

Student Self-Perceptions of Leadership in Two Missouri FFA Chapters: A Collective Case Study

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Abstract

The focus of this study is the self-perceptions of leadership engagement of FFA members in two FFA chapters in Missouri. This multiple case study used documentation of student self-perceptions, researcher observations, and focus groups. The two cases included 24 high school students comprised of FFA officers and members, who provided their perspectives on leadership. Six major themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) personal abilities and motivation as influencing student leaders; (b) barriers to leadership as perceived by officers and members; (c) support from others as influencing student leadership; (d) officers' perceiving that members are apathetic; (e) leadership as enhancing personal and professional development; and (f) perceived gender differences in leadership style. It is recommended that FFA advisors discuss diverse leadership styles and motivational factors with students. In turn, leading to the potential development of leadership skills and awareness by all students in a FFA chapter. The content of leadership education for adolescents also may need broadening to emphasize content beyond study of traits. Recommendations for student success include additional research into best practices of leadership development of all students and the ability to assist students in addressing identified barriers.

Keywords: leadership; FFA; barriers; motivation; officers

Developing the next generation of leaders is essential to the sustained success of a society. To this end, adolescents need to be provided with the basic skills for leading productive and prosperous lives (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011), with a key skill being leadership. In the common vernacular of leadership, study and observation of trait leadership is predominant and as a result, thoughts of leadership often bring up images of brave, commanding, powerful, and dynamic individuals (Yukl, 2013). Therefore, adolescents may view leadership as unattainable (van Linden & Fertman, 1998).

Through targeted curricula, educators can encourage adolescents to move beyond their concerns and leadership hurdles. Van Linden and Fertman (1998) purport the attainability of leadership skills and assert through the stages of awareness, interaction, and mastery, leadership development can progress. To better understand where an adolescent may be in his or her development, it is necessary to understand the adolescent's perspective on leadership and the motivations behind his or her decisions to engage in leadership. Research in adolescent leadership is often discussed from an adult perspective, which may not have sufficient relevance to understanding how students perceive leadership partly due to the contextual differences of experience and leadership application (Whitehead, 2009). Whitehead asserted further research

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needs to explore the leadership perspective of adolescents to aid in developing opportunities for adolescents to achieve their leadership potential.

Adolescent leadership development is a primary aim of the FFA Organization and takes center stage in the FFA motto and strategies (National FFA Organization, 2006). Empirical evidence demonstrates that student membership in the FFA enhances leadership skills (Dormody & SeEVERS, 1994; Mullins & Weeks, 2006; Ricketts & Newcomb, 1984; Rutherford, Townsend, Briers, Cummins, & Conrad, 2002; Stewart, Smith, Ehlert & Mihalevich, 1985; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997). Further, a students' active involvement within multiple aspects of the organization positively directs students' self-perceptions of their leadership ability (Brick, 1998; Carter & Spotanski, 1989; Mullins & Weeks, 2006; Ricketts & Newcomb, 1984; Rutherford et al., 2002; Townsend & Carter, 1983).

In the FFA, although half of the leadership positions are occupied by female students, male students outnumber female students (National FFA Organization, 2013). Partially contributing to this dynamic, several studies describe females FFA members possess stronger self-perceptions of their leadership abilities than do male members (Brick, 1998; Dormody & SeEVERS, 1994; Ricketts et al., 2004; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997). Involvement in the FFA has shaped the leadership development of hundreds of thousands of its members, but there is sparse research on students' leadership decision making within the organization. To develop the next generation of leaders, it is important to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of leadership held by adolescents involved in FFA chapters.

Review of the Literature

Leadership has been studied and defined in a variety of ways. According to Burns (1995), leadership is "one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth" (p. 9). Often referenced in leadership education literature, Yukl's (2013) definition of leadership, "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (p. 7). More specifically, in agricultural education, leadership has been defined as "the ability to move or influence others toward achieving individual or group goals" (Ricketts, 2003, p. 3). Ricketts' definition is a synthesis of definitions proposed by others, including Blanchard (2007), Burns (1995) and Maxwell (1993), and is seen in textbooks and materials commonly used in high school agriculture classrooms.

Adolescent Leadership

Research on adolescent leadership development from outside the realm of agricultural education has reinforced the need for a broader understanding of adolescents' perspective of leadership development. For instance, Whitehead (2009), noted that much of the literature on adolescent leadership is discussed from an adult perspective. This perspective, however, is not helpful in developing an understanding of how students perceive leadership (Whitehead, 2009). Whitehead stated, "A focus of research on the leadership philosophies held by adolescents adds considerable value to the overall field of leadership studies, while at the same time providing practical tools for those involved in developing adolescent leaders" (p. 848). Accordingly, it would be useful to have an understanding of leadership from the perspectives of FFA members, which, in turn, could be used toward curriculum and program development.

