

Development of Youth Leadership Life Skills of Texas Youth as San Antonio Livestock Exposition School Tour Guides

Laura A. Real
Extension Agent-4-H and Youth Development
Gillespie County
Fredericksburg, TX

Julie F. Harlin
Assistant Professor
Texas A&M University
2116 TAMU
College Station, TX 77843-2116
979-862-3014
j-harlin@tamu.edu

Abstract

This study's purpose was to determine the youth leadership life skills of Texas 4-H, FFA, and FCCLA members participating as school tour guides. Descriptive characteristics were evaluated to determine those affecting leadership life skills development. School tour guides participating in the exit-meeting during the 2004 San Antonio Livestock Exposition were asked to complete the questionnaire. This resulted in 1,691 responses and a 94% response rate. The questionnaire was a 28-item survey that was based on the scales: working with groups, understanding self, communicating, making decisions, and leadership. Conclusions showed that school tour guides were developing leadership life skills. The most influential descriptive characteristics were gender, previous leadership experiences, and ethnicity. Females and those participants who had previous leadership experiences reported stronger perceptions of their leadership life skills. In addition, African and Asian Americans, Hispanics, and Anglos all had stronger perceptions of their leadership life skills when compared to Native Americans.

Introduction

Since the beginning of 4-H, FFA, and FCCLA (Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America) programs, the goal has been to produce productive members of society through the development of leadership life skills in the youth enrolled in those programs. Youth organizations offer countless opportunities for members to learn and develop leadership life skills that are important in becoming contributable members of society as adults. 4-H, FFA, and FCCLA are just three of many youth organizations available. The 4-H program is the youth component

of the Cooperative Extension Service serving youth ages 8 to 19 (Texas Agricultural Extension Service, 2001). The National FFA Organization is an agricultural education program that serves secondary school youth (National FFA Organization, 2003). FCCLA is a national vocational organization for high school students interested in family and consumer sciences education (Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America, 2003). Members of these organizations can participate in numerous types of projects ranging from cooking to animal projects and public speaking to leadership. These programs employ the motto of "learning by doing." By participating in hands-on experiences, youth are better able to learn and apply these necessary skills to their lifestyles (Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997; Howard, 2001).

Members are given numerous opportunities to engage in leadership development activities. One such activity is the School Tours Program at San Antonio Livestock Exposition. The San Antonio Livestock Exposition (SALE) School Tours Program was created in 1990 to provide a safe, guided tour of the show grounds to students of San Antonio and the surrounding areas. Each year, about 20,000 kindergarten through third grade students are invited as guests of the School Tours Program who are guided through exhibits by 4-H, FFA, and FCCLA members. Guides are selected by county agents and teachers to participate in the program and undergo a 30 to 90 minute training session including information to relate to students and routes to take. Guides are assigned a class for the day; the guide leads the class through the different barns and educational exhibits on the grounds. Before entering each barn, the guide provides background information to the students and answers questions.

Review of Literature

Leadership education has been an integral part of experiential youth leadership organizations. Three of these organizations are 4-H, FFA, and FCCLA. By their very nature and purpose, these organizations focus on the development of youth through various activities. Most assume that these organizations are successful at developing leadership life skills through the programs and opportunities they offer to their members. Nevertheless, is this perception true? Recently, organizations such as these are focusing on the effectiveness of the leadership training they offer to their members to provide accountability for and to continually improve their respective programs (Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997; Howard, 2001; Rutherford, Townsend, Briers, Cummins, & Conrad, 2002).

Holder and Wilkinson (2001) state that to be a good leader, one needs to develop several types of skills that can be used in many ways throughout life; thus, they are called leadership life skills. They define seven leadership life skill areas: (a) understanding self, (b) communicating, (c) getting along with others, (d) learning to learn, (e) making decisions, (f) managing, and (g) working with groups. These seven areas match the seven constructs of youth leadership life skill development (YLLSD) as described by Seevers, Dormody, and Clason (1995). These seven

constructs where originally based on work of Miller (1976) who defined youth leadership life skills as the “development of life skills necessary to perform leadership functions in real life” (p. 2). Townsend and Carter (1983) also studied youth leadership life skills and provide five scales of leadership: (a) working with groups, (b) understanding self, (c) making decisions, (d) communication, and (e) leadership.

Boyd, Herring, and Briers (1992) compared YLLSD of Texas 4-H members to non-members, and examined the relationship between YLLSD and level of participation in 4-H. The researchers found that Texas 4-H members’ perceptions of their YLLSD were significantly higher than the perceptions of non-members. In addition, the researchers found that Texas 4-H members’ level of YLLSD increased as their level of participation in 4-H activities increased.

