

Poster type: Research

**The 4-H Youth Development Program's Influence on Youth Public Speaking Self-Efficacy**

Nicole Marshall-Wheeler  
5 County Center Drive, Oroville, CA 95965  
530-592-5696  
nmarshall@ucanr.edu

## **Introduction**

Public speaking skills are needed for success in personal and professional life. Employers have ranked communication skills to be one of the most important qualities needed for effective job performance in an employee (Brink & Costigan, 2015), yet many people report feeling shy or uncomfortable speaking in front of others (McCain, 2012). In the context of youth development, young people may have opportunities to practice their public speaking in school classrooms, but these are limited and are often in groups or tied to their grades which can create tension (Anderson 1997; Kellam 2018). Additionally, there is a lack of K-12 curriculum and research on youth public speaking. Many K-12 teachers do not learn public speaking best practices in their teaching credential program (Hunt et al. 2014), even though public speaking has become a standard as early as third grade (California Department of Education, 2010). Youth need more opportunities to practice their public speaking and develop these crucial skills. Thus, there is a role for youth development programs and professionals to provide education and opportunities around public speaking. The 4-H Youth Development Program and other agriculture education programs have a history of growing youths' public speaking skills. However, there is limited research regarding what influences youth's public speaking confidence, including the specific program activities which support youth in improving their public speaking confidence.

## **Theoretical Framework**

With the lack of youth public speaking opportunities and prevalence of public speaking fears, strengthening self-efficacy (also referred to as confidence) in public speaking is essential. Self-efficacy, in the public speaking context, is the belief in one's abilities to present a speech with effective content, structure, and delivery (Warren, 2011). Bandura (1997; 2010) advanced four sources affecting self-efficacy: (1) mastery experiences (i.e., successful/failure public speaking experiences), (2) vicarious (or observing) experiences (i.e., observing others give successful or inferior presentations), (3) social persuasion (i.e., encouragement or discouragement from peers and adults), and (4) affective state (i.e., psychological factors like stress and anxiety about public speaking).

## **Methodology**

To address the gap in youth public speaking research, we conducted two studies. For the first study, we surveyed youth who participated in the 2020 4-H State Presentation Event (n=176, response rate 59%) about their public speaking self-efficacy and sources of self-efficacy. We also investigated the relationship between 4-H youths' public speaking self-efficacy and the scores of external raters (presentation evaluator scores). The data was gathered with post-event surveys. Then we matched the completed surveys with evaluator scores. For the second study, we explored 4-H youth members' public speaking confidence and identified 4-H program activities that helped them improve. We used a combined data set from 2020 and 2021 State Presentation Events (n=117, response rate 32%), and 2021 County Presentation Events (n=47). The completed surveys were combined and checked for duplicate responses and missing data making a combined dataset of 310 youth participants. The survey administered in 2021 had ten Likert-scale based items to measure public speaking confidence and three open-ended questions to explore their public speaking experiences.

## Findings

We present three main findings from the two studies. First, positive experiences presenting to an audience leads to increased confidence. A regression calculation demonstrated that successful presentation (mastery) experiences ( $\beta=0.435$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) as well as affective state ( $\beta=-0.160$ ,  $p=0.047$ ) had a statistically significant relationship with young people's public speaking self-efficacy (adjusted  $R^2=0.31$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). The influence of mastery experiences was high, while the relative importance of affective state was minimum (i.e., the small coefficient). Vicarious (social) experiences and social persuasions did not have a statistically significant relationship. Youth reported growing their confidence presenting informally at 4-H club or project meetings, as well as at formal, evaluated events such as Presentation Events, as found by our qualitative analysis.

Second, 4-H youth report higher levels of public speaking confidence the more years they have participated in 4-H, even when controlling for age. Specifically, there was a positive correlation between public speaking self-efficacy and the number of years a young person was in 4-H (Person's  $r=0.29$ ,  $n=270$ ,  $P<0.001$ ), implying, on average, the more years a youth was in 4-H, the higher their public speaking self-efficacy.

Third, skill and confidence are related. Youth who reported high levels of public speaking confidence were also highly rated by external raters (evaluators' scores). We looked at the relationship between the evaluator scores and the youths' self-reported self-efficacy. The findings show a small, but statistically significant positive relationship ( $\rho =0.191$ ;  $n=126$ ;  $p=0.034$ ) between the two. Youth who reported higher levels of public speaking self-efficacy also received higher scores on their presentation from the panel of evaluators, as indicated by the positive correlation.

## Recommendations

Based on our findings, we suggest youth development professionals consider how many public speaking opportunities are available, the environment of the opportunities, and the barriers which prevent youth from participating.

Mastery experiences – positive experiences are likely to boost youths' public speaking self-efficacy, while negative experiences are likely to deter youth from seeking public speaking opportunities and lower their self-efficacy. To promote positive mastery experiences, we recommend both formal (evaluated or graded) and informal public speaking (non-evaluated or graded) opportunities be offered to youth for the maximum effect. Formal opportunities allow youth to receive formal and often written or standardized feedback on their speaking, while informal opportunities allow youth to feel less anxious since there is no affiliated score or grade and may be more comfortable with the opportunity. Opportunities to present at just formal or just informal occasions may not bolster youths' public speaking to the same degree.

Further, we suggest professionals reflect on the barriers which prevent youth from engaging in public speaking opportunities, such as specific requirements to participate. The more opportunities youth have to practice, the more opportunities they have to build their speaking confidence. Youth development programs and agriculture education programs, have a role to play in developing young people's public speaking confidence and a workforce ready youth.

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