Volunteer Training, Tenure, and Facilitation of Essential Elements in 4-H: Examining Conditions that Promote Positive Youth Development Practices

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Abstract

Volunteers are noteworthy youth development professionals in the 4-H program whose training translates into practices that promote positive outcomes among young people they serve. This study explored how contextual and programmatic factors were associated with volunteers' practices of the essential elements with youth. Programmatic influences included breadth of volunteer training, tenure in 4-H whereas gender and age were contextual factors. Results supported associations between breadth of volunteer training and the essential element of mastery; this effect was not found with other essential elements. Also, volunteers' tenure in the 4-H program moderated the relationship between breadth of training and practices promoting mastery, with stronger association between training breadth and mastery for less seasoned volunteers. Moreover, among volunteers reporting greater breadth of trainings in the past year, men reported greater levels of facilitating independence than women, an effect not found across the whole sample. Our findings suggest mastery as a relevant essential element retained in training and applied in 4-H volunteers' practice. Implications are discussed regarding volunteer training content and promotion of responsibilities for both new and seasoned volunteers, as well as consideration for possible effects of differences in gender role expectations influencing the practice of promoting certain essential elements.

Keywords: *essential elements, volunteers, training, youth development practice*

Introduction

The 4-H Youth Development Program's goal is to help young people, ages 5 to 18, acquire the information and life skills necessary to become contributing, responsible members of society by using a learn-by-doing approach in conjunction with compassionate adults (Florida 4-H, n.d.). Positive youth development (PYD) is the foundational knowledge base of the 4-H program. PYD is a practice-based, strengths-focused, multipronged approach that provides assets to promote life skill development and positive life outcomes. Desired outcomes for youth define PYD, such as Lerner's (2014) Five Cs and the 4-H Thriving Model (Arnold & Gagnon, 2020), to guide youth development practitioners (King et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2014) and program evaluation research (Arnold & Gagnon, 2019). Lerner's (2014) Big Three of programs that lead to PYD outcomes consist of: (1) enduring and affirming youth-adult relationships; (2) activities that develop youths' life skills; and (3) leadership opportunities. The first and main feature of the Big Three, youth-adult partnerships (YAP), is fostered by 4-H volunteers via mentoring youth and management of clubs (Fogarty et al., 2009). Through YAPs, 4-H volunteers have positively impacted adolescents' developmental spheres (Ladewig & Thomas, 1987; Lerner et al., 2005).

A vital foundation for volunteers' contributing to PYD outcomes is the intentionality of volunteers to provide a high-quality developmental context that promotes the essential elements of 4-H: belonging (e.g., when youth feel safe, included, and have positive relationships with caring adults), independence (e.g., when youth visualize themselves as active participants in their future), generosity (e.g., when youth understand the value of giving back to their community), and mastery (e.g., when youth actively participate in learning and skill enhancement) (Van Bockern & McDonald, 2012). The 4-H essential elements are described in detail in the following section, however the practice of PYD by youth development professionals is indicated by the use of the essential elements throughout their programming (Kress, 2005). Youth engagement is the bridge that connects the essential elements and PYD outcomes (Kress, 2005) and this engagement is a catalyst to thriving in youth (Arnold & Gagnon, 2019; Scales et al, 2011). Youth development professionals in 4-H focus on providing the essential elements in their programs and train volunteers accordingly (NIFA, 2011). Training volunteers is imperative to the success of a 4-H program. Many youth serving organizations, such as 4-H and others, empower its volunteers to deliver the program both effectively and with intentionality. This has an intertwined, two-fold result. First, the volunteers become the leading liaisons between the organization and the youth, and secondly, the volunteers should then establish caring relationships when crucial to fostering a sense of belonging (Homan, 2017). When volunteers promote belonginess and inclusivity, their members have increased participation (Hensley et al., 2007). The Volunteer Research Knowledge and Competency Taxonomy (VRKC) was created in 2006 to identify the competencies 4-H volunteers need to conduct youth development programs, including communication, organization, management, educational design, positive youth development, and interpersonal characteristics (Culp et al., 2006; 2007). Volunteers with greater skills and knowledge from comprehensive training opportunities demonstrate increased confidence and capacity for success due to higher competency levels (Culp et al., 2006).

