# PRACTICES OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL HIGH SCHOOL CONTEXT: FINDINGS FROM A QUALITATIVE SECONDARY ANALYSIS

*Victoria Sherif*
University of Kentucky

## Abstract

The study described in this paper elevates youth voices in proposing educational practices of leadership development within rural settings. A secondary analysis of qualitative data collected as part of a longitudinal case study explores youth perspectives on specificities of education, such as volunteering and community service, collaboration with school administration and staff, leadership course activities, and purposeful self-reflection, designed to further leadership in the rural high school learning environment. This article, with its focus on student voice, helps fill a gap in research involving rural youth and serves as a foundation for rural high school principals and educators to foster a sense of community among youth leaders and school administration. It also has important implications for social and educational leadership researchers and practitioners interested in applications of qualitative secondary analysis and involved in design and implementation of educational strategies targeting youth leadership education.

Keywords: youth leadership, youth leadership development, rural youth, student voice, qualitative secondary analysis

## Introduction

Development of talents and skills is one of the goals of general secondary education (Oakland et al., 1996). Educators are expected to promote cognitive, motivational, affective, and ethical qualities in youth, thus, enabling them to take leadership roles in learning, social, and professional areas. Facilitation of leadership development at a young age predetermines youth readiness to assume their leadership in business, educational, religious, governmental, etc. activities. Therefore, it is crucial to understand not only what youth leadership is, but also how its development is fostered in various settings. This is especially true in rural areas, where there are often limited educational and economic resources (Gallo & Beckman, 2016), and strong family and community ties (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Although research has investigated both leadership and the development of young leaders, little is known about the perspective of high school students about how their leadership development is supported in a rural school environment.

The purpose of this study was to explore successful practices of leadership development in a high school setting as recounted by youth. This study drew on secondary analysis of qualitative data and aimed to determine what educational practices youth, aged 15-18, emphasize as most contributing to the development of their leadership potential within the framework of a leadership development course. The first sections of this article situate the scholarship on leadership of rural youth and describe the nature of qualitative secondary analysis. In achieving the purpose of this study, a brief overview of the study design is provided. The next section overviews data findings and suggests that volunteering and serving community, engaging in course activities, collaborating with school administration and staff, and employing continuous self-reflection were most valuable to leadership development from a youth perspective. The article concludes with a discussion of the meaning these findings might have for youth leadership theory and practice, leadership educators, educational leaders, and policymakers.

## Overview of Literature on Leadership of Rural Youth

The term "youth leadership" has gained increasing prevalence in education as a construct to describe "the involvement of youth in responsible, challenging action that meets genuine needs for planning and decision making" (Kress, 2006, p. 51). This definition of youth leadership assumes continuous engagement of youth in hands-on leadership activities with further transformation of their experiences into leadership knowledge and skills (Zacharatos et al., 2000). "Being complex and tugging on emotional interactions" (Whitehead, 2009, p. 847), youth leadership extends beyond basic experiences; it includes motivation, intellectual stimulation, consideration (Zacharatos et al., 2000), as well as attitudes, self-awareness and self-efficacy, behaviors, past leadership experience, and various interpersonal, learning, and professional skills (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Jones, 1938; Klau, 2006; Van Linden & Fertman, 1998). When placed into practice, youth define leadership as "an inclusive opportunity available to anyone who is motivated to make change happen… working for the common good, putting others' needs before one's own" (Mortensen et al., 2014, pp. 457-458). It therefore requires young people to put into practice their decision-making skills and meet their developmental and social needs regardless of the provided educational support.

Recent research on leadership of rural youth has served as a catalyst for change in rural schools and communities. For instance, scholars have reported high aspirations of rural youth to lead a successful and fulfilling adulthood as a result of purposeful leadership education and economic resources sufficient for continuing education in rural settings (Ley et al., 1996). Checkoway and Gutierrez (2006) also emphasize the positive influence youth and their leadership have on program development, quality and extent of intergenerational partnerships, and community contribution. Furthermore, young leaders have reportedly increased self-awareness of themselves as leaders allowing them to develop a mentoring relationship with their peers and make themselves more competitive for future employment (Garst & Johnson, 2005).

A primary way to build leadership among rural youth is to provide direct individual instruction (Mitra, 2005). Driven by adult advising, leadership of rural youth thrives in smaller group activities and with the support of direct, individual instruction. As identified by Mitra (2005), to unify youth leaders and collectively construct meaningful actions, a variety of resources and tools are necessary. Those include, but are not limited to communication skills, common norms, and common language. As a result, it enables youth to be active change agents in rural school and community settings, while increasing student leadership and their empowerment.

Although youth leadership is not new to education and social sciences, leadership of rural youth as a branch of youth leadership scholarship is emerging. Comprehensive examination of rural youth leadership began in the 1990s in the field of agricultural education and community services. The focus of this research has been examining the impact of extension service programs on the development of youth's leadership skills. Consider, for example, a study conducted by Seevers and Dormody (1994). With an aim of exploring the relationship between leadership life skills of 400 rural youth and their participation in 4-H leadership activities, achievement expectancy, self-esteem, years in 4-H, age, ethnicity, gender, and place of residence, the scholars determined that participation in 4-H practices positively correlated with youth's leadership skills regardless of their age, self-esteem, years in the program, or place of residence.

Seevers and Dormody (1995) extended their research to identify specific leadership activities that were valued by youth as most contributing to their leadership skill development. They found that such activities as holding office, teaching younger program members, fairs, demonstrations, public speaking, and community service ranked number one as a contribution toward youth leadership development. While a significant number of youth were involved in the leadership activities, most youth did not realize the value of these activities. Therefore, it is crucial to design an environment for student leadership development and practice, as well as provide opportunities for self-reflection and leadership evaluation.

