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Kathleen D. Kelsey
University of Georgia, kdk@uga.edu

Nicholas E. Fuhrman
University of Georgia, fuhrman@uga.edu

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Leadership and Life Skills Development among 4-H State-Level Youth Leaders

Kathleen D. Kelsey
Nicholas E. Fuhrman
University of Georgia

This mixed-methods study sought to determine the impact of a 4-H state-level youth leadership program on participants' leadership and life skills (LLS) development. Youth who participated in the study served as a state-level leader for one year. Two cohorts, 2017 and 2018 (N = 18), participated in the study. Twelve youth completed the survey and interviews. Results from the Youth Leadership Life Skills Development scale (YLLSD) and interviews revealed participants gained LLS in the areas of understanding self, decision-making, strengthened oral communication, teamwork, and critical thinking skills. Participation in 4-H positively built LLS among participants. Long-term engagement in 4-H was found to increase and deepen LLS development among participants by reinforcing lessons learned and through positive role-modeling between peers. Further research should explore the relationship between assigning youth leaders with titles such as president, vice-president, and secretary and associated LLS outcomes as previous research indicated that those given these titles benefited more than youth without titles in spite of all youth receiving similar formative experiences.

Keywords: 4-H youth leadership program, career-ready skills, employability skills, leadership life skill development, soft skill development, youth leaders

Introduction

As the largest youth development organization in the U.S. with six million members, 4-H provides programming to advance participants' knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward mature and responsible citizenship, and critical life skills such as communication, intra- and interpersonal relationships, and cooperation (Boyd et al., 1992; Connell et al., 2000). Through unique experiences grounded in Hendricks' (1998) life skills model, 4-H members are exposed to learning opportunities that build competencies in leadership, teamwork, and communication, often referred to as leadership and life skills (LLS).

Involving youth in 4-H is one way to build LLS and prepare them for college and the workforce while simultaneously offering opportunities to engage with positive adult mentors. In fact,

Direct correspondence to Kathleen D. Kelsey at kdk1000@gmail.com

research has documented that participating in youth organizations such as 4-H increases life skills development (Ciocanel et al., 2017). One such experience where youth can engage with caring adults is the Georgia 4-H State Board of Directors leadership program, composed of nine members holding the offices of president, vice-president, three state representatives, and four district representatives. Participants represent the 4-H organization as ambassadors, role models, and recruiters at major functions for one year. Members engage with prominent adult leaders from the land-grant university and state government and are responsible for planning events.

While youth and adults attest to the success of youth leadership programs on developing LLS, few are formally evaluated to determine their impact (Moran et al., 2019; Seevers et al., 1995; Tassin et al., 2010). Therefore, the need for this study was to evaluate the impact of a state-level leadership program on participants' LLS development to gain a deeper understanding of the program elements that contribute to growing LLS among participants.

Review of Literature

LLS development is integral to 4-H programming (Boyd et al., 1992; Bruce et al., 2004; Moran, 2015; Seevers et al., 1995; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997). LLS are “cognitive skills for analyzing and using information, personal skills for developing personal agency and managing oneself, and interpersonal skills for communicating and interacting effectively with others” (UNICEF, 2017, p. 1). Hendricks' (1998) life skill framework was used to create the life skills model related to the four H's in the 4-H pledge. Thirty-five life skills were incorporated into thinking and managing (head), relating and caring (heart), giving and working (hands), and living and being (health). With fewer high school programs emphasizing life skills development over competencies assessed with standardized tests, college ambassador programs have become an avenue for students to gain critical LLS for students not previously involved in 4-H (Arnold, 2012).

LLS training is effective at helping youth to successfully transition into adulthood. Tassin et al. (2010) found 4-H officers' life skills improved because of their involvement in LLS-building experiences. Previous service as 4-H president, vice-president, or secretary resulted in measurable changes in life skills, whereas other officer roles did not. The impact of the program only reached the highest level of officer service in 4-H, reinforcing the need for additional study on outcomes of those in other 4-H leadership positions. McElravy and Hastings (2014) suggested examining a youth leader's emotional intelligence to determine previously unrevealed outcomes of a young person's service in a leadership role.