In *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future,* Brendtro and colleagues (1990) first introduced essential elements as the Circle of Courage, a Native American education model. Essential elements, like Search Institute's developmental assets (Scales et al., 2000; 2006), are practice-based principles within PYD that are essential precursors to positive youth outcomes. They represent lifelong human needs that are supported by PYD program research findings (Van Bockern & McDonald, 2012). For example, volunteers' responsibilities such as intentionally practicing PYD principles, encouraging all members in decision-making, and supporting project education in 4-H clubs were significantly associated with the degree to which they promoted the essential elements of belonging and independence; these essential elements were, in turn, linked with volunteers' observations of life skill levels among youth in their 4-H clubs (Sarver, 2018). Further, Hensley and colleagues (2020) found frequency of training participation significantly predicted 4-H volunteers' reports of fostering generosity whereas total number of trainings were strongly associated with their demonstration of each essential element. The frequency was determined by how many trainings were attended in a year: annually, monthly, quarterly, or biquarterly. The impact on training frequency increases the outcome of practicing generosity, and training satisfaction increases the index score for practicing strategies that promote independence (Hensley et al., 2020). Those volunteers participating in a volunteer orientation report they are more effectively practicing items that promote the essential elements of independence, mastery, and belonging (Hensley et al., 2020). While frequency and satisfaction both tend to matter in respect to

outcome attainment, the quality and type of training may be more impactful than the quantity of training. Of note, trainings may have been repetitive due to state and county facilities providing training to all volunteers, which was not a consideration in the original study.

This study aims to build on prior findings by examining additional precursors to volunteers' support of essential elements in their 4-H clubs. These include volunteer involvement indicated by tenure in the 4-H program, breadth in types of trainings, training frequency, and personal characteristics. This study is guided by the VRKC taxonomy which recognizes six domains that allow volunteers to effectively assist their 4-H program (Culp et al., 2006). These domains are communication, organization, management, education, positive youth development, and interpersonal characteristics.

The Essential Elements of Youth Development Programming

Belonging

Belonging is fundamental for positive life outcomes (Brendtro et al., 2014; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Every person has an innate desire to belong, to have affirming relationships, and to be accepted by others (Tessman et al., 2009). Youth develop a sense of belonging when volunteers intentionally ensure an emotionally and physically safe space for them to explore their interests and try new things (Wagoner, 2010a); youth also need to feel connected to others in the group and to feel cared about (Hensley et al., 2007). According to Maslow (1943), meeting one's physiological and safety needs are the only two factors that matter more than feeling loved and having a sense of belonging. Thus, it is crucial for volunteers to foster a sense of belonging so that every young person—no matter their age, ability, gender, ethnicity, race, or other attributes that might make them feel different—feels included and that they matter. Volunteers that create safety in their club and cultivate a sense of belonging allow youth to be themselves while also having the freedom to fail along with the opportunity to succeed (Weybright, 2017). The development of the relationship between volunteers and youth—as well as emotional safety—are two key aspects of program quality that continually predict positive youth development outcomes (Lewis et al., 2020).

Independence

Independence develops as youth in 4-H take advantage of opportunities to acquire responsibility (Kress, 2014). Gaining independence in 4-H means that youth begin to visualize themselves as engaged participants in their own future, and that they begin to develop self-determination (Wagoner, 2010b). Self-determination develops when youth realize their thoughts and ideas are valid and influential to those around them. Volunteers help youth build self-determination by providing them with opportunities to explore and to investigate and challenge themselves (which results in confidence and competence in their thinking) (Meyer & Jones, 2015); these are two of the Five C outcomes in PYD.

Mastery

Learning by doing offers youth opportunities to safely try and fail or succeed, which is a crucial component in mastery (Kress, 2003; 2014). Mastery offers youth self-assurance and confidence in overcoming obstacles and solving problems as well as a sense of achievement. Research supports that YAP that include belonging contribute to resiliency outcomes (Sulimani-Aidan & Schwartz-Tayri, 2021), which indicate PYD. Resilience, in turn, can support persistence in mastering new skills (Porter et al., 2020).

Generosity

To build relationships with communities and learn how to give back, youth participate in 4-H community service-learning and citizenship projects. This relationship building points to the significance of having awareness and expressing compassion in a global community. Volunteers help lay the groundwork for understanding life's purpose and giving back to others (4-H.org, n.d.). As mentioned briefly, the Five Cs of PYD lead to desired PYD outcomes. These Five Cs are caring, character, confidence, connection, and competence, which in turn lead to the sixth C—of contribution—which has a long-term impact. Volunteers who intentionally promote generosity in their club help youth develop the Five Cs, which often leads to societal contribution (Lerner et al., 2014).

