Revitalizing Student Leadership Programs: A Study of Challenges and Strategies in an International School Setting.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effectiveness of a student leadership program implemented as a student life department in an international school. This study identifies the difficulties students face while working and proposes strategies to improve the existing program. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This study identified various work issues in different departments that may contribute to the program's effectiveness in schools. This study proposes measures to reform the program, mainly in terms of improving recruitment and training systems to overcome difficulties. The study suggests incorporating an official promotion campaign to encourage more students to join the program, improve the recruitment policy and training courses, and provide practical support for students' interactions with staff members. The study also highlights the need for a strong training system to prepare students for leadership roles and produce more effective leaders who are molded by the program. The proposed measures aim to produce more effective future leaders molded by the program, benefiting a larger student body than the currently small percentage who take part.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, demand for leadership programs within educational institutions has witnessed significant growth, mirroring the dynamic landscape of the global educational system. A comprehensive study conducted by Google for Education, in partnership with the research entity Canvas spanning 24 countries, underscored the importance of enhancing learning environments, empowering educators with data, and reassessing student progress (Google for Education, 2023). Simultaneously, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) initiated the "The Future of Education and Skills 2030" project, seeking answers to pivotal questions about education. This initiative aims to equip learners with the agency, purpose, and competencies required to shape their lives and meaningfully contribute to the lives of others (OECD, 2018).

The urgency for educational reform is evident in a world in which the acquisition of new knowledge consistently supersedes outdated information (James et al., 2007). Acknowledging this need, the United Kingdom established a specialized center dedicated to researching learning for the broader benefits of education (James et al., 2007). In an interconnected world, individuals and communities must engage in continual learning, apply acquired knowledge, and generate new insights to make informed decisions (James & McCormick, 2009). It is becoming increasingly clear that schools must adapt swiftly to keep pace with

the evolving global landscape (Dempster, 2009).

As argued by Mac Beath and Dempster (2008), education transcends conventional classrooms and academic knowledge, encompassing the entire environment and students' interactions with their surroundings. Learning is a nuanced process shaped by personal experiences, as emphasized by Egan (1997), who posited that individuals continually revisit their ways of knowing and construct layers of understanding based on their unique experiences.

Student leadership programs have emerged as vital contributors to the development of essential skills such as empathy, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration among students. These programs, often involving student councils, project-based learning, and initiatives to prepare students for future leadership roles, are designed to cultivate a positive school culture by imparting self-leadership and integrity, potentially influencing students' personal and professional trajectories (Lee & Walker, 2018). Notably, programs like the Kosovo Transformational Leadership Program go beyond the school setting, aiming to train a new generation of leaders capable of driving significant changes in economic, political, and social priority areas (Cheng et al., 2022).

As the educational landscape evolves, it becomes imperative for schools to reassess and adapt their approach. The primary objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of the existing leadership program and discern the underlying reasons for the declining participation of students. This research was approached through qualitative data by conducting interviews with stakeholders who have direct interactions with the student leadership departmentin various school departments. This study focuses on three central questions.

1. How do students perceive the leadership program provided in Student Life?
2. What are the challenges faced by the students participating in the program?
3. What roles do school leaders play in supporting and motivating students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution of educational institutions and their approaches to leadership and learning has undergone a significant historical transformation. This literature review explores the intricate connections between leadership, learning, and educational communities. In an era marked by rapid changes, understanding the dynamics of leadership within schools is crucial for enhancing students' learning experiences and achieving positive outcomes. This review critically examines the existing literature on leadership for learning, emphasizing the importance of shared moral purposes, agency, and the impact of leadership practices on students.

The landscape of educational leadership and learning has undergone substantial changes, with recent research and initiatives emphasizing the crucial role of leadership in educational organizations. The OECD's "Leadership for 21st Century Learning" Initiative, for instance, underscores the importance of setting direction and taking responsibility for facilitating learning through distributed, connected efforts (OECD, 2023). The Wallace Foundation also emphasizes the critical impact of leadership practices on learning outcomes, highlighting historical neglect and a lack of public funding for educational leadership (Wallace Foundation, 2023).

The Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL) system serves as a school-wide leadership assessment and feedback mechanism designed to support professional growth and school improvement. It emphasizes the significance of leadership practices, policies, and programs known to enhance school quality, aligning with the Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement framework

(Leadership for Learning, 2023).

The Leadership for Learning (LfL) principles outlined by the University of Cambridge stress maintaining a focus on learning as a shared activity, creating conducive learning conditions, sharing leadership, and fostering shared accountability (University of Cambridge, 2023). These principles highlight the importance of leadership practices that enhance learning experiences and drive positive student outcomes.

Phillips et al. (2023) found that undergraduate students' perceptions of leadership development programmes positively predicted their leadership self-efficacy. Another study by Dial (2006) explored how the Leadership programme shaped students' leadership experiences, revealing an initial understanding of leadership from a positional perspective. Murage et al. (2019) identified challenges faced by student leaders in managing student affairs in public universities in Kenya, emphasizing conflicts between academic pursuits and leadership roles, lack of teamwork, and student ignorance of university policies.