Building on Seevers and Dormody's study, Wingenbach (1995) investigated leadership life skills of rural youth and their participation in Future Farmers of America (FFA) leadership activities. Leadership activities included practices oriented toward building skills in communication, decision making, human relations, learning and resource management. Findings revealed a significant relationship between youth leadership and participation in leadership development activities. As a result, Wingenbach suggests creating more opportunities for youth to participate in leadership activities, with a greater emphasis on female youth involvement.

Hastings and her team (2011) describe the process of how rural youth leaders develop through community engagement. Their study sought to understand the conditions under which youth engage in their community and strategies used by youth and adults for collaboration. They

found strategies such as purpose identification, encouragement of youth to share their views, and collaborative work to enable ideas fostered youth leadership. Specifically, emphasis was placed on ownership, responsibility, and perception and attitude at the individual level along with the community ability to capitalize on youth leadership potential. Continuing their research, the scholars also predicted self-perceived youth leadership skills by youth emotional intelligence (McElravy & Hastings, 2014). These findings expanded research conducted by Seevers and Dormody in the 1990s and indicate the dependence of youth self-perception as leaders from their ability to successfully marshal their emotions and emotions of others.

Engagement in service learning demonstrates that rural adolescents are capable of self-driven learning and addressing the needs of their community (Terry, 2003). According to the scholar, leadership activities incorporated into service learning positively impact self-selected curriculum, allowing youth to experience leadership and learning in a meaningful way. Learning more about leadership and community needs can lead to a stronger commitment by students to self- and community development, as well as a positive attitude toward leadership and community projects, thus empowering rural youth to make decisions and take independent actions.

Researchers have also emphasized the connection between the aspirations of young rural leaders, their participation in school-community partnership, and an increased sense of responsibility. Those rural students who share career, educational, and leadership goals with parents and teachers are reported to aspire to lead a successful and fulfilling adulthood (Ley et al., 1996). Seen as community leaders, rural youth, with educational support, are capable of making influential choices about their future careers and life direction, thus, showing progression in their leadership maturity (Bajema et al., 2002). Partnering with students to grow schools and communities creates new meaning and understanding for students in rural settings, producing a common purpose for schooling, youth well-being and responsibility, and a thriving community (Bauch, 2001; Wood et al., 2009).

There is ample research explaining the concept of youth leadership, as well as sufficient evidence of the positive impact of leadership programs on youth personal and leadership development. Various models are used in the development of young leaders. These models combine leader personality and skills (Van Linden & Fertman, 1998); scholarly understanding, reflective practice, transformative experience and active demonstration of leadership in the field and in the community (Stein et al., 2005); leadership knowledge, attitude, desire, will, decision making, critical thinking, as well as intra-/interpersonal and communication skills (Ricketts & Rudd, 2002); and leader identity, self concept, group influences, developmental changes, and leadership view (Owen, 2012). Although the list of leader development models is not limited to the aforementioned, these represent the breadth, diversity, and complexity of youth leadership development. Therefore, both require a deep level of understanding of leadership and its development that is founded in "a person's constructive development, or their understanding and construction of the world" (Sessa et al., 2015, p. 16). Despite the abundance of perspectives on practices related to its development, in order to fully meet youth developmental and social needs, and address the challenges faced by rural youth, youth voice needs to be taken into account (Mortensen et al., 2014).

Furthermore, current research still inadequately portrays leadership from a rural youth perspective; nor is it comprehensively familiar with leadership development practices valued by rural youth. As a participant in a study conducted by Mortensen and her team (2014) stated, "There

are many ways in becoming a leader and they can be big or small steps. In some of our daily lives we don't even notice it, but we are being a leader in someone else's life" (p.453). A comprehensive understanding of pathways of leadership development within rural youth allows general and leadership educators to create youth-led leadership development programs. As a result, it becomes possible to address the root causes of existing community problems, elevate the youth role in self- and school development, and increase youth collective efficacy and responsibility. In this paper, as recounted by rural youth, major leadership development practices that most contribute to youth leadership education are exemplified.

## Defining Secondary Data Analysis

This study employed secondary analysis of qualitative data to explore youth perspectives of activities designed to foster their leadership. Secondary analysis of qualitative data is relatively new; however, in recent years it has become more popular among the U.S. and UK qualitative education and social researchers (Heaton, 2004; Irwin, 2013; Johnston, 2014; Long-Sutehall et al., 2010).

Secondary analysis is the supplementary study of existing data in order to pursue a research inquiry that is different from the original investigation (Bustamante-Gavino et al., 2012; Hakim, 1982; Johnston, 2014). Moreover, qualitative secondary analysis can be used to construct and/or verify knowledge by (re-)exploring experiences and perceptions of targeted populations (Ebbinghaus, 2005). In addition, qualitative secondary analysis is useful when "there is little information known about a phenomenon, the applicability of what is known has not been examined, or when there is reason to doubt the accepted knowledge about a given phenomenon" (Kidd et al., 1996, p. 225). Using qualitative secondary analysis to address new research questions allows one to critically assess previously collected data (Hinds et al., 1997), to apply different theoretical frameworks from the original study (Heaton, 2004); or describe characteristics and/or behaviors of individuals, communities, or organizations (Long-Sutehall et al., 2010).

