

**The Importance of Social Capital for Youth Leadership Development in Agriculture:
Perspectives from State FFA Officers**

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Introduction & Literature Review

According to Libby et al. (2006), youth leadership development has been celebrated in the U.S. for many years, even though it has not been labeled as such, but rather described as character development, life preparation, as well as the building of relationships and community. Youth leaders in agricultural education programs have also been found to exhibit a high level of influence, especially in their local communities (Hasting et al., 2011). This study's goal was to understand how social relationships influenced the perspectives of current and former State FFA Officers regarding their leadership development.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study was Alder's and Kwon's (2002) social capital theory. Through this lens, social relationships have the power to yield opportunities, motivation, and abilities for individuals (Alder & Kwon, 2002). As such, social capital can be valuable in contributing to the successful personal and professional development of individuals (Alder & Kwon, 2002). In the current study, social capital was used as a lens to describe the relationships that led to the State FFA Officers' initial engagement, continued involvement, and the value they found in their participation in the National FFA Organization.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe the perspectives of current and former Louisiana State FFA Officers regarding their youth leadership development through the National FFA Organization. The study was guided by the following question: (1) In what ways did the lived experiences of State FFA Officers shape their perspectives on youth leadership development?

Methodology

For this investigation, we employed a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994). To recruit participants, we used a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling to identify 10 current or former Louisiana State FFA Officers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These participants' state office years ranged from 1984 to 2023. After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we then conducted individual interviews with each participant. These interviews took place through Microsoft Teams or in person, depending on the participants' preference. We facilitated each interview using a semi-structured interview protocol. We also collected pictures as an additional form of data from each participant to triangulate our findings. After data collection, we transcribed each interview verbatim. To analyze the data, we employed Saldaña's (2021) coding procedures. In the first cycle of coding, we used three different coding methods: (1) in vivo, (2) descriptive, and (3) holistic. We then used axial coding for the second cycle of coding. Through this systematic process, themes emerged.

Findings

The findings of this investigation were told through a sequential story using three themes.

Theme #1: Joining FFA

In the first theme, joining FFA, the participants recognized that their youth leadership development through the FFA began when they joined at the local level. Their motivations for joining the FFA were articulated through two major subthemes: (a) relationships and (b) opportunities. For example, seven of the 10 participants reported that they joined their local FFA chapter because they had “family ties” to the organization. For these individuals, their social relationships with their families motivated them to join and increase their social capital through interactions with other members and professionals connected to the organization. Several participants also reported that the opportunities they observed their peers engage in through FFA were another reason why they joined their local chapter. These social relationships, therefore, set the stage for their youth leadership development.

Theme #2: Year of Service

The second theme emerged as the participants spoke about how social relationships formed during their year of service as a State FFA Officer influenced their youth leadership development. During this stage, the participants underwent a variety of professional development. This training was a combination of National FFA and the Louisiana FFA curriculum and experiences. During these professional development opportunities, the State FFA Officers mentioned that they began to form close bonds with others and gain insight into more diverse perspectives about leadership. Through journaling and other forms of reflection, they began to make sense of their own leadership style and seek out more opportunities to grow. For example, nine of the 10 participants reported that the relationships developed through professional development opportunities during their year of service helped them hone their “leadership knowledge and skills positively.”

Theme #2: Continued Growth and Development

In the final stage, continued growth and development, the participants explained how their social connections kept them engaged in youth leadership activities and initiatives after leaving the FFA. For example, when asked if they were actively involved in youth leadership development, every participant said “yes.” However, after being so involved in FFA for so long, many of the participants showed signs of burnout: “When someone does something for so long, they get really burned out ... I was ready to be done” (Participant #8). Despite this, the participants’ social connections often kept them engaged and wanting to continue to grow and develop to become leaders in the agricultural industry.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

The findings demonstrated that social capital influenced the State FFA Officers’ youth leadership development prior to being involved in FFA and continued after their year of service. As such, we recommend expanding on this study to understand the lived experiences of State FFA Officers beyond [State] and to include more diverse State FFA Officers. We also recommend additional follow-up studies that seek to understand how social capital influences the styles, philosophies, and experiences of State FFA Officers’ youth leadership development.

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