

Strong Villages, Strong Country: Leadership Development of Future Farmers of Georgia Adolescents Participating in a Week-long Leadership Training Institute

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Abstract

Strong Villages, Strong Country is the motto for the Future Farmers of Georgia (FFG) youth organization in the Republic of Georgia. In an effort to assist with agricultural and youth development in the country of Georgia, FFG was established as an organization that uses the context of agriculture to build leaders that will help move the country to a new era of prosperity. One of the activities associated with this venture involves a week-long leadership training opportunity for student leaders from each school with a FFG Club. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the leadership and life skills development of FFG members as a result of their participation in this training opportunity. Specifically, the objective of the study was to determine FFG students' gain in overall and itemized Youth Leadership and Life Skills Development (YLLSD) (Dormody, SeEVERS, & Clason, 1993) as a result of the program. Twenty-eight students participated in the institute and completed the YLLSD instrument. The overall YLLSD score was $M = 76.18$, $SD = 4.45$, which was indicative of high development (skill gain), with only one item, trust, showing less than a "moderate gain." When comparing overall scores between males and females, males scored higher ($N = 16$, $M = 79.17$, $SD = 4.07$) than females ($N = 12$, $M = 73.94$, $SD = 3.41$). With the help of this study and othes to come, FFG and collaborators will continue to improve the design of future leadership development training institutes for youth in the Republic of Georgia.

Key words: Republic of Georgia, Leadership Development, Adolescents, YLLSD, Trust

Introduction

Strong Villages, Strong Country is the motto for the Future Farmers of Georgia (FFG) youth organization. In an effort to assist with agricultural and youth development in the country of Georgia, the Future Farmers of Georgia (FFG) was established as an organization that uses the context of agriculture to build leaders that will help move the country to a new era of prosperity. One of the activities associated with this venture involves a week-long leadership training opportunity for student leaders from each school with a FFG Club. The goal of the leadership training institute was to introduce young leaders in a young democracy to skills that would aid them in leading much more than just their peers. As Brock (1992) stated, “there is much more to life than earning a living, and we want more from education than productive workers. We want citizens who can discharge the responsibilities that go with living in a democratic society and with becoming parents” (p. 4).

The leadership training initiative for the newly established FFG is one of several agricultural education initiatives being supported by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), World Link, Inc., a private, non-profit organization whose purpose is to provide international cross-cultural exchange opportunities for students and educators, the Georgia Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA), and the University of Georgia (UGA).

Literature Review

Dormody and Seevers (1994) described youth leadership life skills as those needed to become a leader as an adult, and Scheer (1997) indicated that “leadership skills are essential for young people to feel satisfaction and contribute to society” (p. 1). One of the first instruments developed in agricultural and extension education to measure self-perceptions of leadership life skills was the *Leadership Skills Inventory* (LSI) developed by Carter and Townsend in 1980 (Rutherford, Townsend, Briers, Cummins, & Conrad, 2002). The LSI had 21 statements corresponding to “five internal scales for analysis: working with groups, understanding self, communicating, making decisions, and leadership” (Rutherford, Townsend, Briers, Cummins, & Conrad, 2002, p. 23-24). Similarly, Miller (1976, as cited in Bruce, Boyd, & Dooley, 2004) separated the leadership life skills students developed into seven sub-domains which included “decision making, relationships, learning, management, understanding self, group processes, and communications” (para. 2). Using these seven categories, Seevers, Dormody, and Clason (1995) developed another instrument to measure self-perceptions of leadership life skills development, the *Youth Leadership Life Skills Development Scale* (YLLSD), which had 30 items.

Several agricultural and extension-related studies have analyzed the leadership life skills development of American youth using these instruments. Boyd, Herring, and Briers (1992) used the LSI scale and indicated that in their study participation in the 4-H youth organization was positively related to youth leadership and life skills development. In two separate studies, Dormody and Seevers (1994) measured the leadership life skills of youth and determined that achievement expectancy and participation in leadership development activities had an influence on YLLSD scores. Additionally, Wingenbach and Kahler (1997) uncovered a positive relationship between YLLSD scores and leadership activities with FFA. Boyd (2001) indicated that although implementing leadership development programs for at-risk youth was quite challenging, service learning opportunities could be appropriate means to make leadership skills development available to inner-city youth, and, using the LSI, he showed increase in team work and decision-making knowledge and skills of participating youth. Rutherford, Townsend, Briers, Cummins, and Conrad (2002) analyzed the relationship between the Washington Leadership

Conference participants and the LSI, showing that there was a positive relationship between FFA participants' level of involvement, level of activity, and whether or not they held an office, with the value of their LSI.

