

**Examining International Models: Finding the Leadership Development Aspect of
Elementary Agricultural Education for Georgia**

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Introduction

Georgia's approach to agricultural education begins as early as elementary school. However, a need exists to consider how other countries prepare students for future success, as many emphasize hands-on learning, creativity, and leadership development alongside early agricultural instruction (Schroeder-Moreno et al., 2012). At this stage, student-centered approaches support the development of fundamental skills related to academic progression, personal growth, and creativity (Whitty & Wisby, 2007). The Georgia General Assembly (2018) codified the three-component model of agricultural education: classroom instruction, supervised agricultural experience, and active participation in the national FFA Organization. Building on this foundation, this study examined how giving elementary students a voice in their curriculum influenced their leadership development.

Theoretical Framework

Grow (1991) proposed the Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) model, which integrates support elements and structured strategies into lesson planning to teach students about self-directed learning. Within this model, teachers guide students through four stages: dependent, interested, involved, and self-directed (Kuo et al., 2014). For self-directed learning to occur, students must be intrinsically motivated and take ownership of their learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Pupil voice groups align with this framework by providing platforms where students can exercise control over their learning, thereby promoting self-direction and cultivating essential engagement skills in both the classroom and the community (Kuo et al., 2014). PVGs are structured forums that engage students in expressing their views and participating in school decision-making (Rubenstein et al., 2022). In this study, PVGs serve as the instructional context through which self-directed learning processes support leadership development among elementary students.

Methodology

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to examine the role of pupil voice groups (PVGs), focusing on how educators described student leadership behaviors, decision-making opportunities, and student autonomy within these structures. Interviews with four teachers and two administrators, each lasting 30-45 minutes, were transcribed and analyzed in MaxQDA to identify themes related to PVGs and leadership (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were required to have at least two years of experience leading PVGs. Interview questions focused on PVGs structures, students' leadership behavior, and decision-making opportunities. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and methodological journal.

Purpose and Research Question

This study aimed to explore the use of PVGs in a Scottish primary school through teachers' perceptions of their impact on student leadership skill development. The findings from this study could help address the current issue of leadership skill development in elementary agriculture education classrooms. The research question guided this study:

1. What strategies are teachers using to prepare students to become leaders in their school and community through pupil voice groups?

Results/Findings

Community engagement, leadership and student participation, skills development, and community and student integration formed the study themes. While schools and communities often collaborate in planning and management, students are rarely included in the decision-making process. By allowing students to shape their school environment, PVGs foster ownership, responsibility, and leadership through active participation and decision making. Jane noted, “It’s a voice in their school, it’s a voice in the community because my class has gone out into the community this time.” In one of the PVGs, a student proposed providing help at a local mental health hospital, showing that their idea goes beyond school improvements. Teachers further described noticeable changes in students’ confidence and initiative after participating in PVGs. Ryan stated, “They have got more of a buzz about them; they are feeling important. You will see them going around the corridors because they have got things to organize.”

Finally, in line with challenges that come with independence, Carly reflected, “Transferable life skills, a lot of the skills in pupil voice groups, I would be able to expect them to do in any subject area. You need to be able to take your team with you, and the only way to do that is by listening.”

Discussion/Conclusions

Leadership development was the central outcome of PVG involvement, with students demonstrating qualities such as decisiveness, innovation, communication, teamwork, and responsibility. These outcomes support Mitra’s (2004) assertion that student voice initiatives strengthen leadership capacities that extend into community life. PVGs also help develop transferable skills, aligning with Whitty and Wisby’s (2007) argument that pupil participation connects personal growth and social responsibility. PVG uses a democratic approach that fosters students’ engagement in projects such as community, service projects, and school yards improvements. The findings align with Noyes (2005) who asserts that a democratic approach to teaching and engaging students in learning help them develop leadership and self-direction through community projects and apply classroom knowledge to real-life situations, thereby strengthening their leadership skills and confidence. In practice, some students use PVGs as opportunities to experiment with new ideas while others approach them as a way to learn differently. The change of environment contributes positively to students’ happiness, which in turn improves their behavior and engagement (Bandura, 1986).

Implications/Recommendations

The lesson from this study provides a model that could be adapted for Georgia’s elementary agricultural education. While leadership opportunities in the U.S. often begin in middle or high school, PVGs show that younger students can partake in meaningful roles. Applying PVG principles in elementary aged through activities like service projects and school gardens can help students to practice teamwork, responsibility, and decision-making. This early exposure builds confidence and connects agricultural learning with civic engagement, thereby laying a strong foundation for future workforce readiness in Georgia.

Schools should utilize PVGs to strengthen relationships and foster student leadership. Engagement in community and local activities enables students to practice and refine leadership skills. Elementary agricultural education should integrate PVG as a leadership development tool. Collaboration with community members allows students to confront real-world challenges. This exposure promotes resilience and cooperation essential for growth. PVGs provide early opportunities to connect classroom learning with practical experiences. Further research with larger samples is recommended.

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