


Building the Next Generation of Transformational Leaders:


Identifying Perceptions and Existing Opportunities

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Abstract

As the world faces dynamic challenges affecting societies and organizations, there has been an increasing call for the development of transformational leadership among youth. This focus is critical for preparing for the future and for inspiring hope, trust, and cooperation within any given system. Unfortunately, despite the popularity of the transformational leadership domain, the emphasis has largely been on adult leaders. Thus, this study explores the perspectives of 4-H Extension agents about transformational leadership among youth and existing opportunities available for youth to build their transformational leadership skills. The insights are gleaned from interviews with 15 Extension agents working with 4-H—the largest youth development organization in the United States. The findings are relevant to multiple stakeholders, including 4-H Extension services, for-profit and nonprofit organizations, and academic institutions.

Introduction

As increasingly wicked and complex problems emerge, there has been growing interest in how transformational leadership skills can be developed in both formal and informal settings to inspire hope, trust, and cooperation, as well as to adapt to contemporary global dynamics (Farahnak et al., 2020). Although youth development has been widely examined in theory and practice, empirical studies on youth transformational leadership development remain scarce (Karagianni & Montgomery, 2018). Even still, transformational leadership development among youth has become imperative. Alegbeleye and Kaufman (2020) noted that transformational leadership development equips youth with competencies to function effectively at both individual and team levels. At the individual level, transformational leadership enables youth to inspire hope and empower others to pursue meaningful goals. At the team level, youth develop the capacity to foster group identity, communicate a shared vision effectively, and engage in team building. Farahnak et al. (2020) further asserted that transformational leadership development allows youth to recognize the need for change, inspire peers to transcend self-interest, and motivate them to achieve optimal outcomes. Additionally, scholarly discourse on youth leadership development increasingly advocates for preparing youth with transformational leadership skills to address current and unforeseen challenges (Bates et al., 2020; Carroll & Firth, 2021).

Accordingly, this study sought to bridge the gap in the study of transformational leadership by exploring the perceptions of 4-H Extension agents' regarding influences of transformational leadership development among intermediate and senior youth on change-making efforts, as well as existing opportunities available for youth to cultivate these skills. The 4-H Extension Service's target age is 5 to 18, and the intermediate and senior category falls between ages 12 and 18 (4-H, n.d.). Numerous studies reveal youth within the intermediate and senior categories demonstrate high levels of cognitive engagement and enthusiasm toward changing their societies (Eva & Sendjava, 2013; Sun & Shek, 2012; Zhou et al., 2020). While this study is not aimed at proposing a conceptual framework, its purpose is to serve as a foundational building block to scholars seeking to pursue research and practices in transformational leadership among youth, particularly within the 4-H Extension Service. Thus, the study is grounded in House's (1971)

path-goal theory processes for goal attainment, which is the transformational leadership development of youth. These processes include defining goals, clarifying pathways, removing obstacles, and providing support needed to achieve the goal (Northouse, 2022). This study will examine the first two processes—defining goals and clarifying pathways.

Transformational Leadership Behaviors

Bass and Avolio (1995) developed the Full Range Leadership model, conceptualized into three distinct styles of leadership: (a) transactional leadership, (b) transformational leadership, and (c) laissez-faire leadership. Transactional leadership refers to the form of leadership wherein leaders apply reward or punishment in exchange for followers' compliance or non-compliance (Northouse, 2022). This form of leadership is usually associated with structural and task oriented behaviors and expectations (Garzon-Lasso et al., 2024). On the other hand, laissez-faire leadership represents the absence of leadership within a context or non-involvement in a leadership process (Lundmark et al., 2022). In contrast, transformational leadership was described as the process involving the improvement of performance and motivation of followers to perform to their fullest potential (Northouse, 2022). As conceptualized by Bass and Avolio (1995), transformational leadership involves four core attributes: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

