



4-H as a Culturally Responsive Program: Building an Afterschool 4-H Program that Engages Latino Youth and Parents in Sacramento, CA

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Abstract

In a richly diverse state—and one where no single ethnic group makes a clear majority—the University of California 4-H Youth Development Program (CA 4-H YDP) is proposing new program structures to attract and serve Latino audiences, especially through a 4-H Club experience. One such structure creates 4-H Clubs in established after-school programs that take place on school sites. The 4-H Youth Development Program in Sacramento, California, has a history of engaging African American, Asian, and Latino youth in a variety of non-club programs, and is seeking to establish an after-school 4-H Club at a charter school serving primarily Latino children.

In an effort to better understand the qualities that best support Latino participation in positive youth development (PYD) programs, CA 4-H YDP also commissioned a review to synthesize the research and literature in this area. The resulting paper (Erbstein and Fabionar, 2014) explores Latino participation in PYD programs through a framework, Positive Youth Development Program Elements, which includes four components: conceptual framework, program elements, organizational infrastructure, and organizational and community relationships.

This paper has two purposes: to describe the process, challenges, and outcomes in forming a predominately Latino 4-H Club in an after school setting; and to view the process of forming the Club through the lens of the Positive Youth Development Program Elements framework.

Keywords: 4-H, youth development, Latino, afterschool, youth programs

Introduction

In 2014-15, the California 4-H Youth Development Program (CA 4-H YDP) reached 80,435 young people through 13,048 adult volunteers. About 33% of youth and 12% of adults identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino. The statewide goal is to increase Latino participation in the 4-H YDP to 50% by 2025. To reach that goal, CA 4-H YDP has adopted a multipronged strategy that includes the redefinition of the community club model, intensive cultural competence training for staff and academics, and the implementation of Expansion and Review committees at the county level to plan and implement an effective local outreach program.

4-H Community Clubs in California and generally across the nation provide a space where youth can learn about almost any topic they become interested in while working with their peers and a caring adult. The Land Grant Institutions' State or Local 4-H Extension Office must charter each 4-H club and, by and large, all 4-H clubs must be youth-led, volunteer-administered, and supervised by local 4-H staff. Historically, this model has allowed land grant universities to deliver high quality youth development programming.

Because the traditional 4-H model relies heavily on adult volunteers, parent engagement is often the biggest challenge in starting a new 4-H club. This is especially true for Latino and other cultural groups who are often unfamiliar with 4-H and the benefits associated with participating. Therefore, despite outreach efforts, local 4-H programs have found it difficult to attract and maintain diverse populations. For example, in 2014-2015, 15% of youth in 4-H community clubs statewide were Latino while over 50% of the state youth population was Latino.

This paper chronicles efforts to expand 4-H volunteer base and adopt an alternative Club model in a largely Latino community in Sacramento County.

Background

Sacramento 4-H Youth Development Program offers a variety of out-of-school time opportunities,

including 4-H Community Clubs, camps, and science literacy projects conducted in afterschool programs. As a whole, participation in these programs closely reflect local demographics, but like other California counties, the Sacramento Club program is not in parity.

The Sacramento 4-H Club Program has been traditionally volunteer-administrated and youth-led and offers project-based, hands-on experiences for youth ages 5-19. The Clubs are centered in communities (neighborhoods, schools, etc.) and rely mainly on the youth and leaders' social capital to find meeting locations, project supplies and/or meeting planning. This case study documents key learnings in building one after-school 4-H Club program that engaged 34 Latino youth and six parent volunteers in Sacramento, CA.

Club Formation

Steps in Organizing

In spring 2014, parents and community members submitted a petition to the school district Board of Education for consideration to re-open a neighborhood school as a Community Charter School with a tentative opening date in September 2014. The proposed Community Charter School was to have an agricultural theme.

After the elementary school opened, one of the program directors—a retired teacher and a founder of the charter school—approached Sacramento County 4-H to explore how 4-H programming might happen at the site. A 4-H Club leader in years past, she understood the 4-H program structure and benefits and was able to see the where the goals of 4-H fit with the goals of the school, especially as it related to the school's agricultural theme (and a traditional focus in 4-H). During the winter of 2015, the local 4-H staff and program director tried a 4-H curricula project during the school day with little success. By Fall 2015, the program director and 4-H staff identified an after-school setting as the best fit for the 4-H club program. To form the club, multiple steps were coordinated:

1. The director recruited volunteers from the parents of the children attending the after-school program. The club offered seven projects: cooking, crocheting, electronics, gardening, needle point, theater arts, and woodworking. While most of these volunteers were English speakers and several were bilingual, at least one of the parents spoke only Spanish.
2. The 4-H staff made site visits to the school during 4-H programming, as well as for other school functions (e.g. fall festival, community recognition event).
3. The 4-H staff and the program director identified and provided 4-H curricular resources for new volunteers.
4. The 4-H staff and program director discussed necessary student and volunteer registration and chartering of the Afterschool Club.
5. The 4-H staff delivered customized training for new volunteers on the school site for volunteers' convenience and availability.

