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Exploring the 4-H Thriving Model: A Commentary Through an Equity Lens

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Abstract

Many youth-serving organizations across the nation have made commitments to enhance their ability to better engage diverse communities with equity and inclusion at the fore. For many youth programs, there is a need to better align youth, adult leaders, and curriculum with the diverse needs and social conditions of the country. In their article, Professors Arnold and Gagnon describe the most recent iteration of a theory of change for 4-H, a national youth-serving organization that offers a variety of PYD programs. 4-H recognizes the critical need to reach the most marginalized communities, yet the opportunity gap that exists in its programming cannot be fully addressed if an equity lens is not applied to the systematic analysis and delivery of programs. In this commentary, I critique the 4-H Thriving Model through an equity lens and, in doing so, explain the key terms and theories necessary for stakeholders to understand in order to promote equity in the youth sector.

Key words: positive youth development, diversity, equity

Introduction

Positive Youth Development (PYD) programs across the nation are making commitments to enhance their ability to better engage diverse communities with equity and inclusion at the fore. For many youth programs, there is a need to better align youth, staff, mentors, and curriculum with the diverse needs and social conditions of the country. 4-H Youth Development for example, recognizes the critical need to close the opportunity gap that exists among the most marginalized communities. 4-H shares, "uniting toward an inclusive, diverse and equitable 4-H is the fuel we need to increase access for all youth, families and communities—in every town, every city and every corner of America" (Extension Committee on Organization & Policy [ECOP] 4-H, 2019). In order for 4-H and other PYD programs to play a role in closing the opportunity

gap, it will require national, state, and local stakeholders to systematically analyze and deliver programs through an equity lens. This commentary will explore (a) key terms and definitions related to equity, (b) critical theories and pedagogies that influence equity, and (c) the 4-H Thriving Model through an equity lens.

Terms and Definitions

There are many terms used when we talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is important to establish a shared understanding of terminology when discussing goals and strategies that foster more inclusive and equitable PYD programs. Below are some common terms that will be referenced throughout this commentary:

- **culture**: the shared experiences of people, including their languages, values, customs, and worldviews (American Evaluation Association, 2017; Deen, Parker & Huskey, 2015; Fields, 2019).
- **culturally relevant teaching**: teaching practices that use the cultural knowledge, viewpoints, and social conditions of our participants to make our programs more relevant (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995).
- **diversity**: our different identities such as age, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, physical and mental ability, gender, sexual orientation, spiritual practices, employment status, geographic location, and other characteristics (Fields, 2019; Merriam-Webster, n.d.).
- **equality**: each member of a society or group receiving the same resource or treatment regardless of what may be needed to achieve a desired outcome (Calhoun, 2002; Fields, 2019; Niblett, 2017).
- **equity**: a person or group receiving the unique resources and opportunities needed to reduce or eliminate the barriers to achieving desired goals. (Calhoun, 2002; Fields, 2019; Niblett. 2017).
- **inclusion**: the movement beyond simply having diversity within a space and toward creating an equitable environment where the richness of ideas, backgrounds, and perspectives are harnessed. Inclusion is the act of creating a space where each person is authentically valued, respected and supported (Baltimore Racial Justice Action, 2016; Fields, 2019).
- **oppression**: the discrimination of one social group for the benefit of another (Baltimore Racial Justice Action, 2016; Fields, 2019; Freire, 1970/2012; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).
- **social justice**: the act of distributing power, resources, opportunity, societal benefits and protection in a way that is equitable for all members of society (Baltimore Racial

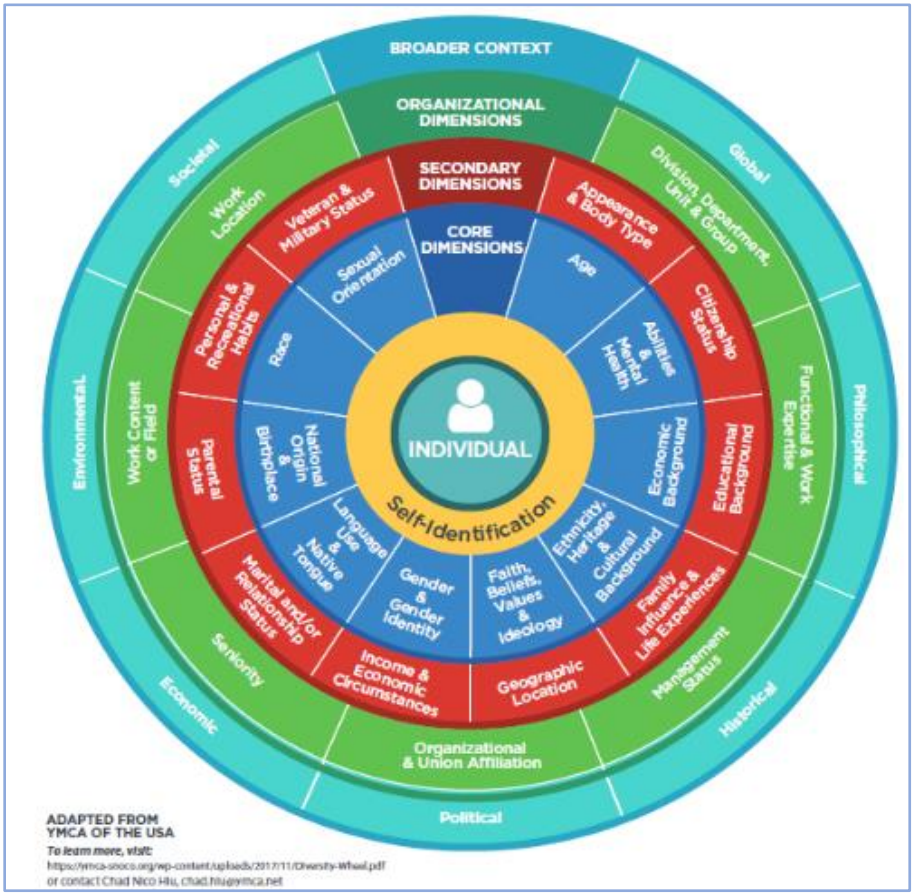
Justice Action, 2016; Fields, 2019; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

