

## 4-H Program Quality Assessment: Can Volunteers Improve Quality?

Samantha Grant, M.A.  
Extension Educator, University of Minnesota Extension  
863 30<sup>th</sup> Ave. SE, Rochester, MN 55904  
Tel.: 507-536-6302 \* FAX 507-536-6311 \* E-mail: samgrant@umn.edu

Eric Vogel, M.Ed.  
Extension Educator, University of Minnesota Extension  
Extension Regional Center- St. Cloud, Midtown Office Complex  
3400 1<sup>st</sup> St. North, St. Cloud, MN 56303  
Tel.: 320-203-6105 \* FAX 320-203-6110 \* E-mail: vogel007@umn.edu

### Abstract

*Expectations for volunteers in youth development organizations have grown to include an emphasis on accountability. In recent years, the field of youth development has begun to investigate out-of-school time settings by measuring the quality of learning environments at the point of service- the places where youth and adults interact. The current study investigated 4-H volunteers' experiences in building quality youth development settings. Ten 4-H clubs were randomly divided into either an experimental or control group. Clubs in the experimental group received three hours of training on topics related to quality. Results demonstrated that experimental clubs saw improvements in measures of supportive environments. In addition, interview data revealed three themes important for implementing quality initiatives in volunteer settings: emphasis on engagement, special considerations in working with volunteers, and importance of a system-wide approach. Implications and future directions are discussed.*

### Key Words:

quality, training, improvement, youth development

Youth serving organizations and professionals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are confronted with the task of keeping pace with current research findings and the movement of the youth development profession. Volunteers play a pivotal role in the delivery of key messages. In recent years, the field of youth development has begun to investigate learning environments by measuring quality at the point of service, i.e. the places where youth and adults interact. Multiple definitions exist for the concept of quality, but according to Smith, Akiva, and Henry (2006), "A high quality program provides youth with access to key experiences that advance adaptive, developmental and learning outcomes"

(p. 2). 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers around the nation have welcomed quality research and some states have mandated quality assessment, as researchers have noted that focusing on quality rather than outcomes can be a key strategy for improving youth programming (Pianta, 2003). When looking at emphasizing quality in youth settings, it is important to know and understand the perspective of volunteers. Minnesota 4-H has begun to investigate the promises made to 4-H members by the organization and the level of delivering on these promises. One key promise is a quality learning environment. This research was a pilot investigation of volunteers' experiences in building quality systems that

gives Minnesota 4-H direction as it develops a plan for system-wide quality enhancement.

### **Why Quality Youth Development?**

The field of youth development has learned much about what constitutes strong programs for youth. Research suggests that successful programs are those that are safe, active, focused, and explicit (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). Eccles and Gootman (2002) described eight research-based features of quality positive developmental settings. Observation tools that measure features of program quality have been created in recent years in response to applied research. A report by the Forum for Youth Investment highlighted the current tools available to measure quality in youth development settings (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2009), and by comparing these tools, more has been learned about central tenets of quality. The quality of interaction that youth have with adults is vitally important as youth experiences with interactive and engaging programs are linked to the outcomes of youth interest, a sense of growth, and reports of skill development (Smith, Akiva, & Henry, 2006).

Increasing attention on quality can also be attributed to programs that have not met standards. Belle (1999) argued that quality matters, noting that youth in poor quality programs are worse off than some youth in self care. A meta-analysis of youth programs demonstrated that about one-half of evaluated youth programs did not have an impact on youth (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). Clearly, youth organizations need to invest resources in improving quality in order to achieve desired impacts on youth. Now that the youth development field is acknowledging the importance of quality as a way to build strong programs and advance long-term youth outcomes, it is crucial to

implement system-wide change targeting volunteers and leadership staff. Research on quality supports the involvement of whole systems in order to create lasting change (Tseng & Seidman, 2007; Yohalem, Granger, Pittman, 2009). In a volunteer led system, such as 4-H, involvement of volunteers is crucial for progress; however, much of the research that has been conducted on quality in youth development settings has focused on programs led by trained, paid staff. It was of interest to look deeper into the experiences of volunteers in building quality programs, as research suggests that staff are key in driving quality accountability systems because they are the direct link with youth (Smith, Devaney, Akiva, & Sugar, 2009). If volunteers come to an organization without the necessary skill sets, how do professional staff train them to create quality programs? In order to understand this question, we explored the experience of volunteer leaders through a multi-year observation of 4-H clubs. The purpose of our research was threefold: (1) to investigate quality in the volunteer-led 4-H system; (2) to test if a training, focused on quality concepts, created change in 4-H clubs; and (3) to document qualitative changes seen by volunteers through a follow-up interview. These goals frame a volunteer's experience in improving the quality of youth development programs and served to educate youth development staff in identifying prime strategies to implement change throughout a volunteer system.