Day and Sammons (2014) emphasized the key role of school leaders, particularly principals, in setting directions, creating a positive school culture, and supporting staff motivation. Effective school leadership, encompassing instructional/pedagogical and transformational leadership, was identified as crucial, but insufficient in isolation.

Goleman and Menkes (2014) and Maccoby (2017) highlighted the significant impact of leadership initiatives on the classroom environment, broader school policies, student learning outcomes, and overall educational environment. Effective leadership practices, such as modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart, contribute to positive learning experiences.

"Leadership for learning" is described as a distinct form of educational practice guided by moral purposes, emphasizing a focus on learning, fostering conducive conditions, and embracing shared and accountable leadership. Leadership practices play a vital role in motivating students, facilitating professional development, fostering trust among colleagues, and improving driving (Nye 2012).

The Student Life Department (SLD) provides a unique context for students to assume leadership roles in the school community. This student-led community encourages shared leadership, the development of social and academic skills, and the cultivation of a strong moral purpose, benefiting both student leaders and the broader school community (Taysum& Iqbal, 2012).

The historical transformation of educational institutions emphasizes the evolving landscape of leadership for learning. This highlights the importance of effective leadership practices, shared moral purpose, and their impact on students and the broader educational community. The integration of diverse studies and initiatives contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between leadership and learning in educational settings.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study aimed to explore the effectiveness of a leadership program and to identify barriers that may demotivate students, leading them to leave the program. Additionally, this study sought to comprehend the perspectives of stakeholders and staff from other departments regarding how to motivate students and facilitate their engagement within learning communities.

The research paradigm chosen for this study primarily embraces inter pretivism, focusing on understanding human behavior as meaningful and interpretable. The researcher, in the role of a Student Life Leader (SLL),

had a unique vantage point connecting them with various school departments, facilitating the evaluation of participants' behavior within their societal context. This approach primarily involved collecting qualitative data to gain insight into the current situation.

Data collection predominantly consisted of semi-structured interviews specifically designed to elicit in-depth qualitative information. The interviews were conducted with the participants, and the responses were recorded for subsequent analyses. Participants were given assurances regarding the confidentiality of the recorded interviews, fostering an environment conducive to open and honest communication.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the findings for RQ1 focused on how students perceived the effectiveness of the leadership programme.

The purpose of the program was to teach students responsibility and equip them with the skills they need to be capable of doing things on their own and standing up for themselves.

RP3 asserted that teaching students' responsibility and giving them the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them will make them better prepared for life and help them build up a personality that will continue in the future. RP2 emphasized the necessity of having leadership programmes in schools to expose and train students to make the best choices. RP1 stressed the value of the students' work and the importance of having academic support within the leadership program in school. The interaction of student life department with other students benefits both parties, and leadership in this interaction is the central thread for learning. RP3 explained that staff support is important for enhancing students' self-confidence and self-esteem when they are given responsibilities. The most important outcome of such communities is to enhance the Emotional Quotient (EQ), where the most successful individuals are those who have a high level of EQ rather than intelligence quotient (IQ) The analysis also highlighted the difficulties students faced in the program, such as the lack of proper training and support. RP2 emphasized the importance of staff members' interaction with and the need to change their mentality to believe in students' abilities. RP3 explained how the impact of student leaders is very important in keeping their team motivated and up to their tasks. Overall, the analysis showed that the leadership program is perceived as effective in teaching responsibility and equipping students with the skills they need to be capable of doing things on their own and standing up for themselves. However, there are areas that need improvement, such as the lack of proper training and support and the need to change staff members' mentality to believe in students' abilities. The analysis of the findings for RQ1 reveals a consistent theme aligning with the literature's emphasis on the impact of leadership initiatives on students. Phillips et al. (2023) and Dial (2006) identified positive outcomes of leadership development programs on students' self-efficacy and initial perspectives of leadership. These findings resonate with our results, which emphasize the effectiveness of the leadership program in teaching responsibility and equipping students with skills for independent decision-making. The literature's emphasis on shared moral purposes and conducive learning conditions aligns with our identified themes, emphasizing the value of academic support within the leadership program.

The analysis of the findings for RQ2 focused on the reasons students dropped out of the leadership program. RP2 identified the lack of a recruitment policy and evaluation system as weaknesses in the program. RP2 stated that the lack of a clear recruitment policy leads to choosing the wrong person for the program, and the absence of an evaluation system makes it difficult to determine the status quo. RP2 emphasized the importance of collecting necessary data to apply skilled interventions and provide a clearer vision of value, goals, and what should be done. RP3 stressed the importance of staff support in enhancing students' self-confidence and self-esteem when given responsibilities. RP3 also mentioned the influence of staff members' behavior on students and the need for staff members to display consistent behavior similar to what they want