Continuous communication between the program director, volunteers, and 4-H staff was critical, especially during the beginning stages of the club. To solidify a sense of belonging for youth and volunteers, and to integrate the club more fully into the school community, the program director and 4-H staff sought opportunities to participate in school-wide events. This gave the new 4-H members opportunity to showcase the skills gained through their participation in the afterschool 4-H Club, and enabled 4-H staff to understand and become more closely connected to the community.

By Winter 2016, staff and the program director integrated the new club with the broader Sacramento 4-H program. They gave presentations about their project to 4-H Community Club Leaders at their quarterly meeting and also gave demonstrations at County Presentation Day, a traditional 4-H event, where they had the opportunity to interact with other 4-H members and volunteers.

By Spring 2016, the 4-H Afterschool Club had taken root, and volunteers demonstrated their willingness to continue, despite the fact that the program

director indicated she would be retiring and leaving the program at the close of the school year. The school principal confirmed with 4-H staff that the school was excited to maintain the 4-H Afterschool Club in the 2016-2017 academic year.

Observations in Club Organizing

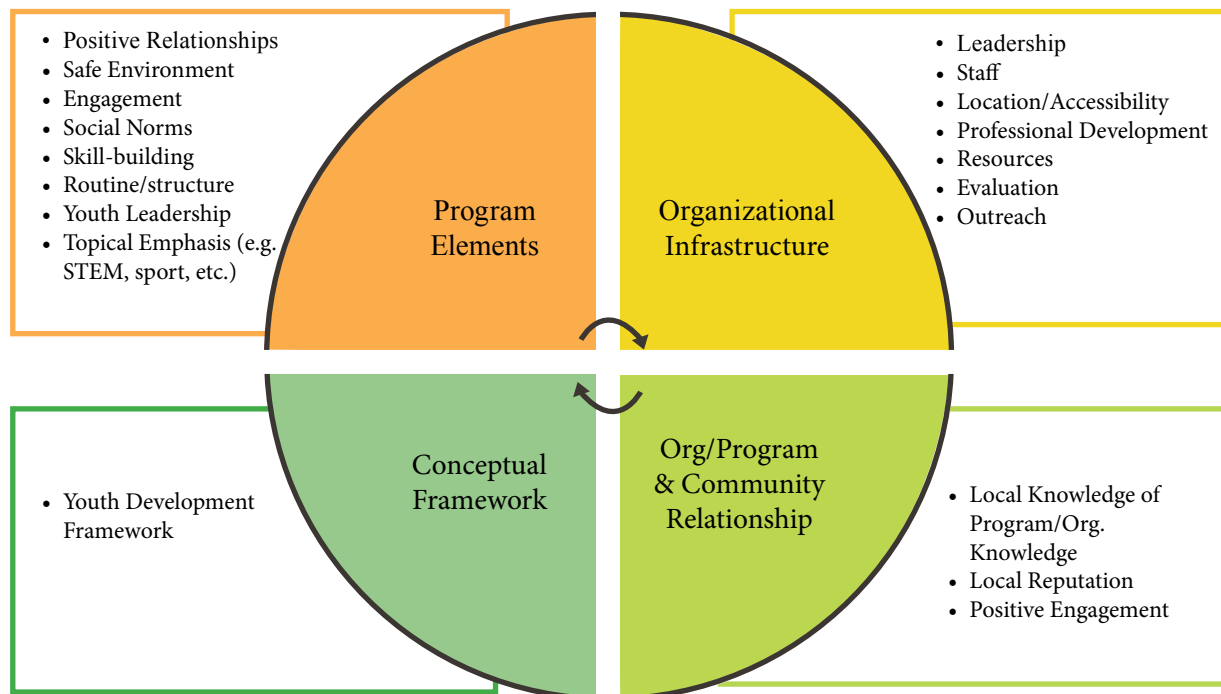
Upon reflecting on the organizing process, 4-H staff made the following observations:

1. The program director's passion for integrating 4-H into the after-school program was critical. Her role as "champion" created the entrée with parent volunteers and the school principal; and her knowledge of 4-H enabled her to envision the experience she sought for youth.
2. It was not necessary to be Spanish speaking to organize the Club. Neither 4-H staff, nor the program director, was bilingual. Bilingual interpretation was used only during the on-site training for parent volunteers.
3. Maintaining volunteers was a challenge because only two-thirds saw their 4-H projects to the end of the school year.
4. Youth and volunteers who participated in activities with traditional 4-H Community Clubs strengthened their commitment to the program. Those volunteers have risen as leaders for the new Club, and youth attending Presentation Day have indicated a strong desire to continue.
5. Staff observed quality program at the site as measured by positive youth-adult interactions, learning, and student engagement.