In some of these studies, the researchers compared the leadership life skill development indicators between male and female participants. Interestingly, none of the studies mentioned earlier indicated a stronger self-assessment of leadership life skills by males, while many of them reported that females had higher perceptions of their leadership life skills (Real, 2004; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997; and Dormody & Seevers, 1994).

Just as gender is usually a factor affecting both the leadership style and the self-assessment of leadership life skills development, there is an "assumption that concepts of leadership differ as a function of cultural differences" (Brodbeck, Frese, Akerblom, Audia, Bakacsi, Bendova, et al., 2000, p. 1). Brodbeck et al. (2000) tested this assumption in a survey to 6052 middle managers from 22 countries in Europe, and showed that "clusters of European countries which share similar cultural values according to prior cross-cultural research . . . also share similar leadership concepts" (p. 1). The Republic of Georgia was one of the countries included in this study. The results of the article show that for Anglo cultures the ranking of leadership attributes goes in the following order, from best to worst: Performance, inspirational, visionary, team integrator, integrity, decisive, participative (high positive); non-autocratic, administrative, diplomatic, collaborative, modesty, self sacrificial, humane, conflict avoider (low positive); autonomous, status conscious, procedural (low negative); face saver, self-centered, and malevolent (high negative). For Georgia, the ranking is as follows: Administrative, decisive, performance, visionary, integrity, team integrator, humane, diplomatic, collaborative, modesty (high positive); inspirational, non-autocratic, self sacrificial, status conscious, autonomous, participative, procedural (low positive); conflict avoider, face saver, self centered (low negative); and malevolent (high negative) (Brodbeck et al., 2000). Understanding the differences and modifying leadership behavior (or leadership skill development training) to adapt to those rankings (congruence) is important to achieve leadership interactions characterized by high performance, trust, and motivation (Brodbeck et al., 2000).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the leadership and life skills development (gain) of FFG members as a result of their participation in a week-long leadership training institute in the Black Sea coastal community of Buknari, Georgia. Specifically, the objective of the study was to determine FFG students' gain in overall and itemized Youth Leadership and Life Skills Development (YLLSD) (Dormody, Seevers, & Clason, 1993) as a result of the program.

Methods and Data Sources

Twenty-eight students ranging from 13 to 17 years of age participated in the leadership training institute. Prior to data collection on the last day of the institute in the summer of 2007, interactive leadership curricula were delivered for four full days. Day one focused on personal leadership development. Day two focused on team building, accountability, and decision-making. Day three focused on FFG officer roles and responsibilities, and day four focused on putting the entire week together through club planning. A more detailed outline of the program is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Future Farmers of Georgia Leadership Training Institute Schedule (Black Sea coastal community of Buknari, Georgia)

Day and Theme	Session
Day 1: Personal leadership development	Welcome / Get to know You Session 1: Defining Leadership Styles Session 2: Vision Session 3: Character Reflections: Care-packages and t-shirts
Day 2: Team building, accountability, and decision-making	Session 1: Teambuilding games Session 2: Team Accountability Session 3: Team Communication Session 4: Team Commitment Campfire/Smores
Day 3: FFG officer roles and responsibilities	Session 1: Officer Roles & Responsibilities Session 2: Order of Meetings, Voting, Parliamentary Procedure Session 3: Writing a speech Field Trip to Castle/Batumi Café/ice-cream on the beach
Day 4: Club Planning	National Officer Elections Session 1: Identifying Needs Session 2: Planning Activities Session 3: Planning time/POA creation Celebration banquet and announcement of National Officers Dance (Disco-tech)
Day 5	Wrap up by new National Officers and goodbyes

As a final exercise at the institute, all students in the leadership training institute (N=28) (100% response rate) agreed to participate in this descriptive population study, which utilized the *Youth Leadership Life Skills Development Scale* (YLLSD) developed by Dormody, Seevers, and Clason (1993). Students completed the questionnaire once translated from English into Georgian. The instrument had 30 items and used a four-point summated rating scale (0=No Gain, 1=Slight Gain, 2=Moderate Gain, 3=A Lot of Gain) to measure the amount of leadership skill gained as a result of the leadership program. The instrument had been evaluated for face and content validity by a panel of seven New Mexico State University experts, and field tested with 262 respondents (66% response rate, with no differences found between respondents and “non respondents”), yielding a “Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .98” (Seevers, Dormody, & Clason, 1995, p. 28).

