

The Perceived Importance of Youth Educator's Confidence in Delivering Leadership Development Programming

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Abstract

A successful component of programs designed to deliver youth leadership development programs are youth educators who understand the importance of utilizing research-based information and seeking professional development opportunities. The purpose of this study was to determine youth educator's perceived confidence in leading youth leadership development programs. Study objectives included describing types of youth leadership development training received by youth educators, describing the number of hours of youth leadership development training received by youth educators, describing the perceived importance of youth leadership development training received by youth educators, describing youth leadership development training delivery mode preferences of youth educators, determining if the addition of hours of training received and the perception of the importance of youth leadership training improved the prediction of perceived confidence beyond that provided by differences in selected demographic variables (gender, age, years of service, education level, office location). The target population for this study was southern region 4-H youth development educators. Results of this study indicate that perceived importance of youth leadership development training is predictive of youth educator's confidence level in teaching youth leadership development.

Youth leadership development programs are a cornerstone of many youth serving organizations. The importance of youth leadership development to the core goals of programs is illustrated by its explicit inclusion in program logic models as well as its implicit presence when older youth serve in teaching and mentoring roles for younger youth. The success or failure of a youth leadership development program may be linked to many factors, one of which is the educator who leads the program. Youth educators influence program success in many ways. The focus of this study is to explore educators' prior experiences as well as their perceived confidence in delivering youth leadership development programming. Given the strong connections between a person's beliefs and behaviors, it is important to understand youth educators' beliefs within the context of their prior experiences (Ajzen, Joyce, Sheikh, & Cote, 2011). This study seeks to expand the literature about youth educators' youth leadership development training beliefs. It has practical implications for developing professional development trainings for youth educators as well as theoretical implications for advancing a deeper understanding of educators' core beliefs about training specifically related to youth

leadership development.

Literature Review

Youth leadership development is an approach that, over time, not only teaches about leadership, but allows youth the opportunity to apply leadership principles to their everyday lives (MacNeil, 2006). In youth-centered leadership development programs, youth aged 12 to 19 are exposed to experiences that intentionally focus on leadership principles that are relevant to adolescents (Barcelona, Hurd, & Bruggeman, 2011). The teaching and real world application of leadership principles may include serving as a mentor for younger youth, teaching a workshop, leading a meeting, speaking to a group, or conducting service-learning or community service projects.

Youth educators are responsible for delivering youth leadership programs that are both meaningful and engaging to youth (Grierman & Addington, 2008). In the Cooperative Extension service, youth educators are known as youth development extension agents. Effective youth development extension agents apply numerous research-based principles to their work by receiving training in youth leadership development; seeking professional development opportunities; and gaining confidence by building competencies (Astroth, Garze, & Taylor, 2004; Hartje, Evans, Killian, & Brown, 2008; Huebner, 2003; McElravy & Hasting, 2014).

The youth development field cannot simply hope to hire effective youth educators, as success of a program depends on the youth educator (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014). Training is a necessity to educate and empower youth educators to maintain a successful youth development program (Astroth, et al., 2004; Barcelona, et al., 2011; Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014; Huebner, 2003). Youth educators who are trained in key concepts that help in the development and implementation of a youth leadership development program will bring much more knowledge and confidence to the overall program (Posner & Kouzes, 1997; Ricketts & Rudd, 2002; Zeldin & Camino, 1999). When there is a lack of emphasis on staff training and development, the organization is at risk of its educators lacking confidence and skills in program development (Hartje, et al., 2008). This could lead to an increase in the rate of staff burnout and turnover within the organization (Hartje, et al., 2008).

An effective youth educator must possess a desire to seek professional development training (Walker, 2003). Those educators who have access to and attend professional development opportunities are more likely to continue working and are more effective in their work (Walker, 2003). It is critical to develop engaging opportunities for better professional development (Hartje, et al., 2008; Shantal, Halttunen, & Pekka, 2014). It is recommended that youth educators be given time for staff development, be given clear job expectations, and be allowed to build knowledge through professional collaborations (Hartje, et al., 2008; Walker, 2003). Youth educators want to increase knowledge and have an opportunity to process how the new knowledge gained can be applied to their program (Shantal, et al., 2014; Walker, 2003). Youth educators identified their favored training method as one that triangulates research, practice and effort (Walker, 2003).