- **social justice youth development**: a way to foster critical consciousness among young people while encouraging them to act toward achieving a sociopolitical vision (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Diving Deeper Into the Related Terms

Diversity is a word that is commonly used in our programs and organizations. Diversity describes our different identities such as age, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, physical and mental ability, gender, sexual orientation, spiritual practices, employment status, geographic location, and other characteristics. There are many aspects of diversity, although we tend to focus on the physical attributes we may see. It is important to acknowledge that diversity is multi-dimensional (see Figure 1), and we must take time to explore our own identities as well as those around us (Fields, 2019; YMCA of the USA, 2017).

Figure 1. Dimensions of Diversity (Fields, 2019; YMCA of the USA, 2017)



While diversity and inclusion are often used interchangeably, these terms are quite different. Inclusion moves beyond simply having diversity within a space and toward creating an equitable environment where the richness of ideas, backgrounds, and perspectives are harnessed (Baltimore Racial Justice Action, 2016; Fields, 2019). Inclusion is the act of creating a space where each person is authentically valued, respected and supported. It is not enough to merely have diversity within a space. It is important that a program's culture, practices, and policies are such that each person feels like they truly belong and have the opportunity to fully participate and connect with others (Fields, 2019).

Equality and equity are also often mistakenly used interchangeably. However, there are distinct differences between these terms. Equality means that each member of a society or group receives the same resource or treatment regardless of what may be needed to achieve a desired outcome (Fields, 2019; Niblett, 2017). However, because of individual's unique identities in addition to historical and institutional barriers that stem from discrimination, equal does not always work (Fields, 2019). Equity on the other hand, means providing a person or group with the unique resources and opportunities needed to reduce or eliminate the barriers that prevent them from achieving the desired outcome (Fields, 2019; Niblett; 2017) (See Figure 2).

In Figure 2, each person is a different height. More importantly, the fence is slanted and therefore presents a different height barrier for each person. On the left side (equality), each person has an equal size box, yet not everyone can view the game. On the right side (equity), the boxes, which you may think of as resources, are equitably distributed so that each person has an opportunity to view the game. In this image, the fence symbolizes systemic forms of oppression and injustice. The various heights of those represented in the image symbolizes the privilege or lack thereof that people have. Historic oppression and systemic barriers that decrease access to opportunities precludes educators from using a one-size-fits-all approach in their programming and community engagement. Educators have a responsibility to be aware of the disparities that exist both within our programming and in society. This is critical, because educators who aim to develop youth without acknowledgment of and response to a young person's possible societal inequities, are in fact perpetuating injustice (Fields et al., 2018).

Figure 2. Equality vs. Equity Image. (Interaction Institute for Social Change, 2016; Fields, 2019; *Kutner, 2016.)*

In order to enact equitable practices, one must understand oppression and privilege. Oppression describes the discrimination of one societal group for the benefit of another (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Fields, 2019). Oppression is established and maintained through institutional systems and power—which are held by dominant cultures in our society. The dominant culture represents the values, practices, language and traditions that are assumed to be the most accepted and influential within a given society (University of Washington [US] Tacoma Diversity Research Center, 2015). Members of a dominant culture are in positions of power that influence and even solely decide policy, laws, and practices that maintain systems of oppression (Fields, 2019).

In American culture, dominant identities include: White, middle class/wealthy, heterosexual, men, Christian, people with college degrees, people with full physical and mental ability, American citizens, and English speaking people. Intersectionality can also confound the levels of oppression that one experiences. Intersectionality is the notion that identities such as gender identity, race, class, and others cannot be examined in isolation from one another; they interact and intersect in individuals' lives, in society, in social systems, and are mutually constitutive (Fields, 2019; UW Tacoma Diversity Resource Center, 2015). Individuals could have privilege with one identity and be oppressed through another.

