

Contributions to the Development of State FFA Officers

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Abstract

What are the long term consequences associated with serving as a state FFA officer? Using a semi-structured interview format, selected state FFA officers from a twenty year time span were interviewed to assess their perceptions of and assets attributed to their experiences as a state officer. Results indicated that past state officers, regardless of when they served, noted positive leadership development, personal growth, and a heightened level of community awareness. Additionally, experiences and subsequent engagement related to their term confirmed four key features of positive adolescent development, which are, a sense of industry and competence; a sense of identity; a sense of control over one's fate; and connectedness to others (CSR Inc, 1997).

Introduction/Conceptual Framework

Adolescent Development-In 1997, CSR Inc. published a report titled *Understanding Youth Development: Promoting Positive Pathways of Growth* for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Four critical features of positive adolescent development emerged from their meta-analysis of literature on adolescent development. These critical features or components were: 1) a sense of industry and competency; 2) a sense of control over one's fate in life; 3) connection to others and society; and 4) a sense of identity (CSR Inc., 1997). Structured youth organizations can provide adolescents the opportunity to engage in positive and developmental activities that reflect the four key themes in the 1997 report.

- *Sense of industry and competency* - This factor is associated with the level of belief an individual has about their own abilities. Erickson (1963; 1968) provided some of the foundational research for this principle. Other researchers have noted that engagement in sports, extracurricular activities, religious organizations, part-time jobs, clubs, and community organizations youth have the opportunity to be recognized and rewarded for their productivity and competence. This contributes to a sense of value and contribution as a productive member of their community(ies) (Earls, Cairns, & Mercy, 1993; Hamilton & Powers, 1990; Hanks & Eckland, 1978; Larson, 1994; Yates & Youniss, 1996).
- *Sense of control over one's fate* - When adolescents have a sense of control over their fate and believe they can predict the outcomes of their decisions and actions, they are more likely to develop in a positive manner (Patterson & Dishion, 1995; Sampson, 1992 in CSR Inc., 1997). This level of control can be supported and enhanced through the framework and structure of an organized youth organization along with the guidance and support of adults (Spencer, Kim & Marshall, 1987). Additionally, most youth-based organizations provide adolescents the opportunity to participate in new and different activities and events that are developmentally based and also reflect a degree of predictability in terms of outcome. Larson (1994) and Eccles and Barber (1999) provide evidence that participation in youth organizations reduces delinquent behavior in adolescents.
- *Connectedness to others* - Numerous authors have linked positive adolescent development to a connection with other individuals, communities, and families (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1994; Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1994). The positive role of adults in the prosocial development of adolescents is a strong predictor in the successful transition of adolescents to young adults (Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1995; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). The level of community and connection to others is a foundational component in all types of youth based organizations. Social integration is an important outcome available through participation in organizations when adolescents interact with peers, adults, and community members (Larson, 1994).
- *Sense of Identity* - The last factor of positive adolescent development is based on the development of a stable identity (CSR Inc., 1997). Dworkin, Larson, and Hansen (2003) reported that youth who participated in youth activities noted personal exploration, an increase in self-knowledge, and developed a stronger self awareness. Youniss and Yates (1997) as found in McIntosh, Metz, and Youniss (2005) found that identity development was fostered when adolescents engaged in community service activities. Many youth organizations engage their members in community based service. Cooper et al., (1996) in CSR Inc., (1997) noted identity was enhanced in youth when

they received support for future goals. Additionally, many youth organizations recognize and reward youth for investigation, participation, and performance in activities related to avocational and/or vocational pursuits or goals. Vondracek (1994) reinforces the relationship between identity development, occupational choice, and participation in youth organizations

Impact of prolonged participation in youth organizations- Eccles, Barber, Stone, and Hunt (2003) conducted a longitudinal study related to adolescent life transitions which began with a cohort group of sixth graders and followed them through to age 25-26. Key findings included that participation in school-based leadership and spirit activities, sports, and academic clubs increased the likelihood that youth would be enrolled as a full-time college student at age 21. Oden (1995) found similar results related to academic achievement and enrollment in post secondary education when teens were involved in youth programs. Eccles and Barber (1999) found evidence that teen participation in extracurricular activities predicted positive academic performance. Additionally, youth participation in “prosocial activities predicted lower rates of increase in alcohol and drug use, as well as lower levels at both grades 10 and 12”(Eccles, et al, 2003, p.872). These findings were consistent when the variables of social class, gender, and academic aptitude were controlled (Eccles, et al., 2003).