Another major contribution to the field of transformational leadership is Kouzes and Posner's (2023) five practices of exemplary leadership. Many scholars have adopted these practices, which have been developed from over four decades of research and interviews, into their studies of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Shrestha, 2020). The five practices include leader's ability to: (a) model the way, by setting personal examples for others to emulate; (b) inspire a shared vision, by visualizing a desired future and communicating the same to others; (c) challenge the process, by taking risks that will change the status quo and birth development; (d) enable others to act, by building trust and promoting collaboration; and (e) encourage the heart, by recognizing and rewarding others for their accomplishment. Additionally, Bennis and Nanus (2007) revealed four essential transformational leadership behaviors: (1) attention through vision, (2) meaning through communication, (3) trust through positioning, and (4) deployment of self through positive self-regard (i.e., pouring one's energies into worthwhile goals and shared vision). This assertion shares similarity with Kouzes and Posner's (2023) five practices, as both provide clear, simplistic lenses for understanding transformational leadership within organizational, social, and change-making contexts. In contrast, Bass and Avolio's (1995) Full Range Leadership model is predominantly suited to organizational settings (Andersen, 2015).

Based on the above typologies and the peculiar attributes of the youth stage, this study adopts three attributes of transformational leadership among youth — inspirational leadership, vision development, and persuasive communication (Anselmann & Mulder, 2020; Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2018).

Mattering

Mattering is a psychological concept that is associated with approaches for youth wellbeing and their sense of "feeling valued" and "adding value" (Marshall, 2001; Prilleltensky, 2019). It involves an encompassing connection youth seek to have with themselves (intrapersonal), other

people (interpersonal), and broader society (external or social bonding). What a youth experiences at the external and interpersonal levels often influences their sense of self and vice versa; when youth do not believe that they matter to themselves, they are not able to experience mattering at the interpersonal and societal levels (Paradisi et al., 2024; Rayle, 2006; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

Youth perceptions of mattering vary significantly. While the youth stage is characterized by positive energy and motivation (Cheah et al., 2018), many youth experience a plethora of emotional and social challenges, which makes them susceptible to unhealthy behavioral patterns and lack of self-esteem (Broad et al., 2017). Nevertheless, findings from Watson (2017) suggests that when youth have a strong feeling of mattering and social connectedness, they are less likely to engage in delinquent behaviors and more likely to record better academic outcomes, and experience lower levels of emotional distress. Moreover, when youth develop a sense of perceived mattering to their friends and close associations, they exhibit great quality of happiness (Demir et al., 2011; Marshall, 2001). Overall, literature suggests youth's engagement in activities that lead to perceived mattering to other people can lead to positive behavioral and intrapersonal outcomes such as happiness, academic and individual successes, and personal fulfilment.

Youth Transformational Leadership and Mattering

Existing literature suggest that youth may be motivated to engage in transformational leadership activities for two primary reasons: First, because they are invited to participate, which makes them feel valued; and second, because such involvement fosters a sense of connection with friends and close relationships (Akiva et al., 2017; Demir et al., 2011). In general, what distinguishes transformational leadership is its thoughtful, empathetic, and others-centered approach, which seeks to ensure that all participants feel valued and inspired to engage in the process of creating meaningful change (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016; Riggio et al. 2004). For youth, this process emphasizes the interpersonal relationships that exist between and among young people, youth working collaboratively with others, seeking their engagement and buy-in, aligning shared priorities, and co-creating a collective vision.

Within this transformational leadership process, the concept of mattering may manifest in three ways. First, the young transformational leader seeks to positively influence the attitudes and behaviors of peers [followers] (Pitichat & Riggio, 2025), and receiving a corresponding response reinforces the leader's own sense of mattering. Second, the youth who are influenced may, in turn, develop a sense of being valued. Third, the collaborative efforts between the transformational leader and followers to effect social change foster a shared sense of providing value and making a meaningful contribution. When young people develop and demonstrate success in the interpersonal components of transformational leadership, they become more motivated to pursue social change (Yap et al., 2022). This motivation often stems from the belief that if they matter to a few individuals, there is a strong likelihood that they can make a meaningful difference to many others. In contrast, developing the feeling of not mattering can potentially lead to demotivation and depression (Flett et al., 2019; Marshall & Tilton-Weaver, 2019). Overall, transformational leadership among youth is grounded in the principle that young people both feel valued and contribute value to others.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify strategies for effectively fostering transformational leadership development among intermediate and senior 4-H youth to enable them to serve as change agents in solving the wicked and complex organizational and social problems of the world. The study is focused on two research questions:

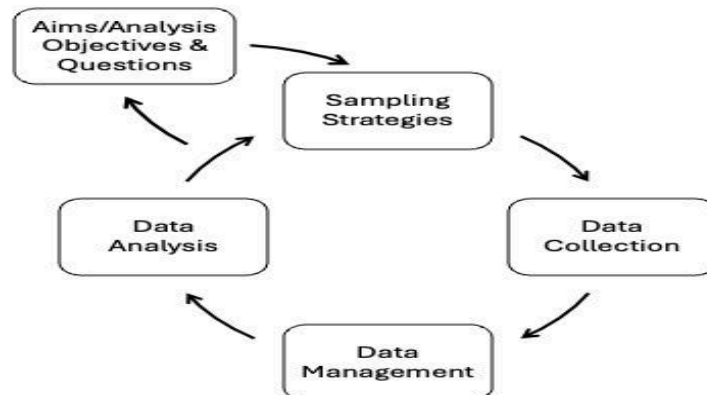
1. **Defining goals:** How do 4-H Extension agents perceive the potential influence of transformational leadership development of intermediate and senior 4-H youth on social change?
2. **Clarifying pathways:** Among programs for intermediate and senior 4-H members, which are most aligned with strategies for transformational leadership development?

Methods/Procedures

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore 4-H Extension agents' perceptions of the influence of transformational leadership development among youth on change-making efforts, as well as the existing opportunities available for youth within the 4-H Extension Service to cultivate these skills. According to Crabtree and Miller (2023), the qualitative method provides opportunity for engaging in interpretative, focused, and natural activity with the goal of receiving a holistic and descriptive explanation. Their framework involves starting with the specific research questions to be answered, then sampling strategies, and data collection, data management, data analysis, and comparing the results of the analysis to the developed research questions (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Simplified Diagram of Iterative Qualitative Research Process



Note. Adapted from “Doing Qualitative Research” by B. F. Crabtree, and W.L. Miller, 2023, Sage publications.

This study used convenience sampling and snowball methods to recruit 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. Following Hennink and Kaiser’s (2022) guideline that 9 to 17 interviews are

typically sufficient to reach saturation in qualitative research, this study interviewed 15 Extension agents affiliated with 4-H. Details on each are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics of 4-H Extension Agents Interviewed for the Study

Pseudonym	4-H Region	Length of Service	4-H Background?
Angela	Southern	5 years	Yes
Bernard	Northeast	32 years	No
Blake	Northeast	15 years	Yes
Claire	North Central	12 years	Yes
Daniella	Southern	11 years	No
Faith	Southern	9 years	No
Gabriella	Northeast	4 years	Yes
Idris	Southern	6 years	Yes
Joel	Southern	20 years	Yes
Kate	Northeast	9 years	No
Kasie	Northeast	8 years	No
Luke	Southern	32 years	Yes
Mary	Southern	2 years	No
Nasir	Southern	12 years	No
Ruth	Western	20 years	Yes

Note. For the 4-H Background, “Yes” indicates the participant was previously a 4-H member and “No” indicates they were not a 4-H member.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, where questions were phrased to help participants reflect on specific leadership attributes and components, with no limit on responses. After data collection, interviews were transcribed, cleaned, and anonymized. A line-by-line analysis was conducted in three steps: transcripts were reviewed for clarity, excerpts were analyzed for meaning, and data were coded and organized thematically using a combination of Atlas.ti and Microsoft Excel.

Results/Findings


Our findings highlight how 4-H Extension agents perceive the importance of transformational leadership among youth. Through analysis of participant experiences, several interconnected themes emerged that explicitly answer our two research questions.