Fitzpatrick et al. (2005) determined the long-term impact of 4-H membership on LLS development. Members reported learning (in order of magnitude) skills such as accepting people who were different, community service, making healthy choices, and job skills. LLS included self-esteem, teamwork, responsibility, planning and organizing, cooperation, record keeping,

goal setting, community service, communication, and leadership. Length of time as a 4-H member was also an important variable for increasing the impact of life skill outcomes.

Boyd et al. (1992, p. 1) found similar results, reporting “the level of LLS development increased as the level of 4-H participation increased” among 4-H members. Fox et al. (2003) studied 4-H members who participated from three to 13 years, averaging nine years. 4-H influenced member’s sense of responsibility, product production skills, and abilities to handle competition and meet new people.

Moran et al. (2019) more recently examined 4-H state leadership board members’ development of LLS resulting from their involvement in youth-adult interactions. Members reported moderate to a lot of gain using the Youth Leadership Life Skills Development (YLLSD) scale (SeEVERS et al. 1995). However, there were no significant differences between the development of LLS and youth-adult partnerships. Low positive differences existed for older youth who served as a state board member and for youth who spent more time at board sponsored events. Bruce et al. (2004) studied state 4-H council members for LLS growth and reported gains in self-growth, self-discovery, and relationship building.

Many studies assessing youth LLS development are underpinned by the theory of positive youth development (PYD) first reported by Lerner et al. (2005) and later refined by Lerner et al. (2012). PYD theory implies that youth develop competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (known as the five C’s) as psychological attributes through the normal maturation process and through exposure to positive ecological assets such as social networks, institutions, individuals, and access to resources.

Individual strengths of youth could be enhanced by intentional self-regulation, school engagement (including extracurricular activities such as 4-H), and hopeful future expectations. Through time, youth increase their expression of the five C’s to become contributing members of society, including community, family, and self. Youth who did not significantly develop the five C’s were reported to exhibit risky and problematic behaviors such as depression, delinquency, and substance abuse (Lerner et al., 2012). The current study examined the role of those involved in 4-H leadership positions, specifically on key LLS competencies associated with the five C’s.

Adolescent adaptive developmental regulations that are embedded in a system, such as 4-H, can lead to youth developing the sixth C of PYD, community contributions (Lerner et al., 2012). Central to PYD is creating positive environments (ecological assets) that nurture the five C’s within a community setting and asking youth to contribute to their communities. It is important to note context shapes youth adaptive development over time (temporal aspect of PYD).

From these aforementioned studies, the length of time spent in 4-H activities and serving as president, vice-president, or secretary resulted in the most gains for LLS. Additional research is needed to identify potential growth among lower-ranking members of youth leadership teams

and to more deeply understand the impact of state-level leadership programs on participants' LLS development. In the context of the research reported here, youth were engaged in an ecological asset that provided positive social networks of other high achieving youth, extended contact with positive and high-achieving adult role models, institutional structure from the land-grant university, and resources through the yearlong state-level leadership program.

Purpose

The purpose of this descriptive study was to measure the development of LLS among participants after serving as a state-level leader. Specific objectives were to:

1. Measure youth participants' development of LLS because of participating in a yearlong state-level leadership program using the YLLSD scale (Seevers et al., 1995).
2. Describe youth participants' experiences as a state-level leader in regard to developing LLS.

Methods

Population

The target population for this census study consisted of all youth who were elected to serve as state-level leaders between 2016 and 2018 ($N = 18$). Of the 18 youth eligible, 12 agreed to participate in the study, nine from the 2017-2018 cohort, and three from the 2016-2017 cohort. Respondents ranged in age from 16-19 years ($M = 17$ years). Participants identified as White ($n = 10$) and Black ($n = 2$), female ($n = 5$), and male ($n = 7$). Participants spent four to 13 years involved with 4-H ($M = 7$). Before serving as a state-level leader, participants held between two to six offices ($M = 3$) and participated in one to seven ($M = 3$) additional organizations prior to or concurrently with being elected to a state-level leadership role. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of participants. 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.

