



Guiding Leaders of Tomorrow: Examining FFA Leadership with Member Focus Groups

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Robin Peiter Horstmeier
Assistant Professor
University of KY
306 Garrigus Building
Lexington, KY 40546
rpeiter@uky.edu
Phone: 859/257-7287
FAX: 859-257-1164



Martha A. Nall, CFCS
Extension Professor
University of KY
712 Garrigus Building
Lexington, KY 40546
mnall@uky.edu
Phone: 859/257-7193
FAX: 859/323-8696

Introduction

Although the purposes of youth organizations vary and the context is different, they generally seek to provide events and experiences which help adolescents become contributing adults and leaders. *Understanding Youth Development: Promoting Positive Pathways of Growth* (1997), a report for the US Department of Health and Human Services, indicated research shows that when adolescents feel competent, connected, have a sense of control and a sense of identity they are more likely to exhibit positive developmental behaviors. Interactions identified as most productive in producing these outcomes include those that:

- provide recognition for their productivity,
- involve interactions with adults who monitor and supervise behaviors and activities,
- consistently involve caring adults who provide emotional support, encouragement, and practical advice, and
- create exchanges between adolescents and adults based on the acceptance of adolescents as individuals (US Dept. HHS, 1997).

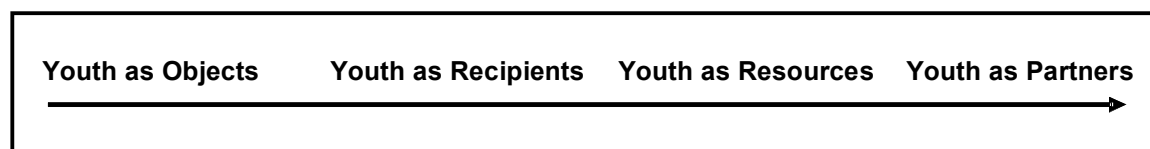
The National FFA Organization seeks to create opportunities for adolescents to engage in a variety of experiences, events and activities to develop leadership skills and provide interactions which lead to positive youth development. The LifeKnowledge curriculum has been designed to guide the activities and development of leadership skills. The advisor influences members and impacts the outcomes related to growth and development of the members. Although many leadership studies examining FFA have been studied, very little research has been conducted examining the youth-adult interactions and the context in which leadership behaviors are learned through FFA or other youth leadership organizations.

Literature Review

Role of Youth in Society

Lofquist (1989) developed a “spectrum of attitudes” that adults may hold regarding the role of young people in society. The continuum (See Figure 1.) represents attitudes where young people are viewed as “objects,” (Do this because I know best), as “recipients,” (Do this because it is good for you), and as “resources”, (Do this because you can make a contribution). The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development (2001) added a characterization of youth as “partners” to Lofquist’s original continuum. As partners, youth share leadership and decision-making roles with adults.

Figure 1. A Spectrum of Adult Attitudes toward Youth



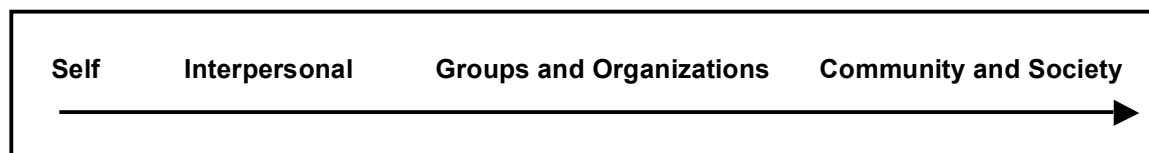
The view adults take toward young people tends to shape the nature of the leadership programs they design. In some programs, leadership is taught through formal routines that emphasize compliance. The leader is “in charge” and followers are objects to be directed. At other times, youth run activities designed by well-meaning adults gaining knowledge and skills for later life. Programs where young people are resources, promote growth in knowledge, skills and self-

esteem. Sometimes youth are engaged as full partners with adults in making decisions and taking actions (Peiter, Nall, and Rennekamp, 2005).

Context of Leadership Activity

Ayres (1987) identified four key developmental phases through which individuals engaged in a leadership curriculum should progress (See Figure 2). First, individuals develop knowledge of themselves, who they are, what they believe, and how they function. Progressively they move to mastering skills for working with others, refining skills working with groups or organizations and finally focusing on leadership within the context of communities, systems, and society. As the arena in which leadership is being practiced continues to broaden, individuals use knowledge and skills learned at previous levels to be effective in the new context.

Figure 2. Context of Leadership Activity



Other leadership models focus on developing knowledge and skills first at the individual level, emphasizing that we must understand ourselves before we can contribute to a larger effort. These models combined interpersonal interactions and the ability to participate in and understand group development. The third level in this model focuses on community, recognizing that the ultimate goal of individual and group development is to serve the common good beyond the individual or organization.

