The Sharpening Stone: A Phenomenological Study of the Impact of a 4-H State-Level Leadership Role on Youth Leadership and Life Skills Development

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4-H is the largest youth organization in the US, with six million participants. 4-H contributes to developing positive leadership and life skills (LLS). The purpose of the research reported here was to discover the essence of LLS development of 4-H youth while serving as an officer for the Georgia State Board of Directors. The population was all 4-H state-level leaders who served from 2016 to 2018 (N = 18, n = 12). A qualitative phenomenological research design was used to describe what and how participants experienced being in a state-level leadership role, resulting in the essence of participants' lived experiences in the context of LLS development. Face-to-face interviews led to textural and structural descriptions of what participants experienced, resulting in the essence of the experience as a sharpening stone. Participants gained LLS in the areas of serving others, building confidence, open-mindedness, self-awareness, motivation, communication skills (speaking, listening, writing), personal agency, transfer of learning, and solidified college and career goals. Peer-influence was the most important factor in shaping participants' choices to belong to 4-H and strive for leadership roles. A peer affiliated with 4-H and serving as a leader deeply inspired youth to run for a state-level leadership role. Adult and peer influence served as the "honing process" to cultivate and sharpen LLS.

Keywords: positive youth development, leadership skill, life skill, 4-H state-level leadership role

Introduction

4-H is the largest youth development organization in the US, with six million participants in nearly every county of the United States (National 4-H Council, 2016). 4-H Council initiated a *Grow True Leaders Campaign* to "empower young people with the life skills to thrive in life today and career tomorrow" (National 4-H Council, 2016, p. 5). A primary goal of 4-H activities is positive youth development (PYD) which refers to "an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive" (Positive youth development, n.d., para 1). Leadership and life skills (LLS) are a subset of PYD. Miller (1976) defined LLS as decision-

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making, building positive relationships, learning, management, understanding self, group processes, and communication skills.

The National Research Council (2012) advised youth to participate in 21st century skill development (communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and self-management) needed for adult roles. 4-H provides leadership programming to advance participants' knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward mature and responsible citizenship (Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992). One such program is the *Georgia State Board of Directors* leadership program, which recruits nine youth per year to serve in a state-level leadership role. Participants represent 4-H at state-level events as ambassadors, role models, and recruiters at major functions for one year.

Youth leadership programs have been evaluated to determine their effectiveness and impact on PYD and LLS using a variety of methods (Arnold, 2018; Lerner & Lerner, 2013; Sage, Vandagriff, & Schmidt, 2018; Tassin, Higgins, & Kotrlik, 2010; Weybright et al., 2016), but few have reported on impacts from participants' unique perspectives as a lived experience using phenomenological methods. Therefore, the need for this study was to document the impact of serving as a state-level leader on participants' knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward responsible citizenship using a phenomenological research design.

Review of Literature

Positive youth development (PYD) has been a goal of 4-H from inception (Arnold, 2018; Boyd et al., 1992; Bruce, Boyd, & Dooley, 2004; Lerner & Lerner, 2013; Moran, 2015; Weybright et al., 2016). Leadership and life skills (LLS) are a subset of PYD and were defined as *cognitive skills* for analyzing and using information including decision making, critical thinking, and planning; *personal skills* for developing personal agency and managing oneself; and *inter-personal skills* for communicating and interacting effectively with others including building positive relationships, group processes, and collaboration (Miller, 1976; National Research Council, 2012).

Within the 4-H context, experts refer to PYD as a developmental process that underpins youth programming philosophy with the goal of fostering healthy psychosocial development of youth (Lerner & Lerner, 2013; Weybright et al., 2016). Important approaches to enhancing LLS and PYD are known as the five Cs of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring for others, together leading to the outcome of developing strong contributions to self and others. Lerner et al. (2005) implied that youth who embodied the five Cs would be at lower risk for personal, social, and behavioral problems throughout their lives.

