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Reconceptualizing Youth Sparks: A Sociocultural Approach to Co-Designing Programs for Somali Youth

Joanna A. Tzenis

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The 4-H Youth Development Program has a long history of fostering positive youth outcomes. Recently, attention and resources have been invested in the development of a program model (i.e., the 4-H Thriving Model) that theorizes the program elements that lead to positive outcomes (Arnold, 2018). Less attention, however, has been given to the program design process by which and with whom 4-H programs are designed and implemented. This matters because a lack of a community-engaged design process may lead to outcomes disconnected from community self-interests or to the exclusion of youth who might view the program as irrelevant to their lives (Simpkins et al., 2017). Drawing from examples of a collaboration between Minnesota 4-H and a Somali youth-serving organization located in central Minnesota, this article discusses how a sociocultural perspective can be used to critique youth programs around the inclusion/exclusion of youths' broader social, cultural, and political contexts of development and socialization. Particular attention is given to the reconceptualization of sparks as socially situated, collective, and relational. The article concludes with a discussion of practical implications and future directions for Extension/4-H's community-engaged and ongoing program design processes.

Keywords: community engagement, program design, youth development, Somali youth

The field of youth development has given increasingly more attention to the processes and conditions that foster youth thriving. This growing body of research steers the field away from a deficit-oriented approach to youth development and instead investigates the social conditions youth need for optimal development (e.g., Arnold, 2015, 2018; Balsano et al., 2009; Scales et al., 2011). Foundational to this asset-based approach (i.e., positive youth development) is the notion that young people thrive when they interact in social contexts that nurture their *sparks*—which refers to their interests and passions that inspire joy and intrinsic motivation to pursue meaningful futures (Scales et al., 2011). This body of literature argues that when youth sparks are nurtured and reflected in their social contexts by means of positive relationships and opportunities, youth feel empowered to pursue their own interests and act on their passions to contribute to the social good (Scales et al., 2011).

4-H, the largest youth-serving organization in the nation, has drawn on this body of research to develop the “4-H Thriving Model” (Arnold, 2018). This model theorizes how and why youth

who participate in 4-H consistently achieve positive developmental outcomes. Focusing on the 4-H program context, the model identifies elements that should be included in program design to support youth thriving, with the aim of nurturing youth sparks lying at the heart of the model. This model offers 4-H a consistent, research-based framework that has served as an impetus for 4-H professionals nationwide to use more intentional and uniformed program design strategies to optimize youths' opportunities to thrive through participation in 4-H. Yet the uniformity of this model can implicate its effectiveness if it does not consider "broader ecological conditions" influencing youths' development and socialization (Lerner, 2020, p. 150).

Arnold and Gagnon (2020) are leading a task force to "update" the model examining with specificity around what program activities are effective "for whom and under what conditions" (p. 14). This step of "testing" the model's effectiveness for youth of diverse backgrounds is an important step in refining the model with equity in mind. Still absent from the conversations, however, is the *process* by which and with whom these high-quality 4-H programs are designed and implemented. This matters because a design process void of community collaboration and engagement may lead to outcomes disconnected from community self-interests or to the exclusion of youth and families who view the program as irrelevant to their lives (Simpkins et al., 2017). This article argues that the 4-H Thriving Model would benefit from the inclusion of a program design process that enables 4-H educators to consider and engage with youths' myriad contexts of development and socialization to ensure youth have equitable opportunities to thrive and live a life of value.

To support this argument, in this article, I examine youth programs designed with and for Somali youth in urban areas in central Minnesota. I use a sociocultural lens to reconceptualize 4-H program elements as situated within relationships with others and the broader social, cultural, and political systems in which they live (DeJaeghere, 2022). Particular attention is given to the model's most central concept, "sparks." The dominant narrative and conceptualization of sparks within the 4-H Thriving Model have been individualistic in nature. For instance, the 4-H thriving model webpage describes sparks as being "deep within" an individual, implying youth arrive at a youth program in possession of a latent spark that needs to be "discovered" (Extension Foundation, n.d.). This paper offers an alternative and sociocultural conceptualization of sparks as socially situated, collective, and relational. This conceptualization does not necessarily refer to youth relationships with trusting and caring adults in their program context (see Balsano et al., 2009). Instead, this conceptualization is an analytical frame for examining how youths' lives are interconnected with others and broader social worlds within which (and across which) they live, interact, and strive to live a life they consider good and valuable (DeJaeghere, 2022).

This article has two aims. The first aim is to identify and operationalize a community-engaged program design process that facilitates the development of high-quality 4-H youth programs inclusive of and responsive to youths' broader social contexts. The second aim is to empirically examine the social and cultural complexities and contradictions inherent in building and

implementing a youth program centered around youths' sparks. This article draws on a developmental evaluation process that was used to contribute to the ongoing development of youth programs designed with and for Somali youth living in urban areas of central Minnesota. It explicates, drawing on engagement strategies identified by Timmons and Dworkin (2020), how Extension and 4-H professionals can recognize and engage with the underlying social, cultural, and political conditions influencing youths' development when designing youth programs.

Literature Review

Rethinking 4-H Program Design Processes

4-H, like all Extension programs, consists of research-based, nonformal educational activities conducted in partnership between communities and universities (Peterson, 2015). While initially a rural program designed to prepare youth for future careers in agriculture, 4-H currently serves nearly six million youth in every geographic pocket of the national landscape and focuses on fostering youth learning and leadership outcomes around current issues such as climate change, food security, and civic engagement (4-H, 2021). And yet, while 4-H's project areas and geographic locations have evolved through time, until the introduction of Arnold's (2018) 4-H Thriving Model, its program model has remained relatively unchanged and unexamined since its rural origin (Arnold, 2015).