Determining predictors of YLLSD of youth in Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico was the purpose of two similar studies conducted by Seevers and Dormody (1994) of senior 4-H members and by Dormody and Seevers (1994) of FFA members. The two major findings of this study were that three variables – achievement expectancy, participation in FFA leadership activities, and gender – explained statistically significant amounts of variance in YLLSDS scores; and YLLSD was not related to self-esteem, years in FFA, age, ethnicity, or place of residence. The findings of this study are in contrast to the results of the similar study conducted by Seevers and Dormody of 4-H members. Four variables attributed to variance in YLLSDS scores: participation in leadership activities, ethnicity, achievement expectancy, and gender.

Using an adapted version of the YLLSDS developed by Seevers et al. (1995), Wingenbach and Kahler (1997) explored the relationship between Iowa FFA members’ self-perceived leadership and life skills development and their participation in youth leadership activities. The researchers found “the strongest statistically significant relationship existed between [YLLSD] and FFA leadership activities” (p. 23). Other factors that related to YLLSD were years of membership in FFA, age, jobs, achievement expectancy, club officer, church groups, and class officer. These researchers also found that the female FFA members participating in “this study significantly outscored their male counterparts on the YLLSDS section” (p. 23).

A study conducted by Thorp, Cummins, and Townsend (1998) looked at a college student population. These researchers evaluated gender as it specifically related to the development of leadership skills and examined the relationship between women’s previous leadership experiences and their self-perceived leadership skills, as well as the differences between women in an all-female educational setting and women in a coeducational setting. The researchers found statistically significant relationships between gender, participation in high school and collegiate leadership activities, and participants’ self-perceived leadership skills. In addition, women in the all-female section had stronger perceptions of

themselves on all five measured scales. Other researchers have confirmed that gender does play a role in students' self-perceived youth leadership life skills development (Farley, 1989; McKinley, Birkenholz, & Stewart, 1993; Dormody & Seevers, 1994; Seevers & Dormody, 1994; Wingenbach et al., 1997).

Many researchers have studied leadership life skills through overall involvement of experiential youth leadership organizations and indicated that youth truly are developing these skills and they are retaining them into their adulthood (Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992; Dormody & Seevers, 1994; Seevers & Dormody, 1994; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997; Howard, 2001; Rutherford, Townsend, Briers, Cummins, & Conrad, 2002). However, none of these studies have specifically addressed the youth leadership life skills of one specific activity.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine the youth leadership life skills of Texas 4-H, FFA, and FCCLA members participating as school tour guides. The following objectives were set to guide this study.

1. Describe the characteristics of school tour guides at the 2004 San Antonio Livestock Exposition.
2. Determine the leadership life skills of Texas 4-H, FFA, and FCCLA members serving as school tour guides according to the Leadership Skills Inventory.
3. Determine which descriptive characteristics affected youth leadership life skills development.

For the purpose of this study, leadership life skills referred to the five scales measured by the Leadership Skills Inventory including (a) Working with Groups, (b) Understanding Self, (c) Communicating, (d) Making Decisions, and (e) Leadership. Also, descriptive characteristics were defined as gender, age, ethnicity, youth organization membership, years of membership, years of experience as a school tour guide, and previous leadership skills training.

Procedures

Population

Pre-experimental, descriptive survey methodology, and a correlational design were used in this study. The dependent variable was youth leadership life skills development. The independent variables were gender, age, ethnicity, youth organization membership, years of membership, years of experience as a school tour guide, and previous leadership skills training. Both the dependent and independent variables were measured following their natural occurrence *ex post facto*. The population of interest was Texas 4-H, FFA, and FCCLA members that served as school tour guides at the San Antonio Livestock Exposition. To ensure parental consent, letters were sent to teachers of each participating 4-H County,

FFA Chapter, and FCCLA Chapter. A cover letter was sent to all sponsors requesting that an additional letter be sent home with each school tour guide for parental review. Parents were to review the letter before their child participated as a school tour guide. All school tour guides returning for the afternoon exit-meeting during the 2004 San Antonio Livestock Exposition were asked to complete the questionnaire (1800). A total of 1,691 questionnaires were returned resulting in a response rate of 94%. Some respondents did not complete all the questions, as a result the response numbers for specific questions may not be equal to the total number of survey respondents.