Leadership Development in Agricultural Education

As a premier agriculture youth leadership organization, FFA has prepared future leaders through local, state and national activities. The FFA mission states “The National FFA Organization is dedicated to making a positive difference in the lives of young people by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education” (National FFA, 2005).

Research studies indicated participation in FFA enhances leadership abilities. Several researchers (Townsend & Carter, 1983; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997) have found a positive relationship between leadership skill development and FFA participation. Further, Brannon, Holley, & Key (1989) found Vocational Agriculture and the FFA had an impact on the success of many community leaders. These community leaders who had participated in vocational agriculture felt their leadership activities were effective in developing their leadership skills, contributed to their success, and have been of value to their careers regardless of their occupations (Brannon, Holley, & Key, 1989). Scales and Leffert (1999) concluded that youth organizations provide opportunities for success, a sense of belonging and safety, activities that are challenging, interaction and support from adults, leadership opportunities, and other interactions that contribute to the positive development and resiliency of youth.

Peiter, Nall, & Rennekamp (2005) examined the role of youth and the context of FFA leadership activities. When examining the role of youth through leadership activities, respondents indicated the strongest agreement in being treated as partners. However, their partnership focused on developing self. As we looked at developing leadership knowledge and skills moving from self to interpersonal development (others) to group development and ultimately to community/society development, the means decreased at each level. This indicates less opportunity for involvement in leadership activities focusing on developing skills at a higher level (Peiter, Nall, & Rennekamp, 2005).

Methods

Purpose and Research Objectives

This study is designed to describe the leadership activities of rural FFA members, the role of youth-adult interactions in those activities and the context of the activity as it develops leadership skills. The objectives of this study include:

- 1) Describe the context in which leadership activities are performed.
- 2.) Describe the role of youth in those activities.
- 3) Describe the relationship between role of youth and the context in which leadership activities are performed.

Qualitative research methods were used to gain insight into the perceptions of FFA members, as recommended by Peiter, Nall, and Rennekamp (2005). Perceptions examined included leadership skills developed through chapter activities and the role of members in those activities. The focus group method was used for framing the study. Focus groups were conducted according to established protocols (Kreuger & Casey, 2000; Rennekamp & Nall, 2003).

- Small groups of six to twelve members
- Possessing similarities in one or more ways
- Guided through a facilitated discussion
- Topic clearly defined
- Purpose to gather opinions from the group

The population included rural youth who were members of FFA. The participants were solicited from the respondents of the study conducted by Peiter, Nall, and Rennekamp (2005). Of the 36 chapters in the 2005 study, twelve chapters agreed, which provided 11 different states representing all four National FFA regions represented. Prior to the 2005 National FFA Convention, chapters were sent a letter indicating details of the focus group procedure. Four sessions with three chapters per session were assigned a scheduled time to arrive at the convention site, each scheduled for one hour. However, six chapters with a total of 27 students participated in the focus group interviews conducted in October 2005.

To assure accuracy of data, a tape recorder was placed in the center of the table and two assistants were seated at opposite corners to take notes. Researcher bias can never be fully removed; however, an awareness of personal biases were acknowledged and checked with peer reviewers. The researchers acknowledges that their experience in leadership and agricultural education domain help to conceptualize the study, including interview selection questions and interpretation of the data.

The welcome and all questions used were scripted to ensure consistency between focus group sessions. Questions for each focus group began with students identifying their name, school and

leadership roles in FFA and when they first joined FFA. Students reflected on their experiences and how their involvement has changed over the years. They also identified the influence of other members and advisor(s) in their experiences and activities in which they chose to participate.

Context of FFA member's leadership activities were also investigated through focus group interviews. Questions were structured to ask for activities within the context of developing themselves as a leader, skills in working with others, working with groups, and working in their community. Each context of leadership activity, self, others, groups and community, had a series of follow-up questions to encourage dialogue and identify the role of the youth-adult interaction.

Findings

Focus group participants included students ranging from second to sixth year FFA members. Similarly, involvement ranged from very little, never holding an office, to those who had held multiple offices and were very involved.

When asked who helped them get involved in the organization the responses generally indicated a familiarity with someone else in FFA. Respondents identified older students, a relative, i.e. brother, sister, cousin, or other "kids encouraged me to join". Older members and siblings played a strong role in getting new members involved. One student said, "I saw older members doing things and having fun." For one student it was a project that FFA conducted she wanted to be a part of. Interestingly, several responded that the advisor was a key. One student responded that "the advisor said it would be useful." Parents who had been members of FFA also influenced some to join. One student indicated participation because "I want to be a Soil Conservation Agent and figure it will help". A young lady responded, "There are not many girls in FFA and I thought it would be fun."