Many studies have evaluated the impact of youth leadership programs on participants' LLS development. In general, the longer individuals served in 4-H leadership roles, the stronger their LLS skills became. The type of role held was also a significant factor in LLS development gains, for example, president, vice-president, or secretary roles resulted in measurable changes,

whereas no changes were observed for other officer roles (Tassin et al., 2010). Length of time serving in officer roles was also found to have a positive relationship with LLS (Boyd et al., 1992; Fitzpatrick, Gagne, Jones, Lobley, & Phelps, 2005; Fox, Shroeder, & Lodl, 2003; Harris, Stripling, Stephens, & Loveday, 2016; Tassin et al., 2010; Ward, 1996). In these studies, longer-serving 4-H alumni were more accepting of people who were different, engaged in community service, made healthy choices, and increased their job skills by improving their self-esteem, ability to work in teams, assume responsibility, plan and organize events, keep records, and set goals. 4-H enhanced members' sense of responsibility, ability to handle competition, and ability to meet new people.

Moran (2015) examined a 4-H state-level leadership program and found similar results in that the longer participants were involved with 4-H activities, the greater their LLS development. Bruce et al. (2004) studied former state 4-H council participants for LLS gain. Participants demonstrated gains in self-growth, self-discovery, and relationship building.

Weybright et al. (2016) found teens experienced beneficial outcomes when working in partnership with adults as team teachers to advocate for health. Teens experienced mastery, independence, and generosity after participating in an adult-youth mentoring program. Youth-adult partnerships were found to be very effective in supporting development of the five C's among participants (Lerner et al., 2005).

Conceptual Framework

Hastings, Barrett, Barbuto, and Bell (2011) developed a paradigm model of how youth leaders develop through community engagement to explain how youth developed leadership attributes within the context of community engagement. Youth bring social resources, such as connections and previous experiences, and are influenced by an adult champion with sufficient resources to support development activities. According to the paradigm model (Hastings et al., 2011, p. 22), youth, working with a supportive adult, identify a purpose or function, contribute their views, and generate ideas to solve community problems, for example, serving on a board. This type of engagement within a community project creates social capital that is converted into individual leadership skills such as greater ownership, responsibility, empowerment, confidence, and self-awareness. These skills and attributes contribute to community development by building upon the group's leadership potential, perpetuating new connections, shifting attitudes and assumptions for positive change, including viewing youth as positive influencers in community development.

Within Hastings et al. paradigm model, youth engagement was predicated by a significant adult who invited youth to participate in a community project. The significant adult was someone who valued youth as equal contributors and expressed the notion that all must get involved to help the community improve. According to the paradigm model, intervening conditions for successful youth engagement were an adult champion who facilitated meetings and had an inclusive stance

toward youth involvement, possessed resources to execute projects, and created a supportive group environment for expressing ideas in meetings. Because of these conditions, youth engaged in community development projects that resulted in positive psychosocial gains. The community gained by capitalizing on youth leadership potential and developing new connections with a previously underutilized stakeholder group. Adults gained positive perceptions of youth as valuable and contributing participants of the community.

This theory helps to explain how participants in this study developed leadership skills in the context of community engagement. Youth successfully exerted their influence within the community through participating in real-world activities that lead to transfer of learning (Gagné & Briggs, 1979). Adult mentorship, support, and structure are also critical factors for building positive youth outcomes (Larson, 2006; Weybright et al., 2016).

Purpose and Methods

The purpose of the study was to discover the essence of how youth experienced leadership and life skill development while serving as a 4-H state-level leader using a type of qualitative research design known as phenomenology (van Manen, 2014). The population for the study was all participants in the *Georgia State Board of Directors* leadership program from 2016 to 2018 ($N = 18$). Twelve participants completed the study ($n = 12$).

Phenomenology seeks to understand *what* and *how* participants experience a *central phenomenon* by reflecting on essential themes underpinning their lived experiences (van Manen, 2014). The central phenomenon was serving for one year as a youth leader at the state level. Data were collected through in-depth, one-hour, face-to-face interviews with participants using a minimally structured protocol to allow participants to report their experiences during free-flowing conversation. The protocol consisted of seven main questions and 39 subquestions. Sample questions from the protocol were "Describe your experiences as a 4-H member (year joined, offices held, etc.);" "Describe your experiences as a 4-H state-level leader;" "Describe the leadership training you received as a part of the *Georgia State Board of Directors* leadership program;" and "What were some of the highlights of the program?"

The researcher interpreted the meaning of their lived experiences by reducing the interview transcripts into significant statements (sentences from the original transcripts that hold meaning for understanding the research questions) and combining them into substantial themes. A textural description of *what* participants experienced is followed by a structural description of *how* participants experienced being a state-level leader, leading to the *essence* statement (van Manen, 2014). The essence statement is a concluding statement as to what and how participants experienced the phenomenon of interest, typically framed as a metaphor (van Manen, 2014). This study builds on the Hastings et al. (2011) paradigm model to further identify variables that lead to positive youth development.