Instrumentation

The instrument used was the Leadership Skills Inventory (LSI) developed and tested at Iowa State University (Townsend & Carter, 1983). The LSI consisted of 21 statements describing different leadership and life skills. The instrument contained five internal scales: (a) Working with Groups, (b) Understanding Self, (c) Communicating, (d) Making Decisions, and (e) Leadership. Responses were based on a five-point Likert-type scale with 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = undecided, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. A higher numeric value attributed to a statement indicated a stronger agreement or self-perception of the skill. Subject responses for each statement within a scale were averaged to create an individual response for each scale. Other researchers using the instrument (Thorp et al., 1998; Boyd, 1991) reported reliabilities of .63 to .83 and .65 to .83, respectively. The statements used on the survey instrument are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Internal Scales for Leadership Skills Inventory

Scale	Item #	Statement	Reliabilities	
			Thorp	Boyd
Working With Groups	1.	I can cooperate and work in a group.	.75	.72
	2.	I get along with people around me.		
	4.	I believe in dividing the work among group.		
	8.	I listen carefully to opinions of group.		
	12.	I believe that group members are responsible.		
Understanding Self	3.	I feel responsible for my actions.	.67	.75
	5.	I understand myself.		
	13.	I am sure of my abilities.		
	17.	I accept who I am.		
	18.	I feel responsible for my decisions.		
Communicating	10.	I can lead a discussion.	.73	.69
	14.	I am a good listener.		
	19.	I can give clear directions.		
	20.	I can follow directions.		
Making Decisions	7.	I consider all choices before making a decision.	.63	.65
	11.	I use past experiences in making decisions.		
	15.	I use information in making decisions.		
Leadership	6.	I feel comfortable teaching others.	.83	.83

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| 9. | I am respected by others my age. |
| 10. | I can lead a discussion |
| 16. | I feel comfortable being a group leader. |
| 19. | I can give clear directions. |
| 21. | I can run a meeting. |

Limitations

Limitations of the study included self-selected participation by the subjects. It is also recognized by the researchers that the data reflects leadership perceptions of respondents assumed to be leaders because of they were selected to participate as a school tour guide. Therefore, this study provides a description of self-perceived leadership skills and is not generalizable to all 4-H, FFA, and FCCLA members or school tour guides.

Findings

The first objective was to describe the characteristics of school tour guides at the 2004 San Antonio Livestock Exposition. The SPSS procedure FREQUENCIES was used to compute the descriptive characteristics of gender, age, ethnicity, organization membership, years of membership, years as a school tour guide, and previous leadership skills training. These results are shown in Table 2. There were slightly more than twice as many female respondents as male respondents. Reported ages were as follows: 120 participants were 14 years old or younger (12.3%), 178 were 15 years old (18.2%), 233 were 16 years old (23.9%), 228 were 17 years old (23.4%), 178 were 18 years old or older (18.2%). The mean age of the group was 16. The largest ethnic group represented was White/Anglo with 571 respondents (58.5%). This was followed by Hispanic with 241 respondents (24.7%).

School tour guides were members of one of three groups: FFA (36.3%), FCCLA (35.1%), or 4-H (22.5%). Nearly half of all students have been members of their respective organization for only one to two years (47.1%). The majority of students were first-year educational school tour guides (56.7%). A total of 377 (38.6%) of students indicated that they had previous leadership training experiences and 528 (54.1%) claimed they had not; and, 71 did not respond. Of these 377 respondents who have had previous leadership skills experience, 117 (31.0%) respondents received at least a minimum of this experience through their respective 4-H, FFA, or FCCLA program.

Table 2.
Selected Descriptive Characteristics of School Tour Guides

Characteristic		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	282	28.9
	Female	623	63.8

	Did not report	71	7.3
Age	14 years or younger	120	12.3
	15	178	18.2
	16	233	23.9
	17	228	23.4
	18 years or older	178	18.2
	Did not report	39	4.0
Ethnicity	African American	54	5.5
	Asian American	46	4.7
	Hispanic	241	24.7
	Native American	14	1.4
	White/Anglo	571	58.5
	Mixed Ethnicities	12	1.2
	Did not report	38	3.9
Organization Membership	4-H	220	22.5
	FFA	354	36.3
	FCCLA	343	35.1
	Did not report	59	6.0
Years as a Member	1-2 years	460	47.1
	3-4 years	213	21.8
	5-6 years	109	11.2
	7-8 years	91	9.3
	9-10 years	64	6.6
	Did not report	39	4.0
Years as Tour Guide	1 year	553	56.7
	2 years	212	21.7
	3 years	88	9.0
	4 years	43	4.4
	5 years	38	3.9
	Did not report	42	4.3
Previous Leadership Training	Yes	377	38.6
	No	528	54.1
	Did not report	71	7.3

The second objective was to determine the leadership life skills of Texas 4-H, FFA, and FCCLA members serving as school tour guides according to the Leadership Skills Inventory. All scales had means of 4.13 or greater, indicating that school tour guides perceived that they are developing leadership life skills (see Table 3).