Instruments

The study used a mixed-methods research design (Greene, 2007) to answer the research questions. The Youth Leadership Life Skills Development (YLLSD) scale is a valid and reliable measure of LLS (Seevers et al., 1995). It consists of a 30 item self-report measure that is age-appropriate. Seevers et al. synthesized 68 life skill variables into seven subdomains. The scale measures an individual's perceptions of their communication skills, decision-making skills, getting along with others, learning and management skills, understanding self, and working with others. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was reported as .98 for the overall ability of the instrument to consistently measure leadership life skills within one construct.

The instrument used in this study was modified to capture participants' perceptions just prior to participating in the program, and now (currently serving or alumni). The 30 statements were listed once in the left column, and the prompt was repeated twice in the center and right columns. For example, the prompts read, "Before I was elected to serve as a state-level leader, I:" and "After I was elected to serve as a state-level leader, I:". Respondents checked a response for then and now using a 4-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 0 = *none*, 1 = *slight*, 2 = *moderate*, and 3 = *a lot* based on their perceived skill level before and after the program.

The then-now design was chosen to control for overestimation in changes in knowledge and response-shift bias that are common threats to validity as participants may overstate knowledge and skills gained in programs when data are collected at two points in time (Pratt et al., 2000). Self-rating at a single point in time is considered valid for pre- and post-test measures to control for memory-related problems, social desirability responding, and effort justification (Howard et al., 1981).

Data Collection

Survey. After obtaining informed consent from those over age 18, and assent from minors and their parents, participants were administered the YLLSD scale using a paper format during a group meeting by 4-H adult leaders.

Interviews. Face-to-face interviews with participants were conducted to triangulate the survey data and better understand aspects of their experiences as state-level leaders that affected LLS outcomes. Interviews were conducted by the researcher on campus during a training session in November 2018.

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol. The protocol was developed based on the literature pertaining to salient variables regarding LLS development (Boyd et al., 1992; Bruce et al., 2004; Moran, 2015; Seevers et al., 1995). The protocol was reviewed by the 4-H adult leaders for face and content validity.

Participants were asked specific questions pertaining to their individual LLS development. For example, they were asked, "in regard to specific leadership skills and attitudes gained in the program, can you tell me more about how you may have gained various skills such as communication (public speaking, listening, writing), decision-making, critical thinking, planning, and getting along with others (i.e., tact, flexibility, acceptance, etiquette, manners)." In addition, participants were asked to discuss how they may have improved upon their problem solving skills, applying lessons to other situations (transfer of learning), management skills, and ability to set goals and accomplish a project. Participants were asked about program elements related to building self-awareness, self-confidence, and how their personal characteristics may have changed because of the program. Participants also discussed building skills in working with groups and how their personal relationships were affected because of the program.

Data Analysis

Survey. YLLSD data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) v. 24 for Windows. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated to summarize the data. The two scores (then-now) were compared using a paired samples *t*-test to determine differences in perception from before and after the program at a single point in time. Single items were compared within the seven subdomains because of the smaller sample size in this study. Pooled means within subdomains were used to report the data for enhanced readability and interpretation.

Interviews. The interviews, lasting 30 to 60 minutes each, were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher. The transcripts were sent to each participant via email for member checking (Tracy, 2010). None of the participants made changes to the transcripts, indicating the accuracy of the raw data. The transcripts were loaded into a qualitative data analysis software program, ATLAS.ti 7 for Windows (Muhr, 2004) for analysis. The lead researcher worked with the data on both descriptive and conceptual levels (Saldaña, 2016). Conceptual consistency, interpretative agreement, and interpretative distinctiveness (Greene, 2007) were achieved through coding and memoing, or taking notes on emerging themes. Significant quotations were clustered to create thematic groundedness using code frequency and relationships among codes (Friese, 2019). Memoing allowed for operationalization of the salient themes to strengthen the internal reliability of the analysis.