Limitations of the Study

Rockwell and Kohn (1989) indicated that “in certain types of self-report program evaluation, pre-test-posttest comparison results may be an inaccurate assessment of instructional impact because participants may have limited knowledge at the beginning of a program that prevents them from accurately assessing baseline behaviors” (para. 2), and proposed post-then-pre design models to correct the problem. In the post-then-pre design, the participant reports, at the end of the program, his/her self-assessment of what the end-of-the program behavior is, and then, what the baseline behavior was, making the difference between them (gain due to the program) a more accurate estimate of the programs’ worth than a pre-test post-test comparison would have been. Since Rockwell and Kohn’s proposal (1989), many agricultural and extension educators have used the post-then-pre comparison model, also called retrospective post by many (Raidl, Johnson, Gardiner, Denham, Spain, Lanting et al., 2004), and have shown that it provides a “more accurate means of assessing leadership skill development than would the traditional pretest/posttest approach” (Rohs, 1999; see also Smith, Genry, & Ketring, 2005). The format of YLLSD used in this study was a mix of a post-then-pre test design version and a post-test only version. As proposed by Dormody, Seevers, and Clason (1993), the researchers asked the respondents to self-assess the change between their leadership skills at the end of the program as compared to those they had at the beginning of the program (gain, difference, development) instead of retrospectively reporting both pre and post skill ratings. In retrospective, however, the researchers understand that it would have been more accurate to ask the participants to complete a post-then-pre design instead of reporting gain due to participation in the program, for it is not sure that all participants responded the survey with the understanding that they were reporting gain instead of “absolute” leadership skills.

Another limitation of the study is the small size of the sample, and the fact that some of the respondents did not answer some of the items. Other limitations were threats to external validity such as “reaction effects” of participants (Isaac & Michael, 1990, p. 63) and the errors introduced by translation (e.g., some of the terms of the instrument may not have been translated accurately because of the lack of parallel terminology between the two languages).

Results and Discussion

The means, standard deviations, and maximum and minimum values of the itemized responses to the YLLSD instrument by FFG student participants in the Leadership Training Institute are shown in Table 2.

The overall (grand total) YLLSD mean score per respondent was $M = 76.18$, $SD = 4.45$. According to instrument developers (Dormody, Seevers, & Clason, 1993), scores from 61 to 90 are indicative of high increase in leadership skill development. Even with the limitations discussed above (e.g., inaccurate assessment of leadership development, introduction of error as a result of translation, threats to external validity), the quantitative data is indicative of the anecdotal gains in leadership skill development as witnessed by the researchers.

When comparing overall scores between males and females, males ($N = 16$) scored a grand total of $M = 79.17$ ($SD = 4.07$), whereas females ($N = 12$) scored lower, $M = 73.94$ ($SD = 3.41$). These differences were significant at the 0.05 level (dif. = 5.23, SE dif = 2.00, sig. = 0.022), and reveal a different trend than the one observed in several of the manuscripts discussed in the literature review, where females were showing a higher self-assessment of leadership life skills and leadership life skill development than males (Real, 2004; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997; and Dormody & Seevers, 1994). These differences could have several different interpretations.

First, that females could have had a higher level of leadership knowledge and skills at the beginning of the program, and therefore the benefits gained from the program could have been lower for them than they were for males (i.e., the bar was higher and it was difficult to improve more). Another interpretation could be that females are much more critical of their abilities than males, and therefore their self-assessment was lower. Level of involvement and participation in workshop activities could be proposed as an explanation, but the researchers did not observe this type of gender differences in participation and involvement in group activities during the workshops (in fact, a female was chosen as the first FFG National President). More research is needed to elucidate this question and address needs if applicable. If further research indicates that females do not perceive themselves as strong in leadership life skills as males do, then future leadership development programs should focus on differences between males and females and help females increase their self-perception.

In an itemized analysis, one can see in Table 2 that students indicated at least moderate gain in all but one item on the YLLSD scale. The least amount of gain and one of the highest standard deviations ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 0.75$) was in the ability to trust people. The greatest amount of gain was in the following leadership and life skills: A friendly personality, setting goals, respect for others, responsible attitude, honesty, listening skills, and considering input from all group members.

There are several possible explanations why trust was the item with less gain of all. First, there was a factor of time, meaning that the week-long training program did not provide enough time to initiate trust relationships with others, and therefore did not provide the opportunity to change trust perspectives of individuals involved: "Many theories of trust are grounded in social exchange theory . . . which assumes that trust emerges through the repeated exchange of benefits between two individuals" (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998, p. 514). Another possible explanation is that "the citizens of postcommunist states have relatively low levels of trust in their basic political Institutions" (Lovell, 2001, p. 27) and that this is a difficult trait to change. Another item highly related to trust is delegation, and, although its mean was higher than 2 (moderate gain), it also represented one of the lowest ratings of the instrument ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.53$)

Recommendations, Educational Importance, Applications, and Implications

The results also showed differences among males and females in self-perception regarding leadership life skills development. It is recommended to further research the reasons why females "apparently" perceived themselves as having a lower level of leadership life skills development than males. If this investigation indicates that in fact females do not perceive themselves as strong in leadership life skills as males do, then future leadership development programs should focus on differences between males and females and help females increase their self-perception.

