Youth Leadership Development Through School-Based Civic Engagement Activities: A Case Study

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Abstract

Leadership development through a civic engagement activity in a local FFA chapter is explored. Through a case study design, researchers illuminate a project that encouraged youth leadership development through the creation and execution of a civic engagement project in their own local community. Holistically, FFA members viewed the project as a resounding success. Leadership development was experienced at many levels - individual, chapter, and community. FFA members felt particularly engaged when seen as partners with the community. This was accomplished through developing networks and participating in the planning, decision making, and execution of the project. The primary barrier cited was a lack of engagement from all chapter members. Implications include the important role civic engagement plays in youth leadership development, employing civic engagement projects to assist in developing higher level leadership skills, and the need for further research partnerships between career and technical student organizational members and local community citizens.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Civic engagement can take on many forms within the community, including volunteerism, participating as an elected official, and even involvement in civic and nonprofit organizations. More specifically, civic engagement can be defined

as the commitment of individuals to collectively identify an issue within their community, create and execute solutions to address the issue, and ultimately create and sustain interest in their community (National FFA Organization, 2006). A majority of today's youth (67%) indicated that they do not have adequate opportunities to serve their communities (America's Promise, 2009).

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

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

The National FFA Organization seeks to create opportunities for adolescents to engage in a variety of experiences, events and activities to develop leadership skills and provide interactions which lead to positive youth development. Civic engagement is a specific focus for the National FFA Organization (National FFA, 2006). The role of the advisor influences members and impacts the outcomes related to growth and development of the members. Although research examining leadership through FFA participation has been conducted, very little has examined the youth-adult interactions and the context in which leadership behaviors through civic engagement occur through FFA involvement.

Role of Youth in Society

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

Figure 1
A Spectrum of Adult Attitudes toward Youth

Youth as Objects   Youth as Recipients   Youth as Resources   Youth as Partners
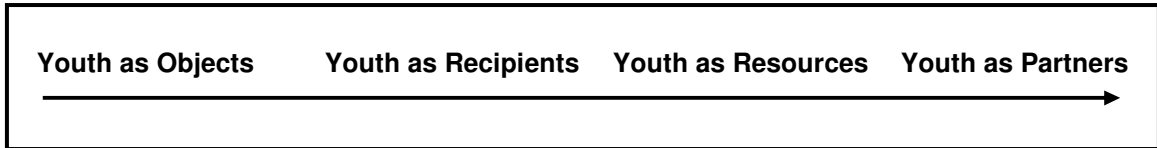
The view adults take toward young people tends to shape the nature of the leadership programs they design. In some programs, leadership is taught through formal routines that emphasize compliance. The leader is in charge and followers are objects to be directed. Many adults view teens as problems to be solved and not potential community leaders (Zeldin, et al., 2000; Gilliam & Bales, 2001). At other times, youth run activities designed by well-meaning adults gaining knowledge and skills for later life. Programs where young people are treated as Resources promote growth in knowledge, skills and self-esteem. Sometimes youth are treated as full partners with adults, therefore making decisions and taking actions targeted to solve a community need (Peiter, Nall, & Rennekamp, 2005).

Context of Leadership Activity

Ayres (1987) identified four key developmental phases through which individuals engaged in a leadership curriculum should progress (see Figure 2). First, individuals develop knowledge of themselves, who they are, what they believe, and how they function. Progressively they move to mastering skills for working with others, refining skills working with groups or organizations and finally focusing on leadership within the context of communities, systems, and society. As the arena in which leadership is being practiced continues to broaden, individuals use knowledge and skills learned at previous levels to be effective in the new context. The fourth level in this model focuses on community, recognizing that the ultimate goal of individual and group development is to serve the common good beyond the individual or organization.