Table 3.
School Tour Guides Self-Perceptions of Youth Leadership Life Skills Development

Scale	Mean ^a	SD
Understanding Self	4.40	.55
Working with Groups	4.39	.53
Making Decisions	4.23	.67
Communicating	4.22	.63
Leadership	4.13	.69
Overall	4.29	.53

Note. ^a1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

The third objective was to determine which descriptive characteristics affected youth leadership life skills development. For the purpose of this study, descriptive characteristics were defined as gender, age, ethnicity, youth organization membership, years of membership, years of experience as a school tour guide, and previous leadership skills training. A *t*-test of independent means was computed to determine if youth leadership life skills development differed by gender. A summary of these results are presented in Table 4. Statistically significant differences were found in all five scales at the 0.05 significance level. Females had a stronger perception of their abilities on all five levels than when compared to males.

Table 4.
Independent Samples *t*-test: Gender and Youth Leadership Life Skills Development

Scale		N	Mean ^a	SD	p
Understanding Self	Male	271	4.35	.57	.005**
	Female	615	4.45	.48	
Working with Groups	Male	275	4.28	.58	<.001**
	Female	616	4.46	.46	
Making Decisions	Male	277	4.09	.68	<.001**
	Female	619	4.30	.62	
Communicating	Male	276	4.15	.66	.007**
	Female	619	4.27	.60	
Leadership	Male	274	4.07	.68	.042*
	Female	611	4.17	.68	
Overall	Male	258	4.19	.55	<.001**
	Female	595	4.35	.47	

Note. ^a1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

*Significant when $p < .05$. **Significant when $p < .01$.

To determine if youth leadership life skills development differed by age, a Pearson correlation coefficient was computed between each of the measurement scales and age. The correlation coefficient was evaluated using a two-tailed test with a significance level of 0.05. Table 5 presents the correlation coefficients for each of the five measurement scales. A statistically significant correlation was found between age and the scales of Working with Groups, Understanding Self, and Communicating. These correlations coefficients were 0.078, 0.071, and 0.067, respectively. This indicated only a negligible relationship between age and youth leadership life skills development (Davis, 1971). This suggests that the older the school tour guides were, the greater perception they had of the abilities to work with groups, understand themselves, and communicate.

Table 5.
Pearson Correlation Coefficient Between Age and Leadership Life Skills Development

Scale	N	Age	
		r	p
Understanding self	918	.071*	.032
Working with groups	921	.078*	.017
Making decisions	927	.050	.131
Communicating	925	.067*	.043
Leadership	912	.048	.150
Overall	876	.072*	.034

Note. *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

To determine if youth leadership life skills development differed by ethnicity, an analysis of variance of scales was computed using the procedure ANOVA. A summary of these results are displayed in Table 6. Statistically significant differences were found in three of the scales (Working with Groups, Understanding Self, and Making Decisions) and overall leadership life skills development. Tukey’s HSD post hoc comparison was used to detect differences among ethnic groups. Table 6 displays these results. Three scales measuring leadership life skills development were statistically different at the .05 level when grouped by ethnicity: Working with Groups, Understanding Self, and Making Decisions. Two scales were statistically different at the $p < .01$ level when grouped by ethnicity: Communicating and Leadership.

Table 6.
Analysis of Variance of Scales Measuring Leadership Life Skills by Ethnicity

Scale	Mean Score by Ethnicity						F	p
	Afr	Asian	Hisp	Nat	Anglo	Mixed		
Understanding Self	4.36 ^a	4.24 ^a	4.40 ^a	3.76 ^b	4.44 ^a	4.15 ^{ab}	5.649	<.001*
Working with Groups	4.48 ^{ac}	4.26 ^{abc}	4.42 ^{ac}	4.02 ^b	4.39 ^{abc}	4.03 ^{bc}	3.362	.005*

Making Decisions	4.17 ^{ab}	4.25 ^a	4.26 ^a	3.52 ^c	4.24 ^a	3.67 ^{bc}	5.168	<.001 [*]
Communicating	4.19 ^{ab}	4.12 ^{ab}	4.20 ^b	4.21 ^a	3.73 ^b	4.25 ^{ab}	2.505	.029 ^{**}
Leadership	4.16 ^a	4.16 ^a	4.22 ^a	4.11 ^b	3.49 ^a	4.14 ^a	2.682	.020 ^{**}
Overall	4.32 ^a	4.25 ^a	4.31 ^a	3.74 ^b	4.30 ^a	4.00 ^{ab}	3.750	.002 ^{**}

Note. ¹1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree. ²Afr = African American, Asian = Asian American, Hisp = Hispanic, Nat = Native American, Anglo = White/Anglo, Mixed = Mixed Ethnicities. ³Means not sharing a letter are different as determined by Tukey’s HSD post hoc comparison. *Significant at p < .05. **Significant at p < .01.