Van Linden and Fertman (1998) provided an in-depth look at the development of leadership in adolescents. They stated that predicting exceptional leadership performance in adolescents is not possible and that all adolescents have the potential to lead (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). The challenge to tapping into this potential is that leadership is seen by adolescents as formal and unreachable and they typically do not think of leadership in relation to

themselves or as something that is attainable or even desirable. This perspective on leadership has provided organizations such as the FFA with curriculum and program development material (Hoover, Scholl, Dunigan, & Mamontova, 2007).

Leadership development in adolescents is a fluid process and consists of three stages (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). During the first stage, awareness, adolescents view leadership as externalized from their being. They often do not believe they possess leadership abilities or are able to have an impact on their surroundings. In the second stage, interaction, adolescents wrestle with the idea of being a leader. They become active and often overextend or overcommit themselves. In the third stage, mastery, adolescents begin to focus their efforts and seek out resources and guidance to work toward a personal or organizational vision. During the mastery stage, adolescents demonstrate what it is to be a leader (van Linden & Fertman, 1998).

Leadership within FFA

The principles of leadership development in the FFA began years before the organization was formed (Hoover et al., 2007). The FFA was founded to provide “fellowship and leadership development” for boys enrolled in vocational agriculture programs (National FFA Organization, as cited in Hoover et al., 2007). Leadership development within the FFA has been studied and the value of the organization in this regard has been established. When compared to non-members, members of the FFA scored higher on scales that assess leadership and personal development abilities (Ricketts & Newcomb, 1984). Specifically, FFA members possess more leadership and personal development abilities than do students who are not members of an agriculture program (Ricketts & Newcomb, 1984).

Involvement is not the only indicator of higher self-perceptions of leadership abilities. Serving as an officer at any level of the FFA has an even greater impact on leadership self-perceptions (Brick, 1998; Carter & Spotanski, 1989; Mullins & Weeks, 2006; Rutherford et al., 2002). Carter and Spotanski (1989) found that members who had served in formal leadership capacities, such as a chapter officer or committee chair, consistently rated themselves higher on 10 measurement scales of leadership and personal development than did students without these experiences.

Gender and Leadership

The majority of what is known about gender and leadership concerns the corporate and organizational leadership of adults. A meta-analysis of gender studies showed that common perceptions of gender differences include men as more self-assertive, motivated, task-oriented, agentic, self-directed, and aggressive in positions of leadership (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Johnson, 1990). In contrast, women are viewed as more interpersonally oriented, selfless, concerned with others, and engaged in social dimensions of leadership (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Kent & Moss, 1994). Eagly and Johnson’s meta-analysis of gender differences in leadership style showed that women commonly have a more democratic or participative leadership style. Zielinski (1999) studied the role of gender in high school government leadership and found that females favor a more social leadership style than do males and enjoy organizing social activities, about which males are far less enthusiastic. Further, advisors also perceived females to have a greater eye for detail and to possess better organizational talents, including leadership, as compared to their male counterparts (Zielinski, 1999).

Studies involving FFA members detail leadership differences between male and female members. Ricketts, Osborne, and Rudd (2004) found that upperclassmen males and females in agri-science courses had similarly high levels of need for achievement, affiliation, and power, but that females were more willing to take charge. The male students in the study preferred to remain within their comfort zones as compared to the female students who were more comfortable in

diverse settings and enthusiastically pursued opportunities for new experiences. Dormody and Severs (1994) sought to find predictors of youth leadership life skills development among high school FFA members. Their results indicated that female members had higher youth leadership life skills development than did male members. Further, Brick (1998) found that female FFA members tended to have stronger self-perceptions of their abilities than did male FFA members.

Studies of adolescent leadership within and outside of the FFA contribute to a better understanding of adolescent leadership development. However, the literature in this area remains limited and a deeper understanding of leadership self-perceptions of adolescents is needed.

Theoretical Framework

Leadership development has always been a pillar of the National FFA Organization (Hoover et al., 2007). Although several studies have focused on leadership among adolescents, few have sought the first-person perspectives of the adolescents themselves (Whitehead, 2009). Ricketts et al. (2004) investigated the increased emergence of female leaders within the FFA in Florida and proposed the conceptual model used to guide this study (Figure 1). The model presents family, FFA, school, self, agriculture program, community, and agriscience teacher as the key factors that lead to the emergence of adolescent leaders, and subfactors provide a further description of each of the factors.

In concert with the Ricketts et al.'s (2004) conceptual model, McClelland's (1961) motivational theory served as a theoretical foundation of this study. According to McClelland, three motives influence individual behaviors: achievement, affiliation, and power. The need for achievement is seen in an individual's doing what he or she can to accomplish a goal or dream (Ricketts et al., 2004). This need is also characterized by taking responsibility for finding solutions to problems, mastering complex tasks, and setting goals (Ratzburg, 2012). Affiliation is characterized by the need or desire to belong, wanting or needing to be liked or accepted, enjoying teamwork, and a concern for interpersonal relationships (Ratzburg, 2012; Ricketts et al., 2004). The need for power, or influence, is described as a drive to control or influence the thoughts of others and to win arguments (Ratzburg, 2012; Ricketts et al., 2004).

