

STUDENT LEADERSHIP DISTRIBUTION: EFFECTS OF A STUDENT-LED LEADERSHIP PROGRAM ON SCHOOL CLIMATE AND COMMUNITY*

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Abstract

This study focuses on the understandings educators developed from two schools concerning how distributed leadership involving a select group of students affected the climate and community of their schools. Findings suggest that student-led leadership roles within the school community have an impact on creating a positive school-wide climate; a positive impact on their own development; and a positive influence on their peers. Three themes emerged that contributed toward the success of the program: school-wide collaboration and trust; adequate time for growth and development; and leadership support teams.

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Sumario en español

Este estudio se centra en los educadores de comprensiones evolucionó a partir de dos escuelas con respecto a cómo liderazgo distribuido que implica un grupo selecto de estudiantes afectó el clima y la comunidad de sus escuelas. Las conclusiones sugieren que papeles de liderazgo de estudiante-dirigió dentro de la comunidad de la escuela tiene un impacto a crear un clima escuela-ancho positivo; un impacto positivo en su propio desarrollo; y una influencia positiva en sus iguales. Tres temas surgieron que contribuyó hacia el éxito del programa: colaboración y confianza escuela-ancho; tiempo adecuado para el crecimiento y el desarrollo; y los equipos de apoyo de liderazgo.

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1 Introduction

Today's high school diploma equals college eligibility, not readiness. Vollmer (2010) suggests that teachers do not emphasize readiness and assessments do not actually measure readiness. Despite the decade's long standards movement, we are still faced with the reality that our schools are not adequately preparing our students for productivity.

According to MetLife's Survey of the American Teacher: Preparing Students for College and Careers (2011), approximately 93% of secondary school parents, 85% of secondary teachers, and 80% of business executives believe college and career readiness should be a priority in our nation's K-12 classrooms. This college and career readiness priority is shared by many of our nation's governors and chief state school officers. Forty-seven states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have adopted the Common Core State Standards, a state-led initiative that identifies what knowledge and skills in English language arts and mathematics our students need to be successful in life after high school (Markow & Pieters, 2011).

The lack of workforce development in schools has created workforce gaps. The majority of our students leave high school not prepared for college or careers. The workforce need is rapidly changing given the recent economic conditions, globalization and advancements in technology. The United States is strategizing how best to meet this need given what Daniel Pink (2005) describes as a movement from the information age to the conceptual age. Pink (2005) suggests that metaphorically, that our "left brain", (the logical sequential, analytical side of our brain that has powered our United States economy during the information age) is no longer sufficient. The qualities and capabilities that we once thought frivolous, including the "right brain" skills of inventiveness, empathy, joyfulness and meaning, will now determine who succeeds.

School transformational efforts must be aligned with the growing demands and needs of our changing global societies. Integration of these skills into our educational system and the methods used to teach these skills for application must be led by strong educational leaders with the ability to distribute leadership at all levels of the school community. This type of transformation in today's educational system is dependent, in large part, by how well teachers work together with their principal and colleagues (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Recent research has focused on the role of the school principal and other site-based leaders in the implementation of professional development initiatives (Pedersen, Yager & Yager, 2010). Principals play a key role in supporting and encouraging teachers' professional development needs. Successful principals establish the work conditions that enable teachers to be better teachers. The ability to share with others and collaborate with them for the purpose of providing instruction that is conducive to enhancing student development is critical given the many demands that are being put upon the system.

Having the opportunities to work with colleagues and building administrative leaders can be extremely challenging. Much of this facilitation is dependent upon the principal and other school administrators being flexible and accommodating. They must provide collaborative work time which is an important part of the learning process. And, it must be open to the diffusion of leadership roles. Researchers have identified three themes that are aligned with school transformation to best prepare students for the workforce (Yager, Pedersen, & Yager, 2011). The three themes are: 1) Leadership teams are critical support mechanisms; 2) Growth and development are nurtured by providing adequate time; and 3) Leadership effectiveness is determined by how well the school community collaborates and trusts one another to allow all stakeholders, including students, to have a voice.

Distributing leadership roles to students for school-wide change initiatives increases the effectiveness of the transformation (Louis, et al., 2010). In order to increase the depth of a positive climate and culture within a school community (and thereby better preparing students for the workforce), a distributed leadership framework that includes student-led responsibilities has been found to be beneficial (Louis et al., 2010). There are few studies that provide evidence regarding the impact of distributed leadership practices on the implementation of professional development initiatives designed to improve school effectiveness, create a positive school climate, and enhance student achievement (Copeland, 2003; Harris, 2004; Leithwood, K., Steinbach, R. and Jantzi, D., 2002). Additionally, there has been a call to explore the actual behaviors and influences associated with core leadership practices that occur with distributed leadership frameworks (Louis et al., 2010).