Ethical Considerations. Credibility was 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 the findings). Transferability was demonstrated by adding thick descriptions in the form of quotes from the participants to enhance truth validity. Dependability was enhanced through triangulating survey results with interview results. An audit trail of all documents related to the study was archived for later reference. Confirmability was ensured by sharing a complete report with the participants for final member checking. No changes were made to the findings, indicating participants agreed with the authors' conclusions. Finally, reciprocity in reporting the study was negotiated with the participants. Participants' quotes are provided in the findings to add truth validity and richness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

Results

Survey Findings

Objective one sought to measure youth participants' development of LLS resulting from participating in a yearlong state-level leadership program using the YLLSD scale (Seever et al., 1995). A two-tailed significance test determined if statistically significant differences in

perceived LLS were evident before and after participating in the program. The p -value was set at .05 *a priori* for a 95% confidence interval (see Table 1).

When examined collectively, members reported statistically significant growth in LLS across all subdomains (Table 1). Specifically, decision-making, understanding self, and learning exhibited the largest growth when comparing pre-post scores. The smallest difference in pre-post growth was in the area of getting along with others, suggesting that either the leadership experience did not stress this leadership skill enough or the YLLSD scale was not sensitive enough to detect skill development in this area.

Table 1. Pre-post Statistics for Subdomains of the Youth Leadership Life Skills Development (YLLSD) Scale

Leadership Skill Subdomain	Pre-mean (SD)	Post-mean (SD)*
Communication	2.09 (0.83)	2.55 (0.52)*
Decision-making	2.07 (0.15)	2.59 (0.12)*
Understanding self	2.11 (0.13)	2.62 (0.16)*
Working with groups	2.12 (0.58)	2.54 (0.47)*
Management	2.41 (0.34)	2.86 (0.06)*
Learning	2.24 (0.34)	2.71 (0.22)*
Getting along with others	2.46 (0.33)	2.82 (0.21)*

Note. *Significant pre-post difference at the 0.05 level.

Qualitative Findings

Objective two sought to describe youth participants' experiences as a state-level leader concerning the development of LLS. Interviews were used to triangulate the survey data and generate themes that elucidated the impact of the program on LLS development. Pseudonyms were used in place of members' names to protect their identity. Numbers following direct quotes indicate location in the original transcripts for audit purposes, for example, Ella (25).

Developing as a Leader. When asked how the SBD program helped members develop as leaders, refinement of their public speaking skills emerged as the most frequently cited benefit (Ella, Axl, Tom, Leo, Ike). Ben was shy and stated that SBD helped him "grow into the leadership aspect of who I am, not changing who I am" (35). Max reported that working with successful peers and adults helped to sharpen his leadership skills. Liv said that she was "put into situations where I needed to be a leader, someone who can step up and take action" (37). Dan said the SBD program helped improve his "teamwork skills, task initiative skills, helped me to be a better person all around" (42). Ike reported that he gained confidence.

Cognitive Skills. Program activities reinforced critical thinking skills among participants. They reported planning events, decision-making, creating skits, considering other's needs and feelings, and working in a team. Participants were challenged with emerging dilemmas such as schedule

disruptions that required resolution. Adult leaders were supportive yet insistent that members solve problems to bolster their critical thinking skills.

Max said the program “enhanced my ability to analyze situations and think of the big picture, as in what will this decision do for me now as well as in the future?” (52), indicating strategic thinking when building relationships. Max also reported that adult leaders supported him in building critical thinking skills by encouraging him to try activities outside of his comfort zone.

Participants saw problem solving as an extension of critical thinking skills. They reflected on problems that emerged, such as scheduling conflicts as problems to be solved without adult interference. Axl equated problem solving with adapting to emerging situations. Dan learned to view problems as an opportunity to “open up your mind and look through all the options and try to see a better way out of the problem instead of just going in head first” (81).