Eccles, et al., (2003) reported that adolescent involvement in extracurricular activities can contribute to a young person’s need for social relatedness and help shape their identity as a valuable member of their community and/or organization. These researchers also noted that participation in positive youth based activities engage youth with peers and increases the likelihood that friendships will emerge from associations with these peer groups. This amount and level of interaction will influence the behaviors and culture of the peer groups (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles, et al., 2003) leading to a higher incidence of prosocial behaviors. Adolescent participation in extracurricular activities often transitions into some level of participation in like activities during adulthood (Hanks & Eckland, 1975). Larson (1994) noted that “Adolescent participation initiates one into a subcultural enclave which provides a reference group and set of mores that one carries (or that carries one) through the transition into adulthood” (p. 50). Metz, McLellan, and Youniss (2003) found that youth who participated in service based activities (i.e. community and civic engagement) were more likely to voluntarily engage in service as adults.

Leadership Development and Participation in Youth Organization- In the overall dynamic of positive adolescent development the concept of leadership emerges. Bennis and Nanus (1985) felt that all individuals, including adolescents, have the

potential to lead. In 1998, van Linden and Fertman noted that all adolescents can develop their leadership potential “through experiences with people, activities, and learning across four settings; their family, community, school, and workplace” (p. 26). Additionally, they proposed that adolescents develop as leaders through hierarchal stages across five leadership dimensions; leadership information, leadership attitude, communication, decision making, and stress-management skills (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). There is evidence that youth who participate in faith-based, service, community, and vocational activities report high levels of experience in identity development, develop a tie to the community, and develop prosocial norms (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003).

The value and level of development secured through participation in activities and events within organized youth clubs and organizations can provide evidence that reflects many components of positive adolescent development. Hansen, Larson and Dworkin (2003) reported that adolescents who participated in youth activities reported a higher degree of personal development. Teens who participated in youth-based activities “reported higher rates of experience with goal setting, problem solving, effort, and time management” (p 48). Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin (2003) also found that adolescents who participated in more youth activities had stronger experiences in teamwork, leadership, and social skills.

Dworkin, Larsen, and Hansen (2003) found positive correlations between participation in youth activities and reported growth in teamwork and social skills. Youth in their study reported through participation in youth activities they learned about leadership and responsibility, working with a group, receiving and giving feedback, and communication skills. Participation in leadership activities significantly contributed toward life skill development of 4-H members (Seevers & Dormody, 1994a) and FFA members (Dormody & Seevers, 1994). Cantrell, Heinsohn, and Doebler (1989) noted a significant relationship in the development of life skills in 4-H members in the areas of leadership, personal development, and citizenship.

Seevers & Dormody(1994b) asked senior 4-H members to rank activities that contributed most to their leadership skill development. Holding an office was the highest rated activity that they felt contributed most to their leadership development. Cantrell, Heinsohn, and Doebler (1989) reported higher levels of interpersonal skill development for those 4-H members who held leadership roles above the club level. Bruce, Boyd, and Dooley (2004) concluded that during their state officer terms, State 4-H Council officers gained leadership skills such as, decision making, communication, and relationship building. Additionally, State Council members reported their team provided them the opportunity to grow and

learn about themselves as leaders. Carter & Spotanski (1989) reported youth who served in leadership roles rated themselves higher in ten areas of leadership development. Cantrell, Heinsohn, and Doebler (1989) provided evidence of an increase in life skill development when 4-H members held leadership roles beyond the club level.

To expand on this level of investigation one can pose an additional set of questions. What happens when youth emerge and evolve as leaders within these youth organizations? Do they develop a greater sense of social capital? Do individuals who serve as officers gain more than those who served as members?