Although the program model has remained relatively unchanged, it does not mean program design has been neglected throughout Extension and 4-H's over 100-year history. Seevers et al. (1997) highlighted the interconnectedness of planning, implementation, and evaluation and encouraged the use of logic models to help Extension professionals adapt programs to changing contexts. This improved staff's conceptual knowledge of how a program works toward its intended outcomes, but there was little evidence that Extension professionals used this knowledge to improve practice, nor if it had the intended community impact (Arnold, 2015). Further, Donaldson and Franck (2021) highlight the limitations of logic models in Extension, noting how they do not account for context and do not allow for program adaptability and innovation. Further, Arnold and Gagnon (2020) clarify the difference between a logic model which describes program activities and a theory of change, which explains "how a program works, for whom, and under what conditions" (p. 14).

Arnold's work (2015, 2018) has most significantly advanced 4-H's program design efforts by translating current research in youth development to program practice. Specifically, Arnold (2018) developed the 4-H Thriving Model, which identifies four elements that comprise a high-quality program:

- Youth sparks, the concept developed by Benson and Scales (2011), which refers to the interests and passions young people have within them, cultivate joy and prompt action for their own well-being and larger society;

- Developmental relationships with peers and adults that encourage growth, express care, expand possibilities, offer support, and share power and respect the young people (Search Institute, 2014);
- the quality (rather than quantity or dosage) of youths' engagement; and
- a sense of belonging.

The model's theory of change suggests that if youth engage with a high-quality programmatic context, within which their sparks will be nurtured, they will develop a thriving orientation that leads to positive developmental outcomes, and eventually, longer-term outcomes around their overall well-being and happiness (Arnold, 2018).

This model offers a robust framework for building program elements that nurture youths' sparks, thus positively influencing their developmental outcomes. Still, the Thriving Model's starting point is the program context, implying that all youth arrive at and experience programs in universal ways (Fields, 2020). Yet, research on culturally responsive youth programs demonstrates the differential effects programs have on youth, arguing that youth only experience the positive outcomes when the programming structure is relevant and responsive to the social, cultural, and political contexts in which youth live (Ngo, 2017; Simpkins et al., 2017; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2018). Moreover, Geldhof et al. (2013) conceptualize youth thriving as a "mutually influential relationship" (p. 1) between the individual and context. This conceptualization suggests that assets youth gain from a diversity of ecological contexts may be "integrated within and across contexts" (p. 4) to facilitate youth thriving and improve the likelihood that young people will, in turn, be positive contributors to their various social ecologies. These social ecologies, or social contexts in which young people live, interact, develop, and contribute include but are not limited to program contexts. This suggests that for youth programs to maximize impact on youths' positive development, the social situatedness of youths' sparks (i.e., the myriad social contexts that might eclipse or nurture their passions) ought to be considered and included in program design to align with and validate youths' assets across contexts (Scales et al., 2011). This requires programmers to have a broader understanding of young people's social arrangements and to design concordant youth programs. Lerner (2020) argues from the opposite perspective asserting that any "standard implementation" of a youth program "would be doomed to fail" because it does not consider or honor the myriad contexts in which youth live and interact (p. 152).

Case in point, DeJaeghere (2022) demonstrates with evidence from programs in India, Tanzania, and Uganda, that out-of-school time youth programming that disproportionately focused on individual life skills to promote individuals' social behavior or to increase youths' productivity in society did not achieve desired youth outcomes because the program insufficiently considered the "value orientations and social relations of power that might be implicated in the use of these skills in different settings" (p. 77). This evidence suggests that additional social conditions,

values, and perspectives can constrain or support youths' abilities to enact the skills they gained in a youth program, and these conditions should be identified and addressed in program design.

Similarly, Baldrige's (2014, 2020) case study of youth programs designed for Black youth in U.S. urban areas demonstrates how the "social and political complexity" in youths' lives "is often overlooked" when designing these youth programs (2020, p. 618). Different and more deleterious than assuming a universal youth program experience, this research found that staff supporting community-based programs in urban areas felt pressure (namely by funders) to identify false deficits tied to tropes characterizing Black youth as "at-risk" to themselves and society (Baldrige, 2014). Rather than recognizing and cultivating youth assets, programs were designed to help youth acquire what they were unjustly characterized as lacking, such as certain life skills and/or empowerment needed to overcome deficits to achieve a specifically neoliberal conceptualization of success (i.e., academic or economic success). Baldrige (2014) argues that "broader than systems of oppression," such as racism, affect youths' abilities to use their skills and act on their passion (p. 621). Like DeJaeghere, Baldrige argues that for Black youth living in urban areas to develop a thriving orientation in their youth programs, these systems should be addressed and interrogated in youth program design.

These studies reveal that when youth programs fail to consider and engage with the myriad sociocultural conditions that influence young people, they are unlikely to achieve desired youth outcomes. On the level of theory, the 4-H Thriving Model is positioned to do this effectively because youth passions and interests are at the model's center. Yet, the framing of youth sparks as individually possessed, awaiting discovery and exploration, obscures the roles of broader contexts (e.g., geographic, cultural, racial, socioeconomic, familial) influencing youths' development and socialization. Conceptualizing sparks as socially situated, collective, and relational, as I propose in this article, would oblige 4-H and Extension professionals to understand youth sparks within the diverse, complex, sometimes oppressive contexts that influence them. This would require that 4-H professionals engage in a process to understand and then include this knowledge in program design. In the next section, I draw on bodies of literature from institutional community engagement and culturally responsive youth programs to propose a process for Extension and 4-H professionals to understand youth in their broader social ecologies.

