advisors realize the value of providing challenges within the 4-H club that match the skills of the members in the club? A study directed to the volunteers who facilitate 4-H clubs could address these questions.

5. Competition: This study clearly demonstrates the importance of youth's experiences with competition in their decision to re-enroll in the 4-H program. As the literature notes that competition can be positive or negative, further investigation should be done concerning how experiences with competition are related to the decision to re-enroll.

Implications for Practice

The findings of the current study on the retention of older 4-H youth have many implications for practice. Although these recommendations were derived from a study of 4-H members, we believe they are applicable for other youth development programs as well.

- helping club advisors and other 4-H volunteers to understand the needs of older youth and to practice strategies aimed at improving the ways they work with them and their parents
- developing ways to reward cooperation, not just competition, providing training opportunities for volunteers related to fostering a sense of healthy competition for members within the club setting, and creating training for project judges (e.g., Evans, McKendrick, Wesley, & Smith, 2008)

- developing strategies that can help youth balance competing demands on their time and become successful in both 4-H and other activities, such as athletics and the arts
- offering a variety of programming opportunities for leadership, decision-making, and meaningful service for older 4-H youth that fit their developing sense of self
- creating intermediary leadership opportunities for youth who are 11 to 14 years to keep members engaged
- figuring out ways to give youth what they want by offering some programs that have flexibility, less structure, and more leisure with small groups of friends who share a specific interest
- following up routinely with those who do not re-enroll

Conclusion

Although making the decision to pursue certain activities and to discontinue involvement in other activities is a normal part of healthy adolescent development, county 4-H programs should pay particular attention to factors that are pushing youth out of local 4-H programs in an attempt to more effectively meet their needs. 4-H professionals must realize that their programs cannot achieve the desired impact if youth do not remain involved in 4-H programming. Effectively meeting the needs of older youth may therefore make participation in 4-H just as appealing, if not more appealing, than participation in other activities.

As young people grow older, part of the developmental process is to give them an increasingly larger voice and choice in the issues affecting their lives. Who best to ask why older youth leave the 4-H program than the youth themselves? Listening to their voices will help youth development professionals develop and improve programs so that these youth are not “here today, gone tomorrow.”

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APPENDIX A
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONING ROUTE

1. Think back to before you joined the Erie County 4-H program. What caused you to join 4-H?
2. What did you enjoy about 4-H?
3. What are the problems with 4-H?
4. Describe the reasons that caused you not to re-enroll in 4-H?
5. How did your experience with your 4-H club influence your decision not to re-enroll?
 - a. Describe your 4-H club advisor(s).
 - i. What did you 4-H advisor(s) do?
 - ii. Describe the ways that your 4-H advisor(s) assisted 4-H members.
 - b. Describe how your 4-H club meetings were run.
 - i. How were club members involved in running the meetings?
 - ii. What types of things did you do during the club meetings?
6. Describe the competitive activities in which you participated while you were a 4-H member.
 - a. How did your experience with competition influence your decision not to re-enroll?
7. When you were in 4-H, in what other activities were you involved?
 - a. How did those other activities influence your involvement with 4-H?
 - b. How does having a job influence your involvement with 4-H?
 - c. How involved are you in other activities now that you are no longer in 4-H?
8. What do you tell your friends about 4-H?
9. What other thing would you like to say that you have not had the chance to share?