Purpose

There is strong evidence that youth learn leadership life skills as members of the 4-H program (Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992; Mueller, 1989; Seevers & Dormody, 1994a; Seevers & Dormody, 1994b). However, as previously stated, little is known about what happens as youth begin to take on progressively greater levels of leadership responsibility within these organizations. The purpose of this study was to explore the State Officer program of the FFA Organization in a state to discover how the State FFA Officer program impacts a young person's personal development.

Methods

Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) say that random or representative sampling is not preferred when doing naturalistic inquiry because the researcher's major concern is not to generalize the findings of the study to a population, but to maximize discovery of the features and issues that occur in the context under study. In this case, the context under study is the Pennsylvania State FFA Officer program. The researchers used purposive sampling, intentionally seeking out participants because of certain qualities, to find participants willing to discuss their experiences as State FFA Officers. The qualities used for this study included: held a State FFA Officer position in a particular state, completed required State Officer Training programs, fulfilled their State Officer terms and requirements, represented a variety of years, and were willing to share their experiences for purposes of research. The names of participants for this study were obtained from a collection of records kept in the office of the FFA Executive Manager. Within naturalistic inquiry, there is no concrete rule for sample size. The key is to look more for the quality of the information than its quantity (Erlandson, et al., 1993). Patton (1990) says that sampling size adequacy is subject to peer review. This

study focused on 14 individuals who had participated in the State FFA Officer program from 1983-1984 through 2003-2004. The sample was made up of six males and eight females, and each officer position in this particular state was represented at least one time. Additionally, all 14 individuals represented a unique officer team.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and coded to retain confidentiality. These codes are included in the results section, in parenthesis after the quotations, as part of the trustworthiness confirmability and the audit trail. Data analysis followed the traditional methods described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) adopted the Glaser and Strauss (1967) constant comparative method for use in naturalistic inquiry. The researchers' use of this method followed that adaptation and is outlined as follows: unitization of data, categorization of units, merging categories, and journaling.

In this study, the researchers established credibility through peer debriefing and member checking. Peer debriefing meetings occurred throughout the study, and each time, memos were prepared for the peer debriefing team. Member checking was done with each of the interview participants by reviewing the content of the field notes with the interviewee at the conclusion of each interview. Once field notes were fully transcribed, interviewees were given an electronic copy and allowed full editorial control, ensuring the transcription accurately reflected the interview, and changes were made as necessary. An audit trail and journaling were used to establish dependability and confirmability. Using the above mentioned techniques as a part of the methodology of the study establishes trustworthiness.

Results

The researchers found that the Pennsylvania State FFA Officer program provided positive and societal contributions for professional and personal development in all four critical features of positive adolescent development outlined in the CSR Inc. 1997 report. Two additional areas emerged through analysis of the responses; transition to adulthood and personal development. As a reminder, the codes found in parenthesis correspond to the individual or individuals who made the statements.

Many of the state officers interviewed had a positive belief about their abilities (I2-8). This contributes to young people having a *sense of industry and competency* (Erickson, 1963; 1968).

I think especially in looking back and knowing where I have been and the things that I have done, I can now look forward and think to myself; I can do different things and accomplish a lot. Those experiences during that year were invaluable to that process (I2).

Again, just the confidence level, you know after you have stood in front of 2500 people to speak, you sort of think to yourself for everything after that, hey I can do this (I3)!

Several individuals felt rewarded and valued for their contributions to the agricultural education community, aligning the findings of this research with previous research in adolescent development (Earls, Cairns, & Mercy, 1993; Hamilton & Powers, 1990; Hanks & Eckland, 1978; Larson, 1994; Yates & Youniss, 1996).

During the year, advisors would pull us aside and share our strengths and tell us how well we were doing. And that was really important for us to hear (I3)!

I got praised a lot for how I handled myself in different situations, and how I handled myself with others (I4).

Many of the state officers interviewed considered themselves ready to take on the tasks required of their respective positions and looked forward to a positive experience demonstrating that the interviewees had *a sense of control over their fate in life*. This level of control is supported and enhanced through the framework and structure of an organized youth organization and with the guidance and support of adults (Spencer, Kim & Marshall, 1987).

I was really excited and looked forward to going out and doing different things (I2).