To determine if youth leadership life skills development differed by previous leadership training experiences, the researchers examined the data in three different forms. The first was an analysis of the number of previous leadership training experiences by calculating a Pearson correlation coefficient between each of the measurement scales and the number of previous leadership training experiences (see Table 7). The second analysis was simply whether the school tour guide had previous leadership training experience. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated between each of the measurement scales and whether the student had previous leadership experiences (see Table 8). This resulted in a statistically significant difference between those with previous leadership experience and those with none. The final analysis only took into account those school tour guides that provided examples of previous leadership experience. A *t*-test was used to determine if a difference existed between a previous experience in 4-H, FFA, or FCCLA (“Ag”) and another organization or program (“Non-Ag”) (see Table 9).

Table 7.
Pearson Correlation Coefficient Between Numbers of Previous Leadership Experiences and Leadership Life Skills Development of School Tour Guides

Scale	Number of Previous Experiences		
	N	r	p
Understanding self	930	.103**	.002
Working with groups	935	.054	.096
Making decisions	940	.100**	.002
Communicating	937	.119**	<.001
Leadership	922	.157**	<.001
Overall	885	.119**	<.001

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 8.
Pearson Correlation Coefficient Between Previous Leadership Experiences and Leadership Life Skills Development of School Tour Guides

Scale	Previous Experience (Yes or No)		
	N	r	p
Understanding self	890	.090**	.007
Working with groups	890	.089**	.008
Making decisions	897	.113**	.001
Communicating	897	.158**	<.001
Leadership	884	.204**	<.001
Overall	853	.156**	<.001

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 9.
Independent Samples *t*-test: Ag or Non-ag Previous Leadership Experience and Leadership Life Skills Development

Scale		N	Mean	SD	p
Understanding Self	Ag	116	4.55	0.46	.209
	Non-Ag	56	4.46	0.43	
Working with Groups	Ag	114	4.49	0.46	.613
	Non-Ag	56	4.53	0.43	
Making Decisions	Ag	116	4.39	0.54	.931
	Non-Ag	57	4.38	0.59	
Communicating	Ag	115	4.36	0.59	.822
	Non-Ag	57	4.38	0.52	
Leadership	Ag	115	4.34	0.67	.563

	Non-Ag	57	4.29	0.52	
Overall	Ag	112	4.43	0.45	.867
	Non-Ag	55	4.42	0.42	

Note. ^a1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

Objective 1 was to determine descriptive characteristics of school tour guides at the 2004 San Antonio Livestock Exposition. These descriptive characteristics included gender, age, ethnicity, youth organization membership, years as a member, years as a school tour guide, and previous leadership training experiences. The typical respondent in this study was a 16 year old White/Anglo, female who had been in FFA from 1-2 years, was serving as a tour guide for the first time, and had not received previous leadership skills training.

Objective 2 was to determine the leadership life skills of Texas 4-H, FFA, and FCCLA members serving as school tour guides according to the Leadership Skills Inventory. The overall mean for leadership life skill development was 4.29 indicating that school tour guides “agreed” with all statements within in the Leadership Skills Inventory. Tour guides perceived themselves as having a higher level of leadership life skill development for the scales Understanding Self (4.40) and Working with Groups (4.39) than the remaining areas. The means for Making Decisions (4.23) and Communicating (4.22) were also similar to one another. Even though guides perceived themselves as having the least development in the Leadership (4.13) scale, they still perceived themselves as developing leadership skills.

Objective 3 was to determine which descriptive characteristics affected youth leadership life skill development. Descriptive characteristics were defined as gender, age, ethnicity, youth organization membership, years of membership, years of experience as a school tour guide, and previous leadership skills training.

Females perceived themselves as having stronger leadership life skills in all five scales: (a) Working with Groups, (b) Understanding Self, (c) Communicating, (d) Making Decisions, and (e) Leadership than did males. Differences in means for Working with Groups, Understanding Self, Communicating, and Making Decisions were all significant at the .01 level. Differences in means for the scale of Leadership were significant at the .05 level. This concurs with other research finding that gender does play a role in students’ self-perceived youth leadership life skills development (Thorp et al., 1998; Farley, 1989; McKinley et al., 1993; Dormody & Seevers, 1994; Seevers & Dormody, 1994; Wingenbach et al., 1997), but still does not answer the question as to why females tend to have higher self-perceived youth leadership life skills than males.