Participants were responsible for planning activities. They reported that planning skills were enhanced by these activities. Planning skills extended to their need to adopt better time-management skills in school as their time was limited due to the demands of leadership activities. Adult leaders helped members learn new skills, such as keeping a personal planner to prepare for upcoming events.

Personal Skills. The transformation to becoming a state-level leader was a significant event for all 12 participants as they reported building self-confidence as a principal outcome of their lifetime experiences as a 4-H member. Public-speaking activities were the primary avenue for building self-confidence starting as early as fifth grade with District Project Achievement (DPA) events. Amy said, “my confidence started growing in ninth grade when I got first place in DPA. Being a state leader has really boosted it” (56).

Small successes in 4-H activities led to increased confidence and risk-taking to engage in additional events such as running for Junior and Senior Board, and ultimately, a state-level leadership role. Ben said, “It’s crazy how 4-H pushes you outside your comfort zone in good ways” (70). Max said, “I’m becoming more confident in public speaking skills, and in communicating my feelings, whether that is one-to-one or with my fellow state leaders, to the entire 4-H delegation. Definitely, my self-confidence in those abilities has increased” (63).

Participants were aware of their progressive LLS development and were grateful for opportunities afforded them in the program. Participants were also aware of their public image as leaders. Max said, “I think the program helped me to be more conscious and self-aware of my actions and surroundings and how they will affect others” (76). Liv said, “we are the face of 4-H; we are the people they look at” (17).

Participants reported they had a great deal of autonomy in their leadership roles. The 4-H adult leaders would facilitate events for the group but left them in charge to determine the agenda and

theme of major events. Participants reported they were able to practice the skill of setting goals and accomplishing projects through the program.

Interpersonal Skills. Participants reported that their communication skills were enhanced during the program as they learned to become better listeners by focusing more on the speaker to engage in meaningful conversations with state agricultural leaders, as well as take oral direction from adult leaders. Participants also improved listening skills when working in peer groups. When asked if her listening skills were impacted by the program, Ella said, “we had to do a lot of listening to each other. We have to work together as a team. We want everyone’s ideas to be heard” (43). Amy said, “I am a better listener; I used to talk and not listen” (63). Liv said, “I used to be the one that was up and talking, so I have had to learn to sit back and let others take the spotlight, let others talk” (51).

As mentioned previously, participants reported that their confidence and skills in public speaking grew considerably during the program. They were asked to lead assemblies, speak at National and State Congress, speak with elected officials, and speak with university and state agricultural leaders. They began practicing public speaking in fifth grade by presenting their DPA projects to adult 4-H leaders. They grew their public speaking skills through serving on Junior and Senior Boards and gained experience giving speeches in front of large audiences. Participants reported feeling proud of their public speaking abilities and were confident when speaking to a group.

Participants reported that writing “was not the most emphasized thing” (Liv, 53). They were asked to write thank you notes to donors, to develop the team’s mission statement, post to social media, write a biography for the state 4-H website, write skits, and write an elevator speech. The writing assignments were good exercises in composition and formal communications and helped build cooperation skills.

Finally, being a youth leader helped participants become more tactful and discerning when interacting with others. Participants recognized the value of others’ contributions to the program and learned to cooperate with others. Ella said, “we all have different things we can contribute” (73). Amy stated that she learned that “it’s not about me; we have to do what is best for the group, so we talk it out” (32).

Conclusions and Implications

The state-level leadership program served to improve participants’ LLS. Members made statistically significant positive changes in the seven subdomains of the YLLSD instrument, and the qualitative data helped spotlight specific elements of the subdomains that were strengthened the most. While others reported that youth who served in upper-level leadership roles (e.g., president, vice-president, and secretary) exhibited the greatest gains in LLS (Tassin et al., 2010), all of the youth in this study perceived themselves as growing in LLS, regardless of their assigned role.

