

# LEADERSHIP CONTEXT AND ROLE OF RURAL FFA MEMBERS IN THE SOUTHERN REGION

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## Abstract

*Numerous studies have examined the degree to which youth have acquired particular leadership skills or the level within the organization at which the members have participated in leadership activities. This study sought to describe and map the context of leadership activities and role with adult-youth interaction of rural FFA members in the southern region. With regard to the role of youth in their leadership activities, FFA members indicated they agreed their role in leadership activities included being partners, resources, recipients and objects. Rural southern FFA members examined FFA activities focusing on leadership development within the context of self, community, groups and others. When mapping their FFA leadership experiences, respondents indicated the greatest agreement was in role of youth-adult role as partners within the context of others. Respondents tended to be white males, high school freshmen with one year in FFA. In addition, few held a chapter office. Future research should include greater analysis of the youth/adult role and context of leadership activities specifically relating to the educational level and years of experience in FFA.*

## Introduction

Over the past several decades, a number of studies have attempted to characterize the leadership skills and behaviors of various youth organizations. These studies have tended to examine either the degree to which youth have acquired particular leadership life skills or the level within the organization at which the members have participated in leadership activities. Little attention has been paid to either the conceptual role that the young person plays in the day-to-day functioning of society or the context in which the leadership behaviors are performed. Research has suggested that the most effective leadership development programs engage young people in meaningful ways as they work as partners with adults in addressing real world situations.

### *Role of Youth in Society*

Lofquist (1989) developed what he termed a *spectrum of attitudes* that adults may hold regarding the role of young people in society. The left side of his continuum (Figure 1.) represents an attitude where young people are viewed as *objects*, being told what to do because the adult *knows what's best* for the youth. As *recipients*, young people participate in learning experiences that adults see as *being good for them*. However, the real contributions of young people are seen as being deferred until some later date and learning experiences are seen as practice for later life. When youth are viewed as *resources*, actions of young people have present value to the community and there is an attitude of respect focusing on building self-esteem and being productive. The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development (2001) later added a characterization of youth as *partners* to Lofquist's original continuum. As partners, youth share leadership and decision-making roles with adults.



Figure 1. A Spectrum of Adult Attitudes toward Youth (Lofquist, 1989).

The view adults take toward young people tends to shape the nature of the leadership programs they design. In some programs, leadership is taught through formal routines that emphasize command and compliance. The leader is *in charge* and followers are objects to be directed. In other programs, youth run club meetings and organize events as practice for more significant roles in the community later in life. In these instances youth are recipients of programs designed by well-meaning adults. When programs involve young people as resources, youth grow, gaining knowledge, skills and building self-esteem from their involvement in service learning activities such as food drives and community clean-up campaigns while performing needed functions within their community. More recently, youth have been engaged as full partners with adults in making decisions and taking actions aimed at producing sustainable and vibrant communities.

### *Context of Leadership Activity*

Ayres (1987) identified four key developmental phases through which individuals engaged in a leadership curriculum should progress (Figure 2). First individuals must develop an expanded knowledge of self: that is who they are, what they believe, and how they function. Next, they move toward mastering skills necessary to work effectively with others. In the next phase, individuals refine their skills working with groups or organizations. The final phase focuses on leadership within the context of communities, systems, and society. As the arena in which leadership is being practiced continues to broaden, individuals must use knowledge and skills learned at previous levels to be effective in the new context.

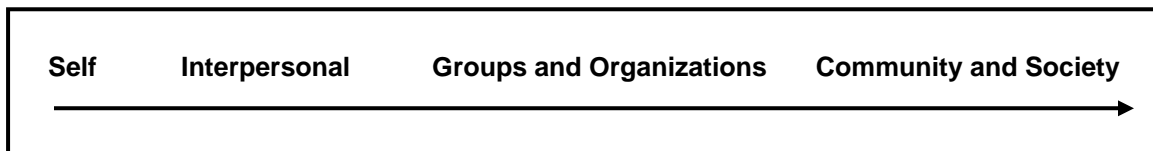


Figure 2. Context of Leadership Activity (Ayres, 1987).