Figure 2
Context of Leadership Activity

Self   Interpersonal   Groups and Organizations   Community and Society
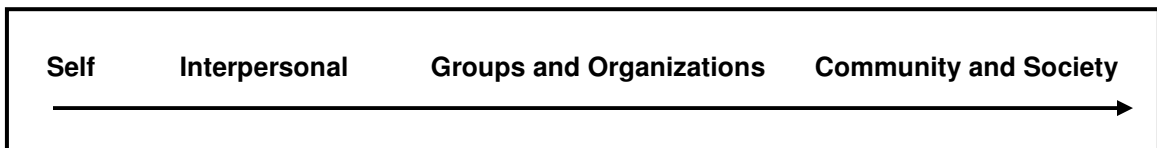
Leadership Development in Agricultural Education

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

Peiter Horstmeier and Nall (2007a) examined the role of youth in the context of FFA leadership activities. When examining the role of members engaged in leadership activities, FFA members agreed strongest that youth were treated as Partners as opposed to Objects, Recipients, or Resources in their FFA leadership activities. However, youth's partnership experiences focused on self-development leadership activities. In addition, Peiter Horstmeier and Nall (2007a) found a decrease in each level of the continuum when leadership experiences develop members' leadership skills from self to community. This indicates youth are provided less opportunities for involvement in leadership activities focusing on developing skills at a higher level, particularly (Peiter Horstmeier & Nall, 2007a).

Furthermore, Peiter Horstmeier and Nall (2007b) examined chapter leadership activities through qualitative methods. Youth participating in focus group interviews focused less on being treated as objects and instead concentrated the discussion on being resources and partners. Through this lens, participants could easily identify personal benefits from participation in FFA activities. In addition, students easily described the activities which helped them develop leadership skills in the context of understanding self. However, as the dialogue moved towards community it became more difficult for FFA members to describe benefits; in fact, students had the most difficulty identifying skill development in relation to community. Obviously, students are well attuned to how FFA involvement benefitted them on a personal basis, but lost the implications as they progressed towards community.

The theoretical framework of this study is based merging the two leadership theories of Lofquist (1989) and Ayers (1987) as created by Peiter, Rennekamp, and Nall (2005). This conceptual map displays the relationship between the context of chapter leadership activities and youth leadership member role, and is displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Conceptual Map for Theoretical Framework (Peiter, Rennekamp, & Nall, 2005).

Context of Activity	Community				
	Groups				
	Others				
	Self				
		Objects	Recipients	Resources	Partners

Role of Young People

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this case study was to examine the outcomes of a project from the National FFA Civic Engagement Initiative. More specifically, this research was intended to bring to light the thoughts, feelings and perceptions regarding civic engagement of the FFA members who developed and participated in this project. Therefore, the guiding research questions for this qualitative study were:

R1: How would you describe your chapter's civic engagement project?

R2: Would you consider your project a success or failure? Why or why not?

R3: Do you think this project benefited you as a person?

R4: Do you think this project benefited your FFA Chapter?

R5: Do you think this project benefited your community?

R4: Would you do this project again? Why or why not?

Methods and Procedures

This study used qualitative methods to gather and interpret data. Research subjects were chosen purposefully in order to maximize the potential of finding the issues that occur in the context under study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). For this study, participants were identified as FFA Chapter members receiving a Civic Engagement Initiative Grant funded by the National FFA Organization in the 2006-2007 academic year. Understanding that within naturalistic inquiry there is no concrete rule for sample size and that the key is to look more for rich information than volume (Erlandson, et al., 1993), this study focused on member role and context of leadership experiences within civic engagement leadership activities.

All chapter advisors in these grant funded chapters were contacted in Fall 2007. Criteria for participation with this case study included member availability and participation with the civic engagement initiative project. After examining type, level of youth involvement and one community engagement, this chapter was selected in order to highlight positive outcomes of a community engagement project. Their project focused on relief efforts and agricultural education with a community affected by Hurricane Katrina.