Defining Goals

Related to our first research question about the influence of transformational leadership development of youth in creating social change, data revealed four overarching themes (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Sample Coded Text from Data Related to Defining Goals

Sample Coded Text		Themes
"Adult leaders serve as role models to youth," "Empowering youth to identify a need," "Ignite youth interest," "Gradual process of helping someone else become a leader," "Ignite youth interest."		Adult leaders providing opportunities for youth to thrive
"Challenging the thoughts of people," "Willingness to change the status quo," "Speaking persuasively to get needs resolved," "Youth performing advocacy functions."		Confidently challenging the status quo
"Desire to work in group settings," "Youth mentoring younger youth within the 4-H," "Inspiring others through their knowledge of leadership," "Youth providing a safe and fun environment for younger youth to learn."		Motivating others to work toward a common goal
"Strong leaders within their communities and workplaces," "Giving back to the community by starting and completing projects," "Empowering youth to identify a need," "Deploying passion to effect positive change."		Becoming change agent in the society

Note. Authors' own figure.

Adult Leaders Providing Opportunities for Youth to Thrive

Participants believed that adult leaders play foundational support roles in fostering transformational leadership development among youth by inspiring them to act, serving as their role models, and patiently following through the gradual process of seeing them become transformational leaders. As shared by Idris, "It's all about inspiring and empowering those kids." Gabriella supported this thought by sharing that transformational leadership is "where you [adult leader] helps someone else [a youth] also become a leader over time." On the other hand, Faith unequivocally expressed that transformational leadership is about enabling and equipping youth to express their passion:

Giving the intermediate and senior youth opportunities to practice those skills and watching them learn the skills that they need to be better leaders; giving them as much practice and relinquishing control when possible so that they have the ability to practice those skills; helping them establish the foundation, and learning what that is, but then giving them platforms to practice those skills.

At the youth stage, the role of an adult leader is highly important in creating opportunities for youth to express their passion in ways that lead to change. Joel reflected on her experience, observing a leader create opportunities for youth:

A few years ago, our state 4-H cabinet president saw a need for her 4-Hers in the whole state. A lot of our school systems don't give excused absences to 4-H in different areas of the state, and she saw that as a really big concern. So, she went out on her own and contacted her little county delegates, and brought it forth to them. It actually went to the House of Representatives and through the Senate, and it got approved. And she actually

spoke on the—I don't know if it was the Senate or the House floor—about why she wanted to do this, and then it got approved by the governor.

Interview participants collectively believed that the influence of transformational leadership among youth begins from a vertical adult-youth lens, and underscores the importance of adult leaders to the success of any youth transformational leadership pursuit.

Confidently Challenging the Status Quo

Further answering our first research question, participants shared that transformational leadership development among intermediate and senior 4-H youth involves building their capacity to be confident and advocate for positive change. Mary shared that her end goal is to “develop kids to become stronger [transformational] leaders in their communities and their workplace... and that would be confidence building.” Kasie also expressed that her understanding of transformational leadership involves youth becoming “more confident, knowledgeable, better leaders; and hopefully that will lead to them inspiring others to lead.”

Transformational leadership among youth often provides opportunities for them to advocate for positive change. Kate further identified that the youth “are community ambassadors, and are really the voice of [their 4-H region]—they do advocacy.” Gabriella reflected that when youth identify what they are passionate about, it becomes easy for them to engage in transformational leadership:

It depends on the youth [and] how much passion the youth have towards a project, but I have had members go through a project, and are like, ‘I don't understand why we are doing this.’ I [often respond with], ‘Well, if it's something that you are passionate about, we can go through and change it...’

Motivating Others to Work Toward a Common Goal

The third theme that surfaced from answering research question one was that transformational leadership development helps youth to motivate others to achieve a common goal. Blake described how 4-H has created opportunities for older youth to support younger youth:

It is about learning how to create opportunities for not only yourself, but for other people.... When we put on meetings and events, these older teens help the younger 4-Hers go forward and participate in activities. They help demonstrate leadership, public speaking, and other activities.