### **Methods**

#### *Participants*

Ten 4-H clubs in Southeast Minnesota were randomly selected to participate in the study. One club from each county became part of the control group and one the experimental group. 4-H clubs were based in both suburban and rural cities.

*Procedures*

All ten clubs were assessed in the spring of 2007 by a trained, reliable observer who had completed a two-part observation training offered through High Scope. 4-H clubs were assessed using the High Scope Educational Research Foundation's Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) Form A. This observation tool has undergone rigorous reliability and validity testing (Smith & Hohmann, 2005; Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2009). The tool focuses on four large areas of point of service quality: safe environment, supportive environment, interaction, and engagement. Figure 1 provides further descriptions of the dimensions of each subscale.

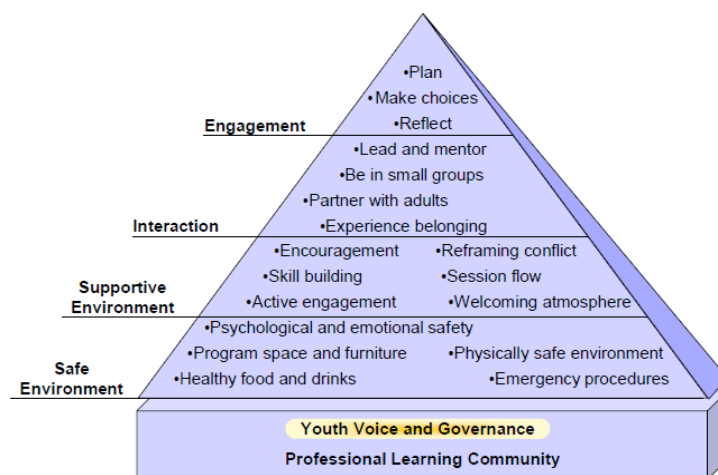
After the first assessment, the clubs were randomly split into control and experimental groups. The experimental group was asked to participate in a series of trainings. At least two adult and two youth leaders participated from each 4-H club. The control group was only observed and received no training. In the fall of 2008, clubs were revisited by the same trained observers using the same

instrument. Following this assessment, clubs were sent a score report from both observations.

*Training Design*

The training for the volunteer teams consisted of two, one and one-half hour sessions: Session One: Foundational to any effort to build quality is a background in youth development; therefore, a section of the training was devoted to positive youth development in the context of 4-H club settings. The remainder of session one covered an introduction of youth program quality based around High Scope's quality dimensions. Clubs also received their scores from the first round of observations; and Session Two: Since 4-H clubs tend to score lowest on youth engagement, almost half of the second session was devoted to exploring engagement subscale items (see Figure 1) as they related to typical situations in 4-H clubs. The second half of the training allowed each club team to develop an action plan to address quality.

Figure 1. The High Scope Pyramid of Program Quality.



© 2006 High/Scope Educational Research Foundation • [ypqi.highscope.org](http://ypqi.highscope.org)

*Follow-up Interview*

Approximately eight months following the training, follow-up interviews were conducted. Volunteers in the experimental group took part in an eight-question interview to learn more about their experience and what could be done in future efforts to promote quality development in clubs. Five adult club volunteers and one youth leader were interviewed, reflecting experiences from all clubs that participated in training.

**Results**

The first purpose of this research was to look at the status of quality in 4-H settings. Table 1 shows the average changes in scores from time one to time two. Overall, clubs saw an increase in the measures of safe environment, supportive environment, interaction, and engagement. Due to low sample sizes, increases in scores were not statistically significant. Clubs tended to score highest on measures of safe

environments and progressively lower on subsequent scales. This finding is consistent with trends in other youth serving organizations (Smith & Akiva, 2008).