Analysis consisted of the researcher reading through the transcripts and coding or highlighting each significant statement within the transcript. The researcher then clustered the 545 significant statements to generate themes to elucidate how participants experienced the phenomenon (horizonalization), concluding in the essence of the lived experience (van Manen, 2014). The themes were supported with participants' quotes to enrich the descriptions while explaining what and how they experienced the *Georgia State Board of Directors* leadership program.

Quality and validity were addressed using a progressive protocol of engaging participants in the research process throughout the study (conceptualizing research questions, negotiating methods, peer-debriefing, and member-checking findings) and negotiating reciprocity in reporting with the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2010). An audit trail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was created by keeping extensive notes of all research activities and copies of all documents generated during the research for future reference.

Tracy's (2010) criteria for quality were addressed in identifying a worthy topic for study, using "sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex" (p. 840) theoretical constructs, data, time in field, and analysis processes. Sincerity was achieved through self-reflexivity (considering my personal experiences and biases) about subjective values and transparency with methods and challenges encountered during the study. Credibility was achieved in offering readers thick descriptions and concrete details of participants' experiences and triangulation of results with adult 4-H leaders through member-checking and peer-debriefing sessions. After the interviews were transcribed, they were sent back to participants for verification of accuracy (i.e., member-checking). A first draft of the research report was shared with all participants during a face-to-face group meeting. Members discussed the report and made small edits to enhance clarity and accuracy (i.e., peer-debriefing). Adult 4-H leaders who read the final report confirmed resonance of findings with what they had experienced in working with the population.

Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and following protocols to ensure respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice for participants. Procedural (IRB approval and strict adherence to the protection of human subjects), situational (being sensitive to context and content of the study), relational (maintaining appropriate boundaries with participants), and exiting (entering and exiting the study site with grace) ethics were practiced throughout the study (Tracy, 2010). Meaningful coherence, or aligning the study objectives with research methods to fit the stated goal, was achieved by aligning the review of literature, paradigm model, and findings to emerge the essence of the phenomenon as experienced by participants (Tracy, 2010).

Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect their privacy. A complete report was shared with youth participants and adult leaders for final member checking. No changes were made to the findings, indicating participants were satisfied with the researcher's representation of their

stories. Participants' quotes are provided in the findings to add further validity and richness, with corresponding pseudonyms before or after the quote.

Findings

Demographic Profile of Participants

Of the 18 youth eligible to participate in the study, nine of the 2017-2018 cohort and three of the 2016-2017 cohort sat for interviews ($n = 12$). Their ages were 16-19 years, averaging 17 years. Ten participants identified as White and two as Black. Five were female, and seven were male. Participants spent 4 to 13 years involved with 4-H, averaging 7 years. They held two to six offices with an average of three (i.e., Junior Board, Senior Board, County Board) and participated in one to seven, with an average of three, additional organizations prior to or concurrently with being a state-level 4-H leader, also serving in leadership roles. Ella, Tom, Max, Ike, and Ivy were homeschooled. Ben, Axl, Amy, Liv, Dan, Leo, and Sky attended public schools for the majority of their K-12 education.

Georgia State Board of Directors Training Curriculum

Participants were asked what they experienced in terms of receiving training to prepare for their role as a State Board of Directors member. Participants were elected to office during the annual State 4-H Council meeting by their peers after submitting a packet (candidate information, qualifications, campaign guidelines, state 4-H officer requirements, and required signatures), performing a skit, and giving a speech. The top five candidates who received the most votes were assigned to the roles of president, vice-president, and three state representatives, respectively. Each of the four districts also elected a candidate who was not in the top five to represent them.

After State 4-H Council, the nine newly elected state officers spent four days in training with adult leaders at the university and also attended training sessions quarterly. Adult leaders included the state 4-H leader, three Extension 4-H specialists, and a 4-H board volunteer. The approaches for training included:

- Interacting with faculty, campus and government leaders, and stakeholders;
- Conversations to identify personal strengths, communication styles, and leadership preferences;
- Networking with faculty, campus and government leaders, and stakeholders to better conceptualize 4-H's role across contextual settings;
- Goal setting through facilitated reflection and discussion; and
- Reflection and assimilation of the experiences, conversations, discussions, and networking opportunities to further identify personal leadership and communication styles, and team member role and contributions.

