



The Minnesota 4-H Quality Improvement Study

Introduction

Quality is one of the most critical issues in youth programs today. Researchers and practitioners alike are defining and measuring quality where youth and adults meet inside daily program activities. Youth programs have a great responsibility for the experiences they provide for youth. Current research on youth program quality tells us:

- **Quality matters.** High quality youth programs are linked to a positive impact on the development of young people.¹ Conversely, youth in poor quality programs are worse off than some youth in self care.²
- **Quality can be measured.** Observational tools measure relationships, environment, engagement, social norms, skill building opportunities and program structure.³
- **We don't have enough.** Youth organizations need to invest resources in improving quality in order to achieve desired impacts on youth.⁴

Minnesota 4-H invested in an approach aimed at building staff and volunteer capacity to observe, measure, and coach program quality. Quality was defined using the Weikart Center's Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) tool which focuses on four large areas: safe environment, supportive environment, interaction, and engagement. The YPQA tool highlights that quality matters the most where young people and adults meet in a setting- what is called the "point of service."

Study Background

The main purpose of the Minnesota 4-H Quality Improvement Study was to test whether

or not youth and adult volunteers could conduct quality observations in local 4-H settings, as well as to look at the differences between pairing adult volunteers and youth teams versus staff and youth teams. Forty Quality Coaches were selected and paired in youth-adult teams to observe and assess quality in 4-H club settings and then coach club leadership in the development and implementation of plans to strengthen one or more dimensions of quality.

Coaches used an adapted version of the YPQA tool, modified to ensure the language and examples of quality indicators used in the tool were relevant and easily understood by 4-H volunteers and staff. They were required to attend one and one-half days of training. In the training they gleaned a greater understanding of what quality looks like, spent time interacting with the assessment tool, practiced skills in observation and assessment, and learned how to structure and engage club leadership in action planning for quality improvement.

Youth-adult coaching teams completed an observational assessment at a 4-H club, met to discuss their observations and created a report to present to clubs at a feedback session. They worked with club leadership to develop a plan for improving one or more dimensions of quality.

Results

The study focused on two evaluation methods:

1. **YPQA Scores.** Teams assessed quality in 4-H club settings using the YPQA observation tool.
2. **Online Surveys.** An online survey was given to all quality coaches and 4-H clubs.

Our preliminary results suggest that youth and volunteers can assess quality and work with local 4-H clubs to improve their programs. We also learned that, for the most part, adult volunteers and 4-H staff were equally skilled in conducting observations and had few differences in their scores.

Results also revealed that:

- Youth and adults played an equal role in the observation and initial assessment scoring.
- Youth involvement in the data collection was seen as extremely valuable.
- Observed 4-H clubs were receptive to this opportunity and viewed the assessment process as a positive one. Eighty-three percent of club members understood and trusted the YPOA data presented, with 67% reporting the data was an accurate picture of their club.
- 4-H clubs were motivated to act upon information presented in the discovery process meetings. The motivation for the site to improve quality and the understanding of elements of quality is crucial to impacting quality improvement.
- The skills of individuals increased and participants reported using those skills in other places.

Lessons Learned

This study demonstrated that youth and volunteers are willing to collect and use data for improvement at the local level. Youth added a unique and needed dimension to the data collection and change process. The readiness of staff, volunteers, youth and clubs directly influenced the process and results. The study also reinforced that a system-wide approach is important for quality improvement.

Recommendations

We recommend:

- Training more staff, volunteers and youth to use the YPOA.
- Bringing staff, volunteers and youth together to determine ways to replicate this work on a larger scale.
- Identifying additional studies to strengthen other parts of the process such as the structure of the coaching session and/or tools used while coaching.

Conclusion

The Extension Center for Youth Development is planning to bring this work to scale in 4-H clubs around the state. The project represents a fine example of the University of Minnesota's land-grant responsibility: to bring together research and practice expertise to support local community needs. As the nation's largest youth organization, 4-H has the opportunity to inform and take action on a critical field issue—quality—and have an exponential public effect.

Bottom Line

Youth and adult volunteers are key to moving quality forward in 4-H. This research shows that youth and volunteers, with adequate training, can learn how to assess quality and work with 4-H clubs to build better programs with youth.

- 1 Durlak, A.J., & Weissberg, R.P. (2007). *The impact of after-school programs that promote personal and social skills*. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Retrieved on February 15, 2011, from <http://www.casei.org/downloads/ASP-Full.pdf>
- 2 Belle, D. (1999). *The afterschool lives of children: Alone and with others while parents work*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- 3 Yohalem, N., & Wilson-Ahlstrom, A. with Fischer, S., & Shinn, M. (2009, January). *Measuring youth program quality: A guide to assessment tools, second edition*. Washington, D.C.: The Forum for Youth Investment.
- 4 Smith, C., Akiva, T., & Henry, B. (2006). *Quality in the out-of-school time sector: Insights from the youth PQA validation study*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.