

Raise: What 4-H Teaches Seven Million Kids in a Resource Review

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Abstract: For over 100 years the 4-H Youth Development program has provided countless experiences for youth. This article reviews the recently published book *Raise: What 4-H teaches seven million kids and how its lessons could change food and farming forever* (Butler, 2015). While the book focuses primarily on the California 4-H program, the author also highlights research from historical 4-H documents as well as thoughts from National 4-H program leaders.

Introduction

If you have lost your excitement for the fair or for youth working toward their goals, this book will put a smile on your face. The goal of the book addresses “what 4-H teaches seven million kids and how its lessons could change food and farming forever.” The author, Kiera Butler, writes mostly about the California 4-H program, but she also interviewed program leaders from Washington DC, researched some of the historical documents about 4-H, and visited an “up-and-coming” 4-H program in Ghana. She reported spending over two years pestering 4-H members and their families and viewing chores, fairs, judging, quiz bowls, and other activities.

In the book, she also provides some interesting statistics and comparisons:

Ninety percent of Americans come from families that haven’t farmed for 2 or 3 generations. Fewer than half of 4-H members live on farms and in rural areas.

If living alumni of 4-H had their own country, it would be the size of Italy.

Butler remarks that 4-H is a program that allows kids to decide what they want to study and also to run the meetings themselves; to learn by doing. To participate in the program, the young people must manage their 4-H activities, school, and other activities. 4-H also gives young people an opportunity to excel outside of a formal school environment. Sometimes learning math, for example, they can relate math to their animal project.

The book discusses the value of public speaking and the feelings of accomplishments youth get when completing something that is difficult for them. She related one instance where a youth had to make a decision whether to continue or to "scratch" their performance based on an injury: living with the results of their decisions.

There are other issues addressed in the book, 1) early discrimination of African American youth, especially in canning programs 2) corporate support for programs, including contests, and profiting from 4-H members' use of commercial products, and 3) the a lack of research on the efficacy of 4-H programs.

Butler mentions that she is not a historian but the book would have benefitted a good deal from further research of the above issues. The following paragraphs point out these discrepancies:

Despite the quote by O.B Martin, who at one point in time said African American youth should not be taught canning, one of the two first hired USDA Cooperative Extension agents was African American. Martin worked in the South, but so did Thomas Campbell, starting in 1906. He was so well liked and respected by blacks and white people, he continued his employment until the mid-1950s. Also, it wasn't O.B. Martin, but another 4-H program leader, O.H. Benson, who was the real instigator of canning. O.H. Benson, who's canning file still exists in the National Agricultural Library, established the first USDA films on canning, wrote microbiologists concerned with its safety, and was able to keep his own family farm based on his ability to can home grown fruits and vegetables, when his father died. In addition, Annie Peters (Hunter), the first African American home economics educator hired by USDA in 1912, was well known for her community canning center (that lasted years several decades after her career) was recognized for the multiple and quality of canning entries provided black children at the county fair in Boley, Oklahoma. Mrs. Peters was also first to be included in integrated Cooperative Extension training programs in 1913.

Some of the concerns Butler outlines about sponsored contests are valid, but one should also be reminded that early 4-H (boys and girls work) began because of sponsored contests before A.B. Graham started the first club. Sponsored support allowed youth to go to Washington DC as evidenced by in a 1913 USDA film.

Regarding the so-called lack of 4-H research (mentioned on page 83), the combined documented number of graduate and professional studies about the 4-H program, located from 1913 to the present, by Scholl and Paster, are in the thousands. Published from 1913 to the present, no less than 15 studies were completed very year since WWII.

Comparing Ghanaian and American 4-H programs, Butler mentioned the triviality of U.S. program in comparison to finding and reducing the cost of seed provided by the corporate sponsors in Ghana. What Butler fails to recognize is that many 4-H members are part of farm families who do rely on multiple contributions the 4-H member to their families' income and well-being.

The author spends several chapters talking about showing at the fairs and reflects both the excitement and the agony of defeat. Reasons why young people may have achieved were identified as well.

What concerns the author is how young people present themselves in order to represent agriculture. She wants youth to understand where food comes from and mentions that it is unlikely that these youth would have gotten this information other than through their 4-H experience. According to the author, the challenge for 4-H is to teach critical thinking about agriculture, not just to kids lucky enough to be able to raise animals or crops.

References

Butler, K. (2015). *Raise: What 4-H teaches seven million kids and how its lessons could change food and farming forever*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.