Understanding Youth Sparks Through Community-Engaged Program Design

In this section, I draw on institutional community engagement and culturally responsive youth program literature to operationalize an engagement process for building youth programs responsive to and inclusive of the myriad contexts influencing youths' development and socialization—and ultimately their sparks. These bodies of literature support the argument that community engagement is a critical process for designing high-quality youth programs with youths' sparks at the center.

Community engagement refers to a process of working collaboratively in a way that is mutually beneficial and that integrates the knowledge and skills of the community and the institution to effect positive social change (Ahmed & Palermo, 2010; Cook & Nation, 2016). Unlike a structured program model with a clear theory of change, community engagement consists of processes, strategies, and a set of principles around a partnership with trust and reciprocity (PennState College of Agricultural Sciences, 2021). It is flexibility carried out based on the nature of the collaboration, the purpose for engagement, and the sensibility to collaborators to adapt said framework with changing circumstances (PennState College of Agricultural Sciences, 2021).

For most public institutions, community engagement is part of their mission (Cook & Nation, 2016). Universities' community engagement strategies include community-university research projects, student service-learning projects, and Extension programs. (Cook & Nation, 2016; Fitzgerald et al., 2012). Universities irrefutably have resources and knowledge to address social issues with local communities. However, they often fall short in the development of community trust (Barajas & Martin, 2016; Cook & Nation, 2016). Semesters or grant funds ending can prompt a university to exit from its community partnership, even though the social issues that affect communities persist and evolve. Because of the distrust that results from the temporal nature of many university-community partnerships, public engagement scholars (e.g., Cook & Nation, 2016; Fitzgerald et al., 2012) recommend that university administrators look to Extension as a primary unit through which they can live out their Land Grant mission because of its embeddedness in local communities (Franz, 2014). However, Extension is also equally criticized for retrofitting programs designed for rural audiences in non-rural settings, limiting a program's capacity to affect individual and community change in urban areas (Goalach et al., 2017).

Given the rapidly diversifying and shifting demographics and the blurring boundaries of urban, suburban, and rural areas, there is a need for Extension to employ innovative, community-engaged strategies to ensure 4-H and all Extension programs are relevant and responsive to changing demographics and diverse societal structures in which people live and interact. The young population is especially rapidly diversifying and shifting to new geographic locations (Frey, 2018). This places a great responsibility on 4-H, the largest youth-serving organization in the nation, to find new and meaningful ways to engage young people in 4-H programs.

Research on culturally responsive youth program design identifies ways programs can ensure youths' cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives are represented and included in program structure and staffing. For example, structuring "downtime" helps youth connect with peers and adults and allows freedom to talk about what's important in their lives (Simpkins et al., 2017; Wong, 2010). Similarly, Ngo's (2017) study of an afterschool program for Hmong youth suggests that staff who function as "cultural brokers" can support ethnically and racially minoritized youth to navigate the contradictions of belonging in both dominant cultures and their

families' cultural or origin (Ngo, 2017). This points to the need to understand and include family knowledge in program activities (Bryan, 2005). A strategy to gain this community knowledge might require staff to visit homes and community gathering sites. Suárez-Orozco et al. (2018) recommend engaging immigrant-oriented youth workers who youth and families alike can trust. Notably, these strategies identified in culturally responsive youth work literature represent a tacit acknowledgment of a cultural and racial divide (and power differential) between youth development professionals and the youth and families they serve.

Engaging Somali Youth, Families, and Communities Around Shared Passion for Education

The aforementioned strategies are helpful for creating an inclusive program for immigrant or racially and ethnically minoritized youth. Still, these strategies assume young people and families have already committed to participate in a program and do not explicitly address the process that must occur to ensure youth and families trust and *choose* 4-H as an opportunity-making space for young people. This is especially important in urban areas, where Extension/4-H is broadly perceived as a rural program and is less trusted in urban areas (National Urban Extension Leaders, 2015). Arnold (2015) explains that the “success of 4-H programs is contingent upon the specific interest and *engagement* that brings youth to the program” [my emphasis] (p. 57). Much attention has been given to the role of youths' interests, seemingly guided by the assumption that youths' individual interest/spark, which in 4-H is often characterized as and conflated with youths' project area, will be sufficient motivation to join a program. This individualist perspective leaves social structures and power unexamined.

To this end, this next part of the review examines effective strategies for engaging Somali families from the perspective of Extension professionals with a different cultural background. These strategies lay the foundation of and framing for my findings and analysis of youth and family engagement around a shared, collective passion and interest. I specifically examine how I relied on engagement strategies outlined by Timmons and Dworkin (2020).

Timmons and Dworkin (2020) recognized the need to engage African families in Extension programs but noted there was little guidance on how to do it. They identified promising strategies for African family engagement in Extension programs. A primary recommendation was to collaborate with the community around the shared value of education. As shared in previous publications of this research (see Tzenis, 2018, 2019), for Somali families, education is a highly esteemed cultural value that tends to belong in the parenting domain of mothers (Hassan, 2018). Somali mothers view being educated not as an end goal to be achieved but as a cultural value to be embodied. Somali mothers tend to believe an educated person represents a cultural ideal of what it means to be both Somali and Muslim (Tzenis, 2019). Many Somali young people share this value orientation toward education. For Somali youth, education is perceived as a means to securing valued futures such as earning a livelihood that enables them to reciprocate the care they received from their parents, to contribute to the greater well-being of

their community, and to negate anti-Muslim and anti-Black racism stereotypes they experience in school that attempts denigrate their intelligence and self-worth (Tzenis, 2018, 2019). Education for Somali families is a value and passion shared and nurtured by family, community, and faith—serving as motivation to pursue a valued life (Tzenis, 2019). Education is also viewed as a source of empowerment and transformation in response to unequitable social structures and systems constraining their opportunities to thrive (Tzenis, 2018). From this sociocultural perspective, education can be viewed as Somali youths' spark that is situated and related to broader diverse, complex, and sometimes contradictory contexts.