According to participants, SOT consisted of meeting with state agricultural leaders, such as the commissioner of agriculture, governor, university president, dean and associate deans of the agricultural college, among other college representatives and agricultural industry professionals. Miss America was on the meet-and-greet list for this cohort, "big people like that, people all across the nation" (Amy).

All participants attended an etiquette skills dinner session to learn how to interact with people of various ages, formal dining, and public speaking. "One of my favorite lessons is no matter where you come from in life, you can still hold yourself with pride and demonstrate etiquette" (Axl).

All participants completed personality inventories and learned how to use social media to be "respectful of our office" (Tom). The group developed a mission statement and identified shared goals for their term in office. "We made one unified statement and a list of characteristics we wanted to have as a group" (Tom).

All participants learned LLS, such as how to resolve conflict, how to adjust to their leadership style, how to understand their personal strengths and weaknesses, how to give a 30-second elevator speech, and how to develop their personal agency. They participated in many team-building exercises to "inch our way out of our comfort zone. The training has been very centralized on being well rounded. Acknowledging one size does not fit all. Adaptation is something we really work on" (Max). "We learned how to communicate with others, how to not shut down others' opinions because it's not the same as yours, be open-minded, and care about others' feelings - it's not just about you" (Amy).

All participants engaged in events as ambassadors, such as a food bank community service project, agribusiness council fall harvest celebration, 4-H fundraising gala, and a large farm equipment show. They met with previous state-level leaders and FFA state officers to build connections. While participants held different office titles, it is important to note that differentiation of duties was not implemented by adult leaders. All youth were treated equally, given the same training, and expected to perform as ambassadors in similar roles.

What and How Participants Experienced Being a State-Level Leader

All participants reflected on the meaning of their experience and how it helped them to develop LLS and transition into adulthood with a deeper understanding of serving others. Participants engaged in exclusive events because of their position and the duties entrusted to them. They earned the respect of their community, and in turn, were afforded numerous opportunities to interact with elite audiences and attend national and international conferences. The following themes emerged as most significant for understanding the phenomenon.

Competence – 4-H activities led to leadership roles. Ten of the 12 participants had been a 4-H member from fifth grade until the present (i.e., the time of the study). One joined 4-H in middle school and one in high school. All 12 served in several 4-H leadership positions prior to their current role. For example, Ella joined 4-H in the fourth grade. She served as an officer (reporter) in her local 4-H club in fifth grade. Axl assumed his first leadership position in seventh grade as a junior board member representing 39 counties.

All 12 participants started in 4-H by engaging in showing and/or judging competitions (livestock), and within their first two years had completed a District Project Achievement (DPA) activity. DPA consisted of selecting a project in an area of the youth's interest, researching the topic, writing a paper, and presenting their ideas to adult leaders. All 12 participants found early success with DPA, which encouraged further participation in 4-H. Not all participants won everything for which they applied; however, there was enough success to keep them motivated to participate and advance to leadership roles.

Caring – leadership means serving others. Buttressed by early success in 4-H competitions, DPA, and winning local club elections, all 12 participants reflected on their definitions of leadership as being one of service to others, exemplifying the servant-leadership philosophy (Chan & So, 2017; Greenleaf, 1970) or compassion (Lerner et al., 2005). They had matured in their understanding of leadership from their early officer roles, transitioned from being "in the spotlight" to being "behind the curtain" helping others to find success. Ben said leaders were people "who were willing to become a positive catalyst for the team or community, who are willing to help a person in need." Axl said, "leadership is not only about being the person in front; it is about helping your group to succeed. Leadership is being able to lead up front and from behind and being able to add positive morale to your group."

Servant leadership, compassion, and generosity (Weybright et al., 2016) emerged as important components of being a 4-H leader. All 12 participants discussed leading community service projects and being taught that giving back is a core value of 4-H. Their community service work extended into other organizations as they learned the skill of serving and saw how important community service was for building resilient communities. Max said, "leadership means service."

All 12 participants embodied giving back in various ways, from creating charitable programs (Cause for Paws, Axl; 4-H Can Hunger, canned food collection, Liv) to speaking to the State House of Representatives and Senate (Tom). "One of my most memorable opportunities was to address the state house and senate on behalf of 4-H to thank them for their funding and ask them to continue to do so. It was a real honor" (Tom).