In order to be an effective youth educator, one must have confidence in their capacity to lead (Zeldin & Camino, 1999). Effectiveness is how youth educators learn, refine, utilize, and practice leadership competencies within their work (Barcelona, et al., 2011). There is not one distinct trait or list of characteristics that identify effectiveness. It is the willingness of a person to identify and strengthen their areas of weaknesses through a variety of training modes (Barcelona, et al., 2011). Youth educators who reported training received as “helpful” also reported confidence in having competencies of effective youth educators, as compared to their counterparts who reported training as “not helpful” and not as confident (Hartje, et al., 2009). The curriculum that is utilized during youth leadership development training should be directly correlated to competencies found in effective youth educators (Astroth, et al., 2004). Those competencies include: understanding and applying research based principles to program development, adolescence development, leadership development; building youth and adult partnerships; and interacting with the youth they serve (Astroth, et al., 2004). Confidence building through trainings focused on competencies is the best way to develop effective youth leadership development educators (Posner & Kouzes, 1997).

While literature about training youth workers exists, there is a notable gap in the literature which specifically targets training youth educators about delivering youth leadership development programs.

Purpose and Study Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine youth educator’s perceived confidence in leading youth leadership development programs. The research objectives guiding this study included the following:

1. Describe types of youth leadership development training received by youth educators;
2. Describe the number of hours of youth leadership development training received by youth educators;
3. Describe the perceived importance of youth leadership development training received by youth educators;
4. Describe youth leadership development training delivery mode preferences of youth educators;
5. Determine if the addition of hours of training received and the perception of the importance of youth leadership training improved the prediction of perceived confidence beyond that provided by differences in selected demographic variables (gender, age, years of service, education level, office location).

Methods

Population and Sample. The target population for this study was southern region 4-H youth development county educators. The educators, known as youth development extension agents, are paid professionals employed by a state Cooperative Extension service. The agents all had some percentage of 4-H youth development job responsibility. The accessible population was youth educators whose emails were available on the list serve of each participating southern region state. Each state’s 4-H specialist/director sent out the survey on behalf of the researcher due to the sensitivity of sharing email list serves. Because of this, the researcher could not

ascertain the total number of individuals that received the survey. The study is classified as a one hundred percent sample of all those 4-H youth educators who had usable email addresses from the 13 southern states' 4-H list serves.

Table 1 includes a summation of selected demographic variables of the youth educators who work with youth leadership development programs in the southern region of the United States. The mean age of southern region youth educators was $M = 39.46$ ($SD = 11.770$). Most of the youth educator respondents were female ($n = 147$; 78.2%); 21.8% of survey respondents were male ($n=41$). The locations of southern region youth educator's offices were similarly split between urban and rural areas. There were slightly more youth educators working in farm, rural or towns under 10,000 ($n = 98$; 52.2%) than youth educators' in towns and cities over 10,000 ($n = 90$; 47.8%).

The majority of southern region youth educators had received a master's degree ($n = 112$; 59.6%). 34.6% of respondents indicated that their level of education received was a college degree ($n = 65$). 9.58 was the mean years of employment of southern region youth educators ($SD = 9.415$). More than half of respondents had less than ten years of experience ($n = 116$; 62.4%).