Mary further elaborated that through transformational leadership development, junior leaders (comprised of intermediate and senior 4-H youth) are able to influence the younger youth in acquiring critical leadership skills:

These junior leaders have that empathy and are able to understand where the younger youth are coming from.... They did something in my first year—when I first came in.... They put on a workshop for little ones [younger youth] to come in and experiment with different 4-H projects so that they could learn what they like in 4-H. And this was led by the Junior Leaders Club [ages 12 through 18]. So, a bunch of teenagers decided to make

this happen, and I loved that. I thought that was a way for them to give back—a way for them to mentor the younger students, as well as providing a safe and fun environment for the kids to learn in.

Becoming Change Agents in the Society

In final attention to research question one, participants expressed that transformational leadership development among intermediate and senior 4-H youth encompasses empowering them to be change agents within their societies through provision of solutions to problems within the society and exhibiting positive behaviors in the society. As mentioned by Kasie, transformational leadership among youth is about “learning, understanding, and acquiring skills to lead and effect change within the society.” Moreover, Gabriella shared examples of change making activities embarked by 4-H youth:

I have had a member [youth] in the past realize that their community town park needed to be repaired, and so they work with their local—I think it was a borough—to like repaint the park. And so, it looked a lot better. Also, I have had members [youth] help mentor kids at a local clinic to become better and safer when they are riding their horses.

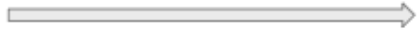
Some participants shared that transformational leadership development among youth includes helping youth develop a positive outlook within the society. Luke discussed that this process is about transforming youth “from negative within the society to positive.” Meanwhile, Mary described it as “developing strong leaders within their communities and workplace.” Notably, Faith shared that transformational leadership development involves empowering youth to uphold positive values within the society: “Helping youth establish the foundation and learning what it is [to be] accountable, responsible, and trustworthy.”

Clarifying Pathways

In pursuit of our second research question, data revealed four more overarching themes (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Sample Coded Text from Data Related to Clarifying Pathways

Sample Coded Text		Themes
"Adult leaders going the extra mile to ensure youth hold their meetings," "Adult leaders provide guidance but still provide autonomy," "Caring adults providing supports to youth," "Adults providing youth with advice if they have leadership ideas," "Adult leaders providing responsive and trustworthy communication."		Adult leaders playing role modelling functions
"Leadership team which involves youth leading other youth," "When a youth successfully engages in transformational leadership, it inspires other youth," "Empowering older youth to serve as role models to younger youths," "The ability for them to create even bigger and better opportunities for themselves, for their peers, for their growth."		Youth influencing each other
"Club meetings provide opportunities for youth to practice transformational leadership," "Developing a leadership project," "Giving the youth opportunity to set goals and achieve them."		Hands-on leadership opportunities
"Adult leaders engage youth in case study sessions related to community development," "Organizing workshops on leadership skills," "Teaching the youth how to communicate," "Educating youth about transformational leadership."		Adult leaders facilitating workshops on critical leadership skills

Note. Authors' own figure.

Adult Leaders Play Role-Modeling Functions

Participants shared that adult leaders play role modeling functions. Angela reflected on her experience mentoring youth to pursue projects they were passionate about:

I provided the intermediate and senior youth the guidance and support they needed to be successful, but I feel like they were the ones making the change, because they were the ones that felt comfortable enough to come to me and tell me how they felt. They were really asking for help, and I supported them. I think through that experience, things have changed a lot for the youth: They have had different opportunities that they maybe never would have had before, if they hadn't asked for help. And even if they didn't get what they wanted, at the end of the day—like their outcomes of that conversation—I felt like they still were learning a valuable skill.

Adult leaders act as role models by providing resources to enhance the transformational leadership skills of youth. Faith discussed her experiences providing resources to youth:

I allow them [the youth] to go and speak in front of certain civic groups and board of directors.... I also take them to travel throughout the state. These experiences open the eyes of the youth to leadership at higher levels.

