LESSONS FOR INTEGRATING LEADERSHIP SKILLS
IN ALTERNATIVE BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAMS

ALTERNATIVE BASIC EDUCATION LEARNING SERIES

MARCH 2016, ISSUE 1

The USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project:

- Provides increased access to quality alternative basic education (ABE) classes, social and leadership development opportunities, and livelihoods skills training for out-of-school youth, ages 13 to 35, with no or marginal literacy and numeracy skills
- Supports the continued growth of economic opportunity through work-based learning and an emphasis on clubs and local alliances to support youth education and livelihood development

INTRODUCTION

Interviews with a sample of youth participants in the USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project revealed that their understanding of effective leadership is essentially different from usual definitions. Youth viewed effective leadership as primarily social, produced by a combination of patience, kindness, and giving good advice—characteristics that rarely top the lists of leadership qualities and are very infrequently drivers of leadership programming. When asked to map these qualities to the project's activities, study participants signaled that the project's meaningful and socially engaging opportunities help develop the leadership skills they value.

This first issue of the Advancing Youth Alternative Basic Education Learning Series summarizes the project's youth leadership study and its recommendations for youth leadership programming within the structure of Alternative Basic Education (ABE) in Liberia.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

To learn how project activities contribute to the development of leadership skills, Advancing Youth implemented a non-experimental qualitative study guided by the following research questions:

1) What are the qualities and skills Advancing Youth Project youth expect of persons who are regarded as effective leaders?

2) What project activities do youth participants feel are the most useful in helping them develop qualities and skills necessary to be a good leader?

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN ADVANCING YOUTH: In addition to the emphasis on personal and collective leadership skills in the ABE Life Skills, Work Readiness, and Literacy for Work courses, youth have the opportunity to participate in youth clubs, livelihoods peer training, and savings and enterprise groups. These activities allow aspiring leaders to build skills in negotiating, planning, managing, and working together with peers and elders.

Study data was collected from eight ABE sites in both Nimba and Montserrado counties during 2014-15. The 16 selected sites represent a mix of rural and urban environments and include those with high and low performance. At each of the sites, 20 learners were chosen from 2 main categories:

- Leadership Experience: Learners who have served as elected leaders of the Youth Club, as Peer Health Educators, as Peer Training Innovators, or who have attended the Advancing Youth Leadership summits.

- No Leadership experience: Learners who have no prior leadership or summit experience within the project.

A total of 320 young people enrolled in ABE participated in the study; 74% of these participants were female and 26% were male, closely representative of the gender split within the project as a whole. Data was collected through two phases of qualitative research. In the first phase, groups of learners at study sites were asked to identify leadership qualities they most respect, to rank those qualities to identify the top five, and to give the reasons for their rankings. In the second phase, learners mapped the leadership qualities to specific project experiences they believed helped develop the leadership qualities they value. The project's Youth Development and Livelihood Coordinators (YDLCs) facilitated both phases.

FINDINGS

Study participants identified the qualities of patience, kindness, and good advice-giving as the top three ranked leadership qualities, with problem-solving and compassion ranked next in importance. While participants discussed these qualities as distinct, our analysis showed they were closely interconnected.

Patience. Study participants described patience as a primarily internal asset that influences one's social behavior. Over and over again, participants explained that patient people have "cool hearts:" they are not quick to speak, and they do not respond out of anger; instead, the cool-hearted wait, overlook irritations, and control their tempers. Youth in all study sites agreed that patience means an ability to avoid hasty and angry interactions with others.

More than all other qualities, participants felt that **patience** was an essential characteristic of a successful leader. They recognized that a leader's primary function is to bring different kinds of people together to take unified action. According to participants, only a patient person—one who is not quickly angered by people's opinions and actions—is able to "bring people together" by "accepting everything that comes [their] way" and by "knowing how to talk to [them]." For Advancing Youth Project youth, patience is a key leadership quality because it allows an individual to create an environment in which different types of people are able to join together to work towards a unified goal.

Kindness. Participants described kindness as a way of viewing the world that plays out in speech and in action. Kind people care for and "seek the welfare of others," "accept people," and are humble and understanding. This other-centered approach further reveals itself in speech, as kind people speak respectfully, are not rude, and do not embarrass others for being wrong.

According to study participants, kindness is essential for leadership in two ways. First, by seeking to understand those he or she leads, a kind person will be interested in and willing to listen to others' problems. Yet participants' emphasis on kindness as essential to leadership has another, less other-centered importance: people like others who are kind to them or concerned for their well-being. Thus, kind people are well-liked and "popular," key elements to becoming and remaining a leader.

LEADERSHIP QUALITIES AND NUMBER OF TIMES THEY WERE IDENTIFIED BY 16 GROUPS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Quality	Count
Patience	8
Kindness	7
Giving good advice	7
Problem-solving	4
Compassion	4
Ability to communicate	3
Independent thinking	2
Moblilizing others	2
Openness to criticism	1

Giving Good Advice. This leadership quality was ranked equal to kindness. For study participants, giving good advice means knowing how to talk to people and encouraging them to do what is right. However, participants recognized that these abilities come from a place of introspection; when individuals have first "looked inside [themselves]," they are then able to "know the right thing to do" and can share that with others.