As educators and members of society, we have a responsibility to acknowledge systems within our organizations and communities that oppress marginalized and non-dominant groups. One way we can do this is to begin thinking with a social justice mindset. Social justice describes the act of distributing power, resources, opportunity, societal benefits, and protection in a way that is equitable for all members of society (Baltimore Racial Justice 2016; Fields, 2019; Niblett, 2017). Social justice youth development offers a way to foster critical consciousness among young people while encouraging them to act toward achieving a sociopolitical vision (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). A social justice youth development mindset requires one to

- be open to reflect on their own identity and organizational culture;
- engage with diverse communities in an inclusive way;
- position youth and community members at the center of programs;
- celebrate and value the diverse cultures around us; and
- acknowledge and most importantly challenge the oppressive barriers that marginalized groups face (Fields, 2017; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; & Niblett, 2017).

In addition to learning about societal inequities, it is equally important for educators to learn of the cultural and social capital diverse youth and adults have (Fields et al., 2018; Yosso, 2016). These are often the first steps in developing a cultural awareness of the diverse youth who participate in one's program. Having cultural awareness includes having an understanding of both the strengths and values of a culture, as well as the historical inequities within cultures.

Critical Theories and Pedagogy

Critical theories and pedagogy challenge the traditional hegemonic ways in which society creates, teaches, makes meaning of, and challenges knowledge. Critical pedagogy seeks to utilize education as a form of liberation from oppression. This pedagogy was birthed from many theoretical perspectives including Marxism, Freirean philosophies of liberation, and the Frankfurt school of critical theory (McLaren, 1997/2000). Marxism is a philosophy that analyzes the relationships between socioeconomic classes. Marxist philosophy strongly critiques capitalism and asserts that there are immense inequities between economic classes. While Marxism was not originally rooted in education, it has many connections to the classroom. The classroom is a microcosm of the larger economic and political society as they reproduce the attitudes and dispositions that are required for the continuation of the present system of domination by the privileged class.

Freierean philosophy focuses on education as a process of conscientization—that is a process through which one develops an awareness and understanding of their oppression (Freire, 1970; Martin, 2008). This student-centered teaching approach fosters an open dialogue where students discuss common issues and make connections to the larger societal norms. Within the Freierean model, the teacher does not simply accept the status quo and deposit meaningless learning into students. Rather, the teacher becomes a conduit between student enlightenment and student praxis—refection and action towards liberation (Freire, 1970/2002).

The Frankfurt school also analyzed the emerging forms of capital and changing forms of domination that accompanied them (Giroux, 1983). These theorists developed a critical theory, which provided both a school of thought and a process of critique to address societal inequities. These three aforementioned philosophies—Marxism, Freirean liberation, and critical theory, have been integrated to form what is known today as *critical pedagogy*. Critical pedagogy was "developed by progressive teachers attempting to eliminate inequalities on the basis of social class" (McLaren, 1997/2010, p. 1).

Critical Experiential Education

Experiential forms of education offer a mechanism for students to learn in context and through hands-on experience. However, not all experiential education is critical or equitable in nature. Dewey's (1938) experiential theory asserts that knowledge is imparted through real-life experiences and is socially constructed. It must be acknowledged however, that Dewey's experiential model was not created to address inequities of race and class within education. Rather, his theory was a critique of traditional forms of schooling.

In traditional forms of schooling, students are often inundated with concepts deemed essential by those outside of their community and culture (Ladson-Billings, 2000). In many cases, students become programmed to memorize information without relating the knowledge to practical or relevant experiences (Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Schooling then solely becomes a means to graduation and economic survival as opposed to a meaningful learning experience (Martin, 2008).

Ladson-Billings (2000) shares that within the United States, those who drive the public education system and define success measures typically represent colonial and Eurocentric epistemologies. Eurocentric epistemological contributions to society can include the westernized construction of race and its correlated hierarchy, and the utilization of standard American English as a measure of intelligence (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Perry et al., 2003). Ladson-Billings

(2000) argues that "the hegemony of the dominant paradigm makes it more than just another way to view the world—it claims to be the only legitimate way to view the world (p. 258). This "system of knowing" however, does not represent the myriad of cultures, education debts, and definitions of success that exist within this country (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Spencer, 2008; Williams, 2003).

One way for students to develop their own epistemologies is to "engage in a series of experiential activities that offer counter-hegemonic insights into the dominant ways of knowing that school structures tend to transmit" (Breunig, 2005, p. 112). Research findings indicate that experiential methods of teaching can increase academic and post-secondary interest along with community engagement (Dewey, 1938; Perry et al., 2003).

