

Multicultural Challenges in 4-H Youth Development: Bridging the Divide

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As we move into this millennium, the United States is experiencing a phenomenal growth of ethnic and cultural diversity and is becoming more pluralistic than ever before.

This growth in diversity brings the challenge of incorporating people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds into every sector of society—such as the workplace, the health care system, and the schools. Bringing together people of different cultural perspectives and value systems creates tensions. While groups are forced to blend in with one another, some groups (such as recent immigrants) do not embrace homogeneity, and are reluctant to give up their cultural identities.

While groups outside the dominant culture are forced to blend in, they still face prejudice and discriminatory attitudes. People seen as different are rejected if they appear to pose a threat to the neighborhood, employment opportunities, or education.

Americans often isolate themselves to maintain some control over their cultural practices, then feel the effects of a diminished or unwelcome identity.

Understanding these dynamics and the growing diversity is essential for our work with other cultural and ethnic groups in 4-H. It is important for us to acknowledge the distinct features of every group—such as ethnicity, language, national heritage, social class, economic status, culture, and interests. Showing concern for their cultural heritage and values is the most basic expectation for cultivating an accepting and inclusive environment.

Valuing Diversity

Prejudice and exclusion marginalizes groups who are not members of the dominant culture. Thoughtfulness and decisive action is needed to eliminate the detrimental effects of marginalization from the fabric of society.

Our responsibility to our youth is to strive for a society where people are accepted irrespective of their physical differences or their cultural perspectives. If an organization is regarded as a multicultural entity, it should reflect the presence, contributions, strengths, and aspirations of all its constituents across the spectrum of cultural, racial, and ethnic differences.

The attitudes and skills of youth growing up in the United States should include intercultural competence and appreciation of difference. Through efforts such as multicultural education,

Successful interactions will require practitioners to understand and value the richness other cultural groups contribute to society.

Adopting imposed cultural standards erodes the basic beliefs and values of groups who then struggle to maintain their sense of identity through cultural traditions and practices. Native Americans, African Americans, and Asian

youth can shed stereotypes and prejudices and value opportunities for learning with people who are different from themselves. "Moreover for children to survive in a society and world destined for dramatic demographic, economic, social and political changes, multicultural education is a necessity." (Gay, 1995) Educating youth in intercultural and cross-cultural knowledge and skills is therefore imperative, especially if they are to engage meaningfully and responsibly in the public life of their communities and communicate and get along with all people. "...[T]oo many youth lack the skills and competencies needed for future success.... [Unfortunately] as a society, we merely seek to reduce youth problems. (Pittman & Cahill, 1993).

Youth development should therefore include opportunities for young people to develop cultural understanding and competence. If we are to rear healthy, productive

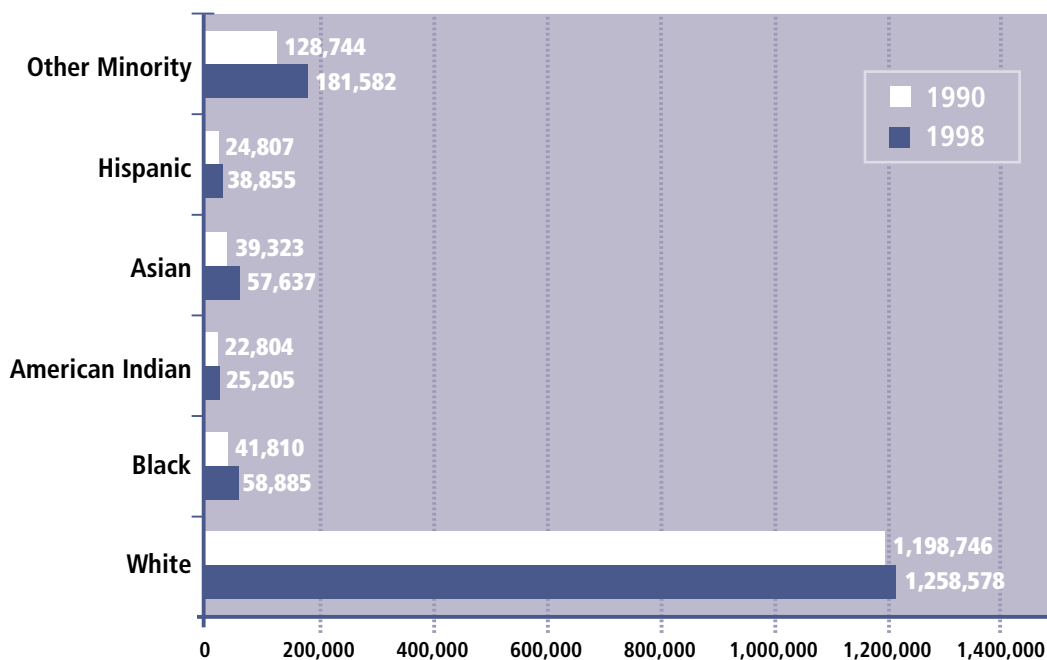
youth our policies and actions should not be restricted to prevention or cures, but should include cultivating skills and meeting needs (Pittman & Cahill, 1993). 4-H can help young people value diversity as a means to gaining skills for healthy participation in multicultural situations.