This study focuses on providing research results that examine distributed leadership responsibilities for students and its effects on the school climate and the entire community.

The research questions examined in this study are: Was there a positive effect on school climate and community development after distributing leadership responsibilities to students? If so, what leadership practices were provided by the program facilitators during the processes which were responsible for the positive change in school climate and community?

2 Methods

This study focuses on the understandings of twenty-two educators from two elementary schools in the Midwest concerning the process of leadership distribution including students and its effects on school-wide climate change. The initiative used in each of the schools was called Student Leadership Ambassador Program developed by Connecting Learning Assures Successful Students (C.L.A.S.S.). The C.L.A.S.S. Model is a school-wide operating system aligned with academic mastery, character building, and positive social interactions for student preparation for the workforce.

The Student Leadership Ambassador Program is designed to distribute leadership to Student Ambassadors, a select group of students from each school who systemically influenced and challenged their peers to help create a positive learning environment. All Student Ambassadors were selected by educators within each school using criteria that focused on the possession of leadership qualities. Several of the students selected were described by the educators as students who were not necessarily the best-behaved students in the building. However, these students had demonstrated peer influence and strong potential for becoming a leader.

C.L.A.S.S. efforts in both schools for implementing the Student Leadership Ambassador Program were identical in terms of mode of delivery and content used. Data for this study were collected approximately one year after school-wide implementation of the program in each school. An online survey and interviews were used to gather data from educators in each school.

3 Findings

After implementing the Student Leadership Ambassador Program for one year, the findings from the two schools indicate the following results:

77% of the respondents believe their Student Ambassadors have made a significant positive impact on character development of all students.

Sample student responders offered the following:

“There is a better quality of relationships among classmates.”

“I have noticed the younger elementary kids using the lifeline words more as a part of their regular vocabulary.”

“Younger students look up to the older student leaders. They look forward to being able to take on a leadership role when they are older. The Ambassadors take great pride in their role and in our school.”

There is more respect among students and there are improved speaking skills coming from fellow classmates.”

82% of the respondents believe the Ambassador Program has made a significant impact by creating a more positive school climate.

Respondents stated:

“I’ve seen more leadership and accountability by and for the Ambassadors. As a special education teacher, I know I can reference the ambassador lesson with each class I see. The ambassadors have a great sense of responsibility for the school climate. It is great to see them lead their classes in the school and to encourage the students to follow hallway procedures.”

“Our fifth grade team appreciates the distribution of leadership in some specific ways. Our ambassadors bring in students in the morning to their classrooms as a way of building relationships. Our own students who have been selected for the program are held to a high standard, and their peers hold them to it as well. I’ve already heard younger students say that they want to be chosen as an ambassador - which gives opportunity to talk about the qualities of such people.”

86% of the respondents would like to see the Ambassador Program continue in their school.

Sample respondents offered the following comments:

“We teach ‘democracy’ and what better way to live ‘democracy’. Students have a voice in the school’s activities, both special events and day-to-day routines.”

“The more responsibility placed on students the better. I think they begin to see the school as “theirs” instead of one where teachers or administrators set the tone.”

“The ambassadors that I am around have become aware of the difficulties of leadership roles around and among their peers. They have also noticed the difficulties and rewards of being in these roles. They seem to have a greater appreciation of their parents and teachers that assume these roles each day. This is good and will help them later in life.”

“The more ownership a student can have in his/her learning and behavior practices the more permanent impact becomes; it will have on their lives. Giving students ownership in decision making, empowering them to make change, and letting them know their actions can make a difference is life changing.”

Based upon the results, three key leadership practices emerged across both schools during the implementation of the student leadership program: Leadership effectiveness is determined by how well the school community members collaborate and trust each other; Leadership teams are critical support mechanisms; Growth and development are nurtured by providing adequate time for the Ambassador program.

4 Leadership effectiveness is determined by how well the school community collaborates and members trust each other

Trust can have a significant impact in creating success and prosperity in all dimensions of the organization (Covey, 2006). Consistent in both schools was the respondents’ emphasis on their school staff’s collaborative efforts in which they described themselves as a team who trusts each other and works together to make the program a success.

Sample respondents described it like this:

“There is 100% buy-in from the faculty. The teachers believe the program is effective; they see the results for themselves.”

“One of the great things about our school is that we all work together and support each other. If there is a problem, our relationships are such that we can go to each other and work things out. We trust each other.”