Similarly, Austin (1996) offered a leadership model which focused on developing knowledge and skills first at the individual level, emphasizing that “before we can contribute to a larger effort, it is imperative that we understand ourselves” (p. 118). However, in this model group development included knowledge and skills related to interpersonal communication and interactions, as well as, the ability to participate in and understand group development, working together to achieve goals, and dealing with conflict. The third level in this model of leadership development focuses on community, recognizing that the ultimate goal of individual and group development is to serve the common good beyond the individual or organization.

### *Leadership Development in Agricultural Education (FFA)*

One of agricultural education’s goals is leadership development. This foundation is shown through the organization’s mission statement, “The National FFA Organization is dedicated to making a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education” (The National FFA Organization, 2005a). Additionally, service to others and to the community is a key component of FFA, and is reflected in its motto, “Learning to Do, Doing to Learn, Earning to Live, Living to Serve” (The National FFA Organization, 2005b).

Precepts for developing leadership through secondary agricultural education were established and referred to as the 16 Precepts of National FFA Essential Learnings (Figure 3). As a result, through this initial work and funding from USDA and John Deere Company, a leadership curriculum was developed named, *LifeKnowledge*.

*LifeKnowledge* is founded on the leadership theory of four phases (Figure 3). This framework is closely related to the theory of Ayres (1987) in examining the context of leadership activities.

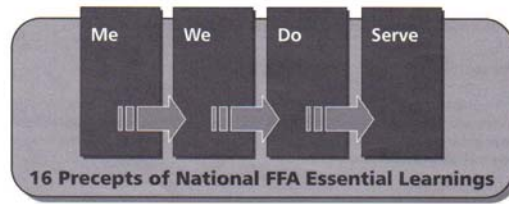


Figure 3. National FFA Essential Learnings of the *LifeKnowledge* Leadership Curriculum.

### Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The theoretical/conceptual framework is based on the leadership theories of Ayres (1987) and Lofquist (1989). Ayres (1987) identified four key developmental phases through which individuals engaged in a leadership curriculum should progress: self, interpersonal, groups and community. Lofquist (1989) developed what he termed a *spectrum of attitudes* that adults may hold regarding the role of young people in society: youth as objects, recipients, resources and partners.

This study is rooted in the connections with leadership developmental phases with the context of leadership activities (Ayres, 1987) and the spectrum of attitudes adults hold of member role in these leadership activities (Lofquist, 1989). Specifically, researchers established a new leadership theory examining member role in leadership activities (Lofquist, 1989) while addressing the leadership phases and context of activities (Ayres, 1987) as shown in a conceptual map focusing on youth development (Figure 4). Youth organizations conduct leadership activities across the continuum and members are viewed by adults in each area, therefore youth organizations have activities focusing within each cell of the matrix. As the cell moves up and to the right, greater leadership takes place (Peiter Horstmeier & Nall, in press).

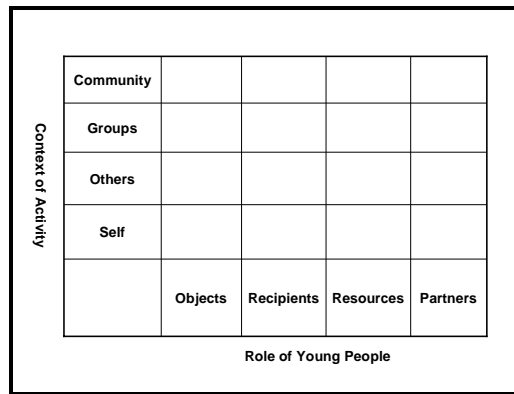


Figure 4. Conceptual Map of Member Leadership Role and Context of Leadership Activities (Peiter Horstmeier & Nall, in press).

### Purpose and Objectives

Many studies have examined the context of leadership activities, specifically with the National FFA Organization. However, few if any studies have examined how members' leadership role interacts within the context of each specific leadership activities. The overall purpose of this study is to describe and map the leadership activities and adult-youth interactions of rural students who are current southern region members of the National FFA Organization.

Specific objectives of the study include:

- 1) Examine demographics of rural FFA members in the southern region.
- 2) Describe the context in which FFA leadership activities are performed.
- 3) Describe the role of rural FFA members in those activities.
- 4) Plot the intersection of role and context.

### Procedures

The target population for this descriptive study was members of the National FFA Organization located in the Southern region. Specially, rural youth were identified. For the purposes of this study, *rural schools* were defined as those serving a geographic region containing no city or town larger than ten thousand residents.