However, before conducting qualitative secondary analysis, it is necessary to evaluate the appropriateness and quality of a qualitative data set (Heaton, 1998; Hinds et al., 1997; Notz 2005; Thorne, 1998). To determine the congruency of data to the secondary study and ensure data quality and viability, the following questions should be addressed: a) do the purpose, context, population, and sample size fit the interest of a secondary analysis study?; b) is the existing data set complete?; c) are existing data broad and deep enough to answer research questions of a secondary analysis study?; d) were qualitative data collected over a sustainable period of time?; and e) does the original project allow for additional data collection? Each of these questions will be addressed in the methods section below.

## Methods

The researcher who conducted this secondary research was the same individual who collected the original data. During the original data collection and secondary data analysis, it was assumed that study participants were knowledgeable of youth leadership and that collected insights were reflective of participants' true beliefs and authentic opinions. The students were also informed on the risks and benefits of participating in the research; their participation in the original

study was voluntary. To assure participants' anonymity, all the names used to report the findings were changed.

As for the process of qualitative secondary analysis, in order to generate new knowledge, the original study, the process of data collection, and the analytical processes applied to the data need to be outlined (Heaton, 1998), and the secondary research questions should be sufficiently close to those of the original research (Thorne, 1998). In addition, existing datasets should be complete, accurate, and transparent, and contain enough detail to explain any decision made regarding data attainment, participant recruitment, research timeframe, and additional data collection. This information will be presented as a framework to explain the procedure for secondary analysis reported in this paper.

**Data Set Evaluation**

**Research purpose, context, population, and sample size.** The original study sought to characterize youth perspectives of leadership, their attitudes, motivation, and experiences in leadership development (Sherif, 2016). Specifically, research objectives were to (a) clarify the meaning of leadership from a youth perspective, (b) understand youth motivation in learning and practicing leadership, (c) explore youth attitudes towards leadership development, and (d) learn how youth experience leadership. Within that framework, the following research questions were examined: 1) How do youth perceive leadership?; 2) What motivates youth to develop and practice leadership?; and 3) What are emotional and behavioral indicators of youth leadership?

The study was conducted in a rural high school setting within the context of a youth leadership development course. The course was designed to engage youth in local and global community improvement initiatives, responsible decision making, school-oriented project development and implementation, and incorporation of modern technology into educational processes. Sixteen high school students enrolled in the course took part in the study. The sample was comprised of 12 female and 4 male participants. The age of the participants ranged from 15 to 18 years old. Additionally, the study enrolled a school principal and course instructor.

The purpose of the research was relevant to the aim of the present study, which is to examine the pathways of youth leadership development created by a youth leadership course. In addition, the present study is guided by research questions that were not initially asked. Specifically, the secondary research questions arose directly from the data and were grounded in the context of the previously conducted study. Secondary research questions were also formulated broadly in an effort to reduce biases and allow subjects' responses to lead researcher's understanding of youth leadership and practices most contributing to the development of leadership within youth.

Similarly, the characteristics of the research settings and study population are integral to the present research. The data provide rich descriptions of study settings that are indicative of occurring development and practice of youth leadership. Youth enrolled in the study actively participated in local and global community improvement initiatives, decision making, school-oriented project development and implementation, and incorporation of modern technology into secondary education learning processes.

**Completeness and accuracy of the data set.** In addressing the question of data completeness and accuracy the researcher had the benefit of accessing necessary background information. Detailed documentation was kept on data collection methodologies, fieldwork, and the recruitment process, which provided evidence of careful and consistent data collection. The records included semi-structured interview protocols, field and observation notes, as well as subject-relevant documents shared by the course instructor and study participants. The interview recordings were checked for transcription accuracy and determined as adequate and meeting the purposes of the current secondary analysis research. Interview and observation protocols were complete, so were the notes. Each note (protocol) was date and time stamped. Finally, in evaluating how complete the original data were, the researcher examined interviewing procedures to ensure they were guided by the protocol, constructed in respect to outlined protocol questions, and how clarity of participants' responses were addressed during each interview.

**Breadth and depth of the existing data set.** It is vital to have access to rich, descriptive, and informative data. For this study, research documentation and existing data were consulted and included the following: semi-structured interview recordings and transcripts, observational and in-field notes, and documents that were shared by study participants and publicly available.

In the original study, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with every student participant. The interview questions sought to investigate how youth perceive leadership and themselves as leaders, what motivated them to take the course and practice leadership, along with what inspired them to be leaders and practice their leadership, and provide specific examples of their leadership practice. Each student was interviewed at least twice for approximately 10-15 minutes. Forty interviews were conducted totaling seven hours of audio data.

Along with student interviews, a school principal and instructor of the leadership development course were interviewed. Adult study participants were asked to share their perceptions of youth leadership and describe educational pathways created within the school to develop youth leadership. The respondents also provided information on various activities offered to youth to further their leadership potential, their importance to youth education and personal growth, and the alignment of youth leadership development activities/programs with school values and the general curriculum. As a result, adult interviewees provided numerous examples of educational supports designed to develop youth leadership within the school and their value for youth engagement in school and community life.

Observational data were also collected and included detailed information about observational settings, time, interpersonal interactions, participants' responses and behaviors. Twenty observations were conducted during the study. Observations included indoor and outdoor observations of students and course activities. The focus of the observations was on educational settings where the development and practice of youth leadership occurred, characteristics of youth leadership in practice, the nature and content of activities offered in the classroom to further youth leadership, and opportunities provided by the course curriculum and instructor for students to practice their leadership.