Axl provided an exemplary case of giving back in his service activities. Working with his officer team on county council, he started a 4-H Movies in the Park program to provide safe entertainment for city youth. He applied for several grants to raise funds to supply equipment for

the movie venue, as well as was awarded grants for a community beautification project that involved fifth-grade students in making flowering baskets for a Main Street project. Axl started his grant writing efforts at age 10 and was 17 at the time of the interview. During this time, he secured $40,000 in grants for his community service projects.

Liv learned about community service from an established 4-H hunger program and then founded a soup kitchen in her community. She raised donations and provided over 1,090 cans of food to the kitchen. Sky volunteered for a local nursing home. Ben noted that his county had one of the highest poverty rates in the state, so he organized a project called Helping Hands to provide food for students in need.

Confidence to express my authentic self. All 12 participants were asked if their personal characteristics had changed because of the program. Eight participants specifically stated that their 4-H involvement gave them the confidence to express their authentic self. All 12 participants experienced the 4-H environment as welcoming and supportive of experimentation with different ways of being and teaching them about personal leadership styles. Liv said, "I'm more secure in myself. When I go to 4-H events and I'm around all these uplifting people, I go home more secure, more confident in what I'm doing."

All 12 participants found a nurturing environment in which to meet diverse people, becoming more open-minded as a result. All 12 participants reported increasing self-motivation by shifting from extrinsic (external) to intrinsic (internal) motivation. They reported becoming more competitive and engaged in community service activities, and improved their public speaking abilities.

Connection – transitioning into adulthood. All 12 participants reported transitioning into adulthood by gaining self-confidence, learning responsibility for others, improving critical thinking skills, becoming a stronger team player, increasing self-awareness, becoming more ambitious and hardworking, and becoming more trustworthy. Two participants stated they were happier because of being a state-level leader. "I have gained a different happiness; it is genuine happiness from people, joyful with the position I'm in, more than the position, the relationships I have made" (Ivy).

All 12 participants reported a deeper appreciation for their parents as they understood the sacrifices made on their behalf. Participants reported being away from home, realizing the temporary nature of existence, and not taking loved ones for granted. Time with family was reduced due to the demands of their office. Independence grew as participants drove to events and spent nights away from home. Peer relationships became more focused on spending time with positive role models and leaving behind those who did not share their values for self-improvement (Dan).

As a part of transitioning into adult roles, all 12 participants reported that they "saw behind the curtain" (Ella) of being an observer and recipient of 4-H activities to being a creator of events for other youth. Ella, Ben, Axl, Tom, Amy, Leo, and Sky talked about embodying the characteristic of giving back to the next generation of 4-Hers as they came to understand the complexity of executing the program from both adult and youth leader perspectives. As youth participants from fifth grade until election night, participants enjoyed the benefits of receiving the program with little thought as to its creation. Serving as a state-level leader allowed all 12 participants to see the "other side" of 4-H and how much adult facilitation is required to execute events. As a state-level leader, "you do a lot of things with adults. That was really helpful for my maturing process to see the relationships between the university and 4-H and how it all branches together" (Axl).

Character – friendship. The celebrity aspect of being a state-level leader was an impactful experience for Axl, Dan, Leo, and Max in terms of becoming more self-aware. While they were flattered by the attention, they were also cognizant of the responsibility that such attention brings in terms of being a positive role model for others and representing the 4-H organization honorably.

All 12 participants were excited to be a part of an elite group that had access to the highest levels of society in the agriculturally-rich state. They repeatedly mentioned meeting and interacting with state-level leaders while representing 4-H. Interaction with adults led to building self-confidence, personal agency, public speaking skills, and becoming more open-minded among all participants.

Creating new friendships was also a highlight for all participants. "The best part about 4-H is leadership – relationships, meeting people from such different backgrounds" (Max). Amy said friendships were the most important aspect of the program – "It feels like a second family."