Negligible, positive relationships existed between age and the three scales of Working with Groups, Understanding Self, and Communicating. Correlation

coefficients ranged from .067 to .078. School tour guides perceived themselves as being better able to work with groups, understand themselves, and communicate as they mature. This supports the findings of Seevers and Dormody (1994).

In looking at overall leadership life skills development, Native Americans differed from African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and Anglos. These four groups all indicated a stronger perception of their leadership life skills development than did Native Americans. No other research using the Leadership Skills Inventory could be found either supporting or contradicting this finding. Although the number of Native Americans participating in this study was relatively small, it certainly warrants further study.

Positive relationships existed between previous leadership experiences and leadership life skills development. This indicated that participants receiving any previous leadership training experience had a higher level of leadership life skills development. This finding supports the research of Seevers and Dormody (1994) and Wingenbach and Kahler (1997) and certainly should not be surprising. What was surprising was the number of students indicating no previous leadership training. Even though the average student had been participating in their organization from one to two years, it could be expected that they would have been exposed to some type of leadership training during that time, especially if they were selected by their teacher or extension agent to serve as a school tour guide.

Recommendations for Additional Research

The following recommendations are based on the findings and conclusions of this study.

1. It is recommended to further investigate school tour guides to determine where guides are developing leadership life skills. A pre-test, post-test design using a random sample may be used to determine if participation as a school tour guide is contributing to the development of leadership life skills.
2. It is recommended to investigate the reasons why female school tour guides perceived themselves as having a higher level of leadership life skills development than males.
3. Another recommendation is to investigate the differences between ethnic groups. Specifically, what causes Native Americans to perceive themselves as having lower levels of leadership life skills development when compared to other groups?
4. The relationship between participation in previous leadership experiences should be investigated to determine which activities are contributing the most to the development of leadership life skills.
5. It is recommended that students who are not involved in extracurricular youth organizations be studied to understand the differences between members of youth organizations and other students.

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Biography

Laura Real received a B.S. in Animal Science in May 2003 and a M.S. in Agricultural Education in 2004 from Texas A&M University. She is currently a County Extension Agent for 4-H and Youth Development for Texas Cooperative Extension in Gillespie County and resides in Fredericksburg, Texas. She enjoys working with youth to help prepare them for their future.

Julie Harlin received a B.S. in Agricultural Science and M.S. in Agricultural Education in 1993 and 1994, respectively, from Texas A&M University and a Ph.D. in Agricultural Education from Oklahoma State University in 1999. She is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications at Texas A&M University where she serves as program leader for the agricultural science teacher education workgroup.

The Consultancy Protocol: Future School Leaders Engage in Collaborative Inquiry

Estelle Kamler
Associate Professor
Department of Educational Leadership and Administration
Long Island University, C. W. Post Campus
Brookville, New York
estelle.kamler@liu.edu

Abstract

Decision-making is key to being an effective administrator. The saying, “You are only as good as your last shot,” sometimes applies to the way principals feel when a new plan that addresses a problem is met with opposition from disapproving faculty, staff, parents, or students. Experienced school principals learned early in their career that asking the right questions underscores the search for the best solution to the problem. In framing and reframing the issue through comprehensive query and gathering input from others, it is more likely that the school leader will seek all the relevant data and then be able to formulate, weigh, and determine a plan of action that will engender support. This brief discusses the use of a collaborative role-playing format based on consultancy protocol to develop aspiring school leaders’ skill at in-depth problem-solving and enhance the quality of their decisions through peer input.

Introduction

One of the most difficult issues I faced as a novice elementary principal was the emotionally and politically charged closing of my building. It was easy to be consumed by the despair of the school community. In retrospect, my initial missteps that caused a decline in student and staff motivation as well as some repercussions from the central office were created by my not having all the facts and selecting a course of action solely riveted on saving the building. Rather than grasping the full extent of the problem which extended beyond the loss of our school, I needed to raise more questions directed not only to the members of my immediate school community, but also to other stakeholders in the district as well as colleagues from other districts in order to understand the arduous and heart wrenching process of redistricting. In time I better understood that my first responsibility was not to fuel the opposition which continued the struggle for the school’s survival, but to ensure that teaching and learning remained in focus during the two turbulent years prior to the final decision to close the school.

As I began to revise my frame with assistance from the faculty, parents, and administrative colleagues which led to a burst of positive energy and recommitment to our mission, the pervasive high anxiety, hopelessness, and lack of motivation in the school significantly diminished. I can now say that some of my most exhilarating times as an educator occurred during this period. After a bumpy start and with a clearer picture of the real possibility that this may be the last reminiscences of this once joyous and productive school setting, the faculty, parents, and I set out to craft as many stimulating and challenging learning experiences as we could hoping to provide everlasting memories for the children as well as the adults. Evening science and social studies fairs, a reading club that engaged all of the 350 students and a Grandparents' Day replete with original poetry, songs, and plays became the school's legacy. Twenty years later, as a professor of educational leadership, I was reminded of these years when one of my graduate students excitedly told the class about her elementary school experiences and then surprised me when she said, "And you were my principal."