As the challenges within communities are unique, there is a need for relevant approaches to experiential forms of education (Perry et al., 2003; Rose & Paisley, 2012; Williams, 2003). Rose and Paisley (2012) share "experiential educators should learn to value various social differences within their participant groups" (p. 142). This is critical in that

> *The dominance of White privilege is well-established in experiential education, and simply encouraging more racially diverse participant groups amounts to a benevolent invitation for 'others' to take part in processes and institutions already well under way without them.* (Rose & Paisley, 2012, p. 142)

Too often experiential educators "facilitate as though all participants experience the activities uniformly, without appropriate consideration of students' various incoming positionalities" (Rose & Paisley, 2012, p. 144). It is critical that experiential educators integrate concepts of justice and utilize participant-informed curriculum and pedagogy (Breunig, 2005; Rose & Paisley, 2012). Rose and Paisley (2012) emphasize the importance of a mutually educative experience where both the teacher and student experience opportunities for learning and discovery. They expound on this idea by stating "the teacher is part of the experiential educational process, and that teacher brings along her or his own values and experiences, though this lens can be mitigated by empowering students to create their own meanings and their own interpretations of knowledge" (p. 143). Therefore, critical experiential learning is not about learning through *any* experience but rather learning through relevant experiences that can empower a young person to think critically.

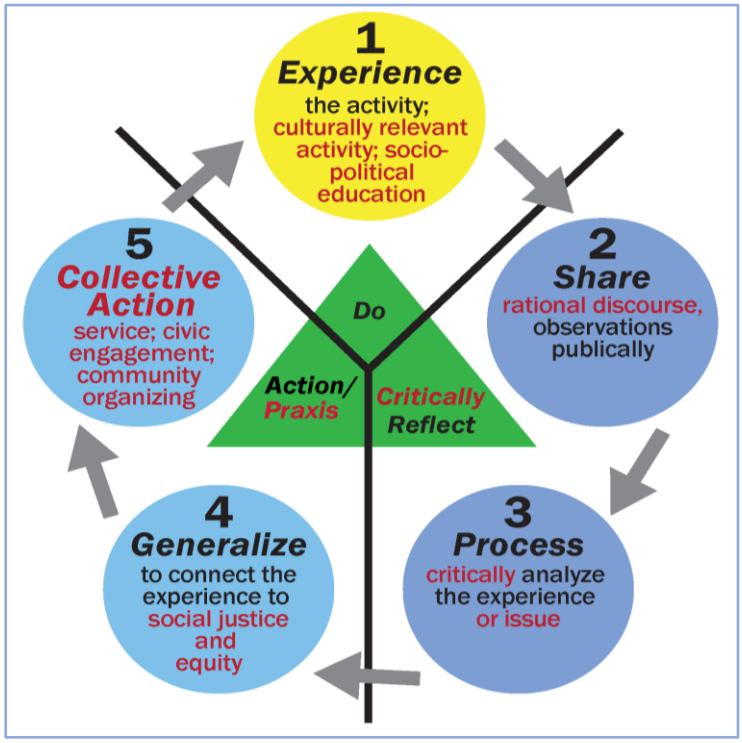
Erbstein (2013) shares, "Young people who have been disengaged from or underserved by school and have limited opportunity to develop skills such as academic literacy, public speaking,

writing, project planning, and meeting participation are likely to require significant additional skill-building support" (p. 119). Therefore, experiential activities that are justice-focused, should have intent and desired outcomes that directly confront issues of privilege (Erbstein, 2014; Rose & Paisley, 2012). On an institutional level, organizations that are rooted in an experiential model should

> *change in order to be of better comfort to those who have been historically and systematically oppressed. Such changes might include shifts in organizational philosophy, program activities, locations, staffing decisions, and identification of relevant target outcomes.* (Rose & Paisley 2012, p. 148)

Fields (2016) offers a *4-H Critical Experiential Learning Model* (see Figure 3) to consider when engaging youth in social justice youth development. The concepts that guide this model come from literature offered by Breunig (2005), Dewey (1938), Erbstein (2013), Fields (2016), Freire (1970), Ginwright & James (2002), Ladson-Billings (2000), and Rose & Pailey (2012). This *4-H Critical Experiential Learning Model* walks youth through a culturally relevant experience to explore societal injustice, encourage critical reflection, and then progresses to collective action in community. This model empowers youth to critically reflect on their community, country, and world, and identify the tools and resources needed to move towards a more just society.

Figure 3. 4-H Critical Experiential Learning Model (Fields, 2016)



Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

There are many forms of culturally rooted pedagogical practices that have been developed within the last four decades. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is one such practice that Gay (2010) defines as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (2010, p. 31). Gay (2010) asserts that culturally responsive teaching is validating and affirming:

1. It acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum.
2. It builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities.
3. It uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles.
4. It teaches students to knows and praise their own and one another's cultural heritages.
5. It incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in school. (p. 29)

Similarly, culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), conceptualized by Ladson-Billings, is "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17-18). CRP is "a pedagogy of opposition [that is] committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). One could describe this collective empowerment as means toward social justice (Fields & Nathaniel, 2015). Similar to the critical experiential practices, culturally relevant pedagogy uses the student's culture to help them create meaning and understand the world. This pedagogy rests on three criteria: (a) students must experience academic success, (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). The third criterion supports an environment where youth come to know that social injustice does in fact exist—and they have the power to challenge this injustice.

