



Strategies for Transformational Leadership Development Among 4-H Youth

Israel O. Oyedare
israelo@vt.edu

Eric K. Kaufman
Virginia Tech Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education
175 West Campus Drive
Blacksburg VA 24061-0343
540-231-6258
ekaufman@vt.edu

Author Note

Israel O. Oyedare  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2390-3360>

Eric K. Kaufman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8009-0066>

Introduction/Need for Research

As more wicked and complex problems emerge, there has been an increase in the search for how transformational leadership skills can be developed in formal and informal settings to inspire hope, trust, and cooperation, and to adapt to the present-day global dynamics (Anselmann & Mulder, 2020). Moreover, Andenoro and Skendall (2020), through the National Leadership Education Research Agenda, reported that the world's evolving complex problems require new processes for developing the next generation of leaders with the skills to proffer transformational solutions to these problems. Therefore, identifying new approaches for fostering transformational leadership development among youth is critical and timely (Farahnak et al., 2020).

Conceptual or Theoretical Framework

The American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE, 2023) has prioritized leadership research. Existing literature suggests youth transformational leadership behaviors consist of two main behaviors: vision development and persuasive communication (e.g. Bass & Avolio, 1995; Kouzes & Posner, 2023). Vision development involves a relational approach of identifying what followers are motivated by and consider as higher goals and creatively developing a shared and compelling goal (Aguas et al., 2017; Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2015). Persuasive communication involves the artistic and charismatic presentation of a shared vision and persuasion of followers to achieve the vision (Williams et al., 2018). Youth transformational leadership development emphasizes youth striving to create connections and engagement with followers, thus, increasing their motivation to perform above expectations (Bass, 1985). Beyond these insights, though, an important research question remains: What youth development programs and strategies are most aligned with transformational leadership development?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore strategies to transformational leadership development (TLD) among intermediate and senior 4-H youth. Snowball and convenience sampling 4-H Extension agents from the Virginia 4-H Extension, the Southern region program leadership network 4-H Committee, and the National 4-H through the USDA. Participants were recruited based on interest and further referrals from initial respondents, allowing access to a wider network within the 4-H community. In total, 15 individuals participated in semi-structured interviews via Zoom. Verbatim transcripts were coded and analyzed using line-by-line analysis with Atlas.ti.

Results/Findings

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed four strategies for fostering transformational leadership development can be fostered among intermediate and senior 4-H youth: (a) Developing the capacity of adult leaders in the area of transformational leadership, (b) Enabling youth's ability to solve complex problems, (c) Building effective transformational leadership programs, and (d) Youth-adult partnership.

Conclusions

The study presents four important conclusions. First, findings from this research underscores the importance of adult leaders learning about and embodying transformational leadership. While the 4-H Extension service ensures that agents receive specialized training in youth development, program implementation, and evaluation (Sundgren, 2019), there remains a need for tailored training in transformational leadership for all adult leaders working with intermediate and senior 4-H youth, including volunteers. Second, findings from this study amplifies the importance of enabling youth to solve complex problems. As suggested by du Plesis et al. (2024), empowering youth to address complex societal problems not only strengthens their transformational leadership skills but also drives grassroots-level development within communities. This empowerment process also includes engaging the youth in decision making processes at the local, sub-national and national levels (Augsberger et al., 2024). Third, findings gathered from this study suggest that tailoring transformational leadership programs to be accessible by youth across cultures and communities is a collaborative strategy between adult leaders and youth (Khan, 2022). According to Song and Hur (2022), building a community and culturally tailored youth transformational leadership program is beneficial in attracting and maintaining the interests of youth and increasing their participation in creating change. Lastly, participants underscores the importance of youth-adult partnership as a valuable skill for fostering transformational leadership development among youth. This aligns with Kokozos and Gonzalez's (2024) research, which found that when adult leaders foster opportunities for collaboration, support, and the free expression of opinions through youth–adult partnerships, the youth involved show growth in communication skills as well as cognitive and emotional development. Moreover, Camino (2000) emphasized that effective youth-adult partnerships are premised on clear principles and values that govern the partnership, the available skills and competencies of the adult, and the action-orientedness of the youth. This often occurs with the end goal of supporting youth in developing essential skills for organizational and community project planning and implementation, and peer mentoring (Zeldin et al., 2016).

Implications/Recommendations/Impact

As the world experiences dynamic and wicked problems across vital sectors of society and organization, this study addresses the call for improved processes and approaches for developing the next generations of leaders who will embody transformational leadership, and inspire hope, trust, and cooperation to solve some of these wicked problems (Andenoro & Skendall, 2020; Anselmann & Mulder, 2020; Farahnak et al., 2020). The findings of this research suggest actionable approaches that can be adopted by key stakeholders—including youth leaders, nonprofit and for-profit organizations, and 4-H Extension agents—to foster transformational leadership among youth and young professionals. Notable recommendations include further investment in 4-H's efforts with youth-centered planning and implementation of transformational leadership development programs. This approach empowers youth by fostering interest in the learning process, promoting self-directed learning, and cultivating a supportive and engaging learning environment (Johnson, 2014). In addition, findings from this study reveal the importance of developing the transformational leadership of the 4-H Extension agents who engage and work with youth. This approach is synonymous to the train-the-trainer approach that focuses on the capacity building of adult leaders.

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