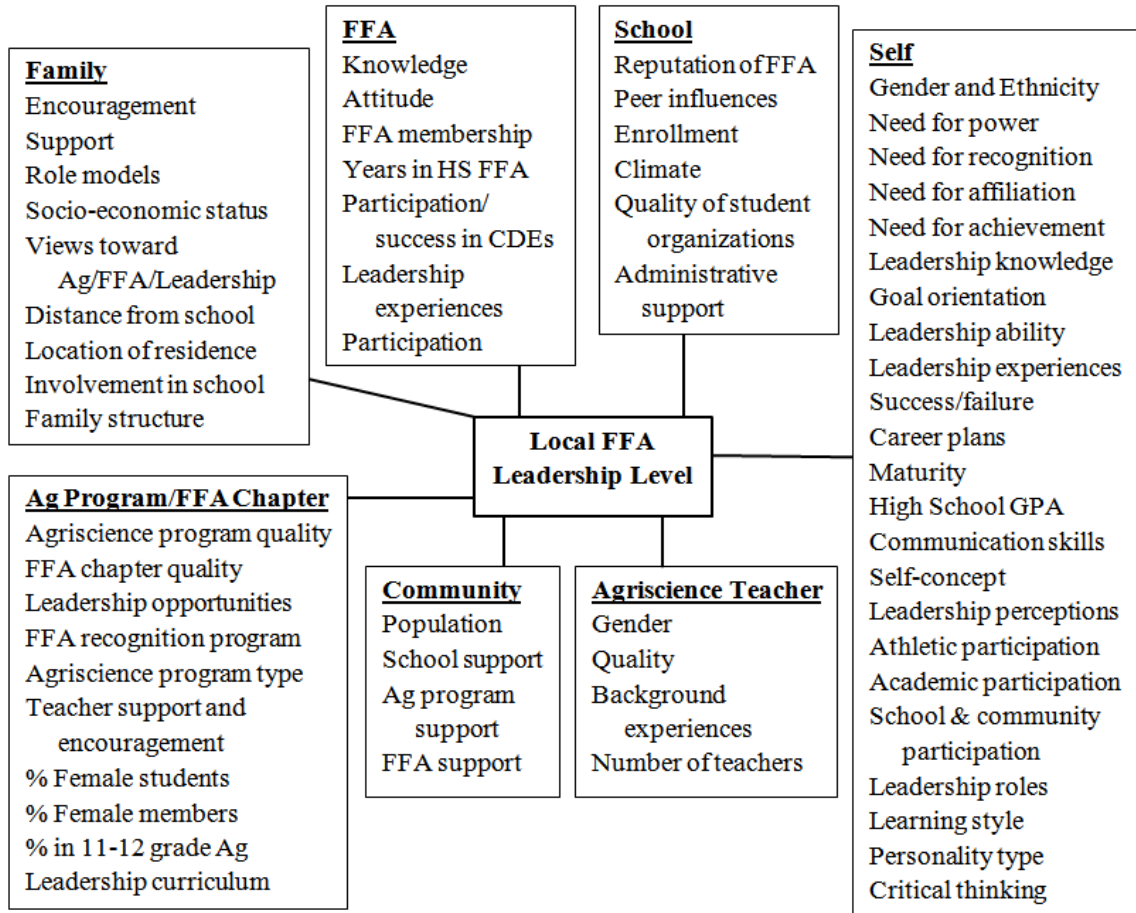


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the emergence of leaders in local FFA chapters (Ricketts et al., 2004).

Considered with the Ricketts et al.’s (2004) conceptual model, McClelland’s (1961) motivational theory served as a theoretical foundation of this study. Building upon the literature, we sought to identify the influences, motivations, and self-perceptions of leadership that affect students’ decisions to engage in leadership. In this study, Ricketts’ (2003) definition of leadership, “the ability to move or influence others toward achieving individual or group goals” (p. 3) is used.

Purpose

The purpose of this collective case study was to explore the self-perceptions of leadership in upperclassmen FFA members in two FFA chapters. The central question used to guide the study was: What are the self-perceptions of leadership engagement of upperclassmen FFA members in two FFA chapters in Missouri? The study was concerned with the outcomes of the secondary program of agriculture and its impact on individuals, as called for in the *American Association for Agricultural Education's National Research Agenda* (Doerfert, 2011). The research questions that guided the study are as follows:

1. What does the term "leadership" mean to upperclassmen FFA members?
2. What influences a student's decision to engage or not engage in leadership within his or her FFA chapter?
3. What do students engaged in leadership in their FFA chapter say they aspire to attain from the experience?
4. What motivational differences emerge between students engaged and not engaged in leadership?
5. How does gender influence a student's decision or propensity to lead?