Education is thus an asset for engaging Somali youth in programs designed to nurture these sparks (Skuzza, 2019; Timmons & Dworkin, 2020). But this engagement in nonformal educational settings is complicated by the cultural perspective of Somali families in that educational settings ought to be rigorous and highly academic. Out-of-school time activities are viewed as disconnected and even at odds with their families' cultural ideals (Tzenis, 2018). To address issues of disconnect or diverse perspectives such as this, Timmons and Dworkin (2020), like Ngo (2017), recommend that Extension staff connect and collaborate with “cultural brokers” (p. 193), referring to people who can help break down cultural barriers of misunderstanding and mismatched worldviews between Extension professionals and families. Finally, Timmons and Dworkin (2020) identify personalized communication with families to facilitate trust and mutual support as a likely effective strategy. Communication is especially critical for Somali families as Somali people have a strong oral history; the Somali language was not written down until the early 1970s (TPT Twin Cities PBS, 2017).

These engagement strategies offer promising and involved ways in which to engage Somali youth in Extension/4-H programs by appealing to their shared spark (i.e., education) and taking time to understand diverse social contexts that shape this spark. Still, without a clear operationalization of these strategies in practice—and the challenges and opportunities they present—these suggestions risk remaining a programmatic ideal never reified in practice. The following sections demonstrate how these strategies played out in a community-engaged program design and delivery process between Minnesota 4-H and a Somali youth-serving organization.

Methodology

Program Context

The process of community-engaged program design featured in this article focuses on a partnership between the University of Minnesota Extension 4-H youth development program and a Somali youth-serving organization in central Minnesota. These two organizations came together to combine resources and develop a sustainable program model that prepares Somali adolescents (ages 11-15) for futures in education in a way that nurtures and develops their and their families' cultural values (see Skuzza, 2019). This partnership yielded three youth programs

focused on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) and was supported by various funding sources, including from an intermediary youth funding foundation and a five-year National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) grant facilitated by the Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) program.

Minnesota 4-H's community partner, Somali Youth Strength (SYS; pseudonym), is a nonprofit organization started by a small group of Somali millennials as a response to issues they identified in their community, such as high school dropouts, a growing rift between youth and elders, and a small group Somali youth in the Twin Cities community being recruited by terrorist groups. The executive director named education as "the answer" to promoting Somali youths' capacities to thrive because of the hope and motivation for an alternative future it instills in youth and families (SYS, personal communication, August, 2015). SYS's main office is located on the edge of the University of Minnesota campus and a block away from an urban neighborhood that is home to the largest immigrant population. More broadly, Minneapolis is home to the largest Somali population in North America. The Twin Cities (i.e., Minneapolis/St. Paul and surrounding areas) was a key place for resettlement for Somali families who had been displaced from their home country following the Somali Civil war, based primarily on word of mouth that described Minnesota as a place of good employment with good schools and excellent refugee services (Omar, 2011). This partnership co-created youth programs in Minneapolis, St. Paul (second highest Somali population in the state) and a Minneapolis suburb with a rapidly growing Somali population.

CYFAR funding for this collaborative work began in 2013 and lasted through 2018. The first year was dedicated to program planning. A new program was implemented each year through 2016. Sponsored funds paid for SYS personnel, program supplies, youth field experiences, Extension professionals' effort on the project, and evaluation resources. Within these five years, 101 Minnesota youth of Somali heritage participated in 4-H. The project's evaluation findings on youth outcomes suggested this program made an impact. The youth felt more prepared for their educational futures, became skilled problem-solvers, and learned to more deeply value making positive choices (Skuza, 2019). Table 1 lists pseudonyms used for youth, SYS staff, and mothers.

Table 1. Participant Pseudonyms

Site Location	Start Year	Pseudonyms: Program Leaders	Pseudonyms: Youth	Pseudonyms: Mothers
Suburb	2014	Hassan	Fardowsa, Noura, Abdirahman	Naima, Asma
St. Paul	2015	Anwar, Ali	Abdikadir, Ibrahim Aisha, Sadiiq,	--
Minneapolis	2016	Ruquia, Abdifitah	Hamdi	Hamdi, Fartun

Positionality

As an Extension professional providing leadership to this work at each local program site, my charge was to learn about the community with whom I would be working and reflect on myself in relation to the community. On one of my first days at the Minneapolis-based program site, Hamdi, mother to two youth participants, handed me two books on Islam. She instructed that I read these books because “You work with us now. You must learn. When you hear Muslim, you think of Hamdi.” She wanted to ensure I knew that she, her children, and her community were *good* people. In this interaction, Hamdi directly identified these “broader political structures and systems of oppression” (Baldrige, 2014, p. 621), namely, anti-Muslim racism, that needed to be “interrogated,” not just in the youth programs themselves, but in the interactions between me, a white woman representing an institution, and the youth and families with whom I build relationships. This required personal reflection and reflexivity, whereby I interrogated the cultural, political, and social origins of my own perspective, how I perceived people different from me, and how they perceived me.

