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4-H State Leadership Boards: Measuring Leadership Life Skills and Youth-Adult Relationships

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This descriptive correlational study sought to measure the development of leadership life skills and the perceptions of youth-adult relationships by youth serving on the Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards. Members of the 2013-2014 Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards (N = 153) served as the population for the study. A total of 99 responses were collected yielding a response rate of 65%. Board members reported high levels of youth involvement, adult involvement, and youth-adult interaction. Based on the high levels of involvement and interaction, youth-adult partnerships were present on the Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards. Future research should be conducted to determine if there is a difference in youth who serve on the Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards and other 4-H members who do not serve on the boards. No statistically significant relationship existed between the development of leadership life skills and youth-adult partnerships. Future research should investigate the subject deeper to determine why the two variables had no significant relationship in this study.

Keywords: leadership life skills, youth-adult relationships, 4-H, state leadership board

Introduction

The 4-H program embraces positive youth development (PYD) principles to foster skills that encourage youth to become productive and engaged citizens (Lerner et al., 2005). PYD focuses on three broad developmental tasks that involve acquiring knowledge and skills in building relationships, becoming a productive citizen, and applying soft skills like communication, goal setting, and cooperation in an everyday context (Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 2000). The concept of youth “as stakeholders in their own development” has grown exponentially over the past 50 years, and collaborative efforts between adults and youth to implement programs and activities have evolved from simply youth input to youth-adult partnerships (Pittman, 2000).

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Youth-Adult Partnerships

By definition, youth-adult partnerships involve youth and adults working collaboratively and continuously on issues of mutual interest (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013). One of the earliest models of youth-adult partnerships sought to describe *how* youth and adults worked together. The Continuum of Youth-Adult Relationships model has five levels that are independent and nonhierarchical (Jones & Perkins, 2004). The levels include (a) adult-centered leadership, (b) adult-led collaboration, (c) youth-adult partnership, (d) youth-led collaboration, (e) and youth-centered leadership. Each level explicates the degree of autonomy exercised by youth. At the lowest level, adult-centered leadership, youth have relatively low autonomy, while at a high level, youth-centered leadership, youth are very autonomous. True youth-adult partnerships, which involve shared decision making between youth and adults, are at the center of the continuum. The focus on shared decision making in youth-adult partnerships continues to be a strong thread in the research (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014; Cater, Machtmes, & Fox, 2013; Zeldin et al., 2013; Zeldin, Krauss, Collura, Lucchesi, & Sulaiman, 2014).

Life Skills

Youth development organizations have focused on the life skills that youth gain by participating in programs (Seevers, Dormody, & Clason, 1995). Life skills are considered essential for youth to be productive citizens in today's society (Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992). Research has shown that being involved in programs like 4-H or FFA increases the perceived gain of life skills (Ciocanel, Power, Eriksen, & Gillings, 2017; Ellsworth et al., 2017). Further, studies have recommended that youth participate beyond just community involvement to regional and state involvement also (Seevers & Dormody, 1994).

Leadership Life Skills

Early studies of leadership life skills development laid the groundwork for future studies with a focus on developing skills to make decisions and build relationships, to gain self-awareness, to perform well within a team, and to communicate well with others (Bruce, Boyd, & Dooley, 2004). Participation in programs like 4-H and FFA has served as an independent variable in many studies. The association between program participation and leadership life skill development is often significant and suggests that as program participation increases, leadership life skills increase (Miller & Bowen, 1993; Rutherford, Townsend, Briers, Cummins, & Conrad, 2002; Seevers & Dormody, 1994; Waguespack, 1988; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997). Intensity of participation has also been positively linked with perceived leadership abilities (Rutherford et al., 2002), while positional leadership is another variable associated with higher perceived leadership abilities (Carter & Spotanski, 1989). More recent research has begun to probe how youth view leadership. One emerging theme centers around the perspective that youth leadership is less positional and more personal (Mortensen et al., 2014). This perspective suggests that youth recognize both formal and informal leadership roles as important.

Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards

Youth-adult partnerships are one avenue used by the Louisiana 4-H Youth Development program to promote the development of leadership life skills among the participants of six Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards. The Louisiana 4-H program emphasizes youth-adult partnerships as one strategy for increasing youth leadership skills (Moran et al., 2009). The Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards have had a presence in Louisiana in some capacity for the past 25 years (Fox, 2010). One goal of the program is to offer a place for youth to work together toward a shared goal. Through their work, youth board members develop leadership skills while giving back to and influencing change in the state 4-H program, their local 4-H programs, and their communities. Louisiana has six boards that each focus on a specific program area. The six boards are (a) Citizenship Board; (b) Executive Board; (c) Fashion Board; (d) Food and Fitness Board; (e) Science, Engineering, and Technology (SET) Board; and (f) the Shooting Sports Ambassadors. To serve on a state leadership board, youth must be a 4-H member in grades 9-12. They may gain membership to a state board through either peer election or selection by application. Board members are exposed to an abundance of opportunities to engage in youth-adult partnerships and play an active leadership role in the Louisiana 4-H program (Fox, 2010). Each board is characterized by a culminating event or program that the youth members work together to plan, implement, and execute. In addition to a culminating event, each board participates in other activities throughout the year that range from organizing service-learning projects to being spokespeople for the Louisiana 4-H program.

Previous research has suggested that board members felt better able to think independently, developed some leadership skills, and expanded their interpersonal communication skills (Fox, 2010). While individual boards have completed exit surveys, no comprehensive study of all six boards has been conducted.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this descriptive, correlational study was to measure the development of leadership life skills and the perceptions of youth-adult relationships by youth serving on the Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards. Specific study objectives included:

- 1) Measure the development of leadership life skills in terms of the State Leadership Boards as measured by the Youth Leadership Life Skills Development Scale.
- 2) Measure the perceptions and experiences of youth on the State Leadership Boards in terms of youth-adult relationships as measured by the Involvement and Interaction Rating Scale.
- 3) Determine if a relationship exists between the development of leadership life skills and youth-adult partnerships for youth on the State Leadership Boards.
- 4) Determine if a relationship exists between the development of leadership life skills and select demographic characteristics of youth on the State Leadership Boards.

Methods

Population and Sample

The target population for this census study included Louisiana 4-H State Board Members from all six boards serving during the year 2013-2014 ($N = 153$). Responses were collected from 99 youth. The majority of the respondents were white (88.9%) females (59.6%) who reported living on a farm or in a rural area (43.4%). Respondents ranged in age from 15 to 20 years old ($M = 17.16$, $SD = 1.04$), had been a 4-H member from 3 to 10 years ($M = 8.01$, $SD = 1.50$), and had served on a state board from 1 to 5 years ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 1.03$). Almost half of the respondents reported they were present at board sponsored events all of the time (46.5%).

Data Collection

The researcher collected responses from the target population ($N = 153$) through an online questionnaire using Dillman, Smyth, and Christian's (2009) Tailored Design Method. The target population was contacted via a Qualtrics-generated email that described the purpose of the study and contained a link to the questionnaire. The nonrespondents at the end of weeks one, two, and three were contacted as follow up. At the end of week four, a random sample, i.e., 20% of the remaining nonrespondents ($n = 13$) were contacted via telephone to complete the questionnaire to control for nonresponse error. To guarantee that the results were representative of the target population, an independent samples t -test was used to compare respondents and nonrespondents. No differences were found between respondents and nonrespondents. As such, it was concluded that the sample was representative of the Louisiana 4-H State Board Members population and nonrespondents ($n = 13$) were combined with respondents ($n = 86$) for a total of 99 useable responses and a response rate of 65%. The study was approved by the LSU Agricultural Center Institutional Review Board.

Instrumentation

Two instruments were used in this study. The first was the Youth Leadership Life Skills Development Scale (YLLSDS; Seevers et al., 1995) which included 30 items measuring an individual's perceptions of his or her development of leadership skills like communication, decision-making, getting along with others, learning skills, management skills, understanding yourself, and skills in working with groups as a result of program participation. Responses were collected using a 4-point Likert-type scale (0 = *no gain*, 1 = *slight gain*, 2 = *moderate gain*, 3 = *a lot of gain*) that referred to how much change had occurred in the development of the specific leadership skill. The following interpretative scale was used: 0.00 - 0.50 = no gain, 0.51 - 1.50 = slight gain, 1.51 - 2.50 = moderate gain, 2.51 - 3.00 = a lot of gain. Cronbach's alpha reliability for the 30 items of the YLLSDS was 0.98.