Methods

This qualitative inquiry utilized a multi-site collective case study methodology. An instrumental case study approach was taken because the research questions were developed prior to the selection of cases (Stake, 1995). Written self-perceptions, focus group interviews, and observational data on student perceptions were used to gain a comprehensive understanding of student leadership perceptions. Focus groups were included to expand the data sources (Krueger & Casey, 2009). We acknowledged that our experience, as former high school agricultural education teachers and state FFA officers, was a potential source of bias as related to our interpretation of FFA membership and leadership development. To reduce this bias, the context of student responses was provided when possible. A social constructivist worldview shaped this study. This worldview was adopted because the issue is complex and dependent on the subjective meanings of each participant's experiences with leadership within his or her local FFA chapter (Creswell, 2007). Each participant created his or her own meaning based upon lived experiences.

Population and Participants

Purposeful sampling was utilized to identify cases that were typical representations of high-quality chapters (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995). To create a uniform sample of chapters, only those chapters with teachers employed at the same school for more than ten years were considered. Teachers employed at the same school for at least a decade were assumed to have had an adequate amount of time to establish expectations, procedures, and traditions for their chapters. Members of these chapters would have been aware of these practices, perhaps even prior to their first agricultural education course or FFA activity. In an effort to select chapters similar in student leadership, we narrowed potential chapters to those with FFA officer teams comprised of more female than male members. This was done not only to help to establish a commonality between the two chapters but also to be consistent with the trend of increasing female leadership within the FFA (Walker & Petty, 2009).

The two FFA chapters selected as bounded case systems for this study represent these characteristics, while also representing ordinary and accessible cases for the study. Both cases had two agricultural education teachers, with a male teacher having the most influence on the leadership aspects of the chapter. Each chapter also had received the National Chapter Award and enrolled between 170 and 180 members. To ensure adequate representation of officers and

members, as well as males and females, the chapter advisors assisted in identifying students who were willing to participate in the study. A total of 24 students, 14 female and 10 male, participated and were divided into four focus groups within each case. The focus groups were divided by female students' serving as officers within their chapter (herein referred to as officers), female students' not serving as officers in their chapter (herein referred to as members), male students' serving as officers within their chapter (herein referred to as officers), and male students' not serving as officers in their chapter (herein referred to as members).

Data Collection

Data triangulation was achieved through the combination of reflective questionnaires collected from each student, eight semi-structured focus group interviews, and field observations (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). Two observers were utilized during field observations to address credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Ary et al., 2006), and data analysis was driven by participant responses (Ary et al., 2006). Interviews and focus groups with the students were held independently at each of the two schools, respectively. Focus group interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes, each. We recorded, transcribed, and individually coded the eight focus group interviews using line-by-line coding and then combined codes into emergent themes (Stake, 1995). Reflective questionnaires and observations were then line-by-line coded by these themes. The credibility of findings was further assured through bracketing of our prior experiences, and trustworthiness was facilitated by maintaining an audit trail throughout the research process (Ary et al., 2006). Consensus between researchers was achieved through regular reflection and discussion among the researchers. Further, a code-recode strategy of intra-rater agreement was conducted on the first four focus group interview transcriptions to provide assurance that the researcher's coding techniques were consistent (Ary et al., 2006). Although the findings of this study cannot be generalized beyond the cases themselves, transferability was facilitated through the use of representative quotes from the participants and the use of thick, rich description (Ary et al., 2006).

Findings

Based on alignment with the theoretical model, six themes emerged from the data analysis. Notably, leadership was defined in the students' voice to provide a foundation for data collection and interpretation.

Defining Leadership

Prior to meeting in focus groups, participants (officers and members) completed a questionnaire and were asked to discuss, in writing, the meaning of leadership in their own words. Commonalities emerged among students; they expressed the belief that leadership is about helping people, influencing others to become better, and making a difference in the lives of others. One male chapter officer stated that a leader is "someone who helps push [others] further than they think they can go." A female officer stated:

I believe that leadership is being able to stand out from the crowd, and really make a difference in others' lives. It isn't about doing what everyone else is and sitting back and doing nothing. Leadership is choosing to use your own experiences to help someone else.

A second leadership premise that students commonly identified involved control of a situation, taking charge, and holding power. Officers and members alike noted that leaders make the decisions, have the power, and direct the work of the organization. "[A leader] is a person that takes charge and leads the group . . . and takes charge of the work." Another student stated, "[Leadership is] influencing people, making decisions for a group of people, and being in a

position of power.” This definitional exercise set the tone for the focus group interviews and contextualized the discussion within the students’ definitions of leadership.