Volunteers' Roles in 4-H

Volunteers are the backbone to the national 4-H Youth Development Program that relies on over five hundred thousand volunteers annually (4-H, n.d.). The program successfully recruits, trains, and retains volunteers at multiple levels within diverse delivery systems. Volunteers in 4-H are motivated by the desire to make a difference in youths' lives and experience satisfaction through helping others (White & Arnold, 2003). Volunteers receive various tangible benefits such as satisfaction, acquiring new skills, building social networks, and resume building (Handy & Mook, 2011). Others have found support for volunteers' improvements in mental health, physical health, and adhering to healthy behaviors (Kim & Konrath, 2016) most likely as a function of setting an example for and giving their time to others.

Among the myriad benefits youth receive from volunteers are
- leadership skills
- working with groups (Boyd et al., 1992)
- accepting people who are different,
- community service,
- making healthy choices (Fitzpatrick et al., 2005),
- taking responsibility,
- ability to handle competition,
- presentation skills,
- willingness to try new things (Fox et al., 2003)increased school attendance, including decreases in dropout rates,
- economic self-sufficiency
- healthy relationshipscommunity involvement (Gambone et al., 2002)independence (Cassels et al., 2015)a sense of belonging (Hensley et al., 2007).

The role of a volunteer, especially a nonparental adult, is critical to the positive development of a young person (Arnold et al., 2009). The 4-H program relies heavily on the hard work and dedication of thousands of adult volunteers (White & Arnold, 2003). As with any organization, its success rests on multiple components, and the success of the 4-H program is in part due to its volunteers. These volunteers implement the program to promote the important development of life skills that perpetuate into adulthood (Ladewig & Thomas, 1987). These caring adults often can be called *spark champions* because they intentionally foster youths' sparks (e.g., passions or skill that energizes a young person's life by giving it vitality and purpose) and thus promote thriving (Scales et al., 2011) and mastery.

Volunteer Impact on Youth Development: What we Know Thus Far

The volunteering literature explores the benefits volunteers receive from service as well as those to beneficiaries (i.e., youth, adults, communities) of volunteer service. Less is known about how volunteers directly or indirectly influence outcomes relating to the youth they work with (Zand et al., 2009). Until the advent of the 4-H thriving model, dissemination of theoretical program models to 4-H educators was limited (Arnold et al., 2009). Once the longitudinal 4-H PYD study results were disseminated, 4-H was classified as an effective program (Lerner & Lerner, 2006; Lerner, 2020; Arnold & Gagnon, 2020).

Some research on volunteers' contributions to 4-H program effects uses youth self-report on their perceptions about their 4-H clubs and life skill gains. Examining volunteer leaders' views on their programmatic contributions to 4-H provides unique perspective and dimensionality for evidence of program effectiveness. For example, a youth self-report-based Search Institute study (Scales et al., 2006) found that internal assets better explained variation in youth thriving indicators than external assets. This is likely a function of youths' greater understanding of more proximal influences (internal assets) contributing to their development, as compared with youths' lesser familiarity with the workings of external supports and community-based structures. The adult volunteer perspective thus encompasses a larger picture of the organizational systems within which they work, shedding light on the contribution of community-based supports to youths' developmental gains.

Recognizing the volunteer leader's perspective is important but it is imperative to provide training and support beyond that of basic rules and process of running a program (Culp & Bullock, 2017). Furthermore, one motivation for adult volunteerism, especially with youth serving organizations, is to make a difference in the lives of young people (Arnold et al., 2009; Radhakrishna & Ewing, 2011; White & Arnold, 2003). Providing a variety of training (breadth) as well as multiple opportunities (frequency) to attend youth programs honors the time and talent volunteers provide to the organization. Volunteers should be specifically trained on how to promote PYD in the club setting for a more effective PYD program (Arnold et al., 2009; Culp & Bullock, 2017). Extension agents and other youth development professionals should prioritize volunteer training and establish a standardized programmatic assessment to confirm that program administration is situated with the PYD model (Arnold et al., 2009).

The current study aims to add to what we know about the degree to which volunteers promote and support the essential elements in their 4-H clubs by better understanding possible influencing contexts and conditions, (e.g., volunteer characteristics and training experiences they sought). Furthermore, this study fills a gap in knowledge regarding volunteer training and the conditions that promote PYD practices (Arnold et al., 2009; Culp & Bullock, 2017). A secondary dataset was used to examine the conditions that promote PYD practices.