A multi-stage cluster sampling technique was implemented to draw a representative sample of active FFA members from across the southern region. In the first stage, three states were randomly selected from the National FFA Organization's Southern Region. In the second stage of the sampling procedure, state FFA advisors randomly selected four schools, each containing FFA chapters which serve rural areas. Of these twelve schools, a total of nine FFA chapters (75%) responded, resulting in 392 members ( $N=392$ ) completing the instruments. Non-response error was examined and no differences were detected between early and late respondents.

### *Development of Instrument*

A researcher developed instrument was created for the purpose of collecting data regarding youth participation in leadership activities. The context of youth activities were identified by developing statements which reflect the potential roles FFA members engage in as they develop leadership skills moving from personal development to interpersonal development to organizational and group development to ultimately engaging in community and societal leadership (Ayres, 1987).

Roles of rural youth in adult-youth relationships through FFA leadership activities were also examined. Questions were developed which reflected the role in which FFA members were engaged through leadership activities which viewed them as objects, recipients, resources, and/or partners (Lofquist, 1989).

In 2004, researchers created a matrix integrating the context of leadership development in relationship to the roles of youth in the context of FFA leadership activities at the local, state, and national levels. Four questions were developed for each cell of the matrix. A total of sixty-four questions were developed in this instrument, corresponding to the sixteen quadrants of the role-context matrix (Figure 5). Statements examining demographic data were also included with the instrument.

Context of Activity	Community	13	14	15	16
	Groups	9	10	11	12
	Others	5	6	7	8
	Self	1	2	3	4
		Objects	Recipients	Resources	Partners
Role of Young People					

Figure 5. Member Role-Context of Leadership Activities Matrix (Peiter Horstmeier & Nall, in press).

Each question began with the statement, *In my FFA Chapter...* and through responses Southern Region FFA members measured their current state of leadership activities. Responses were measured using a four point Likert-type scale. The points on the scale were: *1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree*. For example, a cell 1 statement representing Self and Others was *In my FFA Chapter...New members must participate in initiation activities*. In contrast, cell 16 represents

Community and Partners. A specific statement in this cell read *In my FFA Chapter...Members work side by side with local citizens in planning, conducting and evaluating meaningful community projects*. Four statements were developed for each cell in the role-context matrix describing FFA leadership activities in the paired levels in the role-context matrix.

Validity and reliability of this instrument were established. Content and face validity of the instrument were established using a panel of experts. These experts were in the field of leadership development, current agricultural education teachers serving on the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) Board of Directors, extension staff, agricultural education pre-service teachers, and former FFA members.

The instrument was pilot tested with FFA members from a southern state not included in the random sample. Reliability was established using Chronbach's Alpha and was reported for each construct. Scores included: Objects ( $\alpha = .71$ ), Recipients ( $\alpha = .85$ ), Resources ( $\alpha = .88$ ), Partners ( $\alpha = .86$ ), Self ( $\alpha = .72$ ), Interpersonal ( $\alpha = .88$ ), Groups ( $\alpha = .88$ ), and Community ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

After receiving approval from the Human Subjects Review Board, researchers received a waiver of consent. Permission was granted by the FFA advisor and school administrator for their students to participate in the study. Dillman (2000) research design method was incorporated; therefore 12 FFA chapter advisors were notified of the opportunity to participate prior to the first mailing. Follow-up contacts were made with non-respondent FFA chapters. Ultimately, nine FFA chapters agreed to participate in the study, leading to a response rate of 75%. Survey instruments were mailed to the chapter advisors and each advisor administered the survey instrument to all FFA members in their chapter. Researchers received 392 completed survey instruments. Research data were analyzed using SPSS 10.0. Early and late respondents were compared, with no differences being found. Descriptive statistics of frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were given for each objective.

## Findings

The first objective examined the personal characteristics of rural FFA members in the Southern Region (Table1). Over half of the respondents were male (60.1%). Of those who reported ethnicity, over two-thirds (86.0%) were Caucasian. Nine percent (9.3%) of respondents were African American, and (2.6%) reported their ethnicity as Hispanic. Approximately one percent were Asian (1.3%) and 0.8% of the respondents indicated their ethnicity as other.

In terms of level of education, over one-third of the respondents were high school freshman (33.7%). Approximately one-fourth (23.7%) of the respondents were juniors (23.7%), 22.7 % were sophomores, 15.6% reported being seniors, and 4.3% of the respondents were in Middle School.