Personal Abilities and Motivation as Influencing Student Leaders

Students were asked why they chose or chose not to pursue leadership positions in their local chapters. They were encouraged to detail what they envisioned as the differences between those who chose leadership positions (officers) and those who remained members. They felt that leaders pursue leadership opportunities because they receive personal satisfaction from the experience as well as feel that it is their responsibility to engage in leadership. One student stated, “I feel good after I do something leadership-wise. I just like the idea of it.” Following extended questioning about other personal reasons for choosing leadership, one female officer asked, “Who doesn’t want to be a leader? And who doesn’t want to be someone people want to follow? I think that makes it appealing.”

Both groups, officers and members, noted that recognition, power, and control often accompany leadership positions, making leading desirable. In this regard, one male chapter stated, “I like that you always . . . get noticed when you walk in a room. You get a lot of attention just for being in that leadership position. Everybody knows you.” Other chapter officers were motivated to lead out of a desire to have an impact on something, or someone, within their FFA chapters.

I do hold a leadership position in my FFA chapter because I think that to make a difference you have to be involved. I enjoy being able to give advice to younger members and encourage them to reach for their goals.

Still other students believed that there are certain natural abilities that qualify or disqualify themselves from leadership. Chapter officers were often acknowledged for being more outgoing and better equipped with communication skills than were members.

I guess I lead because I’m just comfortable with it. I’m just a comfortable speaker, and I’m comfortable talking with other people, and some people don’t have as good of communication skills, and I like helping others. I guess I can say, like, I don’t wanna waste my talent? ‘Cuz I feel like if I just sat back and didn’t do anything I’d be wasting . . . God made me have good leadership skills. So that’s why I do [it], I guess.

Motivational differences between officers and members are a final component of this theme. Students were asked with which of the three motivational factors (achievement, affiliation, and power) they most identified. Achievement was cited considerably more as a motivational factor for officers than for members. “In a given situation, I am most motivated by achievement when leading. I like to see the effects of my leadership in fellow students; I feel that my hard work has paid off.”

Barriers to Leadership as Perceived by Officers and Members

Students felt that there are obstacles to assuming leadership roles. Communication skills and the time commitment of leadership were discussed as the strongest barriers to engaging in leadership positions. Students felt that the ability to communicate is a significant role of a leader within the FFA, which led some to perceive that a lack of communication skills can be a barrier. One male officer stated, “Some people aren’t people-people. They don’t like bein’ around people, talkin’ to people, and they aren’t good public speakers. That really hurts ya in FFA.” Public speaking was specifically identified as a barrier within the ability to communicate by both groups. Members recognized the fear of public speaking as a reason that many do not pursue leadership within the FFA. A member stated:

Some people may feel intimidated by, um, a leadership office because, I mean, you do have to be in front of people a lot. And you do have to lead a large group, um, especially within the FFA, you have to be able to lead your whole chapter. . . . I think a lot of people are intimidated by that kind of thing.

A sizeable barrier to leadership identified by nearly all students was the time commitment necessary for leading. Officers and members recognized that, in particular, leading within the FFA is often a significant time commitment. Students acknowledged that, often, members were unwilling or unable to commit to the time required of an officer. One male member stated:

I mean, there are people that put their time in to be an officer, but most of those people don't have a full-time job or have a lot of commitments. . . . But, most of them are not athletes; they dedicate their time to the FFA. I mean, that plays a big role in their ability to be an officer.

Other commitments, particularly part-time jobs, were frequently cited as reasons that students did not expend the time to serve in leadership positions. Many members noted that officers invest a significant amount of time in their FFA chapters and that they believed that they could not, or were unwilling to, handle that commitment on top of other responsibilities. One female member addressed a friend's time management:

I have a friend who's an officer and she's ALWAYS, like, she never has time to spend with us and hang out and everything 'cuz she's always consumed with FFA. And I know I wouldn't be able to do that because I'm already stressed with working and, you know, classes and homework and stuff.

Officers substantiated the assertions that they did spend a significant amount of time each week with their FFA chapter leadership responsibilities. Officers also acknowledged that many students could not, or were unwilling to, devote the amount of time required to lead. In this regard, male officer noted the need to prioritize:

Well, like, some people who do sports or other clubs, like, you don't have time to do a, a leadership position in everything. So, you just have to prioritize, and . . . I think that's why some people don't run for office that would be good officers.

Officers in both chapters perceived that a certain level of pressure and high expectations were a significant drawback to leadership. In his questionnaire, one male officer stated, "Leaders often have more of an impact on those they lead than they realize. As a leader, you must constantly keep your actions in check in order to be a positive role model." These student officers stated that their position placed them more in the public eye, and with that came a level of expectation to always do the right thing. Though recognition and serving were, at times, a benefit, at other times, officers perceived leadership as adding pressure to their daily lives.