Fields and Moncloa (2018) have blended the constructs offered by Gay (2010) and Ladson-Billings (1995) for youth development educators. Fields and Moncloa have compiled 10 strategies for educators as they engage with communities using a culturally relevant approach:

1. Engage in intentional self-reflection to understand one's cultural norms, values, beliefs, and behaviors.
2. Experience cultures different from their own while engaging in intentional self-reflection on similarities and differences.
3. Develop a non-judgmental appreciation and respect for diverse cultural beliefs and values, beyond objective surface understanding of culture, toward a deeper subjective understanding.
4. Evaluate overgeneralizations and stereotypes and seek clarification when needed.
5. Help youth understand there is more than one way of knowing by using materials that reflect people, language, art, music, stories, and games from various cultural traditions.
6. Be a youth-centered educator, demonstrate that you care, and provide experiences that facilitate engagement and discussion of their own cultural backgrounds and assets.
7. Communicate high expectations for diverse participants.
8. Incorporate multiple assessment tools.
9. Ensure practices, guidelines, and policies are created or adapted with diverse populations to be more inclusive.
10. Advocate for systemic organizational change to respond to the needs and interests of diverse populations.

Community-driven positive youth development that is culturally relevant can address the presence of social injustice and inequity by providing systematic and sequentially developed opportunities that draw on the cultural formations of the youth (Perry et al., 2003; Erbstein, 2013).

Culturally Relevant Positive Youth Development

The focus of PYD is to envision young people as resources rather than problems for society (Damon, 2004) and to foster mutually beneficial relations between healthy youth and a nation marked by social justice, democracy, and liberty (Lerner, 2005). PYD aims to understand, educate, and engage children in productive activities as opposed to focusing on the deficits and problems that young people encounter through their development (Benson, 2003; Lerner et al. 2005; Damon, 2004). There was a paradigm shift in the approach to working with youth in the early 1990's, as researchers began to view adolescents "through the lens of systems theories that look at development throughout the life span as a product of relations between individuals and their world" (Lerner, 2005, p. 2). Prior to this shift, "if positive youth development was discussed in the literature . . . it was implicitly or explicitly regarded as the absence of negative or undesirable behaviors" (Lerner et al., 2005, p. 5). Approaches to youth development were

problem-centered as preventative and intervention approaches centered on problems such as learning disabilities, drug abuse, self-esteem deficit and crime (Damon, 2004; Lerner, 2005).

PYD models that are not culturally relevant run the risk of maintaining societal forces of privilege and dominance (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Perry et al., 2003). Ginwright and Cammorota (2002) expound on this idea:

> *Current formulations of positive youth development are based on unrealistic, white middle-class conceptions of youth. This view of youth homogenizes their experiences, simplifies their identities, and conceptualizes them through one dominant cultural frame. Consequently, the relevance of culture, race, class, gender, and sexual identity in the positive youth development model are never fully developed.* (p. 85)

Larson and Ngo (2017) introduced a special issue in the *Journal of Adolescent Research* focused on culture in youth programs. They share that "culture matters because each day youth and staff bring their cultural experiences to the program, and these experiences influence how they think, act, and learn" (p. 4). Williams (2001) affirms that "youth development practitioners may have to increase their knowledge base of different cultures to begin the journey to accomplishing cross-cultural competence so programs may be designed for cultural inclusion of diverse youth and volunteers" (para. 16). Furthermore, youth development practitioners "must have a deep understanding of the impact of limited access and opportunities and inequities on the lives of many cultural groups living in the U.S. today" (National 4-H Learning Priorities Equity, Access, and Opportunity, 2008, p. 1).

Erbstein (2013) states that "effective outreach to marginalized youth [relies] on locally grounded, culturally specific understandings" of the youth (p. 111). Erbstein expounds on this idea by sharing key components of a culturally relevant PYD which include (a) engaging adult allies; (b) respect, care, and high expectations; (c) a critical stance toward systems; (d) communication; and (e) shared culture, language, and experience. Erbstein describes a Sacramento youth development program, entitled REACH— a program that integrates critical experiential projects aimed to engage young people and adults in community change and health development. This program strengthens local networks to take a critical stance toward inequitable systems (Erbstein, 2013). REACH develops skills necessary to enact community change—such as policymaking, community organizing, and community research (Erbstein, 2013). Erbstein shared that the "most important factor in engaging underrepresented youth [within REACH] was the sustained leadership of [adult allies] with the ability to build authentic

relationships. . . . [These adults] brought a deep respect and care for the young people they sought to reach, rooted in a belief that the challenges they had faced and perhaps continued to face were not reflective of their capacities" (p. 113). The adult allies within REACH maintained high standards for their youth participants. Within CRP, Ladson-Billings (2000) also emphasizes the importance of having high standards and the understanding that students learn best when the content is meaningful to them.

