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Within the Mentoring Mosaic: Influences of 4-H Teen Leadership Identity

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Introduction

Youth development efforts focus on developing youth to positively contribute to the greater society. With this in mind, a variety of youth programs exist with a primary focus on positive youth development with an overall focus on the development of life skills. Youth programs that implement positive youth-adult relationships and promote positive youth development have been shown to influence the development of career-readiness skills within youth participants (Jones & Perkins, 2006; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). 4-H is a youth organization that fosters civic-mindedness. In addition to gaining valuable life skills, 4-H members often develop leadership skills, which aid in their success within higher education and the workforce.

Often 4-H leadership opportunities focus on engaging youth in a curriculum that provides opportunity for self-reflection and increased understanding of self. A great deal of research and evaluation has contributed to 4-H emerging as one of the top youth organizations within the United States. Youth with 4-H involvement excel amongst their peers without similar experiences (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). However, little is known about the “journey” 4-Hers take towards understanding their own leadership identities. This study aims to fill this gap by providing insight on the experiences, examples, and influences that led Virginia 4-Hers to attain leadership positions. This study supports the National Research Agenda of the American Association for Agricultural Education Priority 5: Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs by examining the experiences, which lead youth to seek out leadership positions within 4-H (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016).

Conceptual Model

The mentoring mosaic serves as the conceptual framework, which is supported through situated learning theory. In order to fully comprehend cognition which occurs during mentoring, it is essential to examine situated learning theory. Situated learning theory emphasizes context and practice as ways for linkages to occur between knowledge, experience, and skill (Choi & Hannafin, 1995). This requires authenticity in tasks, activities, and real problem-solving situations, which is an aim of 4-H leadership development. In situated learning, mentees and mentors must engage in the collaborative construction of knowledge through insightful reflection and discussions of lessons from their previous experiences (Mullen, 2009; Miller, 2002).

The mentoring mosaic incorporates “a network of secondary mentors that provide strength of weak ties, this can incorporate events, situations, and circumstances of life; books one reads; or crises one faces” (Bey & Holmes, 1992, p. 15). This calls for a holistic consideration of mentoring as a culmination of all experiences and relationships, whether natural or planned, which provide guidance and support for the learner. In adolescence, mentors serve the function of role models providing the basis for one’s cultural development and understanding of the world (Jonson, 2002). Peer mentoring can provide risks for adolescents but also has the capacity of reciprocal gains for youth in cooperative peer-mentoring networks (Miller, 2002). One’s mentoring mosaic represents a culmination of all developmental influences.

Methodology

The researchers designed a study to explore the experiences, leadership examples, and

influences that led Virginia 4-Hers to attain leadership positions. Data consisted of a qualitative open-ended survey (Patton, 2005) that was distributed to a group of 4-H members who held state-wide leadership roles in Virginia. Twenty-one ($n=21$) teens participated, ranging from 14 to 19 years of age. The survey was administered following a problem-solving style workshop the first night of a teen leadership symposium held in November 2016. The open-ended survey responses were transcribed verbatim. Three researchers open-coded the transcripts independently (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Together, the team grouped like codes to come to consensus on categories through an iterative process (Creswell, 1998). The responses were quantified into categories and transformed into nominal values (Chi, 1997).

Results

The participants were 4-H teen leaders ($n=21$) participating in a weekend long leadership training in Virginia. The data was responses to open-ended questions. Participants had the opportunity to provide multiple responses per question. In response to the question, what experiences have you had that lead you to pursue a leadership role in 4-H? The most common responses were previous leadership roles (28.6%, $n=6$), previous experiences (23.8%, $n=5$), experiences with 4-H teen leaders (23.8%, $n=5$), and having the skills of a leader (19%, $n=4$). When asked to provide examples of leadership, most frequent responses were: the identification of leadership traits (47.6%, $n=10$), historical figures (28.6%, $n=6$), Extension agents (28.6%, $n=6$), and family members (14.3%, $n=3$). However, when asked about those who influenced or supported their endeavors to become a leader, 80.1% ($n=17$) of participants responded with family members. Additional frequent responses included: Extension agent (57.1%, $n=12$), teachers (28.6%, $n=6$), and 4-H leaders (28.6%, $n=6$).

Conclusions and Implications

This exploratory study had notable limitations, including a lack of triangulation and only one data point, which was the open-ended survey. However, the study does provide insight into the views of 4-H teen leaders on the experiences, examples, and supporters that have influenced their leadership development journey. Future research should explore reasons why the youth chose their particular influences to achieve more robust results on participants' views on their mentoring mosaic and leadership journey.

From prior experiences 4-H teen leaders in [State] attribute their journey towards 4-H leadership positions. Responses indicated that participants view leadership from both a positional and/or a trait-approach (Zaccaro, 2007). Family members and Extension agents were viewed as the individuals who provided the most support, acting as a portion of the 4-Her's mentoring mosaic. At the same time, many of the same participants did not identify these individuals as examples of leadership. Therefore, the participants may be viewing leadership from a perspective where the leaders are viewed as iconic and mainly possess large scale leadership positions.

Based on the responses in this study, Extension professionals and youth leadership educators should work to incorporate a more holistic view of leadership, where 4-H teen leaders are able to attribute leadership qualities to their mentors and supporters. When providing leadership training to youth, we must consider how to break down the barriers associated with views of iconic leaders to allow teens to see themselves and their peers more easily as exemplars of leadership. 4-Hers are already four times more likely to make contributions to their communities (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). Therefore, it is important for 4-H teens to be able to identify community leaders outside of a positional role or trait approach to continue to support community initiatives.

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