I was excited to do the job and I wanted to get out and try the things that we had been discussing (I3).

I wanted to get in there and dive right in there and try things (I3).

I was pumped up after the workshops! I was ready to go out and get started (I4).

I remember that I was completely excited to be one of the people that I had always looked up to (I8)

Several of the individuals interviewed discussed cultivating a positive relationship with both their high school program advisors and the state level personnel.

I stayed in close contact with my high school advisors. They had other state officers and so I knew I could go to them with questions, etc. and they would help me out (I1).

And I also felt comfortable knowing where to go if I needed something. I knew how to find the resources I guess you could say (I3).

I had a lot of good coaching by my ag teacher (I8).

All of the state officers interviewed felt that their experiences helped them develop a sense of community and family-like connectedness within the agricultural education community *demonstrating their connection to others and society*. This family/community includes state officers, agricultural education teachers, FFA members and advisors, members of the state's agricultural industries, and members of the state Department of Education. Dworkin, Larson, and Hansen (2003) also found that by participating in these kinds of activities, young people begin to develop a tie to their communities.

I walked away with friends and connections for both my professional and personal life (I2)

I walked away with lots of contacts in the state (I4)

I really wanted to give back to the membership, and I really wanted the members to benefit from what we did (I1).

I had gotten a lot out of the program and I was excited to be able to give back to the membership (I2).

It was a great time to give back, and it was important for me to give back to FFA for all of the things that I got out of it (I6).

FFA had done so much for me that I wanted to give something back, and I wanted to be able to help them out. I sort of thought that it was my job to be on the road every week, helping people and giving back (I8).

Several of the individuals interviewed believed that their experiences while a state officer helped them begin a journey of self exploration and discovery contributing to their overall *sense of identity* (CSR Inc., 1997).

I think looking back on it now; it was almost a starting point for me really. I grew a lot that year, learned how to work with others and generally just learned a lot about myself (I1).

It was a huge learning experience for me (I5).

It was a very worthwhile growing experience... It really helped me grow as a person. Good or bad it really helped shape who I am today (I7).

That year gave me some focus (I1).

I think that the big one for me was the confidence that I gained in myself and my own abilities (I2).

Being a SO showed me that I really wanted to work with students (I4).

When adolescents are involved in extracurricular activities, those activities contribute to a young person's need for social relatedness and help shape their identity as a valuable member of their community and/or organization. Participation in positive youth activities engages youth with their peers and increases the likelihood that friendships will emerge from these associations. Many of the individuals interviewed discussed the positive friendships they took away from the experience of being a State Officer which is in line with findings of previous researchers (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles, et al., 2003).

Several of the individuals interviewed talked about their state officer year assisting them in career and life choices *and their transition to adulthood*. This is in harmony with the findings of Larson (1994) who notes that "Adolescent participation initiates one into a subcultural enclave which provides a reference group and set of mores that one carries (or that carries one) through the transition into adulthood" (pg. 50).

Being a State Officer showed me that I really wanted to work with students because I would basically be in withdrawal when I hadn't been out doing chapter visits or whatever, that's why I decided to be an ag teacher (I4).

I think I got a better sense of who I was and certainly what I wanted to do with my life (I8).

That year also cleared up my future, in that it made me solidify what I wanted to do with my life (I4).

Adolescent participation in extracurricular activities often transitions into some level of participation into like activities during adulthood (Hanks & Eckland, 1975).

All of the individuals interviewed talked about how the State Officer experience enhanced skills in the areas of time and stress management, teamwork, goal setting, and problem solving, contributing to their *personal development* (Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin, 2003).

I think that year taught me how to be a responsible person and how you have to give some things up and prioritize (I1).

Taught me how to pick up the slack on some things and not expect anything back (I1).

I learned how to deal with other people (I2).

I really had to learn how to plan my time (I2).

I think I learned it (time management) better because I had to learn how to balance things at home and being with my family when you're there so little, (family obligations), and trying to work a little (I2).

The interactions with students and different people, you really learn how to be adaptable and roll with the punches (I2).

I developed greater levels of public speaking, and motivating people (I3).

