Predictors of FFA Program Quality

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Oliver (1991), vice president of DowElanco Ltd., said that agribusiness was in desperate need of leaders with vision. He asserted that agribusiness had learned about management but needed leadership. Hildreth (1991), with the Farm Foundation, echoed Oliver by saying the need for leaders is large and growing, especially in the field of agriculture. Merritt (1984) chaired a task force that identified and ranked twelve areas of high priority in undergraduate education in agricultural sciences. One of the deficiency areas identified by Merritt's group was leadership. Simply stated, agricultural students need more emphasis on leadership.

Those of us associated with the FFA have contended the FFA is part of the solution to the leadership crisis in agriculture. FFA has been recognized by leaders of business, industry and education as an organization that provides leadership development for youth (Hoyt and Storms, 1988). Barrett (1983) asserted that the FFA and other rural youth development programs have had a significant impact on students by emphasizing leadership development. After studying educational reform efforts, Rosenfeld (1983) concluded that agricultural education was the model for educational reform, partially because of the emphasis on the leadership development component (FFA) of the program.

There has been considerable empirical research in agricultural education regarding leadership development and the FFA (Brannon and Key, 1989; Brick, 1998; Briers and Fraze, 1987; Carter and Gamon, 1987; Carter and Townsend, 1983; Newcomb and Ricketts, 1984; Townsend, 1981; Wingenbach and Kahler, 1997). The findings of the research generally indicate that participation in FFA activities does enhance leadership skills and helps students succeed in their chosen occupations.

A critical element in leadership development is the FFA advisor (agricultural education instructor). Barrett (1983) asserted that a teacher with practical knowledge of leadership theory, group dynamics, advanced teaching methods and knowledge of the agricultural setting will provide a successful environment to learn about leadership development. The literature (Bell, 1996; Dodson and Townsend, 1996; Fritz, 1996; Gliem and Gliem, 1999; Townsend, 1999; Vaughn, 1976) indicates the teacher is the key to leadership development. The FFA advisor is the one who motivates, inspires and teaches leadership skills to FFA members. It would be logical to assume that FFA advisors who have more leadership training and experience would do a better job of developing leadership skills in FFA members. This in turn would result in a higher quality FFA program in the local chapter.

Newcomb and Ricketts (1984) suggested research be conducted to determine the leadership and personal development abilities of FFA advisors. They also recommended that a study be conducted to determine what variables superior chapters have that result in higher leadership development abilities in students. The research presented in this paper builds upon the recommendations of Newcomb and Ricketts.

Purpose/Objective

The primary purpose of this study was to identify the predictors of a quality FFA program in North Carolina. More specifically the researcher wanted to determine if the leadership training and experience of agriculture teachers were predictors of quality FFA programs. The research question was, "What are the predictors of a quality FFA program?"

It was hypothesized that the leadership experiences and the leadership training of the teacher would be the primary determinants of FFA program quality.

Theoretical Framework

Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning coupled with the previous research on the role of the agriculture teacher in leadership development provided the theoretical foundation for this study.

In Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning the starting point for learning is **concrete experience**. Learners need to experience the concept to be mastered. In this research, the past leadership experiences of the teacher fits this component of the model.

Critical Reflection or Critical Observation is the second step in Kolb's theory. The individual has to think about and reflect on their experiences. In this research study, the second step is equated to the formal course work in leadership the teacher has experienced. The agriculture teacher is formally taught leadership concepts in his/her teacher preparation program and is encouraged to compare and contrast this with his or her concrete leadership experiences.

Abstract Conceptualization is the third component of Kolb's model. Agriculture teachers think about how they will teach leadership to their students. This is a result of their experiences and reflection.

Active Experimentation is the final formal stage in Kolb's model. The learner implements what has been learned and tests this skill or knowledge in the crucible of the real world. In this study, the development of leadership skills on the part of the student through participation in FFA activities reflects the active experimentation stage of the model. As illustrated in the diagram below, the success or failure of the active experimentation (operation of the FFA chapter) leads to further critical reflection and the process continues.