students to exhibit. RP2 provided an example of how the lack of consistency in following up from staff demotivates students. The analysis also highlighted the difficulties that students face in the program, such as the lack of proper training and support. RP2 asserted that the demotivation in joining the program at the school definitely has something to do with the weakness of informational and training sessions in producing strong leaders. RP3 confirmed that the practical part of the leadership program alone, without its theoretical part, is not sufficient to ensure the efficiency of the program. RP2 explained that meeting SLD students is extremely important to motivate students, but students do not find these meetings to be as beneficial as they would like them to help them practically. RP3 emphasized the importance of choosing the right student leaders based on their communication skills, body language, and the way they speak and function. Overall, the analysis showed that the lack of a clear recruitment policy, evaluation system, proper training, and support, as well as the influence of staff members' behavior, were the main reasons why students dropped out of the leadership program. Our results regarding the reasons for students dropping out align with the literature's discussion on the critical role of leadership programs. The lack of a clear recruitment policy and evaluation system, as identified in our study, corresponds with the literature's emphasis on the importance of leadership practices and initiatives. The gaps in the program, such as the absence of proper training and support, mirror the literature's assertion that effective leadership practices are crucial for positive outcomes. This aligns with the broader discussion on the historical neglect and lack of public funding for educational leadership (Wallace Foundation, 2023).

The analysis of the findings for RQ3 focused on what school leaders do to motivate, facilitate, and overcome obstacles that SLD students face during their work. RP3 confirmed that facilitating student work teaches students to take care of themselves and their destiny, and it teaches them to inquire when needed, increase their self-confidence and self-esteem, and help them face youth problems such as depression, peer pressure, smoking, drugs, alcohol, and sex. RP2 emphasized the importance of listening to SLD students in proposing ideas, solving problems, and leading changes in school. However, educators must stand by them and guide them because they are not exposed to the full picture. RP2 also stressed the importance of staff members' interaction with the SLD department and the need to change their mentality to believe in students' abilities. RP3 confirmed that staff support is important for enhancing students' self-confidence and self-esteem when they are given responsibilities. The RP3 also mentioned the influence of staff members' behavior on students and the need for staff members to display consistent behavior similar to what they want the students to exhibit. The RP2 gave an example of how the lack of consistency in following up from staff demotivates students. The RP3 confirmed that the practical part of the leadership program solely, without its theoretical part, is not enough in ensuring the efficiency of the program. The RP2 asserted that the demotivation in joining the program at the school definitely has something to do with the weakness of informational and training sessions in producing strong leaders. RP3 explained that staff members' presence around students during their work encourages them to approach staff when they need support. RP2 confirmed that the school policy is clear about the connection between the SLD department and the other school departments, and all staff members are guided to help and support the SLD students. However, not all staff members are convinced and believe in students' abilities in the first place. RP3 explained how the student leaders' impact is very important in keeping their team motivated and up to their tasks. RP2 asserted that the training provided to become leaders of SLD departments is limited to a handful of short sessions that are not enough. RP3 confirmed that the lack of this training might be the reason behind the low percentage of students who have been looking for support in other ways. Overall, the analysis showed that school leaders motivate, facilitate, and overcome the obstacles that SLD students face during their work by providing staff support, changing staff members' mentality, providing theoretical and practical training, and emphasizing the importance of student leaders' impact. Our findings regarding leadership strategies to motivate and facilitate align with the literature's emphasis on effective leadership practices. The positive impact of staff support, changes in staff members' mentality, and the importance of both theoretical and practical training resonate with the literature's discussion on the role of leadership in motivating students and fostering trust among colleagues (Goleman & Menkes, 2014). The importance of consistent leadership

practices is highlighted in both the literature and our findings, particularly in overcoming obstacles faced by SLD students.

CONCLUSION

A study on the effectiveness of the student leadership program in an international school revealed various challenges faced by students in the program. It emphasized the significance of leadership in educational institutions and the role of learning communities. The analysis highlighted the importance of staff support, proper training, and changing the staff mentality to believe in students' abilities. Additionally, it underscored the impact of student leaders in keeping their teams motivated. Overall, the findings indicate a clear need for improvement in recruitment policies, evaluation systems, and support for students with learning disabilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is essential to establish a clear and comprehensive recruitment policy for selecting student leaders. This policy should include criteria such as communication skills, body language, and the ability to effectively function in a leadership role. Additionally, providing thorough and ongoing training for student leaders is crucial for preparing them for their responsibilities and challenges.

Implementing an official campaign to raise awareness and encourage student participation in leadership programmes is vital. This campaign should highlight the value of leadership skills and the benefits of participating in the programme, fostering a culture of leadership within the school community.

Offering practical support for students to engage effectively with staff is essential. This support can include mentorship programs, regular check-ins, and guidance on how to effectively collaborate with staff members to achieve leadership goals.

Implementing specific support mechanisms and training for students with learning disabilities to ensure their inclusion and success in the leadership program. This can involve tailored training programs, accessibility accommodations, and dedicated support staff to assist students in their leadership roles.

It is crucial to review and revise evaluation systems to accurately assess the effectiveness of leadership programs and identify areas for improvement. This can involve implementing regular feedback mechanisms, performance evaluations, and goal-setting processes to track the progress of student leaders.

Fostering a supportive staff mentality that believes in the abilities of students is essential for the success of a leadership program. This can be achieved through staff training, awareness campaigns, and creating a culture of support and encouragement for student leaders in the school community.

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