In addition to observational materials, the data set included documents collected to augment the data and assure credibility of potential research findings. Collected materials were based on two types of data—documents provided by study participants and the course instructor, and publicly available documents. A total of 62 documented materials or over 135 documented

pages were collected. Documents of study participants and course instructor included students' essays, open-ended leadership surveys, reflections on course activities, readings, leadership, and school values, and students' electronic presentations. Publicly available school and course documents included student organization core teams, community mission, and school vision and values, course curriculum, and Lead2Feed lessons which were used as a curricular foundation of the course.

**Duration of data collection.** According to Johnston (2014), the time frame of data collection is paramount to any research. The researcher utilized the data that were no more than three years old. The original study was completed over two academic years from April 2013 through June 2015. The researcher visited the site on average twice a month to collect the data.

**Possibility of additional data collection.** The last step in the evaluation of the original qualitative data set is to assure the appropriateness of and/or need to recontact subjects from the original study. The review of interviews and research documentation indicated the subjects willingly shared their contact information and agreed to be recontacted if there was a need. Although some original participants may have graduated at the time of the secondary study, the remainder still attended the school. It was also found that in the case of this secondary research, there was a sufficient extent of high quality data collected on this very specialized topic, hence, making the secondary analysis possible without any additional data collection and compliant to researcher's university requirements to research integrity, accountability, and ethics.

**Data Coding and Analysis**

The process of secondary analysis of interview, document, and observational data began with initial data review and organization (LeCompte, 2000). To manage the data, a web-based qualitative and mixed method research data analysis tool Dedoose® v.6.1.18 was used for both storage and analysis.

The initial data coding was guided by two approaches: thematic and structural. During thematic analysis, codes were developed and entered into Dedoose allowing for data organization based on emerging thematic patterns and categories. The units of analysis or codes were guided by the secondary research questions and, as the analysis process evolved, were merged into categories (Notz, 2005; Rabiee, 2004; Szabo & Strang, 1997). Individual quotes from interview transcripts, documents, and observational notes were developed into descriptive statements for further analysis (Bustamante-Cavino et al., 2011; Rabiee, 2004).

Once preliminary codes were assigned, data were grouped into themes. By using Dedoose, where coded phrases and paragraphs are automatically connected to themes, the researcher was able to efficiently compare and contrast coded narrative until each category was viewed as an independent, identifiable structure (Burke, 1992). This procedure helped not only refine evolving thematic patterns, but also create a narrative structure with logical, valid, and reliable relationships between secondary research questions and findings (Bowen, 2009; LeCompte, 2000).

After preliminary analysis, a more detailed inductive, conventional content analysis was performed (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000). Specifically, more detailed coding and category formation were guided by the data (Cho & Lee, 2014; Elo & Kyngas, 2008) to explore

and describe, rather than prove or confirm, an examined phenomenon (Bowen, 2009; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000). Narratives were actively reread and separate text fragments were assigned thematic codes to answer secondary research questions using participants' words.

## Limitations

This study has two important limitations related to the study sample and the method of qualitative secondary analysis. First, the sample of rural youth was relatively homogenous. The vast majority of rural youth participating in the original study were female students enrolled in the leadership development course. While this sample of youth reflects the class enrollment, future research should explore the extent to which these findings include the perspectives of more gender diverse youth enrolled in the course and attending the school. Similarly, since the course enrollment is voluntary, it is anticipated that the original study participants may posses more knowledge concerning leadership than their peers due to their personal interest in leadership development and community change. That being said, it is believed that this sample may also reflect the strength of the study. Because the participating youth mindfully selected the leadership development course at the time of data collection, they represent rich cases of youth primed to think about and practice their leadership.

Second, the data used in this study are relatively limited. Specifically, since the data were collected for different research purposes, a study conducted specifically to answer current research questions could present additional and/or different finding dimensions. To partly eliminate the effect of such limitation on present research conclusions, the data were triangulated. Therefore, the findings present only repetitive and consistent themes emerged as a result of analysis of observational, interview, and document data. The narratives youth shared were collected longitudinally and are descriptively rich and contextually abundant. They reflect perspectives of rural youth who care about leadership and foresee the significance of its development in every activity they took part in. There are narratives and observations of youth who committed and dedicated their time to a yearlong leadership development course along with community and school service. Therefore, data utilized in this study were the result of youth thoughtful engagement with the concept of leadership and its practice.

## Results

Rural youth and school educators had unique perspectives on how leadership development should be fostered with youth. They emphasized volunteering and serving community, engaging in course activities, collaborating with school administration and staff, and employing continuous self-reflection as most valuable to their leadership development. Table 1 provides a summary of the emerged themes.

| Theme | Definition |
|---|---|
| Volunteering and community service | Study participants emphasized creating positive social change, helping others, learning leadership, and practicing responsible decision making. |
| Collaboration with school administration and staff | Study participants said leadership emerges as a result of learning from each other, mutual trust and responsibility, professional partnership, constructive communication, and active engagement in the leadership building process. |
| Course activities | Study participants shared course activities deepen rural youth's understanding of leadership, allow for refining and applying leadership knowledge and skills, and contribute to the development of youth confidence, responsibility, and professionalism as leaders. |
| Self-reflection | Study participants agreed self-reflection is crucial to rural youth as a way of problem resolution, personal improvement and growth, self-awareness increase, leadership mobilization, personality evaluation, and assessment of the development of leadership potential. |

Table 1. Summary of Pathways of Youth Leadership Development and Practice

The youth study participants frequently discussed leadership development and practice as part of their daily and life-long goals. These practices were also viewed as contributing to youth leadership by their school principal and course teacher. The following is the detailed description of the aforementioned practices.

**Volunteering and Community Service**

Youth engaged in community service is part of their leadership development. For example, students participated in fundraising for Uganda farmers, organized a showcase of antique cars, collected and assembled care packages for the U.S. troops, organized local trash pickups, and trail and street cleanups. All of the aforementioned projects were proposed, designed, and conducted primarily by the students.