The second instrument used in the study was the Involvement and Interaction Rating Scale (Jones & Perkins, 2005). This scale has 38-items that include bipolar statements to measure the participants' perception of youth-adult relationships. An example of two bipolar statements is "Adults appear uneasy and afraid of youth" and "Adults seem comfortable working with youth." The instrument is a 10-point scale that assesses youth involvement, adult involvement, and youth-adult interaction. The scale ranges from 1-2 = *very poor*; 3-4 = *poor*; 5-6 = *fair*; 7-8 = *good*; and 9-10 = *excellent*. Higher scores on the rating scale indicate greater levels of youth-adult partnership. Cronbach's alpha reliability for the youth involvement subscale was 0.83, for the adult involvement subscale was 0.84, and for the youth-adult interaction subscale was 0.87.

Data Analysis

The data analyses for research objectives one through three involved computing descriptive statistics (e.g., means, percentages, frequencies, and standard deviations). Research questions four, five, and six were analyzed using Spearman rho. The strength of relationships was determined using Davis' (1971) coefficient conventions: $r = .01$ to $.09 =$ *Negligible*, $r = .10$ to $.29 =$ *Low*, $r = .30$ to $.49 =$ *Moderate*, $r = .50$ to $.69 =$ *Substantial*, and $r \geq .70 =$ *Very Strong*. A statistical significance level of .05 was established *a priori* for all statistical tests.

Results

Objective one sought to measure the development of leadership life skills in terms of the State Leadership Boards as assessed by the Youth Leadership Life Skills Development Scale. The overall construct mean was 2.55. The two items with the highest means were (a) *As a result of my 2013-2014 Louisiana 4-H State Board experience I: Get along with others* ($M = 2.71$, $SD = .556$) and (b) *Respect others* ($M = 2.70$, $SD = .543$). The two items with the lowest means were (a) *As a result of my 2013-2014 Louisiana 4-H State Board experience I: Am sensitive to others* ($M = 2.33$, $SD = .958$) and (b) *Trust other people* ($M = 2.20$, $SD = .869$).

Objective two sought to measure the perceptions and experiences of youth on the State Leadership Boards in terms of youth-adult relationships as assessed by the Involvement and Interaction Rating Scale. Youth were asked questions to rate their experiences on the state boards according to youth involvement indicators, adult involvement indicators, and youth-adult interaction indicators. Mean values for each construct are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Board Members' Youth Involvement, Adult Involvement, and Youth-Adult Interaction

Item	M	SD
Youth Involvement	7.70	2.27
Adult Involvement	7.87	2.44
Youth-Adult Interaction	8.10	2.38

Note: Real limits: 1.00 to 5.49 = Low, 5.50 to 10 = High.

Objective three sought to determine if a relationship existed between the development of leadership life skills and youth-adult partnerships for youth on the State Leadership Boards. The analyses revealed that there was no significant relationship between the development of leadership life skills and youth-adult partnerships (see Table 2).

Table 2. Relationship Between Development of Leadership Life Skills and Youth-Adult Partnerships

	Youth Involvement	Adult Involvement	Youth-Adult Interaction
Leadership	.085	.087	.030

Note: Spearman Rho Correlation Coefficient; * $p < .05$.

Objective four sought to determine if a relationship existed between the development of leadership life skills and members' age, presence at board sponsored events, and number of years they served on a state board. The analyses revealed a positive and low relationship between leadership life skills development and age ($r_s = .27$), and leadership life skills and how often respondents were present at board sponsored events ($r_s = .29$). In addition, leadership life skills and how many years the respondent had served on a state board were found to be related moderately and positively ($r_s = .30$; see Table 3).

Table 3. Relationship Between Development of Leadership Life Skills and Selected Demographic Characteristics

	Age	Years on a State Board	Presence at Board Sponsored Events
Leadership	.28*	.30*	.29*

Note: Spearman Rho Correlation Coefficient; * $p < .05$.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

Overall, 4-H members who served on the Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards perceived they gained "a lot" of leadership life skills from their board involvement. Specifically, members perceived that serving on the board assisted them with the ability to get along with others and respect others. This finding is similar to the results of Bruce et al. (2004) who concluded that 4-H members get along with others as a result of serving in a leadership role. Board members perceived they developed a high level of leadership life skills through service. Similarly, Seevers and Dormody (1994) found that there was a positive relationship between 4-H youth participating in leadership activities and an increase in the development of leadership life skills.