The second purpose of this research was to investigate if clubs receiving extra training would increase their quality scores. Toward this aim, repeated measures ANOVAS were conducted in which group (experiment, control) was the between-subjects variable and time (t1, t2) was the within-subjects variable. Analyses were conducted separately for each subscale: safe environment, supportive environment, interaction, and engagement. A significant main effect of group was found on measures of supportive environments,  $F(1,8) = 13.82$ ,  $p < .01$ . Examination of cell means demonstrated that experimental group clubs had greater increases on measures of supportive environments from time one to time two ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = .38$ ) as compared to control group clubs ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = .33$ ).

Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics for Quality Dimensions*

	Experimental Group			Control Group		
	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range
<b>Time One</b>						
Safe Environment	4.06	.70	2.86-4.60	4.09	.31	3.72-4.56
Supportive Environment	3.83	.38	3.46-4.42	3.15	.33	2.80-3.55
Interaction	3.46	.50	2.70-4.10	2.64	.69	2.08-3.80
Engagement	2.47	.70	1.50-3.20	2.27	.55	1.5-3.0
<b>Time Two</b>						
Safe Environment	4.12	.79	2.86-4.90	4.28	.28	3.94-4.70
Supportive Environment	4.24	.51	3.56-4.83	3.68	.12	3.48-3.80
Interaction	3.39	.99	2.25-4.65	3.07	.35	2.68-3.55
Engagement	3.03	.83	2.17-4.17	2.39	.53	1.67-3.0

*N= 10, 5 experimental and 5 control*

Our final purpose was to receive qualitative feedback from volunteers on their experiences in building quality programs for youth. After analyzing interview manuscripts, boosting club efforts in engagement, acknowledging special considerations for volunteers, and approaching quality development systemically were identified as important themes for future attention and are discussed in the following section.

### **Discussion**

The authors wish to emphasize that while the results of this exploratory study may not be inferred to any larger population, several implications are of importance to volunteer resource managers. This research provided preliminary evidence of selected volunteers' experiences in implementing quality accountability systems. The experiences of the 4-H volunteers in this study mirrored findings in the youth development professional field, as overall scores were lower on interaction and engagement in comparison to safe and supportive environment (Smith & Akiva, 2008). Although all aspects of quality are important, the goal for youth development organizations is to build environments that are interactive and engaging. Researchers have suggested that building interactive and engaging programs is related to positive outcomes such as attendance, youth motivation and interest, social skills, and academic gains (Blazevski, Van Egeren, & Smith, 2007; Intercultural Center for Research in Education & National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2005). From this data, we have a better idea of the areas that require more work and attention from a systems perspective.

Despite the small sample, our training demonstrated that the clubs in this study were capable of making changes in their club settings. Experimental clubs saw a

significant increase on scores of support from time one to time two. These preliminary findings presented an important first picture of how to approach training volunteers to increase the quality of their programs. Changes for clubs with a short-lived training intervention only begin to show the possibilities that could come from a long-term, system-wide emphasis on quality.

Three themes emerged from all phases of our data collection that should be addressed in future volunteer training efforts: (1) engagement is an important theme, but further assistance is needed to help adult volunteers achieve results; (2) there are special challenges in advancing quality in volunteer systems; and (3) quality development requires a system-wide approach.

### *Emphasis on Engagement*

Based on interview analysis, it was apparent that volunteers were indeed interested in making progress in the area of engagement in their clubs. This was encouraging as engagement was a key component of the training and an area that research shows is meaningful for youth (Hart, 1992; Shernoff & Vandell, 2008). Two volunteers discussed their efforts to engage youth in their 4-H clubs by reflecting:

*I think probably our largest focus we determined from going through that process was that we needed to be a little more youth centric, meaning, we wanted the young people to do more of the planning and implementing and deciding on things. It seemed like it's real easy to fall into giving those roles to the contact leaders or other parents.*

*We tried to get the youth more involved with the decision making process.*

Creating engaging environments is clearly a formidable task that requires focused attention and the investment of resources.

#### *Special Considerations for Volunteers*

Challenges emerged in working with revolving leadership, achieving a common definition of quality, and balancing necessary dosage with volunteer time.