Bridging the Cultural Divide

Despite the growing cultural diversity, most people still live away from others who are racially, socially, and culturally different. This deprives them of important cross-ethnic contact. Economic disparities create class divisions and segre-

Youth Population (Age 0 to 19) by Ethnic Group



Source: Minnesota State Demographic Center

The faces representing America's youth have changed over the last decade, even in Minnesota. Whites are still the dominant ethnic group, but this is changing.

gated neighborhoods, diminishing opportunities to learn and share with each other. Negative stereotypes, prejudices, and misconceptions can only flourish under such conditions and may have negative impacts on programs that seek to serve young people from diverse groups.

There is a widely held assumption in the United States that American society should be a homogenized melting pot. This assumption leads to a “one size fits all” approach and requires complicity with the cultural values of the dominant culture. Many culturally diverse groups desire to be accepted unconditionally into the mainstream society and feel what they bring is an asset. This is an important lesson and no different than what we learn in American history—that the synergy of elements from many cultures has always influenced this nation.

Cultural Learning Leads to Understanding Difference

Culture is often defined as the total way of life of a people. It involves what people think, what they do and the material they produce (Bodley, 1994). Culture includes customs, beliefs, values and attitudes, communication patterns, and interpretations of life. Although minority cultures place a high value on traditions, customs and practices, and issues that define their identity, they have particular difficulties and disadvantages maintaining their cultural identity. Assimilation becomes an undesirable but necessary experience in a society that allows increased privileges for emulating the dominant culture. Cultural difference is further entwined



with issues of poverty, poor education, race, and class inequalities. This creates ideal circumstances for dominance and the development of an inferior view of people who come from marginalized cultures, and leads to prejudice.

As ethnic, racial, social, and cultural groups grow in size and political significance, they demand that social policies and programs be responsive to their needs. This calls for more cultural sensitivity and inclusivity as well as attempts to reduce prejudice and bias. Successful interactions will require practitioners to understand and value the richness other cultural groups contribute to society.

4-H can encourage youth development projects where young people learn to value and to show respect for the growing cultural diversity in our society. This would enhance the opportunities for youth to acquire appropriate skills to live and function in a multicultural society.

Reducing Prejudice and Bias

Prejudice is a “preconceived judgment or opinion, an adverse opinion or learning formed without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge...an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race or their supposed characteristics” (National 4-H Council,



tion that is not factual may harm positive relationships among groups. A program at the Mary E. Roberts Elementary school in New Jersey emphasizes that by learning and exploring knowledge of other cultures, young people are able to confront negative biases and beliefs about those cultures (Bullard, 1998).

Youth from the mainstream dominant culture should learn about power and powerlessness. They should be encouraged to question their perceived superiority within their culture.

It is also important to look at the “admissions and omissions” in written material by questioning whether it is factual. “Without other knowledge or experience to counteract incorrect information, children will assume that peoples and their cultures are accurately portrayed” (Foulks, 1995). When information about the contributions and important features of another culture are left out, whether deliberately or not, it diminishes the roles or the value of the contributions made by other groups. These omissions

Millennium Youth Challenge Writing Contest

Being a Youth During the New Millennium!

by Shubham Debnath

I feel very lucky to be a youth at the turn of a new decade, century, and millennium. Year 2000 is a very special year for me. I am a decade old this year because I was born in 1990.

This year won't be the end of the world. It will be the beginning of many new things. Soon, the world will have more and more improvements in new technology and I hope that there will be peace everywhere. There will be no hunger, no sickness, and no war. People will learn to live with each other and accept the racial, cultural, and religious differences. People will learn to be kinder to each other. There will be more discoveries. My family and friends view Y2K as the beginning of a new era. This will be a century of technology. People will have happier and more peaceful lives than before. There will be more improvements in medical science and research. There will be better treatments for deadly diseases such as cancer, AIDS, and others. Researchers will find the medicines for cancer patients. In this century, every damaged organ other than the brain and central nervous system will be fixed by artificial devices. Someday researchers will be able to reproduce the brain and the central nervous system in the laboratory. There will be remarkable progress in technology for world transportation. People will use more airways than land ways. Going around the world will be easy because of an intelligent

transportation system, automated highway system, and new aircraft design for supersonic speed. Travel times in both the trains and planes will be much reduced. There will be more technology for distance learning, virtual school and colleges, virtual offices, and videoconferencing. People will be more actively involved in academic science, research, and humanity. People will live longer and have a better life.