In the original study, the training that was offered included volunteer orientation, training in each county, statewide volunteer web-based training, and virtual statewide training series—Make a Difference Mondays (Hensley et al., 2020). Orientation training included a cursory introduction to the essential elements where the county training provided in-depth training on each element and other necessary components for becoming a successful volunteer leader. The statewide training also included best practices for promoting each essential element. The training was offered to all volunteers no matter their tenure, gender, age, ethnicity, race, or any other demographic detail. The southeastern state where the study was conducted is strengthened by its diverse population. Every effort is continually afforded to increase the diversity in its youth and adult membership in 4-H and its youth development professionals.

The interest in variables involving conditions of training such as breadth and frequency was fueled by a knowledge base on evaluating youth participation in PYD programs as a predictor of engagement and beneficial outcomes (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). In effect, the provision of training to 4-H volunteers is expected to spill over to influence factors that encourage youth engagement such as sense of belonging and building intrinsic interest in subject matter of activities (Goodenow, 1993). Breadth can be defined as the "full array" of participation in an educational activity or simply the total number of activities. Due to limitations within the secondary data set used, breadth was an indicator of the total number of training volunteers participated in over the past year. Frequency differs from breadth as it reflects how often volunteers participate in training, versus variation in types of training in which they have engaged.

Research Questions

1. Are volunteers' perceptions of their delivery of the four essential elements associated with aspects of their training (such as frequency of training participation or training breadth)?

2. *(Note that question two is contingent on our findings from research question one).* If features of training are associated with essential elements in program delivery, how might volunteer characteristics—such as tenure in 4-H, age, or gender—influence the training-essential elements of delivery relationship?

Hypotheses

1a. There is a significant positive association between volunteers' reported frequency of trainings participated in and their support of essential elements in their 4-H leadership.

1b. There is a significant positive association between volunteers' reported breadth of trainings participated in and their support of essential elements in their 4-H leadership.

2a. Demographics (gender or age) will not influence the association between training experiences (frequency or breadth) and volunteers' reported essential element use in 4-H programs.

2b. Volunteer tenure moderates or weakens the association between breadth of training and their support of the essential elements, such that more seasoned volunteers who engage in multiple types of training in recent years perceive less effects of their training upon their facilitation of the essential elements.

Method

Participants

A total of 352 volunteers at a 4-H program in the southeastern United States completed an evaluation questionnaire (Johns, 2018; Hensley et al., 2020); out of the total, 340 agreed for their responses to be used for reporting and publication purposes. The evaluation survey was designed to assess volunteers' training satisfaction, their participation in various training types, and the extent to which they supported the four essential elements of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity in their work with youth (Hensley et al., 2020).

Procedure

A state evaluation research center collaborated with the state 4-H program, creating demographic and evaluation items as well as essential elements measures. Data were collected online using Dillman's et al. (2014) method of multiple contact for participants, including reminders via email and text messaging, and the state 4-H web-based enrollment system. About 1,250 volunteers that were enrolled in the state system in 2018 were contacted for recruitment to participate. There were 340 usable responses, presenting a 25% response rate (Hensley et al., 2020). Participant 4-H volunteers reported from nearly 80% (79.1%) of counties in the state. Most participants (n = 190, 56%) reported as club leaders, (n = 57, 17%) as project leaders, and (n = 32, 9%) as activity leaders. Table 1 below describes participant characteristics as well as their tenure in the 4-H program.

Table 1.
Sample Characteristics and Experience of Volunteers (n = 340)

		N	%
	Doctoral	5	1.6
Volunteer	1–5	158	50.8
tenure	6–10	69	22.2
	11–15	34	10.9
	16–20	17	5.5
	21–25	14	4.5
	26+	19	6.1

Measures

Dependent variable: Essential Elements

Items indicating the four essential elements variable were positively worded and coded so that a total score between 30 and 40 indicated a high level of the characteristic being assessed, or, for elements indicated by two factors, scores of 15 to 20 were on the high end. The assessment of each essential element consisted of five- or ten-item scales, created by state 4-H program evaluation leadership (Hensley et al., 2020) in tandem with the state evaluation research center, which were validated (Johns, 2018). The 40 total items had a Likert-type response scale for the extent to which volunteers participated in relevant practices indicating support of each element with 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Often, and 4 = Always.