Blake recounted her experience helping youth during the COVID-19 pandemic:

When COVID hit, there were states around us that completely shut down. If you are going to meet with people, it has to be via online or virtual platforms.... I went to our provost's office, and I said: 'Man, this is not going to work for some of our audiences. Do you mind if I continue to let them meet outdoors in barns, places where there is lots of air and ventilations, so that they can see each other personally?' And every community that we worked in said, 'Yes, you can bring these kids outdoors, underneath sheds.' So we kept doing 4-H all through COVID until March of 2021.

Youth Influencing Each Other

Research participants shared that 4-H offers numerous opportunities for older youth to serve as mentors to younger youth. Luke shared that he “teaches these youth that they are getting older... and that the younger youth really look up to them.” Moreover, Faith provided a practical example:

From a camping perspective, we usually have to hire so many teen leaders to come and volunteer at camp, and that gives them a wonderful opportunity to practice [transformational] leadership skills with kids who are ages 9 to 12. During that time they are pretty much in place of parents: They take care of the kids; they mentor the kids; they teach kids life skills—like even from the basics such as how to properly shower, which sounds weird, but they will explain to them.

In addition, 4-H provides opportunities for youth to collaborate with their peers on changemaking activities. Blake expressed that the youth in her county that “have been in positive well-run collaborative committee structures understand the ability for them to create even bigger and better opportunities for themselves and their peers.” Moreover, Kate shared that she:

Created vision boarding experiences for the youth, where they worked in small groups to practice, then share with each other and then to the larger group.... The youth were able to develop, record, and then send their goals to their mentors.

Hands-on Leadership Opportunities

Participants expressed that 4-H engages youth in leadership opportunities within both 4-H and their immediate societies. These opportunities may be in “supporting the 4-H center,” Angela echoed; or creating opportunities like “the state YLT day where [youth] invite presenters to speak on topics related to teenagers and then they [youth] practice their [national] presentations,” Kasie expressed. According to Idris, giving leadership responsibilities to youth inspire them to seek the growth of their 4-H county:

Having these opportunities, the youth get to see other teens in different localities. They are like: ‘Oh, well, they are doing that; how come we can't do this here?’ And it gives them that spark of interest: ‘Well, if it looked like that in a smaller community, and they made a big impact, how can I take that idea and bring it to such a large community and still make an impact as well?’ So, they start thinking of the big picture.

Participants shared about youth leadership engagement within their broader society. Angela cited an example of youth who identified a need and attempted to solve it: “I work with a youth who is advocating for sign language to be considered a foreign language credit in his school system.” Similarly, Faith reflected on her experience with a group of youth:

I have a group of youth that I work with and I give them a goal of doing a community outreach event throughout the school year. That's literally the only parameters that I set for them.... So for me, just giving them that challenge, they will then think about what type of event they want to plan. Most of the time, the event that they choose to plan is a day camp for younger kids. So the older youth are not only planning this event, but are also going to be working and facilitating the event.

Adult Leaders Facilitating Workshops on Critical Leadership Skills

The 4-H agents further shared that an effective strategy for fostering transformational leadership skills among youth is through facilitating workshops on critical skills such as vision development, and effective communication and collaboration. Mary shared that she adopted an innovative approach in facilitating her workshops: “So how do you lead as a recreational leader and change the culture of your club by the games that you bring in? That was something I did then, and we are working with the [youth] to achieve this.” In addition, Blake conveyed that “we take the older youth, and help them learn how to mentor the younger teens for our 4-H activities.”

Moreover, Nasir shared how she engages youth: “I support youth in facilitating roundtable discussions and presentations for high school 4-H youth... and I have been working with the youth to create a presentation for the USDA and other federal agencies.” To support this, Kate explained how another Extension agent has conducted workshop on vision boarding:

My Extension colleague came into our teen leadership retreat and genuinely did [a workshop on] vision boarding. It was a few hours, and we had about 60 of our intermediate and senior youth there. We really try to impress upon them the language that visioning something and setting a goal are important, because we want them to harness their passions. We make sure that the vision boarding workshop is very youth development friendly. We had a lot of materials and markers and pictures that the youth engaged with.