Table 1
A Summation of All of the Demographic Data

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Age^b	<i>n^a</i>	Percentage
Less than 40	100	53.5
40 and above	88	46.9
Total	188	100.0
Gender	<i>n^a</i>	Percentage
Male	41	21.8
Female	147	78.2
Total	188	100.0
Office Location	<i>n^a</i>	Percentage
Farm, Rural or Town Under 10,000	98	52.5
Towns and Cities 10,000 and Over	90	47.8
Total	188	100.0
Education Level Completed	<i>n^a</i>	Percentage
High School Diploma	9	4.8
Associates or Technical Degree	1	.5
College Degree	65	34.6
Master's Degree	112	59.6
Doctoral Degree	1	.5
Total	188	100.0
Years of Service^c	<i>n^d</i>	Percentage
0-9 years	116	62.4
10-19 years	37	19.9
20-29 years	25	13.4
30 or more years	8	4.3
Total	186	100.0

^a A total of 70 did not respond to this question in the survey.

^b The mean age of southern region youth educators was $M = 39.46$ ($SD = 11.770$). Southern region youth educators ranged in age from 20 to 64 as of January 1, 2012.

^c The mean years of employment of southern region youth educators was 9.58 years as an educator ($SD = 9.415$). The minimum years of employment reported were 0 (representing those with less than 12 months of service) and the maximum was 40 years.

^d A total of 72 did not respond to this question in the survey.

Instrumentation. After conducting a comprehensive search of existing instruments, none emerged as exclusively representative of what the researcher wanted to study. Deductive and inductive processes were used in creating the survey. During a review of youth development literature, important factors were uncovered in developing youth leaders that the researcher utilized to create portions of the survey. Additionally, a panel of experts in youth development and youth program evaluation offered their expert opinions to create the survey. A single item with a 4-point Likert-type response scale (very unimportant to very important) was used to assess youth educators' perception of the importance of training. Practicality suggested that a single item would have the most face validity and would reduce respondent resentment of the

questioning process (Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997). Additionally, prior research demonstrated the validity and reliability of single item scales (Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997). Exploratory factor analysis was used to assess the psychometric properties of the 9 items used to measure perception of confidence in leading youth leadership development programs. A single construct emerged explaining 71.5% of the variance. Cronbach's alpha measure of internal consistency was .955. Demographics were collected and included age, gender, office location, education level and years of service.

Data Collection. The online survey system SurveyMonkey[®] was used to administer the survey. Also, a hard copy and telephone survey methods were offered to participants to ensure all participants had access to the survey (Schaffer and Dillman, 1998). A month prior to the survey launch a short email was sent to all 13 southern region Cooperative Extension directors. The email asked that each state consider participating in the study. The email instructed the directors and administrators to indicate interest in their state participating in the study.

Distribution of the survey was done via email with participating states' 4-H program leaders or state extension directors. The email included a standard paragraph that explained the goals and objectives of the research project. The email also contained a link for respondents to access the survey as well. After one week from when the initial email was sent, the researcher followed up with a brief email reminder to program leaders and extension directors asking them to prompt non-respondents to complete the questionnaire.

Data Analysis. Study objectives one through four were descriptive in nature, thus frequencies and percentages were computed. Study objective five sought to determine the contribution of selected demographic variables, hours of youth leadership development training, and perceived importance of youth leadership development training to perception of confidence in leading youth leadership development programs. Hierarchical regression was used to allow control of the progression of the regression process (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Findings

Objective one sought to describe the types of youth leadership development training received by youth educators. When asked about the different types of youth leadership development training(s) respondents had attended while they were employed by Cooperative Extension, workshop training formats were reported most frequently ($n = 144$; 76.6%). District/area/regional trainings ($n = 128$; 68.1%); informal discussion training format ($n = 125$; 66.5%); and daylong conference ($n = 123$; 65.4%) were also frequently selected types of training attended. The responses that were chosen the least by respondents were study tours ($n = 9$; 4.8%), online module training formats ($n = 34$, 18.1%), and learning community/community of practice ($n = 40$, 21.3%). It was also interesting that four respondents reported not attending any type of youth leadership development training (2.1%). Results can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Types of Youth Leadership Development Training Attended by Youth Educators