4-H members on the Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards reported high levels of youth involvement, adult involvement, and youth-adult interaction. Based on the high levels of involvement and interaction, youth-adult partnerships were present on the Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards according to the Continuum of Youth-Adult Relationships (Jones, 2006). No statistically significant relationship existed between the development of leadership life skills and

youth-adult partnerships for youth on the Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards. However, there was a relationship between leadership life skills and age, years served on a state board, and how often members were present at board sponsored events. As a member's age, years served on a state board, and attendance at board sponsored events increased, so did his/her perceived gain in leadership life skills development.

One limitation of this study was its cross-sectional design. Data were collected from board members who served on one of the boards during the time period from June 2013 to June 2014. Another limitation of the study was that no comparison group of nonboard members was used to determine if differences existed between the groups.

Recommendations for Practice

Youth development professionals who work with youth leadership boards should create opportunities for targeted leadership life skills development. Even though this study explored the perceived gain of leadership life skills, there was no explanation as to how the skills were developed. Directed trainings on leadership skills, theories, and practices could increase the gain of leadership life skills (Carter & Spotanski, 1989; Seevers & Dormody, 1994).

The boards should continue the current practices of youth-adult partnerships. In addition, board sponsors could increase recruitment of varying adults to be a part of the boards. Jones and Perkins (2006) found that females participating in youth programs were more positive toward their experiences because they had female role models. Role models who relate to youth are a key component in youth-adult partnerships (Jones & Perkins, 2006). Similar to youth members, it is unclear what training adult sponsors are given when they agree to serve as sponsors. Training and instruction should be given to adult sponsors on youth-adult partnerships and mentoring relationships.

The population of the study and the total population of 4-H members are not concurrent with one another in terms of race or gender (Louisiana 4-H Youth Development Department, 2015). Youth development professionals could vary the recruitment efforts of potential board members to include a more diverse pool of applicants. This could include widening the range of diverse adult sponsors. Many times, youth feel more connected to adults of similar backgrounds as themselves (Rhodes, Liang, & Spencer, 2009). Cano and Bankston (1992) found that the presence of minority leaders influenced the 4-H program's ability to recruit and retain minority youth.

Board sponsors and leaders should continue the practice of yearly assessments to gauge the impact of serving on the Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards. The assessments should evaluate if the boards are producing outcomes that coincide with the noted goals of the program.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should be conducted to determine if there is a difference in youth who serve on the Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards and other 4-H members who do not serve on the board. This study did not take into account the varying other leadership opportunities to which the youth were exposed and how that might affect the findings. This would provide better insight into the outcome of being a member on a state board.

In addition, future research should be conducted to determine if the presence of a youth-adult partnership relates to the development of leadership life skills. Previous research concluded that youth-adult partnerships have positive impacts on youth in many ways, including skill-building (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000). This study looked at the aforementioned relationship but did not account for other external variables, such as club context (e.g., rural, urban) or club type (e.g., in-school club, project club, special interest club). Future research could delve more deeply into the subject to determine why the two variables had no significant relationship in this study.

As mentioned, this study did not explore the training or lack of training to which the board members were exposed on the subjects of leadership life skills and youth-adult partnerships. Future research should assess training that is provided and its impact on the gain of skills or competencies.

Finally, research on females in leadership positions and the transition from high school to the workforce would be an interesting subject of exploration. A larger percentage of youth serving on the Louisiana 4-H State Leadership Boards was female. However, in the workforce, people in leadership positions are mostly male (Warner, 2014). While women comprise over 50 percent of professional positions, they hold less than 15 percent of executive positions, comprise less than 10 percent of top earners, and hold fewer than 5 percent of Fortune 500 chief executive officer positions (Warner, 2014). Research should be conducted to see if other organizations have the same majority of female youth in leadership roles and to determine why shifts in leadership roles occur as females enter the workforce.

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