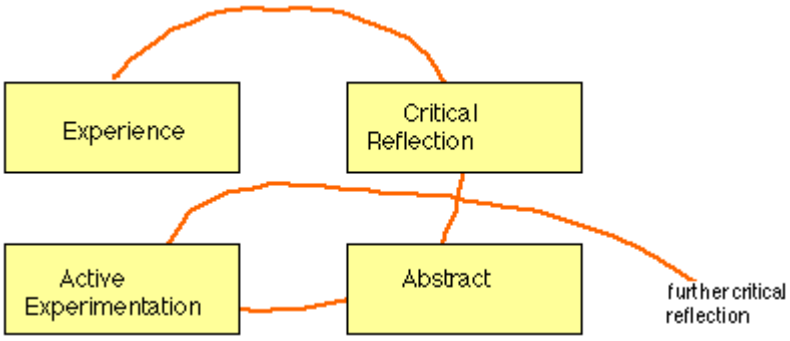

Figure 1 - Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning

Based upon Kolb's model, as the level of leadership experiences and leadership training of the teacher increases, the likelihood of having a high quality FFA program should also increase. This should result in enhanced leadership skills on the part of the students.

Methods and Procedures

Research Design

A descriptive research design was used in this study. Descriptive research is a type of quantitative research (Borg and Gall, 1996). Survey research was used because it is an effective method to obtain data from a large number of people (Borg and Gall, 1996). This method was used to collect information about agricultural education teachers and FFA programs in North Carolina. A questionnaire was administered that asked the same questions to each research participant. This was to ensure that the data obtained was standardized.

The study was ex post facto in design, meaning "after the fact". Kerlinger (1973) identified three weaknesses of ex post facto research: 1) the inability to manipulate independent variables; 2) the inability to use randomization to control extraneous variables and 3) the danger of improper interpretation of results. Kerlinger (1973) suggests two possible methods for controlling extraneous variables in ex post facto research: 1) testing alternative hypothesis and 2) multiple regression analysis. In this study, stepwise multiple regression analysis was used.

Population

The population for this study was 212 FFA advisors of 212 FFA programs located in senior high schools (grades 9-12) in North Carolina. A study of the entire population was conducted. In multiple teacher departments, the teacher with the most years of teaching experience completed the instrument.

Instrumentation

The primary instrument used in the study was modeled after an instrument designed by Asiabaka (1984). Asiabaka (1984) developed an instrument to measure agricultural education program quality as part of his doctoral dissertation at Louisiana State University. In developing the original instrument, Asiabaka (1984) had a panel of 10 nationally recognized authorities in agricultural education validate the instrument. The original instrument had a reliability score of .85.

For this study, the FFA "program quality" section of Asiabaka's (1984) instrument was used. Modifications were made to reflect changes in the FFA. For example, items related to BOAC and other defunct programs were removed. They were replaced with items on new FFA programs such as the agriscience fair. The instrument was prepared in booklet format according to the Total Design Method (TDM) developed by Dillman (1978). The reliability of the modified instrument was .75.

Field Test

A field test of the instrument was conducted in Virginia. A number of questions were modified as a result of the field-test and the placement of some items was changed. It was also decided to omit the "Perceptions of the FFA" section because of low reliability.

Data Collection

Data were collected using two separate types of collection procedures. First, data were collected from agriculture teachers in North Carolina who attended inservice workshops during the month of March, 2000. A total of 101 teachers representing as many programs responded during this first collection method. Second, a mailing to all senior FFA advisors from agricultural education programs who had not attended the inservice meeting or who had not responded was sent after the meetings. A total of 43 teachers representing as many programs returned the questionnaire in the allotted time period. Thirteen questionnaires were received after the deadline. Counting all responses the total response rate was 74%. The researcher compared the early respondents with the late responders based upon the convention of Miller and Smith (1983) who assert that late responders are representative of non-responders. No significant difference between the two groups was found. Therefore, all data were combined and no additional follow-up was conducted.

Analysis of Data

Data were analyzed using SPSS for Windows 9.0. Simple frequencies and descriptive statistics were used to describe the demographic data. Using Kerlinger's suggestions, stepwise multiple regression was used to identify predictors of FFA program quality.

In addition to demographic information, the instrument yielded two summated scores. These two summated scores were an FFA program quality score and a teacher leadership experience score. The design of the study called for the compilation of a leadership training score. When the data were analyzed, it became apparent that the teachers had difficulty in remembering and reporting their formal leadership training hours. If the data the teachers reported had been analyzed, the results would be suspect. Therefore, a leadership training score was not included in the data analysis. It is possible that this could have been a predictor of FFA program quality.