Context of Leadership Activities

Participants in the focus groups were asked to describe activities which helped development themselves as a leader. As a follow-up question they were asked to identify the leadership skills they developed through participating in these activities.

Self. Students described activities such as attending leadership conferences, meeting with other FFA chapters, serving as an officer, speaking to classes of younger students to inform them about FFA, participating in contests, and conducting service projects such as preparing food baskets at holidays.

Skills students developed from these activities included goal setting, communication skills and public speaking. They also identified developing self confidence, learning to think on your feet, getting out of your comfort zone, and feeling important as outcomes of participation in activities in FFA. One student said, "FFA makes you feel important and a part of something good."

Others. FFA activities also helped students developed interpersonal skills. Many of these activities involved fund raising experiences. Fruit sales, selling tickets, labor auctions and plant sales were mentioned. Other activities where FFA members developed interpersonal skills included weekly officer meetings, being a mentor, membership recruitment events, and being a role model.

By participating in these activities the students in the focus groups were able to describe what they had learned from these experiences. Being able to “talk to people” and feeling comfortable around people were two benefits identified. Other students identified learning “people skills” and dealing with interpersonal conflicts as a result of participating in FFA. Being a mentor and role model helps students recognize the influence they can have on others. One student said, “Young students are always looking up to you to see what you are doing as a leader. You have to always watch what you say and do.” Committees of officers and members develop skills in communicating and listening. Students said they had learned to share ideas and respond to comments from others. Chapter activities seemed to have benefits beyond the goal of raising money or completing a project. “Being forced to socialize with others makes you more outgoing,” said one participant.

Groups. FFA activities also helped members develop skills for working in groups. Students described chapter activities, nominating committees and projects which required multiple committees, organization, planning and working as a team to accomplish goals. In raising money to help hurricane victims, students from one chapter described with enthusiasm the “total student project.” From involving other student organizations, to getting permission from administrators and conducting the activity, the students worked together and developed leadership skills for effective groups. Another chapter described a “Food for America Day,” an activity conducted to help third grade students gain an appreciation for agriculture. This all-day event involved multiple activities, food, live animals, hay rides and preparation visits to all third grade classes attending from five towns. Students proudly described assuming the responsibility for all arrangements, successfully handling unexpected situations and working together to solve problems. Learning to work with others, planning for the unexpected, building trust, following through with commitments and communication were group skills developed from this activity.

Officer retreats with team building sessions helped students learn to work in groups. Participants said they learned to “work as a team not as individuals.” One student said through working as a team they “learned that you don’t have to talk to be a leader. Talking is not the only way to communicate.” Another outcome of the team building activities was that individuals sometimes sacrifice personal gain for the good of the group.

Community. Students described FFA activities which helped them develop skills to work in a community. Many of the activities were community service projects. Adopt-a highway projects, landscaping schools and public buildings, helping with a golf tournament, collecting trees to mulch and protecting the land fill, decorating a public building for the holidays, and preparing food baskets at Thanksgiving are examples of community projects students in the focus groups identified. Projects were often repeated from one year to the next. However, some of the students described projects where they identified a need and planned and organized the chapter to complete the activity. One student described a project to clean up the charred wood from a local farmer’s chicken house that had burned. A past chapter president helped provide a truck to haul the debris and the members did the work.

The students described much of their involvement with adults in the community via civic or community organizations. Several students indicated they were involved with local adult organizations such as Kiwanis, Rotary, or Farm Bureau. They were speakers at their meetings, invited them to serve as judges for contests or received financial support for chapter activities.

Several acknowledged the desire to be more involved with the community and vice versa. Engaging in broader community service activities and familiarizing the community with agriculture was shared as a goal by several focus group participants.

Role of Adults

The role of the advisor was a key to participating in activities after they joined. Several mentioned that the advisor let them know about activities and how they could participate. Encouragement from advisors to apply for offices was important to students too. One student said, the “advisor opened doors to students and let students go to different events.” Another said the advisor “corrects mistakes but lets you know it’s alright.” Other responses to the role of the advisor included, “pretty awesome,” “picks our brains and makes us think,” “makes the experience fun,” and “advisor is really good at pushing students to participate.”

Because of their relationships with older students and their involvement in the chapter, students indicated they would be supportive of younger members. When asked if the way they were treated would influence how they treated new members there was a unanimous yes.