In building staff collaboration and trust, leadership must be willing to enable the staff to find their individual ways without stigmatizing them (Fullan, 2008). Several respondents indicated the importance of their principal’s role during this implementation process. Consistent among respondents was the principal’s openness to distribute leadership roles and allow the opportunity for staff and students to gain ownership of the school program and be a part of the decision-making process. Many of the respondents described this collaborative effort as having a positive impact upon the success of the program.

Some respondents described it as follows:

“We have great leadership and teachers who are willing to invest time in helping students develop their leadership skills.”

“All of us work together to make the program a success”

“Our principal has been very supportive in giving us the tools and flexibility that we need to make it successful.”

Covey (2006) suggests that trust is defined as confidence. When you trust people, you have confidence in them, in their abilities, and in their integrity. Without trust, you potentially develop suspicion of colleagues’ integrity, agendas, and capabilities. It is this factor that establishes the way the school system behaves and operates on a daily basis.

Trust can greatly affect how teachers collaborate with each other, which significantly impacts the effectiveness and efficiency of how professional development initiatives such as the Student Leadership Ambassador Program are implemented throughout the school.

5 Growth and development are nurtured by using adequate time

Communication from both schools includes understanding that the Student Leadership Ambassador Program requires time to develop. Teachers from each school indicated that a key factor for the success of the program was that their principal and leadership team provided strong school-wide support.

Responds from teachers included:

“I believe the program leaders at our school are more confident and more clearly organized to meet the program goals and that they were able to show that directly to the students.”

“We have a great school leadership team and teachers who are all willing to invest time in helping students develop their leadership skills. “

Several teachers acknowledged that there were different levels of adoption rates (how fast the initiative was implemented school-wide) with the staff. For some, additional time was needed for individuals to adopt the initiative.

Rodgers (1995) has described this range of adoption levels in terms of *innovators* who are described as active information seekers about new ideas. They are those who are likely to be the first to adopt a new idea, much like the leadership team in this study. They were not *laggards* who are generally suspicious of any change. These are the people who need additional time for “buy-in”.

As a means to aid in the adoption of the program, the principal and leadership team in each school communicated clearly what the expectations and responsibilities of each stakeholder was throughout the process. They gave individual attention when needed. It was evident from the teachers interviewed that this type of attention took a great deal of time and patience from the leadership team. But, it was necessary for the success of the program.

One teacher stated:

“It took me awhile to catch on, but I think that I understand the system now thanks to our principal and the leadership team.”

Several of the teachers stated that this program will take additional time to build further successes and change the culture of the school. Many teachers stated that they were encouraged by the initial feedback from the students and indicated the more they used the program the more positive results they were seeing.

Some respondents stated it this way:

“Like many programs, time resolves many issues and the program gets better and better.”

“I think it is beginning to be effective because the staff is more willing to accept it and the students understand the program better.”

“It is a new program, but I can see positive changes ahead with having the ambassadors involved in many types of service.”

The majority of teachers agreed that this program, for its success, requires a school-wide “buy-in” from the staff as well as a strong leadership team and a principal who is a leader of change. A majority of respondents mentioned that adequate time is needed for full implementation.

6 Leadership teams provide critical support mechanisms

Each of the schools in this study had established a team of teacher leaders called Ambassador Coaches that are responsible for facilitating the program. They provided aid as a support mechanism to staff members and students. The coaches were identified by their peers as persons who were passionate about the student ambassador initiative and intrinsically inspired to lead the student ambassadors through the learning process. Respondents described their coaches as significant factors in how the Student Leadership Ambassador Program was implemented throughout the school building.

Comments included:

“I think the biggest role has been the coaches. They have attended meetings and workshops and are doing a good job of promoting the idea to other teachers in the building.”

“I believe our principal and ambassador coaches have played a big role in our school for the program’s success. They are always working hard to make sure it is better.”

“The ambassador coaches are outstanding and fully dedicated to the students and seeing that the program is successful. They are truly interested in improving students’ character and self-esteem.”

“Our counselor is a great ‘ambassador’ for the program. She has worked hard to make sure that the program is worth the school time devoted to it.”

The leadership team’s role in the school extends leadership responsibilities with the intent to develop other leaders, both students and staff members, who then begin to work together. Reeves (2010) suggests that this type of interaction where teacher leaders provide feedback to help other colleagues and who receive feedback on the impact of their support greatly effects the process of student development. Respondents outside of the leadership teams expressed their involvement and commitment based upon this interaction.

Respondents stated:

“There has to be a lot of adult support, certainly including the coaches and principal and flexibility of teachers.”

“All adults in the building are encouraged to relate to the Ambassadors and hold them accountable.”

“We are all stakeholders for this program.”