Because of this positionality, I recognized a strategic need to continually learn about the different values, relationships, and broader social contexts that shaped the youth and family’s passion and commitment to education. To this end, I led an additional study to accompany and enrich our impact data. I carried out a developmental evaluation to gain a deeper understanding of youth and families’ lives to continually adjust and adapt program design to be inclusive of broader social ecologies shaping youths’ sparks. I came to this work with three years of experience as a community organizer. Through this professional experience, I have been trained and have a breadth of experience in the art of conducting one-to-ones: an organizing technique that facilitates public relationship building around people’s values, passions, and self-interests (WestSouthwestIAF, 2014). This skillset supported my ability to understand youth and families’ sparks as related to education. The next section describes my methodological approach.

Developmental Evaluation

I drew on ethnographic methods and techniques, relying on myself as the primary instrument (Wolcott, 2008) for developmental evaluation. I blended program design with data to guide collaborative decision-making around programming (Patton, 2011). These methods allowed me to gain an in-depth perspective of the youth, families’, and programming staff’s cultural values and perspectives through my natural interactions with them as part of our collaborative process and to include these perspectives in program design (Fetterman, 2010). Specifically, my process involved participant observations of youth, families, and community leaders at program sites, SYS’s office, local shopping centers, and community parks. When at the program sites located in community settings, I frequently helped youth with homework, occasionally led 4-H programmatic activities, and joined in youth conversations around YouTube or Netflix shows. I had frequent conversations with the mothers who came to the program (often over “Somali tea”),

sharing stories of motherhood and learning about the values that guide their parenting choices. Finally, I participated in frequent program planning meetings with Zakariya, executive director of SYS, and the SYS staff (see Table 1), who facilitated the youth programs on-site and worked most directly with the youth and families. I attended organizational meetings, community events, and celebrations when invited. I wrote field notes which included participants' behaviors, my recollection of conversations, and descriptions of the site and activities. Secondary data included collected artifacts such as youth-produced program documents, my own programming notes, newspapers, and other media. Pseudonyms are used for youth, family members, and SYS staff. Notably, these ethnographic techniques also positioned me well for effective community engagement, as the natural and relationship-focused interactions allowed me to foster trust and understanding with the families and communities with whom I was collaborating.

The analysis of these data was ongoing and inductive; I interpreted what I was seeing in [brackets] and memoing (Patton, 2015). To assess the trustworthiness of my early analyses, I would discuss what I observed and interpreted from a site visit (e.g., nonformal learning does not align with parents' beliefs of educational success) with SYS staff. These community partners would offer a cultural context of what I observed (e.g., parents viewed activities as not serious enough). In the second wave of analysis, I reviewed my field notes to identify emerging themes and developed codes that focused on two dimensions of this work—program quality and engagement strategies.

Recognizing the Complexities that Shape Youth Sparks

In this section, I examine one activity structured into this collaboratively designed 4-H program—homework help—to elucidate the diverse cultural perspectives of a shared passion for and commitment to education. I examine how community-engaged processes, namely strategies laid out by Timmons and Dworkin (2020) and the ethnographic techniques I previously described, created the conditions for a dynamic (while still seemingly slow-moving at times), pluralistic, and ongoing program design process that led to high-quality youth programs (centered on youth sparks) for Somali youth living in urban and suburban communities in Minnesota.

No Time for 4-H Today

Early in the partnership, SYS staff expressed to the Extension 4-H team that homework help would be an integral part of the youth program because it was important to the families that their children received academic support. We structured the program in two one-hour blocks—one hour would “provide tutoring and peer mentoring” (SYS public communication), and the other hour would include 4-H programming, i.e., hands-on STEM activities. While seemingly straightforward, it was not easily implemented. Within the first months of programming, Hassan relayed to me at an SYS monthly meeting that they were frequently unable to make time for “4-H activities” because “parents do not think the 4-H activities are as valuable to their kids” as

homework completion, identifying early on the cultural mismatch that would continue to complicate and ultimately enrich the quality of these youth programs.

Field notes from an early site visit to the suburban site illustrate this programming dilemma:

The young people were sitting around their horseshoe-shaped table set-up when I entered the room for their 4-H meeting. ... Three youth were in the “middle” of the horseshoe: Noura, Fardowsa, and Abdirahman.

Most of the youth were smiling and laughing with one another, looking over each other’s shoulders at each other’s iPads. Most textbooks were packed away, and the young people were talking comfortably with those around them. Only two young people were without smiles on their faces. Fardowsa leaned intently over her iPad, swiping, typing, and then writing on her worksheet. [She seemed rushed.] She kept looking up at the club leader [seemingly worried he would tell her homework time was done]. Abdirahman sat in the chair closest to her on the right. He had a worksheet in front of him at which he would just stare [seemingly trying to come up with the answer to the math questions]. Hassan, their club leader, went up to them multiple times and asked, “do you need more time?” They both looked up from their iPad/paper to nod affirmatively and then resumed their work. At one point, Abdirahman walked up to Hassan in the front of the room and sat with him up front while Hassan explained math concepts to him. Meanwhile, the remaining eight youth ... continued to talk among themselves lightheartedly and play with their iPads.

Hassan told me ... that he did not think they would be able to get to the 4-H programming because of “that thing we had talked about.”

These field notes illustrate how “homework help” usually dominated the two-hour program session, and consequently, youth rarely engaged with the engineering activities the club leaders were prepared to facilitate. In the memo I wrote following that visit to the suburban site, I interpreted/judged this approach to education and program structure as illogical and invaluable use of program time:

There seems to be a lot of value placed on homework completion, which seems to be stemming from parent expectations of their children and the program. I personally found it strange that the program couldn’t engage the youth who were done with their homework in some activities.