Changing leadership. It is the habit of many 4-H clubs to rotate volunteer leadership on an annual basis; therefore, some volunteers that took part in the training and developed and implemented an action plan had been replaced a year later. The new leadership may or may not have supported the plan or even been familiar with youth quality concepts. Excerpts from two volunteer interviews echo this idea:

*The training happened and then elections were held and my term as adult leader was now over. The officers also all changed. There was some carry over, but the vision from one year to the next year was lost. . . . it's an ever changing beast because you don't have necessarily the consistency from year to year because of who's doing what, and how well are they doing it, it's a great experience for youth I wouldn't change anything of that. So, but I've struggled with how can we be consistent so that's it a good experience even though things are always changing.*

Accommodating changing staff is not an issue that is unique to the volunteer sector; rather, it is felt throughout youth

development systems (Yohalem, Granger, & Pittman, 2009). Staff changes are especially worrisome when building quality systems, as research has pointed to the fact that quality is more stable across program deliverers than program offerings (Smith & Akiva, 2008). It is imperative that steps be taken to build capacity among the leadership and membership of the organization in order to avoid regression during transitional periods.

Achieving a common vision of quality. Volunteers came to their work with a variety of goals. Some saw quality in increased membership without seeing that without quality, maintaining membership is difficult. Some saw quality as participation in events: the more youth participating in county fair equates to higher levels of quality. Quality development efforts need to gauge volunteer attitudes in this regard and prepare to move thinking to new levels. Some volunteers missed the true emphasis of the quality training. One leader pursued a preexisting personal agenda involving collaborative work with community organizations. Another club developed a plan around a membership drive, although in the training, clubs were told that membership itself was not a measure of quality. Future efforts should downplay the importance of membership drives in 4-H programs, as young people will take part in programs that are high quality.

Training design. All volunteer resource managers struggle with achieving the right balance of training while remaining sensitive to volunteer time commitments. Staff agreed that three hours of training was the most that could be expected of volunteers and their teams. The National Youth Program Quality Intervention study conducted research with staff receiving 30 hours of intensive training and technical assistance. That research demonstrated that point of service quality can be moved

forward with a concerted effort in training (Smith, 2009). Three hours is a minimal amount of training time but 30 hours would be an extreme expectation for volunteers. What then is the optimum amount of training that will give the best return?

Future training efforts will need to consider how to deliver a greater amount of training even though volunteers may never reach the training level typically done with professional staff. The organization must also develop tools besides training to enhance quality including coaching, addressing quality regularly at meetings, and utilizing alternative delivery methods including online resources. Staff must also consider ways to build quality with volunteers who have varying levels of understanding of quality and basic youth development concepts.

#### *Importance of a System-wide Approach*

A final theme that emerged from this research, further supported by a variety of researchers and practitioners in the field, is the importance of building a system-wide approach to improving quality. This means involving staff and volunteers- both youth and adult- in bringing about lasting change. In this research, only staff in three of the five counties were involved. Volunteers from counties who were not invested in the research were aware of the lack of support they received from their local staff. One volunteer reflected:

*I would have liked to have seen our local 4-H [staff] be a little bit more involved in this because I felt like they were totally out of the loop. When I would mention things to [her] she acted like she didn't know. She just kind of brushed it off.*

At the very least, future efforts should consider ways to regularly communicate

with local staff and should ideally include all levels of the system to support training and quality improvement planning. Research supports building a system-wide approach to addressing quality, as changes need to be made in the ways that entire organizations view the importance of quality. Yohalem, Granger, and Pittman (2009) emphasized the importance that leadership has in supporting a quality agenda in stating, "When supervisors consider strengthening point-of service-quality as one of their primary responsibilities (if not the primary responsibility), it has important implications for how they interact with staff..." (p. 137). Systems need to build strategies around training, coaching, continuous improvement and feedback that become part of the common language of the organization.

#### **Conclusions and Implications**

This exploratory research should be of interest to administrators and managers of volunteers wherever volunteers interact with youth in programs. It calls attention to the importance of quality within youth development programs and suggests new possibilities for evaluation. Even with its small sample, it should also highlight the importance of volunteer training to increase quality within those environments. Recommendations have been offered above in the discussion section. Following are three key recommendations to consider for further action and research:

- Quality improvement requires a shift in focus. Volunteer teams should be held accountable for continuous improvement process not for increased quality scores (Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008).
- A balance in the dosage of training is critical. Three hours is minimal but 30 hours is too much to expect of volunteers.

- Results from this study may give insight for further work, but future research should include increased sample size.

Pilots are important in beginning the quality journey. Research suggests that pilot projects allow an organization to build trust, prepare the organization for larger changes, and align training (Smith, Devaney, Akiva, & Sugar, 2009). This pilot investigation provides future direction for a system-wide quality enhancement of the 4-H program driven largely by volunteers. An investment on all levels is important to move a quality agenda forward. The training of staff is certainly important to this effort but the development of volunteers to be the primary drivers of quality development is pivotal. It is also important to note that change will not happen with a short-lived investment. Change of quality requires time and commitment. This is a meaningful commitment if we truly care about the future development of our youth.