Discussion

Erbstein and Fabionar's literature review explored positive youth development program qualities that lead to high and sustained participation rates and positive outcomes for Latino youth. Based on the review, the authors identified an emerging set of guiding principles for program development focused on four aspects of positive youth development: (1) conceptual frameworks, (2) community

Figure 1. Positive Youth Development Program Elements (Erbstein and Fabionar, 2014)



partnerships, (3) program elements, and (4) organizational infrastructure (see Figure 1). The authors of this paper have overlaid the Positive Youth Development Program Elements Framework with the newly formed 4-H Afterschool Club at the Charter school to examine how and where they aligned.

The CA 4-H YDP has a conceptual framework that guides 4-H programming, not only in Sacramento, but statewide. According to the literature review, effective programs tailor efforts to the specific experience, resources, needs, and interests of local and regional Latino youth and families (Erbstein and Fabionar, 2014, p 6). CA 4-H YDP’s 4-H Youth Development Framework encourages local staff and academics to modify program content to speak to local populations including Latino youth and families. It also accounts for “diverse, interesting, fun, and skill-building activities to engage youth.” (Dogan, 2012). 4-H staff in Sacramento, working in partnership with Charter school volunteers, interpreted the framework and selected culturally appropriate approaches and activities for the youth in the new club.

Erbstein and Fabionar analyzed what the programs’ relationships are within their communi-

ties. The review suggested that youth development organizations and programs build on the knowledge of the local Latino community and that staff or volunteers should pursue outreach practices that lead to positive community engagement (Erbstein and Fabionar, 2014, p. 15). In establishing the 4-H Afterschool Club, the program director and 4-H staff actively engaged parents as volunteers. Members of the school community were sought as resources critical to the program’s functioning. These practices of recognizing and tapping into community assets are foundations of ownership and positive change (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). 4-H staff participation in schoolwide events strengthened program reputation and connection. Additionally, flexibility around volunteer training and meeting times was critical to retain parents as 4-H volunteers.

Program elements is the third principle discussed. Literature suggests that successful programs address “hidden safety concerns, build on assets unique to Latino youth, and engage youth, family, and community in program matters” (Erbstein and Fabionar, 2014, p. 17). Before the 4-H club started, the charter school was a welcoming environment for Latino community members. The

school itself was born of local initiative, hence the parents and teachers felt ownership and connection within the context of the school. 4-H staff and the program director were able to establish high-quality positive youth development programming: project meetings happened twice a week; caring adults led those projects; young people developed and showcased new skills. Project leaders and 4-H members used the program activities to express their culture through art, cooking, and theater. The projects built upon unique assets of 4-H volunteers and participants, and allowed 4-H staff to show their appreciation for cultural diversity.

The fourth aspect of the framework is organizational infrastructure such as leadership, staff hiring and development, accessibility, resource allocation, and evaluation. At the time of the club's formation, 4-H staff and academics were participating actively in the Intercultural Competence Training and embedded in community of practices where they had the opportunity to learn from others and reflect upon their own attitudes towards diversity. Academic staff had the liberty to allocate significant time and focus to this case.

A challenge 4-H staff encountered in organizing the new club was to get the formalities (registration, charter, etc.) of the club in place. 4-H staff found the completion and collection of paperwork from new volunteers a consuming process. The literature review found evidence that "some Latino families might mistrust programs due to past negative experiences with formal organizations" (Erbstein and Fabionar, 2014, p. 16). Therefore, when introducing a new program, awareness of the organization's reputation within the community is critical.

Conclusion

This case study of the formation of a predominantly Latino Afterschool 4-H Club in a Community Charter School outlines the process by which the club was developed and the challenges and observations were noted by organizers. It presents a model describing the components important to establishing

youth development programs with Latino populations and discusses how club formation intersects with these principles.

Learnings that might inform practitioners developing similar youth development programs include: the need to be sensitive to needs of the community and flexible in both administrative and programmatic components; knowledge of the key role a champion may play in its organization; an understanding of the importance of integrating the club into the community's activities to build trust; and the embracement of community volunteers as leaders and full participants. The Club required significant staff time, yet the staff did not need to be bilingual to fulfill their role. The organizers employed promising practices of community engagement that show promises of a sustainable program.

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