Study participants identified this quality as essential to being an effective leader because of the positive cycle it catalyzes. First, participants realized that a leader who can provide good advice is able to solve problems, which causes others to trust and listen to the leader. People follow such leaders and this, in turn, improves group unity. A leader who gives good advice, in the words of study participants, "keeps the groups united" and "puts people together."

Problem-Solving. Study participants largely conceived of problem-solving as related to the discord that can arise between individuals in a group. Participants felt that an individual with problem-solving skills could—without self-interest—listen to and talk to people to understand their interpersonal problems, and then provide a solution to "make peace" or "settle problems among [their] people." Thus, problem-solving is an important leadership quality because it allows the leader to bring harmony among those he or she leads. As one participant stated, "if there [are] differences between players, you [the leader] have to solve it."

Compassion. Youth in this study suggested that a compassionate person is one who not only sees the distress of others but who feels their sorrow with them. According to study participants, compassionate people have "great feeling" for those in distress.

While participants described compassion as a feeling, they explained it is important for leadership when it produces action. Young people from several different sites noted that compassionate people are forgiving: the empathy a compassionate person feels for another is an impetus for forgiving that person if they have wronged them. Further, as a result of their compassion and their impetus to forgive, compassionate people are inclusive; they "do not pick and choose between people," but rather "want everybody," regardless of what those people can offer to them or what those people have done to them. This tendency to feel for others, forgive them, and include them creates a leader in tune with the needs of others, which participants describe as an essential first step in helping to solve their problems.

An examination of participants' discussion of these five qualities reveals that youth define an effective leader as one who is able to bring people together and then forge group unity. A leader does this by:

- Responding with **patience** and not with anger to others' words, ideas, and actions, thereby avoiding alienating individuals in a group.

- Being **kind** to others and caring about their problems, proving his or her capacity for caring for the members of a group.

- Proving him or herself to be worthy of being followed by a group by consistently **giving good advice.**

- **Solving problems**—especially interpersonal problems—that arise between members of the group.

- Expressing **compassion** as including everyone in the group.

As described by the participants in this study, leaders with such qualities are effective not because of what they are able to do by themselves, but what they are able to do with and for others.

NUMBER OF SITES THAT MAPPED PROJECT ACTIVITIES TO LEADERSHIP QUALITIES

PROJECT ACTIVITY	LEADERSHIP QUALITIES DEVELOPED THROUGH ACTIVITY				
	Patience	Kindness	Giving good advice	Problem-solving	Compassion
Peer study (without facilitators)	-	2	4	2	2
Youth club gardening	4	2	6	2	-
Sports games & social activities	2	2	4	-	2
Community service	2	8	-	2	4
Youth club meeting	6	4	4	-	4
Visitation (to learners who have been absent or ill)	2	2	4	6	2

MAPPING LEADERSHIP QUALITIES TO PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Advancing Youth Project activities are designed to offer opportunities for learners to develop leadership qualities and skills. When asked to map their definition of leadership qualities to project activities outside of ABE classes, study participants responded that these activities have helped them to develop the qualities they value in effective leaders. They reported they develop and apply valued leadership qualities through peer study, youth club meetings and gardening, sports and social activities and other project activities.

A compelling conclusion from this mapping exercise is the significance of socially engaging opportunities that promote and support academic and other skills development. The Advancing Youth Project model is an integrated literacy, leadership and livelihood approach that offers ABE learners a chance to participate in activities that foster skills development. This integrated model expands the contexts in which participants can learn while strengthening and applying new skills, creating the space where leadership development is a central and critical component.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study encouraged Advancing Youth learners to tap into their beliefs about the leadership qualities and skills they value in a leader: patience, kindness, giving good advice, problem-solving, and compassion. For study participants, these are often the qualities demonstrated by leaders whose focus on others forges group unity. The findings on youth's definitions of effective leadership qualities and

their perceptions of which activities shape effective leaders suggests two recommendations for ABE programs in Liberia.

Invite youth to inform the values that guide leadership programming

Discussions with this study's participants revealed their understanding of effective leadership as primarily social, essentially different from popular constructs of effective leadership, which focus on confidence, optimism and decision-making. The distance between the study findings and other views of leadership qualities has implications for youth leadership programming. It reinforces the importance for program developers to involve youth in defining the leadership qualities they value.

Support integrated opportunities for learning and leadership skills development through youth-led efforts.

Building strong programs for youth requires opportunities for sharing and mutual learning, social navigating and collective action. Such spaces promote cooperation and collaboration among young people so that they have opportunities to witness, learn and practice the leadership skills that they identify as most valuable. As this study suggests, creating spaces for peer interaction, the exchange of ideas, and decision making on issues critical to their social and personal engagement is both possible and meaningful for the participants.

By taking these recommendations into account, Alternative Basic Education programs may be able to provide youth with leadership development opportunities that are both research-driven and responsive to their needs and contexts.

USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project's Alternative Basic Education Learning Series features select studies in the Learning Agenda—a set of research questions that have arisen during project implementation. The studies explore the effectiveness and sustainability of the integrated learning, leadership and livelihoods model.