My memo identifies a collision of two views of education – Somali parents considered nonformal activities “not valuable”; I felt that youth were missing out on an opportunity to do something fun and meaningful. When I asked Hassan why youth could not take a break to do something hands-on, he responded, “Parents would not be happy” if they dropped their kids off

at a program and their homework was not completed. This memo-check and exchange with Hassan encouraged me to seek a further and deeper understanding of why and to what extent parents would be upset around incomplete homework.

While visiting the Minneapolis site one day, I found myself interacting with an unhappy mother. I was standing near the entryway to the program room with club leader Abdifitah and Sadiiq's mother, Fartun, who was loudly expressing discontent with Abdifitah that Sadiiq completed his homework at home (rather than at the program) and late into the night:

Sadiiq's mom was mad that he didn't get his homework done yesterday at the program. Or rather that she was upset that he was up using their computer until 9:30 at night. She says, "it's too late for him. He has to get up at 5:30 to go to a school in St. Paul." Abdifitah was telling her that Sadiiq said he was done with homework at the program. Later, Sadiiq came in, and his mother confronted him harshly. She said to Sadiiq, "They said that you said you didn't have homework; why were you up till 9:30?"

Sadiiq told his mom that he had to write an essay, and he wanted to think free from your distraction. Most of what she was saying was Somali, so I didn't understand, but she kept saying, "Why stay up till 9:30? I need you to get your work done." Abdifitah was trying to defend him and say he needed to focus: "Here it's too crazy – there are a lot of distractions." When Abdifitah would defend him, Fartun would look at him jokingly and salute him.

This field notes excerpt illustrates the pertinacious actions Somali mothers take to ensure their children complete homework at the youth program. This exchange also offers insight into the important role of the youth worker, Abdifitah, as someone who would stand up for the youth in his program while also demonstrating that being in this role might position him at odds with parents. Case in point, when Abdifitah tried to buffer Sadiiq from his mother's indignation, Fartun dismissed him, suggesting that any worldview on how and when to do homework that differed from her own was unimportant.

The next section more deeply examines the tension and dilemmas youth workers, mothers, youth, and I faced as we collaborated to implement these 4-H youth programs that nurtured youths' passion and commitment to education.

Making Sense of our Roles in the Program

My findings suggest that the tenacity of the families' commitment to homework presented dilemmas to the community leaders who had close ties to the parents and who had also committed to work alongside 4-H to deliver a youth development program. Ruqia told me the mothers only brought their children to the program "because of me," which obliged her to honor families' wishes for frequent homework to help to preserve relationships. But she felt her

obligations to the mothers concurrently prevented her from fulfilling her commitment to 4-H and our partnership. These fieldnotes showcase the interplay of these dueling obligations:

[Hamdi] and Ruqia talked to me about a budget to pay for a tutor or a “teacher.” [Hamdi] said, if there is no teacher, “maybe I only come here one day a week. I will look for my kids to get help elsewhere.” [It was hard to explain that my role in the program was not to help with homework, but to support the afterschool programming.] I later told Ruqia we could work something out. She said, mothers “don’t care about the projects. They just want homework done.” [Ruqia seems like she wants to quit.]

There are a couple of pieces worthy of analysis here. First, Hamdi revealed the reality that if academic tutoring was not prioritized to the satisfaction of the parents (preserving fidelity to the model as initially imagined), the program would risk being without participants. This reality bluntly underscores the critical need to consider families’ perspectives and value systems for the mere survival of the program (Simpkins et al., 2017). It also reveals a burden carried by “cultural brokers.” Ruqia understood both worldviews around education and learning and knew it was her role to bridge them, but in this instance, the disconnect seemed too vast and distressed her.

Secondly, note that I showed little flexibility with “my role in the program” and failed to validate the mother’s advocacy to support her children’s education, showing a lack of responsiveness to community concerns (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). I was frequently asked by parents to find tutors on account of my affiliation with the university, an issue on which I reflected one day: “[I feel guilty and worried about the expectations they have of me as a representative from the university.]” I also worried about how this focus on homework help would affect the timeliness of achieving our desired program outcomes and how this dilemma reflects on my own job performance. These concerns underscore the contradictory practices of community engagement in more task and outcome-oriented institutions and organizations (Heel et al., 2006). And yet, despite my concern and growing anxiety, I did not push for program fidelity (as outlined in our team logic model) and instead continued engaging with and learning from the community. In time, benefits (unforeseen to me) emerged in the youth programs.

Homework Help as an Opportunity for Relationships and Sociocultural Understanding

Homework help time afforded me natural opportunities to connect with the mothers. We engaged in conversations about their children and their well-being while they focused on their homework. These conversations aided my own understanding of these participants’ experiences in school. For example, Naima came to pick Fardowsa up from the program early; she was taking her to a tutor to “see where her skills are at.” While waiting for Fardowsa to gather her things, she explained to me, “I don’t want them to be behind” (referring to Fardowsa and all her children). At this point, I knew Fardowsa was an A student, and I was perplexed by this concern. Yet in time, I learned from a conversation with the suburban mothers at “family night” that teachers often placed their children in ESL classes, despite speaking English as a first language. Asma

expressed anger that her daughter, Noura, was missing out on science and math coursework to take a remedial language course unnecessarily. Mothers explained to me they prioritized homework help and academic tutoring because, as Asma put it, “We don’t want kids [to] feel like low.” For the mothers, a rigorous approach to education, like frequent homework help and academic tutoring, was a way to counter the deficit lens through which teachers and peers saw their children and a way to validate their children’s intelligence.

Youth valued homework time as well. Ibrahim was asked in an SYS promotional video what he liked about the program, and he highlighted homework help explaining:

Sometimes at home, I don’t have someone my age or someone that knows math to help me, like when I need help. But when I went to SYS 4-H, they would help me. ... That’s why I like them because they help me!