Types of youth leadership development training attended	<i>n</i> ^a	Percentage
Workshop	144	76.6
District/Area/Regional Training	128	68.1
Informal Discussion	125	66.5
Day Long Conference	123	65.4
Multi-Day Conference	118	62.8
Self-Directed Learning (Books, Web Searches, Thinking)	107	56.9
Meeting	104	55.3
Webinar	95	50.5
Mentoring	90	47.9
Camp	79	42.0
Area/Regional/State Specialist	72	38.3
Graduate Class	72	38.3
Learning Community/Community of Practice	40	21.3
Teleconference Meeting	48	18.6
Online Module	34	18.1
Study Tour	9	4.8
None	4	2.1

^a A total of 70 did not respond to this question in the survey.

The purpose of objective two was to describe youth educators' number of hours of formal youth leadership development training received during the 2011-2012 year. As shown in Table 3, 59 respondents received between 1-5 hours of formal youth leadership development training (31.2%). The next largest group reported receiving 6-10 hours of training ($n = 48$; 25.4%), with 16 or more hours of formal youth leadership development training reported by the third largest group ($n = 41$, 21.7%). Twenty one respondents reported receiving no formal leadership development training in 2011-2012 (11.1 %). Lastly, 20 people reported receiving 11-15 hours of formal youth leadership development training (10.6%).

Table 3

Number of Hours Youth Educators Have Received of Formal Youth Leadership Development Training in 2011-2012

Number of Hours	<i>n</i> ^a	Percentage
16 or more hours	41	21.7
11-15 hours	20	10.6
6-10 hours	48	25.4
1-5 hours	59	31.2
None	21	11.1
Total	189	100.0

^a A total of 69 did not respond to this question in the survey.

Objective three sought to describe the perceived importance of youth leadership development training. Youth leadership educators were asked how important youth leadership development training was to them ($M = 3.22$; $SD = 1.199$). The results are shown in Table 4. The greatest percentage of respondents (77.3%) stated that youth leadership development training was somewhat important ($n = 24$; 12.7%) or very important ($n = 122$; 64.6%). The smallest percentage of respondents (22.7%) stated that youth leadership development training was somewhat unimportant ($n = 5$; 2.6%) or very unimportant ($n = 38$; 20.1%). The responses ranged from 1 = very unimportant to 4 = very important.

Table 4

Importance of Youth Leadership Development Training to Youth Educators

Level of Importance	n^a	Percentage
Very Unimportant	28	20.1
Somewhat Unimportant	5	2.6
Somewhat Important	24	12.7
Very Important	122	64.6
Total	189	100.0

Note. Youth leadership educators were asked how important youth leadership development training was to them ($M = 3.22$; $SD = 1.199$). The responses ranged from 1 = very unimportant to 4 = very important.

^a A total of 69 did not respond to this question in the survey.

Respondents were asked to identify their preferred youth leadership development training modes that the state 4-H department could offer as part of study objective four. Results can be found in Table 5. The mode with the most responses was a workshop training mode ($n = 134$; 70.0%). Other frequently selected training modes were day long training ($n = 102$; 54.0%) and webinars ($n = 92$; 48.7%). The training mode that received the least amount of responses was a study tour mode ($n = 21$; 11.1%). One respondent selected “none” as a training mode preference (.5%).

Table 5
Youth Leadership Development Training Type Preferences of Youth Educators

Types of Training Preferred to be Offered	<i>n</i> ^a	Percentage
Workshop	134	70.9
Day Long Training	102	54.0
Webinar	92	48.7
Distance Education	69	36.5
Online Modules	68	36
Conference	57	30.2
Self-Directed Learning	52	27.5
Multi-Day Training	48	25.4
Learning Community/Community of Practice	42	22.2
Graduate Class	27	14.3
Study Tour	21	11.1
None	1	.5

^a A total of 69 did not respond to this question in the survey.