Working with, in, and for the community to make a positive impact, "help everyone in someway" (Bethany), and "improve leadership skills" (Alice) were seen as important to the youth as a whole. Although student participants did not emphasize specific leadership skills they would like to bolster, they often discussed how being part of community-oriented initiatives allowed them to create positive social and economic change, better the school, and sharpen their social skills. Overall, volunteering and community service practices allowed youth to "learn more about leadership" (Chris), "create visions and goal to help strive for greatness and leadership" (Josh), and "grow as a person" (Kayla). Natasha also illustrated this point, saying:

> I want to be a big part of this school and what happens in the future. By being involved in my community, I can do this. The projects that we will complete will best help me in my future story.

Participants repeatedly emphasized a learning aspect to their leadership practice in the community. Specifically, volunteering and community service helped them broaden their perspectives on local and global community issues, foresee the impact of their leadership at the individual and community levels, and envision a cause for which they could dedicate their leadership. As Maranda eloquently explained:

> The more disciplined attitude that we have toward the project that we are creating and running, the more people will respect us and notice the cause we're fighting for. When we fail at one thing, we must learn to adapt and overcome the situation we're given. The more we go out into our community the more people notice us and join us even if we failed.

Similarly, another student, Emily, emphasized the learning value of community service and volunteering in her leadership development stating, "Leadership allows us to learn about people our age in our community and in other communities around the world. And looking at what they'd done, we can learn from that as well. And continue to grow." Dedicating their leadership to make a positive difference in the world appeared to empower participants to be better leaders, as well as provide them with an opportunity to experience outcomes of their leadership. Moreover, it enabled students to see results of their decision making and take responsibility for their actions as they involved other citizens. Helen exemplified this, saying:

> We're trying to get letters back from the troops that we sent flavor packets for water and food. I think getting to see that, getting to see what you do and how it impacts people is probably the best way to do it. You're doing it yourself and seeing people and how it helps them impact someone is probably the best thing.

Leadership development through active community service and volunteering was just one example of the outcomes youth saw leaders could achieve. They were able to observe and learn from the impact their leadership was making in their community and other people's lives, establish trusting relationships with community members, practice responsible decision making, and take part in the local and global positive change.

**Collaboration with School Administration and Staff**

In addition to volunteering and community service, the participants identified collaboration with school principal and teachers as a valuable practice of their leadership development. They emphasized willingness of school administration and personnel to share their leadership responsibilities, delegate power, and include students in decision-making processes. For example, students took an active role in representing the student body at the school faculty meetings by

sharing ideas related to school improvement, community engagement, and event planning. During one of those meetings, student leaders discussed career shadowing, when they would spend one day learning from a professional in the field of their interest. After successfully implementing this idea across the school, it was adopted by other high schools in the district.

Students also shared their perspectives on how to improve learning and student engagement across the "student houses". For instance, students consistently participated in the development of learning materials and "substituted" their teachers to make learning more relevant. As later noted by participants, such practice resulted in better learning outcomes, student engagement, and increased responsibility of learners to their "teaching peers".

Surprisingly, the school principal and course instructor also saw benefits for their students' leadership from their active engagement and collaboration with administration and staff. According to the participants, establishing positive and collaborative relationships between school staff and young leaders allowed the latter to practice and build on their leadership knowledge and skills, and also observe adult leadership in a working environment. One student, Alison, described this experience saying, "That's one of the main parts of learning leadership—watching the teachers and watching what they do and how they respond to the situations is how you learn leadership in one way."

However, leadership development and learning leadership from adults were not the only outcomes of youth-faculty collaboration. The students particularly described a positive shift in overall student-faculty professional relationships. Specifically, daily interactions with the school administration and faculty were now grounded in trust, mutual responsibility for personal and school success, confidence in each other's ability to fulfill assigned roles, active engagement in school affairs, and constructive communication. For example, to encourage and sustain trusting relationships, school administration had an open-door policy. Every student had an opportunity to share their ideas and/or concerns with school leaders throughout the day. One student described it as a chance to reconnect with the administration and assure his voice was being heard. When he had an issue with finding the professional to shadow for the career shadowing assignment, the assistant principal and counselor dedicated the time to listen and help him acquire contacts necessary for gaining successful career experiences.

Another participant expressed her confidence in the support of administration in respect to student leadership activities. While organizing a fundraising event at the community level, the participant emphasized the administration and staff's openness about possible challenges associated with the event organization and their willingness to collaborate to address them. Particularly, while organizing the marathon to increase public awareness about hunger and provide meals to the people in need, student leaders arranged the location, designed and distributed information sheets, ordered T-shirts, and recruited participants. As for the school administration and staff, they provided constructive feedback along the way to maximize student success in every effort.

## Course Activities

Another important contributor to youth leadership development practice was students' active engagement during the leadership development course. For example, some of the activities included youth participation in the creation of school news, teaching technology to the county's

middle school students, and fundraising for people in need. Course activities as a practice of youth leadership development provided a foundation for various leadership skills and experiences. The course consisted of two components: theoretical and practical. As part of the theoretical component, students learned about different leadership theories, styles, and behaviors. The practical part of the course included participation in one of the three types of projects: technology, school news, and community. The technology group designed, developed and implemented ideas to improve the use of technology in a high school and middle school classroom setting, whereas the school news crew was responsible for weekly school and community updates, news overview, and interviews with local community members, school staff, and other students on various topics. The community team focused on the design and establishment of school- and community-based programs to improve the environment and overall well-being of community members at local, national, and international levels.