Erbstein (2013) argues that "youth who are most vulnerable to challenging community conditions, limited educational and economic trajectories, and poor health, derive especially strong benefits from engagement in community youth development efforts" (p. 109). However, a colorblind and cultureblind understanding of PYD [and its constructs] can serve as a disadvantage to youth who are most affected by social injustice (Erbstein, 2013; Spencer, 2008). Yet, "many educators still believe that good teaching transcends place, people, time, and context" (Gay, 2010, p. 23). To achieve the intended outcomes of PYD, programmatic efforts must be inclusive of culturally relevant pedagogy and critical experiential practices (Erbstein, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Perry et al., 2003).Youth development programs can then serve as a mechanism to combat the social injustices that exist within communities (Fields & Nathaniel, 2015).

Social Justice Youth Development

Damon (2004) acknowledges that while the PYD approach recognizes the existence of adversities, developmental challenges, and economic class, it "resists conceiving of the developmental process mainly as an effort to overcome deficits and risks" (p. 15). Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) share the limits of youth development models that are "bound by an inability to examine the complex social, economic and political forces that bear on the lives of urban youth" (p. 82). Such forces include "issues of identity, racism, sexism, police brutality, and poverty that are supported by unjust economic policies" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 82). As Lerner and colleagues (2005) discuss, the contemporary theory of PYD moves away from the "assumption that children are 'broken' or in danger of becoming broken" (Benson, 2003, p. 21) and is inclusive of "concepts such as developmental assets (Benson, 2003), moral development (Damon, 1990), and civic engagement (Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; Youniss et al., 1999)" (p. 20). PYD acknowledges the "capacity for young people to change communities while simultaneously developing important life skills" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 84).

Youth development educators have a responsibility toward social justice, otherwise they are maintaining the status quo of privilege (Brown, 2004; Fields, 2017). To foster this move towards social justice in youth development, there is a need for professional development around areas such as diversity, privilege, self-reflection, and culturally responsive pedagogy (Brown, 2004; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Ginwright and James (2002) offer principles, practices, and outcomes of social justice youth development (Ginwright & James, 2002). Fields et al. (2018) have slightly adapted this social justice youth development framework for 4-H youth development (see Table 1). These principles and practices should be considered when developing youth development programs as they lead to social justice outcomes that engage youth in empowerment and problem solving.

Table 1. Social Justice Youth Development Framework (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Fields et al., 2018)

Principles	Practices	Outcomes
Analyzes power in social relationships	• Political education & strategizing • Identifying power holders • Reflecting about power in one's own life	• Social problematizing, critical thinking, asking & answering questions related to community & social problems • Development of sociopolitical awareness • Youth sharing power with adults
Makes identity central	• Joining support groups & organizations that support identity development • Reading material where one's identity is central and celebrated • Critiquing stereotypes regarding one's identities	• Development of pride regarding one's identity • Awareness of how sociopolitical forces influence identity • Being a part of something meaningful & productive • The capacity to build solidarity with others who share common struggles/shared interest
Promotes systemic social change	• Working to end social inequality (e.g., racism & sexism) • Refraining from activities/behaviors that are oppressive to others	• Sense of life purpose, empathy for others, optimism about social change • Liberation by ending various forms of social oppression

Table 1. (continued)

Principles	Practices	Outcomes
Encourages collective action	• Involving oneself in collective action and strategies that challenge & change local and national systems and institutions • Community organizing • Rallies and marches • Boycotts and hunger strikes • Electoral strategies	• Capacity to change personal, community, and social conditions • Empowerment and positive orientation toward life circumstances and events • Healing from personal trauma brought on from oppression
Embraces youth culture	• Celebrating youth culture in organizational culture • Personnel who are interculturally competent • Personnel who have an awareness of/share the lived experiences of marginalized youth recruitment strategies	• Authentic youth engagement • Youth-run/led organizations • Effective recruitment strategies • Engagement of marginalized youth

Exploring the 4-H Thriving Model through an Equity Lens

In this series, Mary Arnold introduces readers to the *4-H Thriving Model*. This model "identifies an intermediate process – youth thriving – that mediates the connection between program context and developmental outcomes" (Arnold, 2018, p. 151). The *4-H Thriving Model* is organized into four subsections, (a) Developmental Context, (b) Thriving Trajectory, (c) Developmental Outcomes, and (d) Long-term Outcomes. The first two sections can be described as the *inputs* and *processes* of PYD and the last two sections can be described as the *outcomes* of high-quality and relevant PYD. The subsequent sections will explore this model through an equity lens.