Upon selection of the FFA chapter for the study, structured interviews with chapter members took place in October 2007 at the National FFA Convention held in Indianapolis, Indiana. To assure accuracy of data, a tape recorder was placed in the center of the table and two assistants were seated at opposite corners to take notes. Researcher bias can never be fully removed; however, an awareness of personal biases were acknowledged and checked with peer reviewers. Biases include former membership of the FFA and professional experience with leadership development and the agricultural education profession. The researchers acknowledge that their experience in leadership development and agricultural education domains help to conceptualize the study including interview selection questions and interpretation of the data.

Five members involved in the civic engagement project were interviewed as a group for this case study. The welcome and all questions used were scripted to ensure all objectives were met. Questions for the chapter case study began with students explaining their civic engagement project. Students reflected on their experiences and described their involvement. Youth also identified the influence of other members, advisor(s), and community members in their civic engagement project experience.

Context of FFA member's leadership activities were also investigated through the case study interview. Questions were structured to examine activities from the context of leadership development with one's self, other individuals, groups, and communities. Follow-up questions were used to encourage dialogue and lead participants to discuss the role of the youth-adult interaction. For analysis of student responses, students were assigned a number code (1-4) and pseudo name. To maintain confidentiality, student responses were identified in the findings and are noted by their assigned pseudo name. Once the interview respondents were identified and interviews transcribed, content analysis was conducted.

Finally, because within the qualitative research paradigm the findings of a study cannot be stripped from the social context, the examples provided allows readers to draw their own decisions on the transferability of the findings to their own social construction (Hodder, 1994).

Results and Findings

The purpose behind this study was to illuminate a project that encouraged youth leadership development and civic engagement through the development and execution of their civic engagement project. As such, we will use the aforementioned study questions to provide detail, and will begin with a description of this chapter's civic engagement project:

The first research question sought to describe the civic engagement project. The project of choice was a week-long interactive day camp to teach kids about agriculture in their own local community. The *Agventures* camp was held in the summer of 2007 and began as a desire to help members of their community, who were Katrina victims. The students wanted to provide a learning opportunity, as well as an escape, for young, school-age children in the area; it was to assist parents by providing a learning *day care* of sorts for one week in the summer. The planning began shortly after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and culminated in the summer of 2007. The weeklong camp was divided into a number of learning workshops each day, with activities integrated into each. The school-age students were divided up according to age, and alumni and community members, as well as FFA members, taught the workshops. Ultimately it was seen as a community building exercise; this was clearly illustrated through different service learning projects done as a part of the camp, involving community members in the leadership of the program, and providing benefits for younger community members in the area.

A second study question asked students to describe whether they considered their civic engagement project to be a success or a failure. All the students involved expressed they felt their program was a resounding success, and they gave a wide

range of reasons why. On a personal leadership development level, several individuals stated the camp made them step outside of their comfort zones and make some quick decisions, particularly when addressing the facilitation and management of the camp. Other leadership skills developed included stress management and composure, organization, effective communications, and being an effective role model for children.

Addressing success from a broader standpoint, students also believed their program helped more holistically by working to develop ties within their FFA chapter and ultimately, their own community. Within the FFA chapter, students felt more united and that they had given something back to their community. As this project had Katrina victims as well as other families in mind, they were excited to have made a difference in the world.

A further benefit to the FFA chapter included promoting agriculture awareness throughout the community. Agriculture awareness is a major goal of the participating FFA chapter, and the subject matter of the camp (agriculture) helped to promote agriculture awareness to kids who may never have otherwise been exposed to this subject matter. This assisted in encouraging the development of links between agriculture and the community, and was particularly important in developing future agriculture stakeholders.

> Todd stated:
>> *Our chapter is also big on ag awareness and the elementary school and the younger kids because our city is starting to become urbanized, so we do some other ag awareness activities and it was really cool to get to see the kids to get to understand…milk comes from a cow and not the grocery store.*

> Alexis stated:
>> *Our chapter is very community oriented; we have done so many projects just specifically for the education of the children in our community and for senior citizens and the farmers.*

On a larger scale, students also mentioned several aspects that were successful at the community level. Partnering up with the community was instrumental in encouraging the development of relationships and networks between the students and community members. Other community members began to recognize the students as engaged within their community and as such, they began to appreciate and become more familiar with FFA as a youth leadership development organization. Becoming a more recognized and integral part of the community, providing agriculture knowledge and expertise as well as leadership development, and earning community support were other byproducts of facilitating a successful camp.