Support from Others as Influencing Student Leadership

Officers and members noted that support, or lack thereof, from other individuals in their lives heavily influenced their decision and ability to lead. When asked about qualities of an effective leader, one student stated:

Somebody who has a lot of support. From family, or the members of FFA, or the leaders, like the teachers and stuff . . . because then they kinda have more confidence in what they're doing. . . . And they have somebody to help them if they struggle with something.

Not only did students note that support and influence from others were important, but many students also discussed the role of individuals in their lives and the example that others provided in their decision to lead. Family surfaced as the primary support system for a student's decision to lead. One officer recalled, "My brother was in FFA and he was an officer as well. And, my dad has always pushed me to do more and, like, try to accomplish more." An older sibling's role as an officer or member in their FFA chapter, along with encouragement from parental figures, appeared to heavily influence students' decision to pursue leadership opportunities.

A crucial aspect of the discussion of support was encouragement, or lack thereof, from the FFA advisor. If the advisor had specifically spoken to a student about pursuing a leadership position within the chapter, the student was more likely to take an interest. One male officer discussed those who influenced him:

Mr. Smith influenced my decision to be a leader. When starting high school I didn't work too hard to be a FFA leader. He got me involved and was the reason I interviewed for an office. Without Mr. Smith I would not be a FFA leader.

Conversely, students stated that, if they had never received any indication that their advisor believed in their ability to lead, they were much less likely to pursue chapter leadership opportunities. Some students noted that, in their opinion, the chapter advisor played a large role in determining who led by investing more time on and attention to particular students.

Officers' Perceiving Members are Apathetic

Many officers seemed to believe that those students who do not assume officer roles are simply apathetic toward leadership and their FFA chapters. Officers provided examples they experienced that led to this belief. A female officer stated:

I think some people are lazy. Okay, because being an officer, I have to come in at 7 [a.m.], and being on a leadership FFA contest team, I have to wake up at 5:30 [a.m.] to go to do practice contests. I was talking to a friend the other day and telling them the time [of day] I had to go to FFA contests and they were like, "That is why I quit the team. I did not want to get up that early on my Saturday morning." And that's just, kind of being a bum, I think.

The perspective presented by many of the officers regarding their commitment to the chapter creates the opportunity for a status divide between officers and members. Several members stated that some students who do not choose to be an officer lack the work ethic or level of care to be a leader. One student member stated, "Some of them just want to be lazy and don't wanna do anything. And don't want to take on any responsibility." Conversely, members noted that they simply do not desire a leadership position. Other members felt similarly, that leading within the FFA was too formal and that leadership position did not appear to carry much significance. A senior male chapter member explained:

Seeing my brother have fun in the organization while not leading solidified my decision to not lead in FFA. Also, the meetings are very scripted, and I feel like there is not any decision actually made by the officers that makes a difference, which makes me think they are just there, so they can say they were on applications.

This dichotomy between the views of officers and members is noteworthy in understanding the way that students think about leadership within the FFA.

Leadership as Enhancing Personal and Professional Development

"There is nothing bad about being a leader at all. There is nothing bad that can come from it. It's all good," as stated by one female officer. Nearly all students could identify specific ways or areas in which leading was advantageous. Their conclusions were grouped into two categories: enhancement of personal development and enhancement of professional development.

Enhancement of personal development included the perceived intrinsic benefits, some skill development, and the friendships that were gained through leadership positions. Many officers recognized personal growth and an appreciation for personal development that had come from leadership. Officers felt that they had improved their public speaking skills, become more outgoing, learned to work with others, and developed other life skills that would benefit them, no matter their pursuits in the future. A junior, female officer described:

The benefits of being a leader I think are watching yourself grow, as well as the others around you. It is crazy to think about where I started as a freshman and now seeing the other freshmen grow in the FFA.

Students felt that leadership enhanced professional development through a greater number of opportunities and the preparation for the future that leadership afforded. Students stated that officers often had more opportunities than did members for trips, awards, and recognition within the FFA. Finally, students also explained that serving as an officer within the FFA helped to develop skills that were favorable when applying for jobs and in other avenues of life. One member summed up well the benefits to leadership observed by the majority of the students: "There are many benefits to being a leader. You meet people, experience new things, achieve new things, and can be recognized for doing things to help the chapter."

Perceived Gender Differences in Leadership Style

In the focus group interviews, students were asked whether they observed differences in how males and females lead and think about leadership. Without hesitation, the students stated that there was a difference. First, students felt that differences exist in how males and females approach leadership. Males were recognized by both genders for having a more immediate "here and now" or "get it done" style and attitude toward leadership. Male leaders also were perceived to have less concern for preparation, organization, and details than did their female counterparts. One male officer described the gender differences:

Guys are quicker to make decisions and not think the consequences completely through. But women wanna, like, they'll sit there and think every single option and then take the best one . . . which for different situations either one would be better.