Almost four of 10 members (39.5%) were first year members of FFA, and 18.1% were second year members. Seventy-one agricultural education students have been FFA

members for three years (18.6%), over one-tenth (12.8%) have been members for four years, and 4.2% have been FFA members for 5 years. Finally, 6.8% of the respondents reported being an FFA member for six years. In terms of leadership positions in the FFA, only 20.9% of the respondents reported serving as a chapter officer.

Table 1

*Personal Characteristics of Rural Members in the Southern FFA Region*

Personal Characteristics	<i>f</i>	%
Gender ( <i>n</i> =388)		
Male	233	60.1
Female	155	39.9
Ethnicity ( <i>n</i> =392)		
White, Non-Hispanic	332	86.0
Black, Non-Hispanic	36	9.3
Hispanic	10	2.6
Asian	5	1.3
Other	3	0.8
Grade in School ( <i>n</i> =392)		
Middle School	17	4.3
Freshman	132	33.7
Sophomore	89	22.7
Junior	93	23.7
Senior	61	15.6
Years in FFA ( <i>n</i> =382)		
1	151	39.5
2	69	18.1
3	71	18.6
4	49	12.8
5	16	4.2
6	26	6.8
Chapter Officer ( <i>n</i> =392)		
Yes	82	20.9
No	310	79.1

The second objective described the context (Self, Interpersonal, Groups, Community) in which leadership activities are performed (Table 2). Rural FFA members in the southern region viewed leadership activities focusing on personal development (self) as the greatest ( $M=3.04$ ) context in which leadership activities are performed.

Members viewed activities resulting in Community/Society Development as the second highest. Leadership activities resulting in skills related to group development ( $M=2.97$ ) followed. Interpersonal development ( $M=2.94$ ) was perceived as an area of least involvement ( $M=2.98$ ).

Table 2

*Context in which FFA Leadership Activities are Performed*

	<i>M</i> ( <i>n</i> =392)	<i>SD</i> ( <i>n</i> =392)
Self	3.04	.518
Others	2.94	.529
Groups	2.97	.525
Community	2.98	.581

*1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree*

The third objective described the role of youth (Objects, Recipients, Resources, Partners) in leadership activities (Table 2). Rural FFA members in the southern region viewed themselves as partners ( $M=3.04$ ) to a greater degree than any of the other roles. However, following very closely, youth saw their role as resources ( $M=3.03$ ) in leadership activities. Southern region FFA members viewed their role in leadership activities as recipients ( $M=2.93$ ) and objects ( $M=2.91$ ) less than they viewed their role as partners and resources.

Table 3

*Describe the Role of FFA Members in Leadership Activities*

	<i>M</i> ( <i>n</i> =392)	<i>SD</i> ( <i>n</i> =392)
Objects	2.91	.510
Recipients	2.93	.507
Resources	3.03	.545
Partners	3.04	.557

*1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree*

The final objective was to analyze the intersection of role and context to the leadership activities. Table 4 and Figure 6 show how FFA members in the southern region perceived their role in leadership activities (Objects, Recipients, Resources, Partners) related to the context (Self, Others, Groups, Communities). When members

responded to survey statements regarding the role and context of their leadership involvement, they indicated the greatest agreement in the cell relating to involvement as a partner in the context of working with others ( $M=3.09$ ) (Others and Partners role-context). Youth perceived their role and context equally as resources and self ( $M=3.08$ ) and partners and self ( $M=3.08$ ). This indicated that in the resources and self role-context matrix, members viewed activities which focused on personal development (self) in the context of being resources or partners.

Context of Activity	Community	2.92	2.92	2.06	2.98
	Groups	2.90	2.94	3.00	2.04
	Others	2.91	2.78	2.96	3.09
	Self	2.90	3.06	3.08	3.08
		Objects	Recipients	Resources	Partners
Role of Young People					

*1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree*

Figure 6. Matrix Showing Intersection of Member Role and Leadership Context (Peiter Horstmeier & Nall, in press).