A multiple regression analysis was conducted in order to determine the predictors of a quality FFA program.

Results/Findings

Demographic Data

Of the 157 teachers who responded, the years of teaching experience ranged from .5 to 35 years with a mean of 14.58 years. The mean number of teachers in a department was 1.47. Ninety departments reported having one teacher, 49 reported having two teachers, 9 reported having three teachers and 1 reported having three and one half teachers. The contract length

ranged from 7 to 12 months with a mean of 11.84 months. The majority of teachers, 65.6%, had 12 months employment, .5% (one) held a 7 month contract, 2.8% had a10 month contract, 3.8% (eight) had an 11 month contract and .5% (one) held an 11.5 month contract. Only 10 teachers taught classes other than agriculture. Thirteen teachers also coached.

One hundred thirteen teachers possessed an undergraduate degree in agricultural education and 44 did not. Forty-three teachers were lateral entry teachers. Seventy-six (49 percent) teachers held a masters degree.

The mean number of students enrolled in agricultural education per program was 125.24. The range was 10-320. Of the students enrolled in agricultural education, the mean percentage of males was 70.31 and the mean percentage of females was 29.69. The mean percentage of rural students enrolled in agricultural education was 65.35 and the mean percentage of non-rural students was 34.65. The mean percentage of students who were FFA members was 67.16.

Seventy-eight programs reported having an advisory committee while 79 programs did not have an advisory committee. Forty-nine programs had an FFA Alumni.

Leadership Experience

The leadership experience of the teachers in North Carolina was examined. The number of organizations belonged to and the number of offices held were summed to give a leadership experience score. The items that made up this variable were high school FFA membership of the teacher, FFA offices held by the teacher, high school leadership organizations other than FFA, offices held in high school leadership organizations other than FFA, collegiate leadership organizations and offices held in collegiate organizations, professional education organizations and offices held, civic organizations and offices held, professional development organizations and offices held, other groups and organizations and offices held, regional/state agricultural education committees served on, workshops and training seminars conducted, high school leadership positions and number held and the number of time attending the Advisors Washington Leadership Conference. Table 1 shows a sampling of the items including in compiling the leadership experience score.

A leadership experience score was calculated for each responder. The mean leadership experience score was 23.90. The standard deviation was 14.82.

Leadership Training

The respondents were asked about their leadership training in college. The researcher planned to calculate a leadership training score. However, a close inspection of the data indicated that some teachers reported clock hours of training (what the instructions asked for), some credit hours of training, and some didn't remember. Because of the unreliability of the data provided by the teachers, it was reluctantly decided to omit this factor from the data analysis.

Table 1
Teacher Leadership Experiences

Organization Type	Members / Yes N	Non-Members/ No N	Held Office N
FFA Membership in High School	115	42	98
FFA District/Regional/State Office	-	-	47
Non-FFA Organizations in High School	137	20	98
Collegiate Organization Membership	125	32	80
Professional Education Organizations	143	14	56
Civic Organization Membership	76	81	67
Served on State or Regional AgEd Committees	112	45	-
Conducted Ag. Ed. Workshops/Seminars	65	92	-
Vocational Leadership Position in School	101	56	-
Attended Advisors Washington Leadership Conference	15	142	-

Predictors of FFA Program Quality

Thirty-nine items were used to develop a FFA program quality score. Various activities in which FFA chapters are expected to participate were listed and weighted according to criteria used by Asiabaka (1984). A program quality score was calculated for each chapter. Some of the items included in the FFA program quality score were number of FFA meetings held annually, national chapter rating, percent of FFA membership, participation in career development events, number of state degree recipients, and number of proficiency award applications. The mean quality score was 61.34 with a standard deviation of 32.58. The range of quality scores was 3.25-172.10. Selected variables used in calculating the FFA program quality score are presented in Table 2.

A stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted in order to identify the predictors of a quality FFA program. The dependent variable was FFA program quality. The review of literature provided the background for selecting the variables to enter into the regression formula. The variables entered into the multiple regression analysis were years of teaching experience, number of teachers in the department, number of students in the program, teacher's contract length, leadership experience score (a composite variable), student gender, and the percentage of rural and non-rural students. The model that emerged consisted of two variables that explained 36 percent of the variance. The two variables were the number of teachers in the local department and the teachers' leadership experience.