Alexis stated:

> *Definitely a success. It was so awesome because it's something where when we work with the community that's something you know that we really love to do…and the kids had so much fun.*

Joe stated:

> *It's great, like I said you're working with your community, not just with them, you are actually helping them.*

Sue stated:

> *Our community is like so supportive, it's amazing…we are always in the paper and on the news and so our community is very familiar with what we do, and what our organization stands for. They have always been supportive in everything we do and I think that's part of the reason why we got such a big turnout.*

While FFA members could clearly articulate the individual and groups successes that resulted from participating in this civic engagement project, they were equally astute in communicating the challenges they encountered. The primary challenge experienced as a part of this project was a wide-spread lack of engagement from members in the entire FFA chapter. While the whole chapter was encouraged to assist in the development and management of the *Adventures* camp, realistically this project was developed and put on by the officer team and a select group of other volunteers.

For the third research question, students were asked how this project benefited them, their FFA chapter, and the community. The benefits to the students involved, as well as the FFA chapter and community were expressed in a variety of ways. Students said a Partnership was developed with the community through working on this project, and the partnership has continued even after the project's culmination. Once communication of the project reached the community, community members began volunteering to help in a variety of roles. Through working with the FFA chapter on this project, many community individuals noted a better understanding of what FFA does beyond volunteering. Partnerships were also developed with other community organizations, including the local Waffle House, who provided supplies and volunteer hours toward the project.

Sue stated:

> *Working with the families and the community is something that just comes naturally to our chapter…we are like their support group and they're like ours. We can lean back on our community if we need help and they know we will help if they need it.*

Joe stated:

> *We also had a lot of our alumni and parents and community members come and help us. Our community is good for that…when we do something they want to help because they know it's going to reach a child somewhere.*

Alexis stated:

> *Our high school has a lot of organizations that are great organizations, but we are one of the main ones that get out into the community all the time, and it's not always for the same things.*

As an FFA chapter, students say they bonded and became much closer as a group. Several FFA members who were less involved before the project became much more involved in chapter activities post-project. Increased participation and motivation was perceived because students felt like they were giving something back as a group – they were partners with each other as well as their community.

Todd stated:

> *All together as a chapter we came up with all the activities…and the members were so excited because they helped plan it and put it on, and so they really wanted to help. We even had members from other chapters come and help, some close towns to us…*

Alexis stated:

> *Our chapter became more united, we had some students that just, you know, participated at the chapter level and they did stuff, but I mean they didn't go all out, and when they were able to go to the camp they were able to see what all we did, and able to bond with those kids and work hard.*

Sue stated:

> *In the past we worked with our community, and so we had a lot of members of our community well-acquainted with us and wanting to help… it was them and past members that…wanted to get back involved.*

The individual benefits for students were strongly tied with reasons that contributed to project success. Development of leadership skills, forming closer relationships FFA members, and networking throughout the community were all benefits cited as direct results of interaction while participating in the civic engagement program.

Todd stated:

> *Yes, definitely it was awesome. It helped me grow as a leader.*

Joe stated:

> *I think it helped everybody to deal with stressful situations…you really just had to compose yourself and be structured so it helped everybody be able to function.*

Alexis stated:

> *You have to learn how to bring, learn how to talk to (children)…with children you have to bring it down a lot and. so it tests your skills as a leaders and as a teacher to be able to do that.*

The final research question asked students if they would do their project again. They answered with a resounding yes. If funding was not received from original sources, students talked about using chapter funds or even doing fundraising projects in support of continuing the project. Students articulated how worthwhile the project was; one that gave back to the people of their community and helped strengthen their community in the process. Continuing to develop that partnership with their community was also seen as an important reason to continue doing civic engagement projects, even projects beyond this case study.