Discussion

This study explored the potential benefits of transformational leadership development among youth and existing opportunities available for such development. The findings revealed that adult leaders play a vital role in creating opportunities for youth to develop their transformational leadership skills and to become change agents within their societies. Existing literature underscores the importance of the vertical relationship Extension agents have with youth in inspiring them to thrive (Austin et al., 2020; McNae, 2018; Richards-Schuster & Timmermans, 2017). Through the support of adult leaders, youth can develop their transformational leadership skills to initiate social change across multiple sectors including politics and governance (De Gennaro, 2019), climate change (Burch et al., 2014), and community development (Ledwith &

Springett, 2022). Furthermore, in support of a fundamental tenant of transformational leadership—challenging the process (Kouzes & Posner, 2023; Bass & Avolio, 1995; Crucke et al., 2022), findings indicate that transformational leadership development among youth improves their capacity to engage in advocacy activities and challenge the status quo, and to motivate others to work toward a common goal. Moreover, as indicated in literature, these activities are potential avenues for youth to develop their sense of mattering (Akiva et al., 2017; Watson, 2017).

With regards to existing 4-H strategies that align with transformational leadership development, our findings emphasize the adult leaders' participation as role models to youth. This is supported by Bandura (1977) and Rumjaun and Narod's (2020) assertion that role modeling is a great practice for behavioral learning and modification. Practically, this involves providing youth with experiential and learning-by-doing experiences to embody transformational leadership behaviors, after they have observed an adult leader (Redmond & Dolan, 2016). Another finding that surfaced was that 4-H provides opportunities for youth to influence each other. Research establishes youth's influence on each other as one of the benefits of transformational leadership development (Hirsch et al., 2021). This includes providing youth with opportunities to form alliances with other youth, pooling their unique strengths in accomplishing projects targeted at social change (Oyedare et al., 2025). The influence-relationship can be further fostered through hands-on leadership exposure within the 4-H. Students value hands-on leadership responsibilities important in their transformational leadership experiences and development (Wright et al., 2023). Lastly, an approach deployed within the Extension Service is adult leaders facilitating workshops on transformational leadership. This form of education requires systematic and interconnected components such as training, development, group and individual projects, and service learning, all of which require students to develop across cognitive, behavioral, humanistic, social cognitive, and constructive domains (Allen et al., 2022).

Implication for Practice

This study reveals how 4-H Extension agents perceive the benefits of transformational leadership development among youth and offers insight on existing strategies for developing youth in this area. Evidently, transformational leadership development heavily rests on the ability of adult leaders to train and serve as role models of transformational leadership. Therefore, this study encourages more deliberate efforts on developing the transformational leadership of the adults 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 (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006; Edwards & Taylor, 2024). Moreover, findings from the study underscore the need for empowering youth through hands-on exercises that will expose them to key tenants of transformational leadership through relationship building, peer-mentorship, and communications that challenges the status-quo. Thus, this study advocates that 4-H Extension agents thoughtfully introduce programs and events focused on these areas. This will have a long-term impact on resolving the issue of disengagement among upper-level youth within 4-H (Ellison & Harder, 2018; Lewis et al., 2022), and help them develop their sense of mattering (Flett et al., 2019).

Limitations and Future Directions

Given that transformational leadership among youth remains an underexplored area of research (Karagianni & Montgomery, 2018), this study aimed to serve as a foundational step toward advancing scholarship on how transformational leadership can be cultivated in young people. To guide this effort, Path-Goal Theory, which outlines processes leaders use to facilitate goal attainment, was adopted. Future research should extend this work by directly measuring and evaluating transformational leadership constructs among youth populations. Additionally, because the present study was limited by a small sample size and a singular focus on 4-H Extension services, subsequent studies should incorporate larger and more diverse samples. In particular, greater attention should be given to youths' perspectives, as they are the primary beneficiaries of transformational leadership development initiatives. This could be accomplished by examining how the themes identified in this study align with and are reflected in youths' lived experiences.

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