Demographic and Independent Variables

Demographic and volunteer role related measures were single items asking participants' gender, age (captured in range), tenure in 4-H, frequency of participation in 4-H trainings, satisfaction with the frequency of trainings, and the types of trainings in which they participated. A breadth of training score was calculated by adding up the various types of trainings volunteers reported participating in. Types of training included: volunteer orientation (n = 212, 60.2%); county level training (n = 193, 54.8%); volunteer web-based training series on 4-H state program website (n = 142, 40.3%); a state-level monthly special topic webinar (n = 59, 16.8%); a state in-person volunteer leader forum (n = 25, 7.1%); a volunteer in-person conference of southern states (n = 15, 4.3%); and a district volunteer leader forum (n = 12, 3.4%). Breadth scores ranged from 0 (n = 43, 12.6%), or having participated in none of the types of training mentioned, to 5– 7 types of training (n = 21, 3.6%). The mean value for breadth of training was 1.95, 1.36 S.D. Frequency of training was measured by a single item asking how frequently volunteers participated in 4-H training with responses of: annually (1 per year); quarterly (4 per year); bimonthly (6 per year), and once a month (12 per year).

Data Analysis for Subscales

Essential element subscales were derived using exploratory factor analysis (EFA), via principal components with varimax rotation, indicating: (a) two factors for belonging (31.1% for factor 1 and 25.5% for factor 2 variance explained); (b) two factors for generosity (39.4% for factor 1 and 35.3% for factor 2 variance explained); and (c) single factors for mastery (59.7% of variance explained) and independence (63.8% of variance explained) (Johns, 2018). An item for belonging factor 1: "I provide an environment where all youth feel safe"; and for belonging factor 2: "I provide many forms of recognition/praise for all youth." A sample item for generosity factor 1: "Youth planned and implemented community service projects"; and for generosity factor 2: "Youth share their skills and experiences with younger 4-Her's." A sample item from the mastery subscale was, "I create learning activities related to real-life situations." A sample item from the independence subscale was, "Youth can try new things and challenge themselves safely." Internal consistency reliabilities for the scales and subscales indicated the four essential elements were sufficient:belonging factor 1 (α = .81, 5 items); belonging factor 2 (α = .75, 5 items); mastery (α = .92, 10 items); independence (α = .94, 10 items); generosity factor 1 (α = .92, 5 items); and generosity factor 2 (α = .89, 5 items). .89.

Results

Relationships Among Variables

Associations were significant between breadth of training and three of four essential elements, which was similar to correlational findings among aspects of volunteer training reported with this same dataset (Hensley et al., 2020). Belonging (both subscales) was not significantly associated with training breadth, whereas mastery, independence, and subscale two of generosity were significantly correlated (*p < .05; ** p <.01) (see Table 2). Of interest is that there are no significant associations between volunteers' reports on frequency of training and variety in types of training (breadth); nor is frequency of attending trainings associated with increases in supporting any essential element.

Table 2. Correlation Coefficients for Volunteer Training Items with Essential Elements

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Training frequency	___	-.087	-.025	.002	-.035	-.060	-.132	-.063
2	Breadth of training		___	.064	.053	.175*	.192**	.113	.190**
3	Belonging (factor 1)			___	.642**	.590**	.630**	.484**	.636**
4	Belonging (factor 2)				___	.615**	.582**	.540**	.632**
5	Mastery					___	.791**	.608**	.704**
6	Independence						___	.653**	.784**
7	Generosity (factor 1)							___	.701**
8	Generosity (factor 2)								___

$*\ p < .05$ $**\ p < .01$

To examine our second research question, in follow-up for finding support for hypothesis 1b, we used SPSS 29.0 with the PROCESS 4.2 Macro (Hayes, 2018) to test moderation of the association between breadth of training and three associated essential elements by age, gender, and tenure in 4-H. Using PROCESS 4.2 Model 1 with age as a moderator, we found no support for an interaction between volunteers' age and breadth of training on any of the tested essential element subscales (mastery, independence, and generosity-factor 2) treated as dependent variables. With the same analytical tests, we found a significant interaction ($p < .04$) between gender and breadth on both independence and generosity-factor 2 outcomes. Figure 1 illustrates a steeper slope or stronger effect for male volunteers supporting youths' independence as breadth in their training participation increases, as compared with female volunteers.

Table 3a contains our results for the main effects with ordinary least squares regression analysis when the essential elements are regressed on volunteer characteristics and training experiences. Table 3b indicates moderated effects using regression via the PROCESS 4.2 macro in SPSS. Main effects evidence breadth of training as significantly associated with mastery, independence, and generosity whereas gender is associated only with the second factor of generosity. Tests of indirect moderation effects indicate a tenure in 4-H x breadth of training on mastery, whereas gender x breadth of training is indicated for independence and generosity.