Lovell (2001) analyzes the low levels of trust in postcommunist states and their dangers, and argues that to "consolidate the advances towards civil society and democracy particular attention must be paid to strengthening trust" (p. 27). He posits that "Enhancing trust is a prime responsibility of leadership in postcommunism" (p. 34) and that "the deficit of trust can be addressed by a leadership exemplary in its service to the public interest, and by an acceptance of the new, adversarial politics" (p. 27). Given the low results gain in trust obtained after the leadership training institute and the central importance of trust development in the future of Georgia, it is recommended that special attention be given in the development of trust among and

between leadership trainees, and that efforts in this area continue well beyond the training workshops.

Table 2

Youth Leadership Life Skills Development Scale (YLLSD) Gain in Future Farmers of Georgia Students as a Result of their Participation in the Leadership Training Institute (N=28)

Question: What leadership skills have you improved because of your participation in the Leadership Training Institute?

As a result of my FFG Leadership Training Institute experiences, I:

	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Have a friendly personality	2	3	2.93	0.26
Can set goals	2	3	2.85	0.38
Respect others	2	3	2.83	0.37
Show a responsible attitude	2	3	2.79	0.42
Can be honest with others	1	3	2.69	0.55
Can listen effectively	0	3	2.69	0.72
Consider input from all group members	2	3	2.68	0.48
Can solve problems	2	3	2.67	0.48
Can use information to solve problems	2	3	2.63	0.49
Am sensitive to others	2	3	2.58	0.50
Am open-minded	1	3	2.57	0.57
Am open to change	0	3	2.57	0.69
Can handle mistakes	1	3	2.50	0.59
Can be tactful	0	3	2.50	0.68
Consider the needs of others	1	3	2.46	0.58
Recognize the worth of others	1	3	2.46	0.58
Can express feelings	1	3	2.43	0.63
Get along with others	0	3	2.43	0.69
Can set priorities	0	3	2.41	0.80
Can select alternatives	2	3	2.40	0.49
Can be flexible	0	3	2.39	0.75
Can consider alternatives	1	3	2.33	0.55
Have a positive self-concept	1	3	2.30	0.62
Use rational thinking	1	3	2.30	0.54
Can delegate responsibility	1	3	2.27	0.53
Create an atmosphere of acceptance	1	3	2.26	0.59
Have good manners	0	3	2.21	0.69
Can determine needs	1	3	2.18	0.72
Can clarify my values	0	3	2.15	0.72
Trust other people	0	3	1.69	0.75

Brodbeck et al. (2000) demonstrated that the prototype of a leader is different in different cultures. Therefore, the measuring of the leadership skills and development of an individual should also be a function of cultural differences. If further analysis of leadership skills and leadership skills development is to be done in the Republic of Georgia, it would be

recommended to research further how the “concepts of leadership differ as a function of cultural differences” (Brodbeck et al., 2000), and study whether or not the instrument used to quantify leadership skill development is appropriate for the area and group under study. Once a culturally appropriate measurement instrument is available, it would be easier to inform curriculum development and improvement with that instrument.

Youth leadership enrichment opportunities are not always readily available to all, and frequently it is disadvantaged youth who are not served (Hobbs, 1999), both at home and abroad. It is important that both curriculum and delivery systems be refined to make opportunities available and appropriate for all. This study will help better design future leadership development training institutes for youth in the Republic of Georgia and other countries in the area.

According to this study, the Leadership Training Institute in the country of Georgia had a considerable impact. Other leadership education researchers (Cummins, 1995; Montgomery, 2002; Townsend, 2002) have argued that short-term leadership development activities do not provide much gain in leadership development, but this is not the case for Georgian students benefiting from a week-long leadership training institute. As the newly formed FFG evolves to reach more students in the country, perhaps leadership experiences such as the one evaluated in this study, should be utilized on a consistent basis. Students and teachers in Georgia were given the curriculum materials to be able to deliver in their schools the same activities that were presented in the workshop. Given the positive findings regarding student development in this study, encouraging student-leaders and teachers in FFG schools to use the distributed materials to facilitate leadership development among all students in their respective schools/clubs could be instrumental in helping FFG accomplish its motto: *Strong Villages, Strong Country*.

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