Ibrahim draws subtle attention to the ways homework is related to Somali families’ histories as refugees. Each of the mothers I spoke with through the five years of work on this project had experienced disrupted education on account of the Somali Civil War and are unfamiliar with U.S. educational systems. Ruqia and Hassan often explained to me that homework help is disproportionately important for these youth as it is a way to receive guidance on an institution unfamiliar to their mothers. For example, Ruqia would frequently attend school conferences with or on behalf of mothers because of the language barrier and because the overall U.S. educational system was confusing to them. Also, in his explanation, Ibrahim identifies the community leaders in his 4-H program as people on whom he can depend for help, suggesting that homework help set the conditions for him and all youth participants to have developmental relationships with adults who express care by being dependable and who provide support by helping them navigate the educational system (Search Institute, 2014).

Had I viewed youth sparks as individually held and not explored these broader systems and structures that nurture, temper, and constrains youths’ passion and commitment to education, I likely would have continued to resist the large role of homework help in the program and maintained my view that homework help impeded our program goals. Resultantly, I might have deprived youth of these developmental relationships with the youth workers who promoted belonging and the development of a positive Somali cultural identity (Arnold, 2018; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018), and possibly interfered with youths’ relationships with their mothers as sources of support. Both are critical developmental relationships that support youths’ thriving orientations (Search Institute, 2014).

Finally, homework created a space of belonging for youth that counters the marginalizing school structures that make youth “feel low” outside of the program. While many of the youth in the program said they were quiet at school, during homework help at their 4-H program, youth frequently talked with each other about their grades or the classes they wanted to take. One interpretation of this is that in their program space, they could speak free of the burden

countering other's view of themselves, whether it was claiming educational successes: "All As! Boom!" (Fardowsa) or sharing disappointments: "My grades are like suck." (Aisha). While not exactly "downtime" as a suggested programming structure of racially and ethnically minoritized youth by Simpkins et al. (2017), structuring in homework help created space for young people to talk about what was important in their lives (education and the opportunities it presents).

Broadening Perspectives: "I Was Not Picturing This"

Slowly, through time, the "4-H activities" occurred at each of the three program sites. While my data did not suggest any clear impetus to account for this shift, one interpretation is that the prioritization of building strong relationships over program fidelity helped families begin to trust me, and by proxy, 4-H. Many learned to trust 4-H (with reassurance from our community partners) enough to allow their children to attend an overnight experience at the University of Minnesota, even though one mother once told (on behalf of all Somali mothers), "We don't leave our children without us!"

Allowing children to attend an overnight experience suggests that community-engaged practices can, in time, lead to high-quality youth development programs centered on shared sparks in unforeseen ways. Kadar describes his program experience in an SYS promotional video:

In Somali Youth Strength, like the first hour that we come, we do our homework, and they like help us with the stuff we need help with, and then we do our 4-H activity, and you get to become your own leader, helping each other out with teamwork and helping each other do the program or the thing we are supposed to be doing. We get to do field trips, and we get to set up a lot of things we can be doing that other people aren't able to be doing.

Kadar identified program elements of homework help, "4-H activities," and field experiences as program design elements that helped him become a leader and expand his future possibilities. He also noted the importance of helping each other, suggesting that the expressed value of service to others has been incorporated into his program experience.

Even with an increased presence of nonformal STEM learning, youth still suggested homework help remained a priority. For example, when visiting the suburban site during its third year of programming, I observed an exchange between Hassan and Noura, the newly elected 4-H club president:

Hassan went to ask Noura a question about the upcoming learning activity. She responded, "this is not 4-H time; this is homework time." He said something else [can't remember], and she said, "I would answer, but I'm too busy getting As over here!"

Noura's quip suggests that homework help enables her to explore (and get excited about) her passion and commitment to education.

Also, during the third year of implementation of the suburban club, mother and new 4-H volunteer Naima shares, during the discussion I facilitated at "family night," how her children's homework help and leadership experiences are sparking her own excitement for her children's educational futures:

Before 4-H, I was not motivated as I am today. ... Before, we think they can get everything from just schooling, but not the leadership. I was not picturing this. ... They are going to the U of M, meeting with the leaders. They tell them who they can be, and they're telling them they can be everything they want to be. There's no limit. They feel so hopeful, and before 4-H or Somali Youth Strength, I don't think I would know this.

Naima went on to describe that her daughter, Fardowsa, had hung up on her bedroom wall the "Pathways to Higher Education Map" that she had completed as part of her participation in 4-H. She relayed that it served as a daily reminder of how she can reach her aspirations for and through higher education. Naima illustrates how, through seeing her children's passions nurtured through programming structures like interacting with university faculty and students, her own spark, as a mother, was flamed. Her insight shows the relational and collective aspects of youth sparks. When youth become inspired and motivated through youth programs, this, in turn, inspires and motivates their family members, which arguably strengthens the systems of relational support within the family structure. In this case, Naima came to understand the value of nonformal learning and how it fits with her broader aspirations for her children's future well-being. This mother was not "picturing" the importance of building leadership skills, but through time and trust with the program, she broadened her perspective. Concurrently, I, as the Extension professional, was not "picturing" homework help creating conditions for thriving—as I noted in my early program notes and observation memos. Still, community-engaged strategies, like relying on community partners and communicating with families in person, broadened my own worldview, thus enhancing my professional expertise and ability to make a positive difference in the lives of young people, their families, and their communities. However, we did, along with the SYS staff, all share imaginations for youths' thriving future through education, which was the collective spark that fueled this beautifully complicated and enriching, community-engaged program design process.