Table 3a. Regression Main Effects and Interactions of Training Breadth on Essential Elements

|	On Mastery			On Independence			On Generosity (Factor 2)		
	B(SE)	t	p-value	B(SE)	t	p value	B(SE)	t	p value
Constant	28.7(3.1)	9.23	.000	31.2(3.1)	10.21	.000	15.4(1.5)	10.50	.000
Age	0.3(0.3)	0.99	.322	0.2(0.3)	0.54	.593	1.0(0.1)	0.69	.494
Gender	1.7(0.9)	1.91	.058	1.3(0.8)	1.53	.128	1.3(0.4)	3.21	.002
Yrs in 4-H	-0.8(0.2)	-0.34	.734	-0.6(0.2)	-0.25	.802	0.0(0.1)	0.46	.646
Breadth of training	0.6(0.3)	2.18	.030	0.7(0.3)	2.47	.014	0.3(0.1)	2.38	.018

As moderator variables need not be associated with dependent variables to have an interactive effect, we found support for gender as both a moderator and independent variable in association with the essential element of generosity. Gender effects on volunteers' supporting of independence for the youth they serve were supported, with stronger associations between breadth of training and promotion of independence among male volunteers (Figure 1). We also observed similar effects with stronger associations between training breadth and supporting generosity for male volunteers as compared with females. And newer volunteers showed stronger associations than seasoned ones in training breadth and youth mastery (Figure 2).

Table 3b. Interactions (Tests of Moderation)*

	On Mastery			On Independence			On Generosity (Factor 2)		
	B (SE:HC4)	T	p-value	B (SE:HC4)	t	p value	B (SE:HC4)	t	p value
Breadth x age	-.087 (.254)	-0.34	.731	.274 (.197)	1.39	.166	.073 (.103)	0.71	.479
Breadth x gender	-1.962 (1.025)	-1.91	.057	**-2.008 (.967)**	**-2.08**	**.039**	**-1.211 (.579)**	**-2.09**	**.038**
Breadth x yrs. 4-H	-.330 (.167)	-1.97	.050	-.146 (.210)	-0.70	.487	-.099 (.079)	-1.25	.211

Breadth x Gender Total Model R²	Mastery	Independence	Generosity (F2)
	0.06	**0.07**	**0.11**
Breadth x Gender Interaction F(HC4)	3.66	**4.31**	**4.38**