Identifying college and career goals. The leadership experience helped all 12 participants to refine their college and career goals. Ella, Tom, Ike, Ivy, and Sky reported being dual-enrolled in college and high school courses. Networking with state agricultural leaders helped participants identify specific career goals according to their interests. The influence of leaders from the university focused five participants' attention toward careers in agriculture. "There are a lot of opportunities at the university that inspired me to go into applied biotechnology, double major in biochemistry, and hopefully obtain a Ph.D. in genetics after my Master's program. I hope to be a post-doc and go back and work for the university as a researcher and a professor" (Axl). The specific and focused career goals reported by Axl were the result of spending time interacting with university faculty and agricultural leaders. All 12 participants were very clear and resolute about their career goals in part due to their exposure to university leaders, county Extension agents, and the various opportunities 4-H provided for career exploration. Participants

had a good foundational understanding of their chosen careers and the college path required for attaining their goals.

Fishbowl. Three participants' most memorable lesson was "being in a fishbowl. In this position, we are seen so we need to be a good example and always act right, stay on the straight and narrow" (Tom). "They tell us we are in a fishbowl, we are there for people to look up to and I feel like that is a huge part of leadership, we are the face of 4-H" (Liv). "We learned how to present ourselves as leaders – as in how to work with a group, how to hold yourself and be in front of an audience because working together is a big part of leadership" (Ivy).

Peer Impact on Decision to Participate in State-Level Leadership

Peers were most influential in inspiring all 12 participants to strive for 4-H offices. They reported that a slightly older peer or sibling encouraged them to apply for the state-level leadership position either directly (friend in the same county or 4-H chapter) or indirectly by serving as a role model at 4-H events. According to Hastings et al. (2011), "being asked to engage" in community service was a causal condition for developing LLS (p. 19).

Max recalled listening to a former state-level leader speak at a 4-H event and being awe-struck by his poise and presentation. Four years later, Max achieved his goal of holding the same office as his role model. He said, "just as iron sharpens iron, so does one man sharpen another."

Influential peers were generally one to two years older than the participants, were the same gender, and were serving as 4-H leaders (county, state-level position) when participants encountered them. The significant person's behavior was inspiring as he or she presented him or herself professionally, was articulate, and demonstrated service leadership qualities. Peers directly encouraged participants to stay involved in 4-H and to strive for additional leadership roles. Ben said, "Axl was my main influencer. He is like family, my brother. I love the way he cares about people, and he presents himself in a professional manner when he goes places. He is very kind, very caring about everyone over himself." Second to peers, Ben, Liv, and Dan were encouraged by their county 4-H Extension agents to apply for state-level leadership roles.

One important duty of the state-level role is to recruit new members and encourage further participation. Participants were well-positioned to become the significant peer that encouraged the next generation of youth. When asked if they would recommend the state-level role to others, all 12 participants emphatically stated they absolutely would.

All 12 participants were well versed in the variety of opportunities afforded to 4-H participants and were eager to share their experiences with others. Reciprocity and generosity were mentioned by Dan, Ben, Liv, and Ike. They had been encouraged and supported in applying for leadership roles; thus, they sought to encourage and support others. "I have tried to get my best friend into the program. We have been working on her portfolio for it" (Ben).

Emerging the Essence

According to participants, the essence of their experience as a state-level leader was that of a *sharpening stone*. Participants reported that spending an average of seven years as a 4-H member had cultivated their personal tendencies toward the values espoused by 4-H. Participants were high achievers before serving as a State Board of Directors member. Participants held an average of three offices in 4-H and participated in three additional organizations as participants and officers prior to becoming a state-level leader.

Adult and peer-influence served as the *honing process* to sharpen participants' values and actions in the direction of the 4-H mission, which is "to assist youth in acquiring knowledge, developing life skills, and forming attitudes that will enable them to become self-directing, productive and contributing participants of society" (4-H, 2018, para. 1).

Discussion and Conclusions

The state-level leadership program, in addition to an average of seven years as a 4-H member, served to *hone* and *sharpen* participants' LLS. All 12 participants received the same training, participated in the same events, and shared responsibilities equally within the program. While participants held different titles (president, vice-president, state representative, and district representative), none mentioned differentiation of duties because of their official titles. The equalitarian expectations of adult 4-H leaders resulted in gains in LLS for all participants rather than just three offices, as reported by Tassin et al. (2010). Weybright et al. (2016) also found that adult leaders who approached youth as partners in a supportive and mutuality respectful environment had successful outcomes.