Kids will become happy if, soon, the toy companies make electronic toys that don't need batteries, can really fly and talk with them. These toys will take their minds off their old toys, but these toys can make them lazy. A game like Nintendo 64 can make kids spend hours and hours in front of the TV. I think it is bad because then the kids will not remember how to run or play outside in the snow. When I play games like chess with the computer, then I know I am thinking very hard to beat the computer. I learn a lot how to think with reason. In this century, I think certain toys really should be abolished. Children can learn how to think from playing different smart games and become smart. I say this because I don't like toys, and I do want to be smart and wise.

My grandparents live in India. My grandma never went to school, and my grandpa became a teacher. Now, he is not alive. The other side of my family went to school as youth, but now they are retired. I am sure they

reflect a mistaken belief by educators and other practitioners that members of minority cultures have sufficient knowledge of their own culture. Andy Favorite, historical archivist of the White Earth Indian Reservation, tells visitors how sacrifices made by Native Americans contributed to Minnesota's economy. Scientific discoveries by African-American George Washington Carver were of great benefit to our entire nation. It is important for youth from minority cultures to learn about their cultural heritage and the role and contributions of their ancestors.

Culturally Responsible Educators and Program Leaders

Many educators and youth workers mention that they feel unprepared to meet the needs of students whose cultures they do not understand (Giacchino-Baker, 1995). Without proper training and education, youth who come from minority cultures may be seen as "exotic" and very different. This contributes to the growing alienation experienced by youth from culturally different communities. This prevents some organizations from reaching such audiences, or developing culturally appropriate practices.



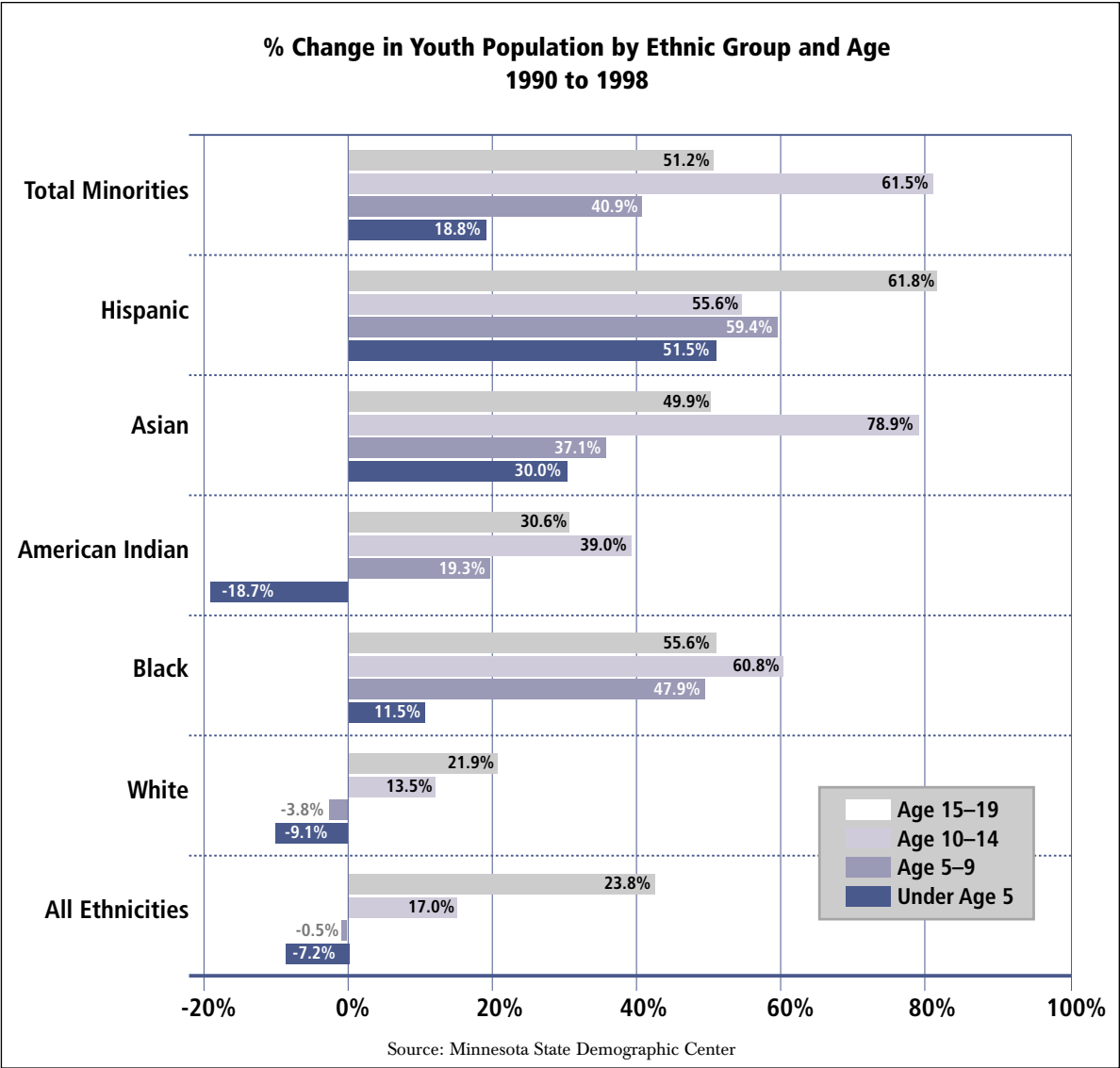
never had the access to the Internet and technology that I have. I think they even did not have a telephone, TV, or a computer in their house. Many years ago we didn't have telephones, electricity, planes, medicines, computers, lights, or space equipment. People discovered these objects. Alexander Graham Bell made the telephone. Benjamin Franklin discovered electricity. The Wright Brothers invented the first plane. John Atanasoff made the first digital computer. Thomas Alva Edison invented the first light. Robert H. Goddard made the first gas-powered rocket. The technological miracles have been changing our family and life very much giving more fun, happiness, convenience, and opportunities. The time that I am experiencing is much more different from what my grandparents and great grandparents had seen. I am growing with technology that my grandparents and great-grandparents could never imagine. Just the communication technology now makes the entire world so close together that my ancestors could never experience.