In the focus group sessions, students were asked to describe their involvement with advisors or other adults. Responses provided insight into the relationships between the adults and youth. The role of involvement ranged from youth as objects to youth as partners. This would be expected as the participants ranged in age from freshmen to seniors, their experience in FFA ranged from second year to sixth, and their leadership knowledge and skills also varied greatly.

Youth as objects. In some instances students indicated they participated because, “it was expected,” “it would be useful,” or as one student put it, the “advisor makes them go.” The “advisors pushed students to get involved,” also described an activity where students acknowledged the adult’s role was very directive. The students seemed to see this as a positive, in that, without this form of encouragement they might not have participated. Initially many youth need direction and guidance to get involved and as they grow and mature the roles change.

Youth as recipients. Encouraging students to participate was a frequent comment from the FFA members. Advisors “encouraged” students to run for office and “encouraged” students to be active and get involved. Programs and activities were in place and students would benefit from involvement. Another student said the “advisors opened doors to students,” indicating that they facilitated the students involvement. For an officer workshop the student said the advisor planned the event and told them what they would be learning. According to the student “attendance was optional but all wanted to attend.”

Youth as resources. Several comments from the students indicated they felt their ideas were valued and they indicated numerous opportunities to conduct activities and be involved. “Advisors are there but students run,” “students find judges,” or “advisor gives ideas, gets the ball rolling, and officers choose activities and implement plans,” were all phrases indicating the students were being seen as valuable resources in conducting FFA activities and events. In several situations students described the presence of an adult, the advisor, but emphasized they were the ones who made decisions and conducted activities.

Youth as partners. Not always seen in youth organizations, FFA members described situations where they felt they were true partners with the adults, even using that word. One chapter

implemented a field day that was “organized by students and advisors – a partnership between the two.” More frequently students described the relationship in terms of working together or sharing decision-making. In interviewing officer candidates the, “president and advisor ask questions.” Another student described their nominating committee as a panel of “a graduating seniors, retiring officers, teacher and principal or parent.”

Conclusions, Recommendations and Implications

The qualitative analysis of focus group interviews provided a forum for information gathering related the role and context of leadership activities among FFA members. The opportunity to clarify, question and probe for a clearer and more definitive description of the chapter activities and role of the adult-youth interactions substantiated the findings of Peiter, Nall, and Rennekamp (2005). Admittedly, the limited number of participants and the inexperience of some, as well as, the varying degree of strength of the FFA Chapters they represented influenced the dialogue.

Youth participating in the focus group interviews provided less emphasis on youth as objects and more discussion of youth as resources and partners. More frequently youth described their roles as resources or partners. This emphasis was consistent with the findings of Peiter, Nall, and Rennekamp (2005). They mentioned participation as recipients, programs were established and participation would prepare them for the future.

Responses from the focus group interviews support the findings by Peiter, Nall, and Rennekamp (2005). Parallels existed when examining the roles of youth in leadership which indicated FFA members describe their role in leadership activities as Objects ($M_{2005}=2.87$), Recipients ($M_{2005}=2.88$), Resources ($M_{2005}=2.97$) and Partners ($M_{2005}=2.99$).

Participants could easily identify the personal benefits from participation in FFA activities. As the dialogue moved to community it was more difficult for FFA members to describe benefits. Qualitative responses for context of leadership activities did not reinforce the findings by Peiter, Nall, and Rennekamp (2005). The original study with quantitative data reported means for Self ($M_{2005}=3.01$), Others ($M_{2005}=2.92$), Groups ($M_{2005}=2.90$), and Community ($M_{2005}=2.88$), with Community as the lowest. Student responses through the focus group interviews provided examples indicating leadership activities in each area. However, numerous activities focusing on community were identified; contradicting the quantitative data.

In describing the intersection of the role of youth and the context of leadership activities, the focus groups supported the survey findings of Peiter, Nall, and Rennekamp (2005). The context of leadership activities was the largest throughout the leadership context of developing self and within their role with adults as partners, resources and recipients.

The researchers recommend replication of study, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Future focus groups interviews stratified by age, years in FFA, and leadership responsibilities would provide additional insight into the developmental process and the growth as a result of FFA participation.

In addition, focus group interviews should be conducted with FFA advisors to gain the adult perspective of the role of FFA members and the context of activities. Comparisons of advisor and member perspectives could provide rich data for chapter member role and context of leadership activities.

Results from this study can assist leaders of the National FFA Organization to further explore current leadership roles and leadership activities. This has implications for not only members and advisors of the National FFA Organization, but other youth organizations as well. From this study, school based student leadership organizations such as DECA, FBLA, and FCCLA, etc.; as well as community based leadership youth organizations like 4-H, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts, etc., should examine what their members' role and the leadership activities offered in their organizations. When this occurs, all youth organizations will better guide leaders of tomorrow.

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