Also, learning what the differences are between being a team and a group. I think that was truly defined for me during that year (I3).

That year taught me a lot about working with people and how you can't make everybody happy all of the time or else you'll just stress yourself out (I4).

I think it (training) helped us all realize the team concept. It is so important to learn to work as a team. Like now, I need to work as a team with my dad and brother. That year helped me learn about people's difference and how to work with them (I7).

It taught me how to work with different students and different age groups, advisors and teachers (I8).

Conclusions

The strongest association between this research population and previous research findings was related to the theme "connectedness to others". Holding a state level FFA office provided these youth with a sense of being a part of something larger than themselves. But more than that, the FFA becomes an extended "Ag Ed" family, of which the individuals interviewed believed that they were an important part. Many researchers link positive adolescent development to connectedness with other individuals, communities, and families (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1994; Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1994). Larson (1994) found that social integration is an important outcome of participation in organizations when adolescents interact with peers, adults, and community members. Dworkin, Larson, and Hansen (2003) found that by participating in these kinds of activities, young people begin to develop a tie their communities.

Within this study, the researchers found that holding a state level FFA office engages youth in self exploration, allows them to find their strengths and weaknesses and provides recognition for competence. This is in agreement with the findings of Erickson who, in 1963 & 1968 found that having a level of belief about one's own abilities or being recognized and rewarded for productivity and competence, are all associated with developing a sense of industry and competency.

Holding a state level FFA office allows youth to feel as if they control their own destiny, and in doing so makes them excited and ready for challenges that lie ahead of them. All of the individuals interviewed for this study felt as if they were better prepared for the future because of their time as state officers. This finding is in alignment with Patterson & Dishion (1995) and Sampson (1992) as found in CSR Inc., 1997 who found that when adolescents have a sense of control over their fate and believe that they can predict the outcomes of their decisions and actions, they are more likely to develop in a positive manner. Spencer, Kim &

Marshall (1987) found that this level of control is enhanced through the structure of organized youth organizations with the guidance of adults.

Within this study population, the researchers found that by participating in the State Officer program (an extracurricular activity), the young people interviewed were able to better define their futures. Participation in a state level FFA officer position helped these young people define their futures. Most often it leads to further participation in the agricultural community. This finding is similar to Hanks and Eckland (1975) who found that when adolescents participate in extracurricular activities, it often transitions into some level of participation into like activities during adulthood.

The researchers found that when young people took on state level FFA officer positions they self-reported that there was significant increase in the life skills areas defined by Hansen, Larson and Dworkin (2003). Hansen, et al., (2003), found that young people that participated in extracurricular activities reported a higher degree of personal development. Specifically, these individuals are developing positive life skills that will carry them throughout adulthood including goal setting, time management, teambuilding and communications skills. Participation in leadership activities significantly contributed toward life skill development of 4-H members (Seevers & Dormody, 1994a) and FFA members (Dormody & Seevers, 1994). Cantrell, Heinsohn, and Doebler (1989) noted a significant relationship of in the development of life skills in 4-H members in areas of leadership, personal development, and citizenship. Thus, this research is also in line with that of Hansen, et al., (2003).

Implications and Recommendations

Many researchers link positive adolescent development to connectedness with other individuals, communities, and families (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1994; Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1994). This level of community and connection to others (adults and peers) is the foundation in all types of youth organizations. Social integration is an important outcome available through participation in organizations when adolescents interact with peers, adults, and community members (Larson, 1994).

The opportunity to provide a level of confirmation on the impact of holding a state FFA level office is heartening and affirming. The findings in the study support existing literature in positive adolescent development, transference of leadership skills, and purposeful engagement in civic and community organizations and activities. The authors recommend this level of research be continued to assess the impact of leadership roles and offices at the chapter/local level.

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Biography

Dr. Jacklyn Bruce is an Assistant Professor of Youth and Adult Leadership Development at The Pennsylvania State University in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education. In this position, Dr. Bruce provides leadership for a variety of state level leadership development programming for the Pennsylvania 4-H program, maintains a rigorous research program in the area of transfer of leadership training and skills and an outreach program on working with teens for Pennsylvania's 4-H Youth Development Extension Agents.

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