As a result of these course activities, participants noted the impact the course had on their understanding of leadership and its importance for personal and professional development in the future. For instance, Josh reported, "Before, I didn't really think about leadership or leadership qualities and how they even make their way in the situations.  Now, I think about it, 'If I want to be a leader, I need to do this.'"

Sharing his perspective on the role of this practice, Matthew pointed, "I have become a better leader by being a part of this team. I have learned how to direct people without being rude and controlling. I have learned how to take everyone's ideas and make it into one." Moreover, active engagement in the course bolstered study participants' confidence in and responsibility for being leaders. For instance, Natasha shared:

> I think it is really helpful and I think it's made me a little more responsible about
> wanting to actually teach people something new and making sure that they are ready
> to go before they even get somewhere and making them fully prepared.

The students emphasized that developing and practicing leadership through course projects while being in the high school would have a positive impact on their professional skills and career in the future. The notion of application of leadership skills in a specific profession served as an important motivator in youth leadership development and practice. A leader could and should transmit his/her skills and knowledge in any career field to better the profession and community. Karla summarized this idea, saying, "I do think it's important that we do learn those skills especially before going to college.  Because we're going to need them in whatever profession we do, no matter what." This process will continue with every new leader but each leader will enrich their area of expertise and encourage leadership behavior in others through active leadership practice and continuous self-improvement.

**Self-reflection**

Participants identified self-reflection as a practice that contributed to the development of their leadership. As a practice, self-reflection allows one to resolve an issue and identify a pathway to achieve the best possible outcome. Jennifer described this impact of self-reflection saying:

>A leader can overcome an obstacle by stepping away from it and thinking. This gives a person time to critically process what is actually happening. It allows the leader to self-reflect and see what needs to be changed in order to achieve the best outcome.

This value of self-reflection is not limited to leader's productivity; rather self-reflection is a process that has the capacity to influence personal betterment and self-awareness of leadership abilities. Furthermore, self-reflection can potentially mobilize someone to practice their leadership. Participants believed that with inspiration, motivation, dedication, and responsibility everyone can be a leader. For example, Karla noted on the role of self-reflection and self-motivation: "It's mostly just self-motivation and self-reflection. I inspire myself. I don't want to be like some of the people in my life. I want to be better than that. So, I want to have a good, secure future." Helen agreed:

>If I become a leader in situations it's because I've been pushing myself, saying, "Look, you have to step up. You have to show whoever it is what they need to do," and you do that by leading by example. So if they don't see you do it, then how can you expect them to do it. That's what I learned from football: if you're not going to finish a drill, you can't expect anyone else to complete it.

The motivational and developmental power of self-reflection cannot be overemphasized. Bethany highlighted its role in overcoming obstacles saying:

>A leader can also overcome an obstacle by stepping away from it and thinking. This gives a person time to critically process what is actually happening. It allows the leader to self-reflect and see what needs to be changed in order to achieve the best outcome.

Self-reflection is, therefore, a way to evaluate personal and leadership strengths and weaknesses, as well as to determine the extent of leadership potential development. According to youth, one's ability to lead is defined based on how effectively they can analyze potential effects of his/her actions. Josh described this importance of self-reflection stating:

>In order to be a proper leader, a person has to know their strengths and weaknesses. If one can't self-reflect, then they don't have the ability to lead others. If a person doesn't even look to improve themselves, then how can they properly lead others?

Therefore, for the youth, self-reflection was not only the way of self-improvement, but also an imperative metric of one's capacity to lead and make a positive difference in their own life and lives of others. Altogether, youth understanding of the role of self-reflection highlighted its significance in expanding leadership potential, determining a direction for personal and professional growth, overcoming challenges, and effectively leading others.

**Conclusions/Implications**

The findings from this study underscore the significance of understanding rural youth's perspectives of practices contributing to leadership development and practice. According to youth, leadership development can be fostered by providing adolescents with opportunities to volunteer, serve their school and community along with getting involved in formal leadership education, collaboration with school leadership and faculty, and purposeful self-reflection. Encouraging youth to participate in volunteering and community service projects can strengthen their relationships with community members, as well as acquire hands-on experience in goal and vision development, expand their perception of local and global community issues, and realize the cause to which they can dedicate their leadership. As a result, volunteering and community service can serve as a practice to empower youth to be responsible, civic, ethical, and change-oriented community members.

Along with volunteering and community service, realization of youth's leadership potential can occur through establishing collaborative relationships with school staff and administration. As shown in this research, young leaders can play an important role in improving learning, student engagement in school affairs, and organizational planning. Grounded in trust, mutual responsibility for school success, and professional relationships, inviting youth to be part of an educational dialogue can increase their commitment to school values and provide an opportunity to positively influence administrative processes.

To foster youth knowledge and experiences in leadership, purposeful organization of youth leadership education through leadership development course activities and projects is important. As recounted by youth, leadership course activities allowed for deepening youth understanding of leadership, application of leadership knowledge and skills to specific life situations, and development of personal confidence in their leadership styles. Leadership development course projects can also be used to encourage peer collaboration and engagement in school- and community-valuable activities, thus, enabling students to learn from each other and transmit their leadership expertise to those who are less leadership-experienced and knowledgeable.

As youth worldview and conceptual thinking becomes more categorical and systematic with the emphasis to the self, it is crucial for educators to create an environment for young leaders to self-reflect. Methodical and guided self-reflection can encourage youth to evaluate accrued leadership experiences in respect to their role for personal and community change and internalize gained leadership insights. Self-reflection also appears a valuable practice to minimize youth impulsive behavior allowing them to translate socially significant values and responsibilities into more complex commitments and purposes.