Table 4

*Means of Member Role and Context for FFA Leadership Activities*

	<i>M</i> ( <i>n</i> =392)	<i>SD</i> ( <i>n</i> =392)
Objects and Self	2.90	.610
Objects and Others	2.91	.627
Objects and Groups	2.90	.660
Objects and Community	2.92	.650
Recipients and Self	3.06	.620
Recipients and Others	2.78	.676
Recipients and Groups	2.94	.599
Recipients and Community	2.92	.666
Resources and Self	3.08	.630
Resources and Others	2.96	.599
Resources and Groups	3.00	.684
Resources and Community	2.06	.664
Partners and Self	3.08	.607
Partners and Others	3.09	.653
Partners and Groups	2.04	.670
Partners and Community	2.98	.656

*1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree*

Rural southern FFA members displayed least agreement in two areas. The first included members' role as a resource in the context of community ( $M=2.06$ ). FFA members' also indicated the least agreement was their role as partners in the context of group development ( $M=2.04$ ).

### **Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications**

Respondents tended to be white males, high school freshmen with one year in FFA. In addition, few held a chapter office. It is recommended to analyze each demographic area, specifically by gender, grade level, years of membership in FFA, and FFA officer involvement. Furthermore, the role and context of leadership development through FFA leadership activities with upper classmen and experienced FFA leaders should be examined. Are we currently focusing on a few, select group of students, or all FFA members? Do officers view their leadership experiences (role and context) differently than other members? Do those students with just one or two years of experiences view their role and the context of leadership development the same?

Respondents indicate that their FFA activities provide them the opportunity to move through various leadership roles. In the southern region, rural FFA members view their greatest role with leadership activities was with youth/adult partnerships in their community. Members also agreed that in leadership activities they have a role as resource and recipient. The least role members view themselves as was the role of an object.

Rural FFA members in the southern region believe leadership activities they are provided in the context of experiences in all areas: self, groups, others and community. However, rural FFA members in the southern region view opportunities focusing on self development as the greatest. Leadership activities in the context of community are also prevalent with southern rural FFA members. These FFA members have the least experience with leadership activities as it relates to community.

Respondents indicated the strongest agreement in being treated as partners, when examining FFA leadership development in the terms of role of youth and context of the leadership activities. However, the greatest agreement was in a partnership that focused on developing self. Similarly, members greatly viewed their role as a recipient and resource in the context of self development. As we looked at developing leadership knowledge and skills moving from self to interpersonal development to group development and ultimately to community/society development, the means decreased at each level. This indicates less opportunity for involvement in leadership activities focusing on developing skills at a higher level.

It is recommended that rural FFA chapters in the southern region continue to organize activities around the conceptual framework identified in this study. Ultimately, FFA chapters should design activities to engage youth as objects, recipients, resources, and partners in an age-appropriate manner. Similarly leadership development activities should help young people gain skills in the context that help them better understand self,

interact with others, function effectively in groups, and provide leadership within the community.

However, the benefits of engaging young people as partners in addressing real community issues and concerns are increasingly well documented. When young people exercise leadership in real community contexts, their activities have more meaning and young people feel a stronger bond to the community in which they live. Furthermore, when leadership development activities have real consequences, they are not seen as just practice for future community roles. Community-based leadership experiences include service learning, action research, youth organizing and youth serving on community boards. It is recommended that rural FFA members in the southern region utilize their chapter Program of Activities (POA) to further enhance their chapter leadership activities that partnership with community organizations and its leaders. Chapter FFA advisors in the southern region must also become more aware of members' role for community partnership and its benefit for developing leadership.

Future plans include continuation of this study in several ways. First, it is recommended the perception of FFA advisors in the southern region be investigated. Through gaining advisors' viewpoints, the members' role and the context of the chapter leadership activities can be further investigated.

In addition, replication of this study should also occur. This study should be replicated with all members, not only those in rural areas. This data would provide Agricultural Education leaders information for all members in FFA. Additionally, replication of this study could provide comparative analysis specific to each particular demographic (rural, urban, etc).

Furthermore, replication of this study would allow national, state and chapter leaders to examine the role and context of the FFA leadership activities of each level over time. Specifically, this data will allow examination of leadership development as the *LifeKnowledge* curriculum is infused into the academic agricultural education classroom.

It is recommended to conduct focus groups with chapter leaders to further define and clarify the degree of involvement in their roles and the context of the activities. This qualitative data could further explore implications to this study. Additionally, scenarios should be infused to describe leadership situations comparing the context and roles. Ranking of these scenarios will provide additional validation to the FFA members' leadership activities at the chapter level as they relate to role and context.

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