Table 2
Selected FFA Program Quality Variables.

Variable	% Chapters	M	SD
Local CDE Competitions are Held	75.2	-	.43
Chapter Participates in CDE Events above the Local Level	84.1	-	13.62
Held Regular FFA Meetings	93.0	-	5.15
Official FFA Ceremonies used in Meetings	73.2	-	.44
Officers Recite FFA Ceremonies from Memory	79.0	-	.39
Chapter has a Written POA	55.4	-	.50
Speakers/Formal Programs at meetings last year	35.0	1.04	1.78
Annual FFA Banquet held	64.3	-	.48
Participates in National FFA Week Activities	72.6	-	.45
Chapter Star Greenhand Pin is Awarded	68.8	-	.46
Chapter Members Receive State FFA Degrees	40.1	2.11	3.42
Agriscience Fair Participation	3.8	-	.43
NC Superior Chapter Rating Received	17.8	-	.38
National Rating Received	4.5	-	.41
Awarded Local Proficiency Awards	49.0	5.15	8.13
Regional CDE Teams last year	77.7	3.75	3.53
NC FFA Convention Attendance	65.6	6.56	7.20
Food for America Program Participation	16.6	-	.37

The number of teachers in the department explained 27 percent of the variance alone. When the teacher's leadership experience score was added, 36 percent of the variance was explained. The results of the stepwise multiple regression analysis are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3
Predictors of FFA Program Quality Multiple Regression Analysis.

Variable	R	R Squared	R Squared Change	Sig. F Change
Number of teachers per department	.52	.27	.27	.001
Teacher's leadership experience	.60	.36	.09	.001

The leadership experience of the teacher was a composite score. Since this score was derived from numerous items, those items were entered into a stepwise multiple regression analysis in order to identify the significant items within the composite variable. Five items emerged from this analysis. They were regional/state agricultural education committees served on, regional/district/state FFA office held by the teacher while a student, leadership positions held in the high school vocational department, the number of times the teacher attended the Advisors Washington Leadership Conference Program and the number of offices held in student leadership organizations other than FFA while in high school.

Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

The first conclusion of this study is that in general, multiple teacher departments have higher quality FFA programs. In this case, research supports common sense. The more teachers in the department the higher the FFA program quality. Common sense tends to support the theory that more things can be accomplished through more people. This conclusion is supported by Straquadine (1988) who found that that the higher the number of teachers in the department, the higher the program quality.

The first implication is that if school systems want a higher quality FFA program they should strive to increase the number of teachers in the department. The second implication is that teachers in single teacher departments could use as much help as possible in efforts to have a quality FFA program. Single teacher departments should consider resources such as having an active FFA alumni and/or an active advisory committee. An active alumni chapter can decrease the total workload of the teacher by helping prepare CDE teams, driving students to events and helping the FFA program raise money. An active advisory committee can assist the teacher in recruitment efforts and developing a program of activities thereby reducing the workload in single teacher departments.

The National FFA should consider providing more resources through the Internet or on CD-ROMs. While all teachers would benefit from this, this would be particularly valuable for teachers in single teacher departments. For example, providing lesson plans, PowerPoint presentations and examples of completed applications would be valuable resources that National FFA could provide.

The second conclusion of this study was that the leadership experiences of the teacher have a positive influence on FFA program quality. Teachers who serve on regional/state agricultural education committees, held regional/district/state FFA office while in high school, hold leadership positions in the high school vocational department, attended the Advisors Washington Leadership Conference Program and held office in student leadership organizations other than FFA while in high school had higher quality FFA programs.

The fact that leadership experiences emerged as a predictor of FFA program quality gives credence to the use of Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning as part of the theoretical model for this research.

The number of regional/state agricultural education committees a teacher served on was associated with FFA program quality. It could be that teachers who have strong programs or asked to serve on regional or state committees. However, it is also possible that teachers who participate on these committees may become aware of the newest information through contact with peers and partners during these meetings. The teacher then uses this information to improve his/her FFA programs. One implication of this finding is that teachers who want to improve their FFA program quality should volunteer to serve on committees.