All participants received the same training, participated in the same events, and shared responsibilities equally. While members held different titles (President, Vice-President, State Representative, District Representative), none mentioned differentiation of duties because of their official title. The equalitarian expectations of 4-H adult leaders for all members, regardless of the office held, resulted in significant gains in LLS for all members. With employers emphasizing the need for strong oral communication skills across occupation types, this study demonstrated that involvement in 4-H state-level youth leadership positions can enhance one's public speaking abilities and potentially contribute to career success.

The results of this study have important implications for Cooperative Extension youth development professionals and adult volunteers mentoring youth in leadership roles. First, public speaking skills were noted as an area of important growth in this study, and adults mentoring youth should consider promoting opportunities for youth to reflect on their communication anxieties throughout a leadership training experience. This may also allow for longitudinal tracking of anxiety reduction over time. Second, with strong LLS gains resulting for youth across all leadership positions in this study, adults mentoring youth should consider less the title of the leadership position when recruiting youth and more the youth's potential for growth within a leadership role.

Recommendations

In regard to practitioner recommendations, we suggest adult leaders of youth teams reconsider the need for specific titles in implementing programs, such as president or vice president, and eliminate unnecessary titles in favor of advancing all youth participants equally. In this study, officer status was conferred by assigning titles to recognize the number of votes received, for example, the winner of the most votes was assigned the title of president; however, there was little differentiation of duties in practice. Leadership development training of youth should be consistent regardless of leadership position.

Participants experienced success in 4-H activities from fifth to twelfth grades. 4-H afforded youth a plethora of opportunities to gain confidence, express their authentic selves, and transition into adulthood with an increased sense of self-awareness, increased responsibility, and autonomy. This finding is similar to Boyd et al. (1992) and Fitzpatrick et al. (2005), who reported that 4-H alumni spent seven years, on average, in 4-H programs and benefited from length of exposure to positive youth development activities.

It is recommended that adult leaders of youth programs create opportunities for youth to remain in 4-H as a continuous experience with progressive engagement and responsibility. The longer youth engaged in 4-H, the greater their gains in LLS. Adult 4-H leaders were influential on members' development by teaching lessons on diversity, inclusion, kindness, finding one's authentic voice, reciprocity, and being nurturing. Adult leaders should also consider using the

YLLSD scale in conjunction with qualitative data collection techniques for an improved picture of the outcomes of youth leadership experiences.

In summary, this study confirmed that participants of the state-level leadership program enhanced their public speaking skills, confidence, self-awareness, critical thinking, problem solving, planning, managing, communicating, interacting effectively with others, and building positive relationships with peers and adults. These findings are similar to Fitzpatrick et al. (2005), Boyd et al. (1992), Ward (1996), Harris et al. (2016), Moran, (2015), Moran et al. (2019), and Bruce et al. (2004).

Participants reported that their 4-H experiences, including their final year as a state-level leader, had a significant impact on their LLS development. It is difficult to extract the precise impact of this final year of service from their lifetime 4-H experiences, in addition to participating in other organizations and community service. However, their final year in 4-H served to refine and polish their skills through practice, reinforcement, and positive affirmation from adult and peer-leaders. Participating in state-level leadership offers promise as a culminating youth development experience for 4-H'ers nearing completion of their 4-H careers.

This study was limited by the small sample size. When using a quantitatively-based questionnaire with scaled response options, meaningful results are often achieved with 30 or more respondents because of the ability to better generalize to a broader population. The fact that items on the YLLSD instrument showed statistically significant differences with our smaller population size demonstrated the ability of the leadership experience to influence those leadership outcomes. In addition, the study was limited geographically, taking place in one state. Although these results cannot be generalized beyond the population reported here, they are useful for youth development professionals interested in the outcomes of involving youth in leadership experiences.

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Kathleen D. Kelsey, Ph.D., is a professor and Director of the Impact Evaluation Unit at the University of Georgia.

Nicholas E. Fuhrman, Ph.D., is a professor in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication at the University of Georgia.