For objective five, hierarchical regression was used to determine if the addition of hours of training received and the perception of the importance of youth leadership training improved the prediction of perceived confidence beyond that provided by differences in selected demographic variables. Ordinal independent variables were dummy coded for the analysis. Cases with missing data were excluded from the analysis. Three influential univariate outliers were identified and removed from the analysis. Multivariate outliers were assessed using a $p < .001$ criterion for Mahalanobis distance. Five cases with values exceeding the critical chi square value were deleted. Non-normality and negative skewness were discovered. In order to improve the normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity of residuals, perceived confidence was transformed subtracting each score from the constant (i.e. largest score plus one) and taking the square root. The highest correlation between predictors was $-.440$, indicating that multicollinearity was not an issue. This was further supported by VIF values which were well below 10 and tolerance statistics above 0.2. The assumption of independence of residuals was met given the Durbin-Watson statistic was $.076$.

Table 6 displays the unstandardized regression coefficients (*B*) and intercept, and the standardized regression coefficients (*B*) after entry of all independent variables. *R* was significantly different from zero at the end of step three, $R^2 = .15$ with 95% confidence limits from $.014$ to $.173$, $F(13, 150) = 2.104$, $p < .05$. The adjusted R^2 value of $.081$ indicates that approximately 8% of the variability in perceived confidence in teaching youth leadership is predicted by the perception that youth leadership development training is important.

Table 6

Hierarchical Multiple Regression for Perceived Confidence and Selected Independent Variables

Model	B	SE B	B	95% CI
(Constant)	2.992	.224		
Female	.005	.117	.003	[-.227, .237]
Age Under 40 vs. 40 and Above	.112	.127	.086	[-.139, .363]
Rural Office Location vs. Urban	-.031	.100	-.024	[-.229, .167]
Bachelor's Degree vs. Master's Degree	-.025	.115	-.018	[-.253, .203]
10-19 Years of Service vs. 0-9 Years	.119	.145	.074	[-.168, .406]
20-29 Years of Service vs. 0-9 Years	-.039	.176	-.021	[-.387, .309]
30 or More Years of Service vs. 0-9 Years	.167	.265	.052	[-.357, .691]
Received 1-5 Hours of Training vs. No Training	.215	.176	.155	[-.134, .563]
Received 6-10 Hours of Training vs. No Training	.185	.185	.124	[-.180, .550]
Received 11-15 Hours of Training vs. No Training	.099	.218	.048	[-.332, .530]
Received 16 or More Hours of Training vs. No Training	.322	.190	.201	[-.053, .696]
Training is Somewhat Important vs. Very Unimportant	.273	.169	.148	[-.061, .606]
Training is Very Important vs. Very Unimportant	.426	.128	.385*	[.273, .779]

* $p < .001$

Discussion

Perceived importance of youth leadership development training is predictive of youth educator's confidence level in teaching youth leadership. Youth workers who have a desire to increase knowledge are more likely to seek an opportunity to process how the new knowledge gained can be applied to their program (Walker, 2003). Having the desire to learn and apply the new knowledge to youth leadership education program development not only benefits the program, but the educator's professional development. State 4-H youth development trainings offered should be very intentional in what they offer to youth educators, offering trainings that triangulate research, practice and effort (Walker, 2003). Those youth educators who are seeking professional development and attending those opportunities are more likely to continue working and are more effective in their work (Walker, 2003). If youth educators' perceived importance of youth leadership development training is predictive of the educators' confidence level in teaching leadership to youth, then trainings should be developed around this concept. Preferred delivery modes should be noted by training coordinators, but more importantly, the focus of training development should be what makes the training important to educators. Purposeful training would include providing educators' a foundation of research-based knowledge; identifying ways to put the knowledge into practice; and giving an evaluation of educators' performance. To develop training that is perceived important to youth educators, coordinators can survey participants prior to developing training, look at the time frame in which trainings are offered, and build in youth leadership development training as part of a staffing plan for each educator who directly works with youth leadership development.