In previous years, young people of my age have not been able to use good technology and media. I have been able to access the Internet and so many channels on TV. Developing countries also don't have things like the United States has. For example, South Africa doesn't have many computers. I can have Internet access at home and at school, but kids in other underdeveloped

countries do not have access to the Internet. My youth is more interesting and challenging than in other countries of the world. I have to be more careful and intelligent. I have to understand the difference between good and bad. I have to make good choices. I think this is only the beginning of a new world. The easy access of information through the Internet, improvements of technology in all directions, open communications will help build our future in the new millennium. The information superhighway will bring the people from different countries, different religions, different backgrounds, and different cultures close together. The new opportunities, education, and technology will create a new, unique, and unified world in the future.



Shubham Debnath
Age 9



Over the last decade, white youth from 0-9 years old have seen the greatest decline. Minnesota's minority

population is 9% of the total population, while nationally minorities are 27% of the total population.

Understanding cultural differences creates openness to what is relevant to someone's culture and how that differs from our own. In some cultures, for example, it is inappropriate to make direct eye contact with an adult or wear sunglasses when communicating. The interpretation of behavior gets complex when youth workers lack knowledge about cultural practices and fear becoming offensive. Communicating with those who are culturally different can clarify what is appropriate or not.

Educators and program leaders who work with youth from other cultural groups should be aware of their own heritage and cultural background. If educators value and embrace their own cultural roots, they are most likely to understand issues of other cultural groups and why they should model respect and recognition. Serving young people from other cultures also means that we can be open to how our value systems are different. This enhances our sensitivity to cultural dynamics and ethical practice.

Opportunities for Social Empowerment

Ethnic minority youth have systematically been denied access to power or opportunities for leadership. Educators who acknowledge this are able to support such young people by seeking opportunities that enhance their empowerment. They are able to create awareness and encourage young people to become involved in social change efforts to improve their conditions. Young people can focus a community's attention on controversial issues—especially those that have a bearing on youth. This can be an empowering experience for young people. All youth including those from more privileged backgrounds should learn how to take a critical stance against things like discrimination, exploitation, and issues that hinder positive social change. If we expect youth to promote social responsibility, we should encourage them

to participate in opportunities that benefit their social emancipation. Empowering youth is an important strategy for helping them gain control over their lives.

Cross-cultural acceptance comes from “real” opportunities for students to get to know each other and to learn about their common values and differences. It is imperative that youth development efforts include opportunities for youth to understand and interact with people who are ethnically, racially, and culturally different. They should explore ethnic backgrounds, values, and significant experiences related to race, color identity, and class differences. Teaching youth to respect and embrace cultural pluralism shows them that cultural differences need not be corrosive and divisive in our society. The great benefit of such cross-cultural cooperation is the richness that comes from multiple perspectives.

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