*Significant Effects in **Bold**

Figure 1. Moderation of the Association Between Breadth of Training and the Extent to Which Male and Female Volunteers Promote Youths' Independence.
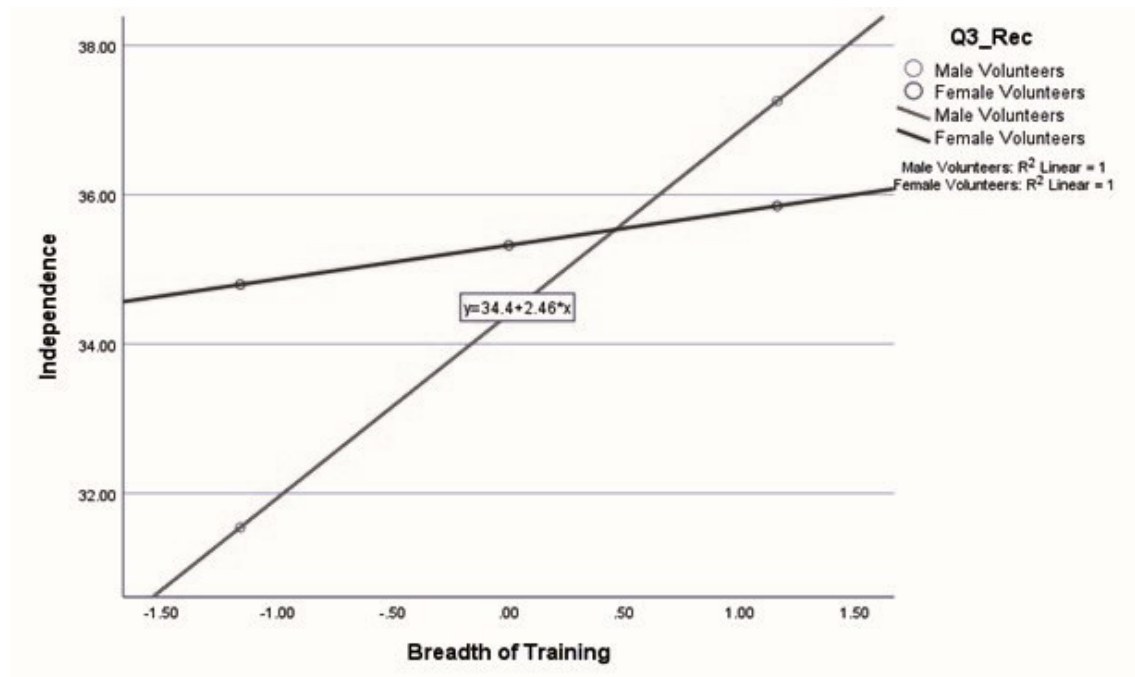
Figure 2. Tenure in 4-H Moderates Association Between Volunteers' Breadth of Training and the Extent to Which They Promote Youths' Mastery in 4-H.
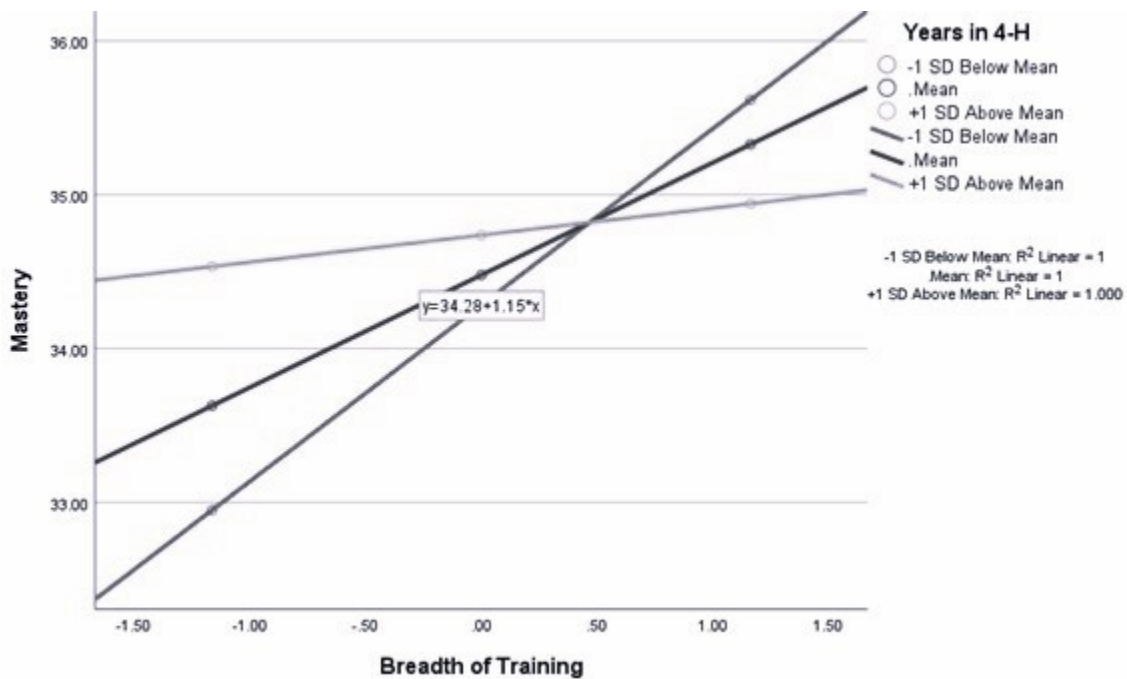
Discussion

The lack of support for belonging in relation to tenure in 4-H, nor with breadth of training volunteers engaged in, was surprising. In a quick post-hoc analysis, gender was found to be significantly associated with both factors in belonging as a main effect, but not a moderated one. Further examination is needed to understand how gender role expectations may influence volunteers' actions to promote youths' sense of belonging. An emergent need for state 4-H programs is to improve training designed to promote inclusion. Given the need for improved training for volunteers to ensure an inclusive club environment, 4-H programs should ensure that volunteers are trained on creating a safe and inclusive environment during the onboarding process. Although we expected volunteer characteristics to have no influence on the connection between training breadth and essential elements (as age did not), gender appeared influential with males who participated in greater breadth of trainings showing up as stronger supporters of independence and generosity than females who reported high levels of breadth in their trainings.

Overall, we found support for breadth of training's connection with independence, mastery, and the second factor for generosity as it pertains to volunteers serving as role models in their communities to encourage the youth they interact with to do the same. The stronger effect of breadth of training on the essential element of mastery for newer volunteers points to variety in training type benefiting volunteers who, perhaps, have a fresher perspective. Providing seasoned volunteers with new opportunities and training with innovative, rather than repetitive, content may prevent volunteers from falling into the "same old thing" or, even worse, burnout.