Alternatively, females were considered by both genders to be more detail-oriented in their approach to leadership. Females were perceived as more likely to holistically consider the potential outcomes in-depth before making a decision. Students felt that this difference in approaching leadership was the primary distinction between male and female leadership.

Although students recognized these differences in male and female leadership styles and attitudes, each gender strongly believed that their style was preferable. It seemed that female students looked at males' "get it done" approach as a lack of commitment and a desire to get to the "fun" aspects of leadership more quickly by swiftly making decisions. Males saw their ability and desire to make decisions quickly as a positive attribute. In their opinion, females' focus on details only slowed them down and made them less efficient. Many males seemed to simply believe that organization and detail were not that important. One male stated:

This is gonna sound kind of sexist, but a guy is gonna go in and get it done in the most straightforward way. They're gonna step in and get the job done, they're not gonna think about all the extra little details or things we can make better, they're gonna go in and get the job done. . . . The guy might not be as organized, but he's gonna still get it done . . . he'll probably get it done sooner.

In addition to revealing the primary differences in leadership style, discussion showed that female officers were much more future-oriented than were their male counterparts. Females seemed to recognize that they were more deliberately focused on the ways that leadership could benefit them in the future and that males were more concerned with the "here and now." These benefits included skill development, networking, and confidence that would help them in college and in future careers. One female stated, "I would think that girls would think more long term and how it's gonna affect people in the long run. Where guys, um, think about now, and what that's gonna look like now." Although males recognized that leadership prepared them for the future, few cited development for the future as the specific reason that they pursued leadership. In contrast, female leaders often explained that preparation for the future was the explicit reason that they chose to serve as an officer within their FFA chapter.

A third difference that emerged between male and female students was their motivations for leading. The pursuit of achievement was frequently cited by both male and female students, although the root of achievement diverged between genders. Female students often cited affiliation as a motivating factor, while male students did not. Female officers who cited achievement never mentioned the achievement of awards as part of that motivation. Instead, they defined achievement as the intrinsic feeling of accomplishing something or successfully pushing themselves to reach a milestone. One female officer explained, "I am motivated by achievement. It's not so much of winning some material thing; it's that I want to be successful in what I do." Female officers and members also were much more motivated by affiliation, or the opportunity to work with others, than were males. This motivation factor manifests itself in helping others, influencing and inspiring others to act on their goals, and serving as a positive example. One female officer stated, "Sometimes, affiliation can be more satisfying than getting an award or having command over everything. Just knowing I have helped another gives me more joy than getting an award."

Males, in general, were less willing to write about or discuss the topic of their motivation, although most male leaders stated that they were primarily motivated by achievement. Male leaders discussed their achievement motivation in terms of the recognition that they received from their peers and the product of their work. In addition to the social attention, male officers often wanted to create change in their chapter or accomplish specific tasks through leadership.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

In this study, we described the self-perceptions of leadership of high school students who were engaged in their local FFA chapters. Participants were either officers or members. It should be noted that, due to the limited scope of this case study, interpretation of the findings and conclusions is limited to the two schools that participated.

The findings of this study support and contribute to McClelland's (1961) theory of motivation. A dichotomy was seen among the student groups related to each of the three motives put forth by McClelland. The motives of affiliation, achievement, and power toward leadership involvement were most often expressed by those who sought leadership opportunities (officers), but appeared to detract from the motivation of those who were members. In this way, our findings align well with Ricketts et al.'s (2004) model of leader emergence in local FFA chapters. Students noted multiple influences for their choice to engage or not engage in leadership responsibilities. While the culture in which the local program was situated and the culture of the program itself aided the direction that students chose at the time of data collection, the factors related to self within the model had the most influence with regard to adolescents' leadership choice and perception.

For research question 1, we concluded that students understand FFA leadership positions to be an opportunity to influence and help others to make a difference in their lives based upon their definition of leadership. Students largely recognized that leadership involves having an influence on others, whether positive or negative. The discussion of power dynamics that accompany formal leadership positions indicated that students understand that leaders have the potential to move people and events, regardless of the direction. Further, it can be concluded that many students still subscribe to the "great man" theory of leadership. That is, many students believe that, on some level, leaders are born with the innate capacity to lead, while others are not. In an organization that aims to develop leadership potential in every member, this belief may have strong implications. There are certainly many influences on the leadership perspectives of students, some of which are based on how leadership is promoted and taught in these chapters. Thus, it may be necessary to broaden the content of leadership education at the secondary level to include not only a focus on the qualities of leadership but also on what it takes to personally

develop leadership abilities. This would better fulfill the aims of the National FFA Organization (2006).