“I think 4th and 5th grade teachers played a big role as we gave up remediation and enrichment time with these kids in order for them to participate in the lessons.”

“As a classroom teacher, I played a valuable role in the success of the program because I was involved in the classroom lessons as a mentor and coach.”

“It is a whole group effort!”

This collaborative effort reaches what Fullan (2005) described as a critical mass of interacting and co-lescing leadership for change across the entire school. The more the change becomes established, the more every teacher, and in this case every student ambassador, becomes a leader. Each of these persons will in turn, begin to operate consistently as interactive expert learners.

7 Discussion

Many students leave high school not prepared for college or careers in the workforce. The need in the workforce is rapidly changing and schools can address this need by increasing programs that emphasize

positive climate, strong collaboration and community involvement. A rigorous curriculum aligned is necessary to accomplish workforce needs. Implementing such initiatives as the Ambassador program is most effective when students are involved in leadership being distributed to them.

Researchers have discussed the important roles principals play in supporting and encouraging teachers' professional development needs. Additionally, recent studies have suggested that involvement by teachers in making good decisions regarding school leadership and improved practices is essential to transform a school (Louis et al., 2010). School leaders can have a significant influence on classroom practices of teachers through their efforts to motivate teachers and students to create workplace settings compatible with instructional practices known to be effective (Louis et al., 2010). General observations have been made that distributed forms of leadership among school staff and students are likely to have significant impacts on positive student achievement and school climate (Bell, Bolam, and Cubillom, 2003). This study demonstrates the impact students can have by using a professional development model to improve climate, collaboration, and culture. When school leaders invite students to participate in leading the initiative, the depth of implementation is increased.

Schools must create opportunities for school leaders and school leadership teams to work together, united with students in school improvement efforts (Spillane, 2006). Several researchers (Elmore, 2000; Miles, Odden, Archibald, Fermanich, and Gallagher, 2002; Joyce, 2004; Odden, 2009) have suggested that effective professional development is linked to the structural features of collective participation – including teachers, staff, and students. Furthermore, effective sustainability of professional development initiatives have been linked to distributed leadership frameworks and learning-centered leaders within individual schools (Southworth, 1998). When a school's transformational activities include students engaging in specific school-wide efforts, and, at the same time, work toward development of a distinctive identity, it maximizes its capacity to enhance outcomes, particularly relative to student achievement (Crowther, Hann, and McMaster, 2001). Increasing teacher and student involvement in the difficult task of making good decisions and introducing improved practices should indicate major foci for school leadership (Louis et al., 2010). This study demonstrates the importance of including students in the process of leading the implementation of initiatives involving school climate, culture, and workforce preparation. This study reveals what earlier research has suggested that the effective behaviors of school leaders when distributing leadership to teachers are similar when also distributing leadership to students (Yager, Pedersen, and Yager, 2010).

Previous research regarding shared decision-making in schools has identified barriers preventing decision-making that focuses on pedagogy and quality instruction (Griffin, 1995). This research revealed these barriers were caused by the culture of isolation among teachers found in most schools and the general non-confrontational tone set among teachers who work together in the same school building. Typically, teachers and students remain unaware of what their colleagues and peers are doing in other classrooms and this, combined with strong divisions commonly found among administrators, teachers, and students, creates a culture of individuality and private practice. These outcomes cause decay in school climate, collaboration, and community. This study, however, demonstrates that when students are engaged in leadership regarding transformational initiatives centered on school climate, culture, and collaboration, workforce preparation is enhanced. Additionally, when teachers view their principal as a member of a school-based leadership team whose purpose is to support and monitor the initiative and to provide adequate time to implement the initiative, the depth of implementation of the initiative will be dramatically increased. Also, this study supports the research that when teachers and students view both their principal and school-based leadership team as committed passionately to instructional improvement, their own level of engagement and follow-through with the implementation of professional development initiatives are increased (Pedersen et al., 2010).

Further research is needed on the impact of distributing leadership to teachers and students in transformational initiatives designed to enhance climate, collaboration, and community; and how this impact, in turn, effects workforce development. A finding in this study is that in schools where students are part of the shared leadership for the implementation of a professional development initiative about school climate, collaboration, and community the depth of implementation is improved. Furthermore, when teachers view the principal and team leaders as learners alongside them the depth of implementation increases. This supports the notion that holistic professional learning, where teachers and principals learn together, will spur changes

leading to enhanced student outcomes (Crowther, 2009). Additional research is needed that examines other professional development initiatives to see if similar findings result regarding the depths of implementation when school-based leadership teams include students. This is particularly important to gaining support and monitoring the implementation.

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