Implications

Our findings are not merely theoretically or conceptually meaningful; they provide practical knowledge to advance youth development practitioners' work. 4-H Extension agents can consider ways to tailor trainings to volunteers' specific needs, such as males or seasoned volunteers who may operate from different standards and expectations as to how to promote the essential elements. Moreover, asking volunteers what they learn the most about in training (e.g., an emphasis on mastery over belonging) would inform 4-H youth development professionals so they can incorporate a more balanced and practical approach to teaching the essential elements.

For example, intentional training in the essential elements entails assessing the "belonging strengths" of those around the table. In the article, *Always Searching for Strengths: Interviewing and Counseling with the Circle of Courage* (Frankowski & Duncan, 2013), an understanding of belonging can be promoted by asking questions like, "When you're with your family, what do you like to do?" or "When you're stressed out, who do you go to?" Furthermore, youth development professionals should utilize resources that promote belonging and inclusion that align with the 4-H Thriving Model, developed by Arnold and Gagnon (2019). Excellent resources such as the Alignment of Positive Youth Development Frameworks with the 4-H Thriving Model (Rachel et al., 2021) can be retrieved from the website dedicated to the 4-H Program Leader's Working Group Standing Committee on PYD. Lastly, club leaders have the unique opportunity to be a spark champion by intentionally asking youth if they have a spark (e.g., something they're passionate about which brings them joy and energy) in their life and they can promote increased self-efficacy and independence by engaging youth in conversations about their spark (Scales et al., 2011).

Although the body of research on the use of essential elements in 4-H is small but growing, it has been studied in schools (Lee, 2013; Rennekamp, 2014; Van Bockern, 2014) and observed in other cultures (Bolin, 2010; Werner 2012). There have also been examinations of how family units are impacted by the essential elements (Garfat & Van Bockern, 2010). Specific to 4-H, Radhakrishna and Ewing (2011) and Radhakrishna and colleagues (2013) found statistically significant associations between belonging and life skills as a dependent variable. Bridging the gap to learn how volunteers exemplify the essential elements, and how they are emphasized in training and recommended for practice, has potential to inform and transform 4-H programs.

Limitations

First, the data were collected with a cross-sectional, non-experimental design with participation happening on a voluntary basis. Sampling did not occur in a stratified manner; stratifying the sample by tenure in 4-H and gender could provide greater representation of certain volunteer groups. Also, stratifying the sample into urban and rural divisions might provide understanding about the degree to which clubs in different areas support essential elements. Original researchers did not collect urban and rural information and gender binary options of male/female were the choices provided at the time of the original research. This study captured a season in time; however, it is highly encouraged that this study continues in a longitudinal format and include multiple perspectives such as youth and program staff, as well as Extension agents and program assistants. To add, matching adult volunteers with their club youth to see how volunteer perceptions of club environments align with youth perceptions will add richness to our understanding of the degree to which essential elements are put into practice in 4-H. Further, for the sake of anonymity for the volunteers and to increase the validity of the results the original researchers did not collect race/ethnicity demographic information, and this may be considered a limitation.

Conclusion

The research planned here involves a secondary dataset with an adequate sample size that is representative of this state 4-H program's volunteer base; and, the response rate was good with 27% of the state volunteer base participating (Hensley et al., 2020) thanks to 4-H YDP leadership as state specialists, the Florida Survey Research Center, and 4-H volunteers who cared enough to complete the survey. Surprising gaps in support for fostering belonging emerged concerning volunteers' tenure, with seemingly lesser concern with this essential element among seasoned volunteers. What was empirically supported, however, was lower promotion of mastery among seasoned volunteers as their breadth of training increased. This can be mitigated moving forward by providing seasoned volunteers with new opportunities and training with innovative, rather than repetitive, content to prevent volunteers from falling into the "same old thing" or, even worse, burnout. Moreover, integrating mindfulness practices and self-care into volunteer training can reduce volunteer compassion fatigue. As volunteers put these activities into practice in their lives a spillover effect can occur, by example set with youth in their clubs. Further, gender emerged as significant for influencing independence and training breadth; Thus a future directive is to ask what types of training volunteers engaged in and identify gender-based trends in training participation. Making a difference in the lives of others is one reason that volunteers give their time and talent. Therefore, PYD professionals should conduct training to meet the diverse needs of their varied volunteers as well as to train them how to intentionally place youth on a trajectory to thrive.

Future Recommendations

Future research would benefit from exploring if training outcomes and training frequency or breadth differs by race/ethnicity, gender, or geographical region.

Acknowledgements

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