In response to research question 2, the findings showed that encouragement and support from others, particularly the local agricultural education teacher/FFA advisor, have a great impact on a student's decision on whether to pursue a leadership position. Family support and family legacy also influence a student's decision on whether to engage in leadership responsibilities at the local level. We can infer that some students do not pursue officer positions because they may not receive encouragement from advisors or family members. Advisors, in particular, should be cognizant that support for leadership development in some individuals, but not others, may be perceived by students as grooming or handpicking. Some students have family members who were involved in the FFA as students and can provide a perspective on the attributes of adolescent leadership, while likely many more students do not have this familial legacy. It is these students and their parents who may need more direct education on the benefits of early leadership involvement. It is recommended that local FFA advisors involve and engage all parents in the positive outcomes of participation in the activities of the FFA. This could be accomplished through parent nights, newsletters, banquet invitations, and progress reports sent home.

Further, perceived barriers to participation in leadership exist within local FFA chapters. These include the fear of public speaking and the perceived time commitment of serving as a chapter officer. It is possible, however, that these barriers also serve a positive purpose. Chapter officers identified the same potential barriers as did members but were willing to overcome these obstacles out of their genuine desire to serve in a leadership position. Although school-based agricultural education curriculum seeks to give students exposure to public-speaking experiences, students still consider having to speak in front of others a reason to avoid a leadership opportunity. It is recommended that agricultural educators help students to understand that, while the ability to speak in public is important, it is a skill, not a trait, and can be developed over time through exposure and experience.

In addition to a fear of public speaking, the time commitment of leadership perceived by students resulted in many choosing not to seek leadership positions. Part-time jobs and other responsibilities consume a large amount of students' time. Educators should help students see that the opportunity to serve as a chapter officer is worth the investment of time required. In addition, educators may consider helping students to learn to manage their time as well as to evaluate the expectations that they have for their chapter officers. Perhaps chapters could find better balance with regard to responsibilities and distribute them among a more substantial group of students within the chapter beyond the officers. It is further recommended that agricultural education teachers approach leadership education as a developmental opportunity and that experiences should be scaffolded over time through active participation. This would encourage students to progress through the stages of adolescent leadership development (van Linden & Fertman, 1998).

For research question 3, we concluded that students sought to attain diverse experiences and outcomes relative to engaging in leadership activities. Drawing partially from students' definition of leadership, we found that many were seeking an altruistic outcome to their leadership engagement. Often, officers cited a desire to help others and to help the broader community in positive ways. Based on this, we felt that students find value in and appreciate the greater purposes of leadership, which is an important step in their maturation. Varied personal and professional outcomes guided students toward leadership opportunities. Students identify with the future context of their present participation in FFA activities. Continued involvement in diverse FFA programming at all level is recommended to further students' abilities to create the connections between premier leadership, personal growth, and career success.

In response to research question 4, we found that students cited varied motivations for leadership engagement. It can be concluded that students involved in formal leadership roles are motivated by a need for achievement. For many chapter officers, holding an office is an accomplishment, and, for some, it may even be on their resume checklist. Advisors can utilize

achievement as the goal to encourage participation and involvement but also must acknowledge that this may not work for all students. Therefore, the motivational factors of affiliation and power also should be taken into consideration.

Officers sometimes believe that members are “lazy” when, in fact, many members do not desire the responsibility of formal leadership positions. For these members, it is a matter of choice. Further, the barriers discussed certainly could inhibit the proclivity of some to participate in leadership ventures. Additionally, the formal opportunities to lead are finite in a local chapter unless leadership is more distributed through committees and less hierarchical responsibilities. Advisors may need to be proactive in this area to prevent a member-versus-officer mentality from taking hold.

In regard to research question 5, students identified differences in leadership styles by gender. According to the participants, females lead with a more detailed, emotional, thoughtful approach, whereas males lead with a “get it done” attitude and logical approach. Genders are biased in their approach to leadership but can see some value in the opposite gender’s approach. Motivation and desire for achievement also differed between the genders. Females were more concerned with a need for affiliation, while achievement was experienced as intrinsic. Male students viewed achievement as recognition received from peers, and their desires were directed toward creating noticeable change in the chapter. Advisors are encouraged to openly acknowledge these perceptual differences between genders and assist students in valuing multiple methods of achieving a task.

Future Research

We recommend that research continue to explore adolescent leadership development. Student membership in the FFA provides a rich venue for leadership development and, consequently, a valuable resource for researchers and advisors. Diversity in gender should be further explored to discover potential differences in leadership perceptions within chapters that are led by both genders. The findings of this study revealed a member-versus-officer mentality; thus, inquiry into the interactions between peers is warranted for a better understanding of students’ choices to engage in leadership roles. Further, research should be conducted to determine how overall school climate may influence the choice to engage, as proposed in the Ricketts et al. (2004) model. Finally, research into best practices of leadership development of all students and into how to address the identified barriers is essential for student success.

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