Becoming a School Leader: A Balance of Theory and Practice

Transitioning from teacher to school leader can be thorny with decision-making being at the forefront of an aspirant's angst. In the Core I course which I teach, three interrelated areas, human relations, leadership, and school community relations, are presented with a balanced viewpoint of theory and practice through analysis of current issues in administration. This course is designed to enable students to:

1. Acquire comprehensive knowledge of administrative theory, organizational culture, and educational leadership and make connections between theory and practice.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of schools as social systems and the impact of historic and current developments on organizational change.
3. Demonstrate the ability to think systematically and critically about school leadership and understand and present multiple solutions to educational leadership issues.
4. Enhance leadership skills in communication, teambuilding, and decision-making.
5. Develop an awareness of one's personal leadership style(s), identifying strengths as well as areas for improvement.
6. Articulate a vision for schools and in the process become more conscious of one's own values, beliefs, and assumptions about the purposes of education.

Theoretical study including models of decision-making as well as administrative processes which promote positive organizational culture, effective communication, motivated faculty and staff, and openness to organizational change provides the foundation for practical exercises such as fieldwork experiences, case studies, role-plays, and simulations. Through these activities students are able to learn the science and art of leadership in a risk-free

environment. Decision-making with an emphasis on understanding issues from multiple perspectives, generating and evaluating alternative solutions, and choosing a beneficial course of action are developed in my leadership classroom through problems of practice underscored by a theoretical base.

In general, the participative process tends to improve the quality, creativity, acceptance, understanding, judgment, and accuracy of decisions (DuBrin, 2002). With this orientation, one of the activities which I use to assist aspiring school leaders in learning the classical decision-making model, in conjunction with a student's self-selected real-life case study, is a modification of the consultancy protocol. The protocol was initially designed for critical discussion of a lesson plan, unit, or classroom issue by the Coalition of Essential School's Program and further adapted and revised as part of an Annenberg Institute Project to provide a structure for teachers to scrutinize a professional issue and gain insights from peers in a conversation designed to further illuminate the subject. In this "administrative" consultancy protocol, the emphasis is also on query development to acquire increased knowledge and information about the school problem and create a greater number of solutions as well as evaluate the alternatives through planned interaction with colleagues.

Understanding the Consultancy Protocol

The purpose of the consultancy protocol is to assist an individual to think through an issue. Its primary function is to define and position the problem in a "descriptive rather than judgmental" fashion with the concern for the person who is consulting rather than on the individual experiences of the consultancy group members (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003). Critical Friends Group was established by three professional developers from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. It was designed as a program using protocols to train coaches to create a collegial culture within their teaching groups focused on improvement of student learning through the examination of student work or observation of each other (Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000).

The protocol provides helpful parameters that "ease the anxieties of revealing the heart of one's practice to colleagues" (Cushman, 1999). In its purest form, the protocol structures the time, behavior, and discussion format of the consultancy session to ensure maximum time on task, support learning, and facilitate positive group dynamics. Depending on the topic of discussion, consultancy groups may meet from 40 minutes to two hours and include a designated timeframe for each step of the process. Within this period, the participants move through the protocol stages to uncover and more closely examine the layers of the issue. In 10 blocks of time lasting 20 minutes each, the group proceeds to address specific tasks such as the ones listed below.

- Present the problem
- Raise clarifying questions
- Pose probing questions

- Offer suggestions
- Engage in discussion
- Debrief the process

Implementing Consultancy Protocol in the Leadership Classroom

In the course syllabus the consultancy protocol is described as a brief oral presentation in which the student assumes the role of an administrator who is presenting a case study to a small group of administrative colleagues who will help the presenter to clarify the issue by asking probing questions, expand thinking about the problem, and further analyze the dilemma. Solutions may be discussed since this outside perspective should assist the presenter in determining the most appropriate resolution to this issue.

Preparing for the Consultancy Protocol

Prior to the consultancy protocol, each student outlines a dilemma or a set of complex issues around a change or school reform observed and personally or professionally involved in. Assurances for anonymity are maintained by changing names and any other identifiable information. The student gathers data through review of public records and reports as well as interviewing school community members or conducting brief surveys. In addition, the student postulates possible solutions to the problem by researching current practice through viewing resources that are directly related to the issues presented in the case. As a student prepares for the individual consultancy, the student assembles the following information.