Sue stated:

> *It's way worth it. I would do it again, we will do it again. One thing I hope for the kids that came to our camp in that when they are filling our their schedules to go to high school that they will consider agriculture and consider what they can do just like what we did for them.*

Conclusions/Recommendations and Implications

FFA members can get excited about helping out their community, and are even more motivated when they have a stake in what's being done. Allowing them to take the lead on developing, planning, executing, and debriefing a project gets them involved and gives them ownership over the entire process. Encouraging service learning projects, linking them to community-based or leadership development courses, and ultimately developing more civic engagement opportunities like this for all Career and Technical Education students is a great way to begin encouraging civic engagement.

Leadership development at a personal level can also be encouraged through participation in civic engagement projects. Putting students in a real life situation where the decisions made determine the success of the program encourages them to think critically and more holistically. The same cause and effect relationships can be witnessed as found within other types of experiential learning, such as

service projects or internships. Aspects such as stress management, communication, being a good role model, and organization were just some of the skills students experienced through this civic engagement project.

To more fully capitalize on the benefits and advantages of student participation in a civic engagement project, there needs to be more engagement from the entire chapter. Involvement and participation from the officer team is critical in creating a cohesive unit; however, it is important to motivate chapter members to also contribute to the overall project. Encouraging students to engage within their community is important for all members; it is not just those who hold visible leadership roles within the organization. As educators, by supporting students to become more civically engaged at a younger age, we make the potential for civic engagement later in life more feasible.

For civic engagement projects to be successful, it is important for the members to be seen as partners with the entity they are serving (in this case, the community). FFA members expressed a strong partnership with community volunteers, FFA alumni, and even other community groups throughout the project. Contact and communication were initiated by the FFA members; however, due to a strong history of collaboration many of the members said they knew they could count on active participation from community members. This activity supports the leadership role and context theoretical framework as established by Peiter, Rennekamp, and Nall (2005).

However, participation from the community is not all that is necessary for effective civic engagement projects. As Loftquist (1989) stated earlier, to make the most effective use of partnerships, youth need to share leadership and decision-making roles with the adults. From the beginning planning stages to the final facilitation, FFA chapter members were encouraged to take a strong role in planning and decision-making. This illustrates several points. Students who are encouraged to take major roles within the planning, facilitation and execution of a project are not only going to be more motivated for future civic engagement possibilities, but their own leadership skills are also being developed through this process. This helps to push student development into another level – from self and interpersonal leadership skill development into the group and even community leadership skill development. As students take on more responsibility and move into more complex leadership situations such as those within a group or community then different skills are tested and required to be successful. Through the experiential learning from this project, many students pushed themselves out of their comfort level and were encouraged to develop more of the complex leadership skills.

In the end, civic engagement projects should not only be looked upon as opportunities for personal development, but should also be noted for their

contribution to the community as a whole. For rural communities to remain there is a call for local leadership to take charge and guide the way into the future. Leadership development must occur, not only with adults but also with young people, so they will be prepared to meet the challenges of the future within their schools and communities. A new generation of leaders is needed to build local partnerships for managing change in today's diverse communities (Tabb & Montesi, 2000).

Leadership skill development is particularly important when it is operationalized through civic engagement. Strong leadership experiences leads to strong communities. By encouraging more youth driven civic engagement projects such as these within FFA or any Career and Technical Education student organization, the link between leadership skill acquisition and actually applying the leadership skill is created. When members use the leadership skills they have acquired to become civically engaged, they not only build leadership skill, but also improve their local communities through the use of various skills.

Designed as a case study, this analysis was meant to illuminate the details surrounding this specific civic engagement project conducted by these local FFA members. While the results, conclusions, and implications are meant to be useful in illustrating the value of civic engagement projects to youth leadership development, they are not in any way meant to be generalized across any other situations or audiences.

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