## References

- Belle, D. (1999). *The afterschool lives of children: Alone and with others while parents work*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Blazevski, J., Van Egeren, L.A., & Smith, C. (2007). *After-school quality and school-day outcomes: Two studies in Michigan's 21st CCLC Program*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation Retrieved on August 24, 2009, from <http://www.highscope.org/file/EducationalPrograms/Adolescent/ResearchEvidence/AS%20Youth%20Report%20Afterschool%20Quality.pdf><http://youth.highscope.org>
- Durlak, A.J., & Weissberg, R.P. (2007). *The impact of after-school programs that promote personal and social skills*. Chicago: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Retrieved on June 18, 2009, from <http://www.casel.org/downloads/ASP-Full.pdf>
- Eccles, J., & Gootman, J.A. (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.
- Hart, R. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. New Florence, Italy: UNICEF.
- Intercultural Center for Research in Education & National Institute on Out-of-School Time. (2005). *Pathways to success for youth: What counts in after-school*. Arlington, MA: United Way of Massachusetts Bay.
- Pianta, R.C. (2003). *Standardized classroom observations from pre-k to 3rd grade: A mechanism for improving classroom quality and practices, consistency of P-3 experiences, and child outcomes*. New York: Foundation for Child Development.
- Shernoff, D.J., & Vandell, D.L. (2008). Youth engagement and quality of experience in afterschool programs. *Afterschool Matters*, 9, 1-14.
- Shinn, M., & Yoshikawa, H. (2008). *Toward Positive Youth Development in Schools and Community Programs*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Smith, C. (2009, May 1). *Building systems for quality: Learnings from research and practice*. Public presentation at



- Inquiry to Impact Symposium,  
Minneapolis, MN.
- Smith, C., & Akiva, T. (2008). Quality accountability: Improving fidelity of broad developmentally focused interventions. In M. Shinn & H. Yoshikawa (Eds.), *Toward positive youth development* (pp. 192- 212). New York: Oxford University Press.
- 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. Retrieved on August 24, 2009, from <http://www.highscope.org/file/Adolescent/YPQA%20SRA%203-26-06.pdf>
- Smith, C., Akiva, T., Blazeovski, J., Pelle, L., & Devaney, T. (2008). *Final report on the palm beach quality improvement system pilot: Model implementation and program quality improvement in 38 after-school programs*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.
- Smith, C., Devaney, T.J., Akiva, T., & Sugar, S.A. (2009). Quality and accountability in the out-of-school time sector. *New Directions for Youth Development, 121*, 109-127.
- Smith, C., & Hohmann, C. (2005). *Full findings from the youth PQA validation study*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. Retrieved on August 31, 2009, from <http://www.highscope.org/file/EducationalPrograms/Adolescent/ResearchEvidence/WebFinalYouthPQATechReport.pdf>  
<http://youth.highscope.org>
- Tseng, V., & Seidman, E. (2007). A systems framework for understanding social settings. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 39*, 217-228.
- 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
- Yohalem, N., Granger, R.C., & Pittman, K. J. (2009). The quest for quality: Recent developments and future directions for the out-of-school-time field. *New Directions for Youth Development, 121*, 129-140.

---

### About the Authors

Samantha Grant works as a 4-H Extension Educator for the University of Minnesota Extension and is based at the Regional Office in Rochester. Her position is focused on providing out-of-school time activities for new and underserved audiences in SE Minnesota. As part of this work, she has led initiatives to engage at-risk youth in youth development programming. Previously, she earned her Master's Degree in Human Development at Washington State University. Her research focuses on building and evaluating quality learning environments for all youth.

Eric Vogel has worked with youth and with adult volunteers who work with youth both professionally and as a volunteer himself. He is an Extension Educator with the University of Minnesota Extension Youth Work Institute and is based at a U of MN Extension Regional Office in St. Cloud, MN. Prior to that he coordinated volunteers working with 4-H programs in central and southeastern Minnesota, and coordinated a group of professionals who volunteer their skills to teach classes on the effects of divorce on children. He received his BS degree from South Dakota State University in public recreation administration and child development and a Masters of Education from the University of Minnesota in vocational education.