Participants experienced early success in 4-H that led to advancement within the organization. They defined leadership as serving others and being engaged in community service, thus, developing compassion (one of the five C's; Lerner et al., 2005). 4-H afforded all 12 participants a plethora of opportunities to gain confidence, express their authentic selves, and transition into adulthood with an increased sense of self-awareness, increased responsibility, mastery, and autonomy. They translated their service to others in numerous community service projects, similar to the findings of Boyd et al. (1992) and Fitzpatrick et al. (2005) who reported that 4-H alumni spent seven years in 4-H programs and benefited from the length of exposure to positive youth development activities.

Peer-influence on participants' decision to run for office was more important than adults' influence, including parents. Slightly older peers who were 4-H leaders served as role models and directly encouraged youth to run for office. This finding is consistent with Harris et al. (2016), who reported that a significant other encouraged youth to engage in a 4-H beef skill-a-thon.

While all 12 participants reported that their 4-H experiences had a substantial impact on their LLS development, it is difficult to extract the precise impact of the state-leadership role (which lasted one year) from their lifetime of 4-H experiences, in addition to participating in other organizations and community service. However, their final year in 4-H as a state-level leader served to *sharpen their skills* through practice, reinforcement, and positive affirmation from adult and peer-leaders, leading to the essence of the phenomenon as a *sharpening stone*.

All 12 participants grew their personal agency and became productive and contributing participants of society. Similar to findings of Fitzpatrick et al. (2005), Boyd et al. (1992), Ward (1996), Harris et al. (2016), Moran (2015), and Bruce et al. (2004), the areas of LLS enhanced by 4-H were public speaking (stated overwhelmingly as the primary skill learned and reinforced) and building confidence through public speaking. All 12 participants also reported making important gains in becoming more self-aware, critical thinking skills, problem-solving, planning, managing oneself, communicating (speaking, listening, writing), interacting effectively with others, and building positive relationships with peers and adults.

Transfer of learning from facts and abstraction to application in daily life is a capstone expression of deeper learning (Gagné & Briggs, 1979; Martinez & McGrath, 2014). All participants reported a variety of situations where they transferred learning from 4-H leadership roles to other contexts, such as teen leadership (e.g., working with younger audiences and classroom/discipline management). They also reported increased self-motivation for academic work, engaged in community service work outside of 4-H, used etiquette and social skills, applied communication skills, improved time management and personal organization, used 4-H specific skills for leading other school-based clubs, completed college applications, and encouraged others by being a supportive friend.

Overall, the state-level leadership experience served as a *sharpening stone* to grow all 12 participants' LLS by offering equalitarian structured training, creating a supportive environment for risk-taking, giving participants autonomy, holding high expectations for performance, and providing meaningful feedback.

Implications

The paradigm model for youth leadership development (Hastings et al., 2011) in the context of community engagement was supported in this study. Individual connections and being asked to engage in 4-H leadership roles by a significant person, namely peers, were two salient conditions that encouraged participants to run for office.

Community engagement and service among participants were cited as consequential activities of their experience that led to LLS development. Similar to the findings of Hastings et al. (2011), participants in the research reported here gained responsibility, empowerment, and especially confidence through participating in a state-level leadership role. Transfer of learning and deeper

learning (Martinez & McGrath, 2014) were important variables in the Hastings et al. model, as they were in this study. Participants were aware of their ability to grow and contribute meaningful leadership not only in the context of 4-H but also in their families, schools, and communities.

Adult leaders are advised to include youth leaders in real-world activities to transfer learning and application of leadership theory to practice and to engage youth as partners that share responsibility for planning and executing community development activities.

Future research should focus on the differences between programs that separate roles and duties for youth leaders. For example, Tassin et al. (2010) found no gains in LLS among youth who served as officers but not in the role of president, vice-president, or secretary. Do programs that have equalitarian expectations of all members to perform duties regardless of role or title, such as *Georgia State Board of Directors* leadership program reported here, have better outcomes than those who assign different duties to each participant? Future research should examine the need for specific roles or titles, such as president and vice-president, when the president has the same responsibilities as a state representative at the state-level. What impact does a role or title have on youth's LLS development?

Equally important to examine is adult leaders' expectations of youth leaders holding specific titles. In the research reported here, roles and titles were awarded by the number of votes obtained when elected, a seemingly ambiguous method for assigning roles. Titles were used at public events to introduce leaders; however, they were disregarded during training sessions, as all participants received the same training and engaged in the same activities to cultivate their LLS. These and other questions about the nature of the relationship between adult leaders and youth serve as rich opportunities to more deeply explore the causal variables the lead to positive youth development.

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