Youth leadership administrators, educators, and practitioners can use the findings from this study to provide students with opportunities to be involved in meaningful decision making and leadership development. They cannot overlook the presence and weight student voice carries in at the high school and community levels. They must be aware of the goals for youth leadership, especially in a rural environment, but also support the inclusion and transition from learning that is traditionally teacher-led to one that is student-led and teacher-supported. It is also the adults' role to provide a structure, such as various school committees, leadership courses, and extracurricular activities, that facilitate the sharing of multiple youth voices and allow students to work collaboratively toward personal and leadership refinement and community engagement.

Policymakers can also benefit from this study by establishing seats on community and education boards and working with school teachers and administrators to identify young leaders to represent their peers. By incorporating youth perspectives into policy review, development, and implementation, young leaders would be encouraged to become active educational and community stakeholders who have a voice in present decisions and future outcomes. Empowerment of youth to take an active position in school, community, and policy development would enable adolescents to become active agents of educational and social change and equally contribute to their learning and community programs.

Lobbying for increased funding for youth leadership and its development, especially in a rural setting, would provide schools and educators with the ability to purchase leadership materials, hire additional leadership advisors, and provide leadership training for educators and youth. Funding would also allow for school-community events and structures to foster leadership collaborations and support youth voice and their leadership development.

The voices shared by youth in this study do not invalidate previously derived empirical research; rather they emphasize the need to connect youth ideas on leadership with youth leadership training programs. As found by researchers (Mortensen et al., 2014) and identified in this study, leadership can and should be fostered in any youth who is motivated to invest in personal, family, and community growth, prioritizing the needs of others over personal ones. Taking into account community roots as recounted by rural youth can foster creation of leadership education responsive to youth developmental needs in personal, social, and professional advancement.

Future research may benefit from additional examination of youth leadership development according to other rural and urban youth who were not part of this study. This study was conducted using a secondary analysis—an independent design aiming to explore practices of leadership development may be capable of capturing additional practices resulting from that development. Future studies should engage more diverse youth population and youth who are not involved in leadership development activities to reveal additional characteristics of leadership development practices. If conducted as a survey-based study, an extensive list of practices may broaden scholars' understanding about how to engage youth from diverse backgrounds in leadership learning and foster their voices and leadership development outside of formal secondary education. Hearing voices of marginalized youth can excite their interests in developing leadership, being role models for their peers, serving their schools and communities as equal partners, self-reflection, and exercising their leadership potential to prepare them to lead now and in the future.

## REFERENCES

Bajema, D.H., Miller W.W. & Williams D.L. (2002). Aspirations of rural youth. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 43*(3), 61-71. doi: 10.5032/jae.2002.03061

Bauch, P.A. (2001). School-community partnerships in rural schools: Leadership, renewal, and a sense of place. *Peabody Journal of Education, 76*(2), 204-221.

Bowen, G.A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal, 9*(2), 27-40. doi: 0.3316/QRJ0902027

Burke, J.M. (1992). Qualitative generation of wellness motivation theory: A secondary analysis (Master's Dissertation).

Bustamante-Cavino, M.I., Rattani, S. & Khan, K. (2011). Women's empowerment in Pakistan – definitions and enabling and disabling factors: A secondary data analysis. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing, 22*(2), 174-181.

Chan, K.-Y., & Drasgow, F. (2001). Toward a theory of individual differences and leadership: Understanding the motivation to lead. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 86*(3), 481-498.

Checkoway, B.N. & Gutierrez, L.M. (2006). Youth participation and community change: An introduction. *Journal of Community Practice, 14*(1), 1-9.

Cho, J.Y. & Lee, E.-H. (2014). Reducing confusion about grounded theory and qualitative content analysis: Similarities and differences. The Qualitative Report, 19(64), 1-20.

Dedoose Version 6.1.18. web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data (2015). Los Angeles, CA: SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC (www.dedoose.com).

Ebbinghaus, B. (2005). When less is more: Selection problems in large-n and small-n cross-national comparisons. *International Sociology, 20*(2), 133-152.

Elo, S. & Kyngas, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 62*(1), 107-115.

Gallo, J. & Beckman, P. (2016). A global view of rural education: Teacher preparation, recruitment, and retention. *Global Education Review, 3*(1), 1-4.

Garst, D.A. & Johnson, J. (2005). Adolescent skill development through residential 4-H camp counseling. *Journal of Extension, 43*(5). Retrieved from: https://www.joe.org/joe/2005october/rb5.php/rb6.php

Hakim, C. (1982). *Secondary analysis in social research: A guide to data sources and methods with examples*. London, the UK: George Allen & Unwin.

Hastings, L.J., Barrett, L.A., Barbuto, J.E. Jr. & Bell, L.C. (2011). Developing a paradigm model of youth leadership development and community engagement: A grounded theory. Journal of Agricultural Education, 52(1), 19-29. doi: 10.5032/jae.2011.01019

Heaton, J. (1998). Secondary analysis of qualitative data. *Social research update, 22*. Retrieved from http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU22.html

Heaton, J. (2004). *Reworking qualitative data.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Herzog, M.J.R. & Pittman, R.B. (1995). Home, family, and community: Ingredients in the rural education equation. *Information analyses: Reports*, 1-25.

Hinds, P.S., Vogel, R.J. & Clarke-Steffen, L. (1997). The possibilities and pitfalls of doing a secondary analysis of a qualitative data set. *Qualitative Health Research, 7*(3), 408-424. doi: 10.1177/104973239700700306

Hsieh, H.F. & Shannon, S.E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 15*(9), 1277-1288.