Developmental Context

The *Developmental Context* includes youth sparks, PYD program quality principles, and developmental relationships. Youth sparks can ignite a young person's passion, give a young person a sense of direction, and encourage goal setting. Sparks can be both identified and nurtured through high quality PYD experiences. Eccles and Gootman (2002) describe eight

critical aspects of quality, including (a) physical and psychological safety; (b) appropriate structure; (c) supportive relationships; (d) opportunities to belong; (5) positive social norms; (f) support for efficacy and mattering; (g) opportunities for skill building; and (h) integration of family, school and community. As it relates to development relationships, Arnold (2019) shares that a positive, supportive relationship between youth and 4-H staff and volunteers is critical to youth development.

As we explore the thriving model through an equity lens, we must consider the individual and societal context that surrounds youth, volunteers, staff, and communities. Youth sparks for instance, must be nurtured through culturally relevant paradigms (Gay, 2010; Fields & Moncloa, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). PYD programs must place the youth and their interests at the center of programs rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach that asks youth to adapt to the program.

Developmental relationships are also a critical aspect of youth's thriving. Developmental relationships

- include a secure attachment between the young person and adult, reflected in mutual warmth, respect, and trust;
- foster a bidirectional engagement and benefit for both the youth and adult; and
- increase in complexity over time as youth develop. (Arnold, 2018)

Youth development professionals and volunteers must be intentional about building relationships with youth and community as this is a means to developing social capital for youth. Chazdon et al. (2013) define social capital as "the web of cooperative relationships between members of a community that allows them to act collectively to solve problems together" (p. 1). Fields and Nathaniel (2015) share that youth who have higher levels of social capital—trusting relationships and engagement in their community—are better able to navigate and negotiate through the myriad barriers and challenges that stem from injustice. Fields and Nathaniel assert "this ability is due in part to having stronger community connections and reliable, stronger adult allies" which often increases a young person's self-efficacy—the belief that they matter and can influence change (p. 2). It is critical however, that PYD programs engage diverse volunteers and adult allies who continuously develop their cultural competencies and represent the communities of the youth.

The quality aspects of PYD must also be explored through an equity lens. Table 2 poses some equity considerations for educators and administrators related to PYD aspects of quality.

Table 2. Equity Considerations for 4-H Thriving Quality Aspects

Eight critical aspects of quality	Equity considerations
Physical and psychological safety	. . . consider the socioecological factors that affect marginalized communities.
Appropriate structure	. . . that is culturally relevant.
Supportive relationships	. . . with diverse groups of youth & adults that also represent the identities of the youth.
Opportunities to belong	. . . in a genuine and authentic environment.
Positive social norms	. . . that do not reinforce a hegemonic understanding of norms or behaviors but are inclusive of the cultures represented in the community.
Support for efficacy and mattering	. . . and opportunities for critical thinking and action that addresses issues of injustice.
Opportunities for skill building	. . . through culturally relevant learning.
Integration of family, school, and community	. . . to place the youth, family, and community at the center of programs. This also increases opportunities to develop social capital through bonding, bridging, and linking networks (Multi-State Research Project NCERA215, 2015).

Youth Engagement Driving the Thriving

Arnold (2018) places "intentional emphasis on youth engagement in an attempt to move the PYD discourse away from the idea of linking mere youth participation (showing up) and program dosage to successful developmental outcomes" (p. 147). While it may seem logical that youth who participate in 4-H for many years would be impacted differently than those who experience 4-H for a defined amount of time, there is little evidence to support that program participation alone leads to developmental outcomes (Arnold, 2018; Roth et al., 2010). Research (Weiss et al., 2005) indicates three dimensions of youth engagement that influence the level of PYD outcomes and impacts. These dimensions include

- *duration:* length of time a youth participates in a program;
- *intensity:* frequency or involvement of a youth with a program; and
- *breadth:* number and scope of opportunities youth participate in as a part of a program.

Youth engagement serves as a moderating effect between the developmental context and youth thriving (Arnold & Gagnon, 2020). This framing of the developmental context and

engagement is critical as it moves the conversation away from a singular "premier" method in which 4-H is delivered and towards a conversation about what ingredients should be present in any 4-H experience for thriving to be a probable outcome. Historically, 4-H has placed higher value on opportunities that have been steeped in White, rural, homogenous communities. Thus, rural-based community clubs were often deemed the premier model of 4-H. However, in contemporary times, there has been acknowledgment and increased engagement of diverse youth through various 4-H urban, suburban, and rural experiences. For instance, urban school-based clubs or clubs held in tandem with non-profit organizations also have reported similar developmental outcomes to those reported in rural-based community clubs (Fields, 2016).