Southern region youth educators mainly attended face to face trainings, and they preferred this type of training opportunity. The consensus from these results is that, in the

southern region, youth leadership development training is being delivered through workshops, district/area/regional trainings, informal discussions, and day long trainings. When developing youth leadership development trainings, it is important to offer effective professional development opportunities. In the literature, many things have been identified to improve professional development opportunities for youth worker effectiveness (Hartje, et al., 2003). Suggestions include for youth workers to be given time for staff development, be given clear job expectations, and have an opportunity to build knowledge through professional collaborations (Hartje, et al., 2003; Walker, 2003). Trainers should be encouraged to not only offer a preferred training format to their attendees, but also market the training as one that is beneficial to youth educators' work.

The accuracy of the numbers of formal youth leadership development hours reported by respondents is questionable. The majority of respondents (42.3%) reported that they had received 5 or less hours of formal youth leadership development training from 4-H state staff. In an effort to maintain or increase a youth educator's confidence level of teaching youth leadership, should youth educators receive more than 0-5 hours of training during an entire year? On the job training is a significant predictor of a youth educator's job retention (Hartje, et al., 2008). To be confident in performing one's job, a youth educator must receive training. This training can also lead to an increase in confidence of one's ability to perform their job, thus increasing employment retention rates among new educators.

Implications

The primary roles for youth workers in the field of youth leadership development are to understand leadership concepts and to teach youth leadership to adolescents (Barcelona, et al., 2011). The 4-H youth development program is a research-based program where successful youth development professionals apply a multitude of theoretical principles to their work with youth (Huebner, 2003). Concern could be raised due to the lack of formalized training for adults on youth leadership and development and the low amount of hours being reported by respondents with 42.3% reporting receiving 5 hours or less.

As extension professionals, it is thought that one would possess a desire to increase their knowledge through trainings. If a youth educator does not value the importance of being knowledgeable about leadership theory, it presents an obstacle when teaching youth leadership development. (Walker, 2003). There is a potential problem as youth workers may not take the time to participate in youth leadership professional development opportunities. There is also the potential that the lack of value for youth leadership development training impacts the choices made when selecting teaching tools and curriculum. In order to be effective as youth educators teaching leadership, one must possess a confidence in ones' ability to lead (Zeldin & Camino, 1999). The greatest impediment to one's leadership development is the lack of confidence in skills and abilities (Posner & Kouzes, 1997). As a youth leadership educator, by recognizing personal values and beliefs, a sense of empowerment takes over that can lead to action (Posner & Kouzes, 1997). A knowledge base of leadership theories helps educators to be effective and may give them confidence in their role. Perceiving training opportunities as valuable and attending trainings are the most significant ways to build one's knowledge base.

Recommendations

When looking at youth educators who teach youth leadership, there are three recommendations from this study to be offered to the field. There is a need to further explore and understand how youth educators value job training; a need to develop professional development goals for which educators are held accountable; and a need to create a youth leadership development framework.

The need for training has been identified in the literature (Astroth, et al., 2004; Huebner, 2003). An important conclusion of this study is that youth workers who perceived training as important are more confident in teaching a youth leadership development program. It is recommended that additional research be conducted on how to increase the value youth educators place on youth leadership development training.

Another recommendation from this study is that youth educators be held responsible for developing a professional development goal that identifies weaknesses and includes a plan to improve upon those weaknesses (Astroth, et al., 2004). Staff development plans can be used with new employees and during evaluation periods for current staff as a professional development tool within the field (Astroth, et al., 2004). There should be some type of accountability built into the development of this goal. Statewide trainings and coursework can be tailored around areas of weaknesses educators have identified in their plans (Astroth, et al., 2004).

Lastly, it is recommended that a tested youth leadership program theory be created that leads to a practical framework to be used by youth educators. It is suggested that there be some type of framework to guide program development that contains both research based information with real world practice to encourage consistency. A framework can also ensure youth development principles are used to make program decisions. In conclusion, by having a practical framework that is research based, a formalized training for adults can be developed that supports what is being taught to the youth. With a formalized training linked to a practical framework, adults' perception of the training may be increased because of the connection between the training and framework.

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