Irwin, S. (2013). Qualitative secondary data analysis: Ethics, epistemology, and context. *Progress in development studies, 13*(4), 295-306.

Johnston, M.P. (2014). Secondary data analysis: A method of which the time has come. *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries, 3*, 619-626.

Jones, A. J. (1938). *The education of youth for leadership* (1ˢᵗ ed.). New York and London: McGraw-Hill.

Kidd, P., Scharf, T. & Veazie, M. (1996). Linking stress and injury in the farming environment: A secondary analysis of qualitative data. *Health Education & Behavior, 23*(2), 224-237.

Klau, M. (2006). Exploring youth leadership in theory and practice. *New Directions for Youth Development, 109*, 57-87. doi: 10.1002/yd.155

Kress, C. (2006). Youth leadership and youth development: Connections and questions. *New Directions for Youth Development, 109*, 45-56.doi: 10.1002/yd.154

LeCompte, M.D. (2000). Analyzing qualitative data. *Theory Into Practice, 39*(3), 146-154. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/1477546?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

Ley, J., Nelson, S. & Beltyukova, S. (1996). Congruence of aspirations of rural youth with expectations held by parents and school staff. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 12*(3), 133-141.

Long-Sutehall, T., Sque, M. & Addington-Hall, J. (2011). Secondary analysis of qualitative data: A valuable method for exploring sensitive issues with an elusive population? *Journal of Research in Nursing, 16*(4), 335-344. doi: 10.1177/1744987110381553

Mayring, P. (2000). Qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Social Research, 1*(2), 1-10.

McElravy, L.J. & Hastings, L.J. (2014). Profiling the youth leader: Personality and emotional intelligence trends and their relationship to leadership skills. Journal of Agricultural Education, 55(1), 134-151. doi: 10.5032/jae.2014.01134

Mitra, D. L. (2005). Adults advising youth: Leading while getting out of the way. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 41*(3), 520-553. doi: 10.1177/0013161X04269620

Mortensen, J., Lichty, L., Foster-Fishman, P., Harfst, S., Warsinske, K., & Abdullah, K. (2014). Leadership through a youth lens: Understanding youth conceptualizations of leadership. *Journal of Community Psychology, 42*(4), 447-462. doi: 10.1002/jcop.21620

Notz, P. (2005). Secondary qualitative analysis of interviews. A method used for gaining insight into the work/life balance of middle managers in Germany. *Qualitative Social Research, 6*(1), 1-8.

Oakland, T., Falkenberg, B. A., & Christopher, O. (1996). Assessment of leadership in children, youth, and adults. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 40*(138), 138-146. doi:10.1177/001698629604000304

Owen, J. E. (2012). Using student development theories as conceptual frameworks in leadership education. *New Directions for Student Services, 2012*(n140), 17-35. doi: 10.1002/ss.20029

Rabiee, F. (2004). Focus-group interview and data analysis. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society, 63*, 655-660. doi: 10.1079/PNS2004399

Ricketts, J. C., & Rudd, R. D. (2002). A comprehensive leadership educational model to train, teach, and develop leadership in youth. *Journal of Career and Technical Education, 19*(1).

Sessa, V.I., Ploskonka, J., Alvarez, E.L., Dourdis, S., Dixon, C. & Bragger, J.D. (2015). The relationship between student leaders' constructive development, their leadership identity, and their understanding of leadership. *Journal of Leadership Education, 15*(1), 15-30. doi: 1012806/V15/I1/R2.

Seveers, B. & Dormody, T.J. (1994). Predicting youth life leadership skills development among senior 4-H members: A tri-state study. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 35*(3), 64-69. Retrieved from http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.504.5793&rep=rep1&type=pdf

Seveers, B. & Dormody, T.J. (1995). Leadership life skills development: Perceptions of senior 4-H youth. *Journal of Extension, 33*(4). Retrieved from http://www.joe.org/joe/1995august/rb1.php

Sherif, V. (2016). Examination of Rural High School Students' Perceptions on Leadership. *In Progress.*

Stein, J.A., Wood. E., Walker, J.A., Kimball, E.M., Outley, C.W. & Baizerman, M. (2005). The youth development leadership experience: Transformative, reflective education for youthwork practitioners. *Child and Youth Care Forum, 34*(4), 303-325. doi: 0.1007/s10566-005-4096-5

Szabo, V. & Strang, V. (1997). Secondary analysis of qualitative data. *Advances in Nursing Science, 20*(2), 66-74.

Terry (2003). Effects of service learning on young, gifted adolescents and their community. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 47*(4), 295-308. doi: 10.1177/001698620304700406

Thorne, S. (1998). Ethical and representational issues in qualitative secondary analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 84*(4), 547-555.

Van Linden, J. A., & Fertman, C. I. (1998). *Youth Leadership: A Guide to Understanding Leadership Development in Adolescents*: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Whingenbach, G.J. (1995). *Self-perceived youth leadership and life skills development among Iowa FFA members* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Iowa State University Digital Repository http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=12021&context=rtd

Whitehead, G. (2009). Adolescent leadership development: Building a case for an authenticity framework. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership, 37*(6), 847-872. doi: 10.1177/1741143209345441

Wood, D., Larson, R.W. & Brown, J.R. (2009). How adolescents come to see themselves as more responsible through participation in youth programs. *Child Development, 80*(1), 295-309. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/29738612

Zacharatos, A., Barling, J., & Kelloway, K. E. (2000). Development and effects of transformational leadership in adolescents. *Leadership Quarterly, 11*(2), 211-226