- Profile of the school district or school—demographics (i.e., location, student population, staff profile, socio-economic background)
- The players--administrative organization— centralized, decentralized, different positions, formal and informal chain of command
- Philosophy—vision, mission, goals, procedures as related to this case
- Background of the situation—origin, history
- Description of the situation and problem and relevant data and research

Engaging in the Process

The consultancy protocol group consists of six participants. When the session begins each student assumes the role of an administrator and puts on the self-selected “administrator’s hat.” The students choose a particular administrative role based on a prior assignment in which they conduct an in-depth interview of a practicing administrator in a position to which they aspire. From this personal interchange, they begin to grasp some of the issues as well as concerns that school leaders need to consider in their decision-making process. The students are given a 40-minute period to present their case, ask for clarifying and provocative questions, and generate discussion. There is a suggested time frame for each

segment of the consultancy protocol; however, since another goal for these aspirants is to learn to facilitate group discussion, the presenter as the facilitator of the protocol is allowed some leeway in adjusting the timeslots with the understanding that the objective is to maximize the assistance they receive from engaging their “administrative” colleagues in this collaborative inquiry method.

Reflecting on the Process

The debriefing, or reflective component of the consultancy protocol, is completed after the students conclude their discussion. Two forms, one for the presenter and another for the other group participants, are distributed. Within a 10-minute period students are required to complete these reflection sheets either from the perspective of the presenter or from the “administrative” consultant’s depending on the role they played during the specific protocol. The presenter is asked to respond to the questions noted below.

- What issues and questions were raised that you didn’t think of?
- How has the consultancy discussion altered or solidified your thinking about a course of action to resolve your problem?

In addition the presenter is encouraged to comment on the process and the individual’s delivery of the information as well as the ability to facilitate a focused, meaningful discussion. The other participants (administrative consultants) note the underlying theories that can inform the resolution to this problem, indicate the clarifying and thought-provoking questions, write their reflections about the process, and comment on their contributions in assisting the presenter in the decision-making process.

Solidifying the Decision

The forms completed by the “administrative” consultants are given to the presenter for review and reflection of the session. All the reflection responses are attached to the finalized written case study submitted to me the following week. This written document is presented in the form of a memo in which the student in the role of administrator reports to a supervisor. With the added perspective gained through the consultancy protocol, in this document, the student describes the situation, discusses the various resolution possibilities with supportive data and research, and recommends a course of action with justification. In addition to the memo, students attach a one-page brief presenting the underlying theories that serve as the foundation for this decision.

Gaining an Administrative Perspective

In review of the students’ evaluations of their own performance as a facilitator as well as an “administrative” colleague, many recorded their delight in stepping into the administrative role and viewing issues with new lenses. On the other hand, students commented that they needed to remind themselves to think about all

school community stakeholders and the questions that they may pose in the decision-making process. The opportunity to work on a relevant problem which required them to think differently and listen to others' viewpoints allowed them to experience in some measure the world of a school leader. The additional practice in presentation delivery also promoted confidence. Faced with a complex parent problem, one student noted the ability to successfully address and resolve the issue through reframing the problem learned in the consultancy process. With the concern for administrative team building as cited in recent school reform literature (Elmore, 2000), it is interesting to observe that this experience appears to reinforce the importance of having a leadership "collegial circle" for feedback, support, and reflection. Therefore, these aspiring leaders at entrée level may, hopefully, embrace the concept of developing and being an active participant in a professional community that encourages learning through team inquiry.

Conclusion

Collaborative inquiry can be traced to Socrates. Raising question, reframing issues from alternate paradigms can be a provocative activity, but more importantly a necessary one to ensure that one is not blinded by one's own lens or viewpoint. The consultancy protocol has been effectively implemented by staff developers in assisting teachers in examining student work and teaching strategies to improve student learning through a non-threatening and group solidifying approach. In activating this procedure in the school leadership classroom, it appears that this technique has validity in addressing broader school issues. Site-based teams have been formed nationwide and when facilitated with objectivity and sensitivity to the participants, have provided invaluable insight and support for school reform. The consultancy protocol with its carefully designed procedure may be another approach to be used by today's school leaders in working with each other to deeply investigate issues and in the process reveal a host of new ideas.

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Biography

Dr. Estelle Kamler is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Administration at Long Island University, C. W. Post Campus. She is a former school superintendent who served as assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, director for special educational services, and elementary principal. Dr. Kamler provides students with opportunities to experience many real-life administrative tasks and leadership events to build self-efficacy. One prong of her research agenda is the evaluation of her course work through self-reflection and more importantly the students' lenses.