If the teacher held a regional/district/state FFA office while in high school, he or she had higher FFA program quality scores. In this study, just being an FFA member was not a predictor of FFA program quality. This is supported by Vaughn's (1976) study, which said that the participation in FFA as a student did not affect the degree of success the teacher had. Individuals who held an elected FFA office above the chapter level had higher FFA program quality scores. The implication is that we should actively recruit regional/district and state FFA officers into agricultural education teacher preparation programs.

The number of leadership positions the teacher held in the local vocational department was another indicator of FFA program quality. If a teacher is an active leader in the local school, it stands to reason that the teacher would be an active leader of his or her FFA program. The implication is that teachers who are involved in leadership positions in their school are likely to be more active in strengthening their FFA program.

The number of times the teacher attended the Washington Leadership Conference for advisors was associated with FFA program quality. The leadership conference is a nationally sponsored conference developed especially for advisors. This provides a unique inservice opportunity to strengthen teacher leadership skills. The implication is that more advisors should attend the Washington Leadership Conference for Advisors. This supports the research conducted by White (1982) that determined that more in-service activities for advisors should be held to teach leadership and leadership training skills.

The number of offices held in high school leadership organizations other than the FFA was also associated with FFA program quality. Perhaps FFA does not have a monopoly on leadership training. High school students who plan to be agricultural teachers should not be discouraged from being officers in other youth organizations. This will help them in the future.

The hypothesis of this study was that the teacher's training and experiences related to leadership were predictors of a quality FFA program. Because of instrumentation problems, the researcher was not able to test the "training" component of the hypothesis The stepwise multiple regression analysis showed the teachers' leadership experience score to be a determinant of a quality FFA program. The findings partially support the hypothesis and supports Cronin's (1984) claim that leaders are made through exposure to leadership and not born.

Additional Thoughts

In conclusion, the programs that were shown to be of higher quality were those that had multiple teachers and those that had teachers with more leadership experience. An unexpected finding of the study that surprised the researcher was the overall low FFA program quality scores. Many chapters simply are not doing what leaders in the field believe quality FFA programs should be doing. For example, the number of chapters using the official opening and closing ceremonies at chapter FFA meetings was lower than expected. The number of FFA programs that had speakers/formal programs last year at meetings was 36.9 percent and of those, they only averaged 1.04 speakers per year. Only 55.4 percent of the FFA programs in North Carolina had a written program of activities. These variables along with several others are at a level that is less than acceptable.

Because of problems in calculating leadership training scores in this study, additional research should be conducted to determine if the formal leadership training experienced by teachers in their teaching training program is a predictor of FFA program quality.

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Predictors of FFA Program Quality

A Critique

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Contribution and Significance of Research

The literature cited by the authors lays a thorough theoretical base for this study on the importance of the FFA in leadership development and the critical role of the instructor. Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning was used as the linchpin between the concrete leadership experience of the advisor and the active experimentation of the students practicing leadership through the FFA. This reviewer thought the study would also be informed by Bandura's social learning model with special attention given to his concepts of modeling. Students would adopt those leadership practices used by effective models. The efficacy of the agriscience instructor as a model would be based on many of the variables examined in this study.

Procedural Considerations

The methods and procedures section did a good job of describing the research design, population and sampling procedures. The population is described as the 212 advisors in North Carolina. A census of this population was taken. Is this truly the population of interest?

Instruments developed for this study were constructed following recognized procedures to ensure content validity and instrumental reliability. The researchers are to be commended for doing an excellent job. Few of our studies complete field tests. Data collection and data analysis were completed following recognized procedures.

The authors will want to appropriately limit the conclusions/implications to the population of interest, apparently the 212 North Carolina programs. The number of teachers is clearly related to a higher program quality score. This reviewer questions whether or not to attribute causation to the variable. How much of that variance might be explained by higher student numbers (almost certainly related to teacher numbers). Attendance at the Washington Leadership conference and the number of leadership positions held outside the vocational program were related to a higher program quality score. Here again causation may be difficult to support.

Questions for Consideration

The leadership experiences of the instructors were related to a higher quality score. Teachers with more frequent participation in leadership programs direct higher quality FFA programs. This has implications for practice among teachers and teacher education programs. What should we do with this information?

The authors point out that many programs were not performing the activities required in the program quality index at an acceptable level. What can we do with this information?