4-H and other PYD programs need to explore how the methods of engagement (e.g., community clubs, school enrichment, after-school, camping, etc.) can be culturally relevant, nurture youth sparks, and encourage high duration, intensity and breadth. To this end, the 4-H Thriving Model task force is exploring the model under the primary question 'what works for whom under what conditions?' In this way, the taskforce is looking specifically to see how the 4-H Thriving Model theory holds with diverse youth in diverse settings (Pawson, 2003; Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

Thriving Indicators

Arnold (2018) shares that youth thriving is marked by "social interaction with adults and other youth, reflecting the need to belong" and later by "the presence of personal passion, clear goals, and plans for the transition into adulthood" (p. 150). Arnold describes the thriving indicators as a bridge between program context and outcomes (Benson & Scales, 2009, 2011; Lerner et al, 2003; Lerner et al., 2011; Theokas et al., 2005). Arnold (2019) and the Search Institute (2014) describe the following indicators of a thriving trajectory (summarized in Table 3):

- *openness to challenge and discovery*: an intrinsic desire to explore new things and enjoy challenges.
- *growth mindset*: emphasis on effort in learning over innate ability.
- *hopeful purpose*: having a sense of purpose and on the way to a happy and successful future.
- *transcendent awareness*: an awareness of a sacred or transcendent force and the role of faith or spirituality in shaping everyday thoughts and actions.
- *pro-social orientation*: personal values of respect, responsibility, honesty and caring, and helping others.

- *positive emotionality*: is positive and optimistic, and able to manage emotions appropriately.
- *goal management*: sets goals and shapes effective strategies to achieve them, perseveres and makes adjustment when goals are not attained.

Table 3. Equity Considerations for 4-H Thriving Indicators

Thriving indicator	Equity considerations
Openness to challenge and discovery	Exposure to new opportunity and connections can serve as a link to critical perspectives, resources, and connections to institutions that can bring about change.
Growth mindset	This directly connects to the concept of high expectations—a key ingredient within culturally relevant teaching.
Hopeful purpose	This concept directly connects to self-efficacy—an integral component of youth's success and confidence to address issues related to injustice.
Transcendent awareness	It is critical that the idea of transcendent awareness not imply a religious affiliation as this can be exclusive. A sense of empathy grows when one acknowledges that the world is bigger than just oneself. Social justice requires one to feel a sense of responsibility beyond self.
Pro-social orientation	This must include diverse cultural values and norms related to respect, responsibility, honesty, caring, and helping others so as to not reinforce hegemonic understandings and expectations.
Positive emotionality	It is critical to acknowledge the trauma and societal factors that exist within marginalized communities as this can be a determining factor of optimism and emotional responses. PYD professionals must examine the complex social, economic, and political forces that influence youth experiences.
Goal management	Youth's cultural values must be at the center of establishing desired goals. Strategies to achieve goals should be informed by the youth's socioecological factors. Increasing access to social capital can influence self-efficacy—a critical ingredient in setting and achieving personal and community goals.

Developmental Outcomes

The *4-H Thriving Model's* developmental outcomes align closely with the 5Cs proposed by Lerner (2007), "although the definitions are modified slightly in an effort to narrow and clarify the outcomes for 4-H" (Arnold, 2018, p. 152). The approaches to PYD should be relevant and centered around diverse youth in communities as should the anticipated outcomes of such efforts. Table 4 provides some questions to consider when assessing developmental outcomes of PYD work through an equity lens.

Table 4. Equity Considerations for 4-H Thriving Developmental Outcomes

Developmental outcome	Equity questions to consider
Academic motivation and success	How do we consider inequitable access to quality education in academic motivating factors? How do we consider inequitable access to quality education in academic success outcomes (i.e., education debt owed to marginalized audiences; [Ladson-Billings, 2006])? How do we define success, and it does align with the community's cultural values?
Social competence	How do we intentionally acknowledge diversity, privilege, systems of oppression? Do we support inclusive practices among diverse youth and volunteers?
Personal standards	How do we place equal value on various cultural norms and values?
Contribution to others	How do we encourage engagement in service and collective action to address social injustice?
Connection to others	How do we ensure connection among and between diverse groups of people?
Personal responsibility	How do we acknowledge societal inequities that affect one's sense of self-efficacy? How do we acknowledge the varied levels responsibilities for youth who are a depended source of income in their family?

Conclusion

4-H and other PYD programs must intentionally and systematically use critical pedagogical approaches that foster equity and thriving outcomes for *all* youth—particularly those who have been marginalized by systems of oppression. Fields and Nathaniel (2015) posit that if we can better connect youth to their community in meaningful and purposeful ways, we improve our chances of creating the environments where youth feel a sense of efficacy, belonging, and responsibility to their world. The *4-H Thriving Model* presents an opportunity for PYD

professionals to explore the process and outcomes of PYD through a holistic lens. However, if the model is not explored and applied through an equity lens, it runs the risk of further perpetuating injustices that exist within PYD programs and within society. If 4-H harnesses the opportunity to nurture youth's sparks through culturally relevant engagement, and empowers youth to see the world as bigger than themselves—then 4-H stands a chance to keep our promise to America's youth while collectively working towards a more just society.

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