Reflection and Conclusion

This article proposes that 4-H and Extension professionals approach program design through a sociocultural lens using community engagement strategies to understand and validate the broader systems that shape and influence youths' sparks. The findings I presented and analyzed showed how enacting the recommended engagement strategies identified by Timmons and Dworkin (2020) facilitated an ongoing and community-engaged program design process that led to the co-

creation of three SYS 4-H clubs uniquely designed for Somali youth living in the Twin Cities metro area.

Founding the collaboration on the shared value of education (Timmons & Dworkin, 2020) and recognizing education as a collective spark among all stakeholders helped the team stay committed to the wayward course of co-creating a program that honors and includes diverse perspectives and approaches to education (e.g., homework help *and* hands-on engineering activities). The strategy of prioritizing relationships with youth and families through personalized communication, such as one-to-one conversations and natural interactions, enabled me, a professional representing Extension/4-H, to understand that homework was related to youths' broader contexts of development and socialization (e.g., family histories as refugees, or experiences with anti-Muslim racism at school) and to ensure this activity was structured into the youth program. The SYS staff, who acted as cultural brokers, facilitated the exchange of cultural knowledge between the families and me, which was sometimes an onerous task but led to a programming structure that strengthened Extension/4-H's relationship with the Somali community in the Twin Cities.

On the level of theory, these findings offer an alternative conceptualization of youth sparks as it relates to youths' thriving orientations. Different than engaging youth by appealing to their individually held and intrinsically motivating interest or passion, I argue for an approach to understanding youth sparks as socially situated, collective, and relational (DeJaeghere, 2022). My findings revealed how education was an embodied cultural ideal that inspired youth to act (through homework help and experiential learning) toward valued and thriving futures. They shared a value with their families and the broader Minnesota Somali community (as indicated by how SYS's foundation viewed education as "key" to youth Somali youth thriving). Youths' passion and commitment to education were shaped by contexts of support, constraints, and contradictions in multiple social ecologies. Understanding youths' sparks as related to these broader contexts create the conditions for youth belonging as they can be included in the structure of the youth program, which in this case, occurred via homework (Simpkins et al., 2017). On the program level, and from my positionality, homework help seemed antithetical to experiential learning principles upheld in 4-H. But these findings suggest that homework help created programmatic opportunities for youth to build developmental relationships with adults who share cultural identities and could help them grow, learn, and belong (Search Institute, 2014). It also helped redress the effects of marginalizing school contexts that viewed Somali youth through a deficit lens and placed them unnecessarily in remedial courses by providing opportunities for youth to discuss and pursue their education in a safe and supportive environment.

Implications for 4-H and Extension

These findings have important implications for 4-H's nationwide program design efforts and the utility of the 4-H Thriving Model. I argue this model is of critical importance to ensure 4-H programs are designed in ways that inspire joy, motivation, and empowerment for youth to contribute to their own and their community's well-being. Community engagement processes must be employed to ensure 4-H programs are equally informed by research-based and community-based knowledge to create equitable opportunities for youth thriving through participation in 4-H. Through such a process, 4-H is better equipped to co-create high-quality youth programs that are responsive to and inclusive of youths' broader social ecologies.

To this end, I recommend Extension and 4-H consider the arguments of Donaldson and Frack (2021) and make developmental evaluation approaches more prominent in program design efforts. This would support Extension and 4-H professionals to approach program design as ongoing, adaptable, innovative, and open to including community knowledge and expertise.

This approach to evaluation complements the community engagement strategies I outlined. Still, the community-engaged strategies explored in this paper required a robust partnership with substantial reliance on community leaders who acted as a cultural bridge to 4-H and Somali families. This cultural bridge appeared to be onerous for cultural brokers. They tried to bring together seemingly oppositional ways of knowing and seeing the world and generously share cultural knowledge with me. With the support of grant funding, we had funds to compensate community partners for their contributions, which implicates Extension and 4-H in a power dynamic as these institutions are better resourced to compensate employees than a smaller organization whose contributions are of equal value to building strong communities. This also suggests that future Extension research should more deeply explore how cultural brokers experience and navigate challenging situations that emerge from their collaboration with Extension. Additional research can contribute to the existing literature on youth workers' dilemmas (Larson & Walker, 2010). This knowledge could be applied to explore Extension can equitably support and value the contributions cultural brokers make to strengthening communities in partnership with Extension.

Baldrige's (2014) and DeJaeghere's (2022) charge to create spaces to interrogate and prepare for systems of oppression occurred somewhat incidentally through homework help. The pedagogical ways in which 4-H programs can be a space of belonging to specifically redress and interrogate the systems that implicate youths' thriving orientation is worthy of future Extension research. Further, the strategies I explored are complex, labor-intensive, and required resources such as time, funding, and staff with the community engagement skills (Clinical and Translational Science Awards Consortium & Community Engagement Key Function Committee, 2011). Grant reporting and performance reviews that focus on short-term outcomes or the number of participants reached impede opportunities to assign value to Extension professionals'

time building relationships of trust and reciprocity—resources that are foundational to sustained community impact and collaboration (Fitzgerald et al., 2012).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, my positionality in the community as a white woman representing the institution and the privilege it entails required a personal process of interrogating issues of power and understanding cultural knowledge that is different than my own. This calls to the urgency for Extension to incorporate diverse value systems and ways of knowing within its organizational structures and staffing. Such an organizational and systems change can strengthen Extension and 4-H's relationships with communities, enhance expertise (Fitzgerald et al., 2012), and enrich Extension's abilities to co-create solutions to issues that affect communities' collective ability to thrive.

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