Student Leadership Ambassadors: Effects of Leadership Distribution Using a Student-Centered Leadership Program

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Abstract

This study focuses on the understandings principals and teachers developed from four schools concerning how distributed leadership to a select group of students has affected the climate and community of their schools. Teachers and administrators identified their school climate as positively changing through the use of leadership distribution; collaboration and trust; adequate time for development; and leadership support teams. Findings suggest that student-led leadership roles within the school community have a positive impact on their own development; a positive influence on their peers; and an impact on creating a positive school-wide climate that is absent of threat.

Workforce development is rapidly changing given the recent economic conditions, globalization and advancements of technology. The United States is strategizing how best to meet these needs given what Daniel Pink (2005) describes as a movement from the information age to the conceptual age. Pink (2005) suggests that metaphorically, 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, the “right brain” skills of inventiveness, empathy, joyfulfulness and meaning, will now determine who succeeds.

Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2007) has developed a framework that represents the skills, knowledge and expertise students should master to succeed in the 21st century that align itself with Pink’s argument.

- **Core Subjects** including; language arts, world languages, mathematics, economics, geography, science, history, government and civics, global awareness, civic literacy, health literacy, financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy.
- **Innovative Skills** including; creativity, critical-thinking and problem solving skills, communication and collaboration skills.
- **Media, Information and Technology Skills** including; information literacy, media literacy, and information and communication technology.

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Life and Career Skills including; flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility.

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 leadership 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 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 by providing collaborative work time; to be an important part of the learning process; and to be open to the diffusion of leadership roles.

The same type of facilitation is true in distributing leadership roles to students for school-wide change initiatives (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). In order to increase the depth of a positive climate and culture within a school community, a distributed leadership framework that includes student-led responsibilities can prove 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 and 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 for this call by examining distributed leadership behaviors using a student-led professional development initiative and its affects on building a positive school-wide climate and community through peer to peer interactions.

The research question examined in this study is: What leadership practices were present in all four schools that positively influenced the implementation of the student-centered leadership program?
Methods

This study focuses on the understandings of 31 teachers and administrators from four schools in the Midwest concerning the process of leadership distribution and the affects this process has on school-wide climate change. The initiative used in each of the schools is entitled 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 framework and philosophy aligned with academic mastery, character building, and positive social interactions for student preparation in the workforce.

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

C.L.A.S.S. training for each school implementing the Student Leadership Ambassador Program was identical in deliveries and content. All schools began training toward the end of August 2010, just prior to the start to the 2010 school year. Data for this study were collected approximately two months after school-wide implementation of the program from each school. An online survey and interviews were used to gather data from teachers and administrators in each school.

A group of independent evaluators selected the four elementary schools used in this study from a pool of twenty-three schools implementing the Student Leadership Ambassador Program. The evaluators were expert trainers in the C.L.A.S.S. Model and identified the schools based upon similar student enrollment size, socio-economic levels and the implementation level of the Student Leadership Ambassador Program.

Findings

After implementing the Student Leadership Ambassador Program for two months, the findings from the four schools suggest that:

93% of the respondents indicated a positive growth in the climate of their school.

Respondents stated:

“Ambassadors and their peers have greater ownership in the classroom behavior. Other students remind the ambassadors to check their behavior as well. Younger students have a great respect for their ambassadors.”
“The students have taken an ownership role within the school. They feel more a part of the school family.”

*50% of the respondents indicated that there was a greater awareness and use of the Lifelines in their classroom and throughout the school building.*

Respondents stated:

“The students are much more aware of how to implement the lifelines in the classroom, and in every part of their day. The students seem to be much more receptive school wide of each others’ feelings and actions.”

“The student body uses the language of leadership commonly when referring to positive behavior and they look up to Student Ambassadors in the school as role models and leaders.”

*53% of the respondents indicated that they believed the Ambassadors had already made a significant impact upon their peers in character development.*

Respondents stated:

“I think that students have experienced the change at school because they are learning from their peers.”

“Students know that their ambassador is watching and checking on them. I think this helps keep the students doing the right thing and treating others right.”

“Staff members have indicated that their students look up to the Student Ambassadors. When they hear these positive examples coming from other students, they seem to take more notice.”

*27% of the respondents indicated they had already observed growth in the Student Ambassadors on how they communicate with others and model expected behaviors.*

Respondents stated:

“The greatest impact that I have seen is in the leaders themselves. They are learning important lessons on how to relate to each other and how to work with others in that leader role. They work hard and realize that it is not easy to be in that position.”

“The students who become ambassadors take on a positive leadership role. I see a growth in self-confidence and ability to work with others. The other children seem to respond well to the Ambassadors and help to tip the balance overall to the positive.”

“The student Ambassadors have taken responsibility for the classrooms for what they are in charge. They seem to realize the importance of modeling expected behavior and use of the Lifelines.”
“I have been amazed at how students have stepped up to the challenge of being ambassadors. I'm amazed at the way they can process the lessons, internalize what they need to present, differentiate the lesson to meet their students needs and reflect on the changes they need to make. I'm impressed with student ability to articulate why we have the ambassador initiative and how their role can affect other students. The structure of the program is set up and implemented so that students see their role as a responsibility as well as a privilege. They take their role seriously and do not look at themselves as having something other students do not have. They look at their role as a job and they work very hard to complete the tasks and to be prepared.”

23% of the respondents indicated they had already noticed an increase in parental support and involvement with the transfer of Lifelines to the home environment.

A respondent stated:

“I have seen an increase in parent support and the lessons carrying over to the home.”

Based upon the results, four key leadership practices emerged across all schools during the implementation of the student leadership program: Principals are co-learners alongside the school community; Leadership teams are critical support mechanisms; Growth and development is nurtured by providing adequate time; and leadership effectiveness is determined by how well the school community collaborates and trusts each other to allow all stakeholders, including students, to have a voice.

Principals are co-learners alongside the whole school community

Based upon the interviews, all respondents indicated that the principal’s leadership played a crucial role in the successful implementation of the student leadership program. The teachers indicated that the principal and the leadership team were co-learners along with the teachers. Survey results showed that teachers felt less threat and greater support for them to implement the initiative because they believed the principal and leadership team were participating in the professional development together.

Crowther (2009) describes this new role for the principal and members of school leadership teams as one that fosters communities of people working together so that their collective intelligence results in creation of new knowledge that enhances classroom instruction. The teachers reported that they believed the principal and the leadership team were in a collegial and supportive relationship; learning together about the initiative. They also reported that because of viewing the leaders as co-learners, they all felt stronger ownership in the implementation of the model.

Senge (1990) refers to this alignment as team learning. When a team becomes more aligned, such as through a professional development initiative with a principal acting as a co-learner, a commonality of directions emerge, and individuals’ energies harmonize. There becomes less wasted energy and a synergy is created. Also, there develops a commonality of purpose, shared vision, and an understanding of how to complement one another’s efforts. Eventually, the shared vision becomes an extension of the teachers’ personal vision.
One respondent described it this way: “Our Principal is on board 100% with C.L.A.S.S., learns with us, and encourages collaboration among our staff.”

One teacher shared: “In the past years the principal, administration and teachers were the only ones to remind the students of the Lifelines, and to do the right thing and treat people right. Now the Ambassadors have the opportunity to remind these younger students. If my students see their Ambassador in the hallway or the bathroom they try really hard to show them they know the right thing to do. They always want to talk to him and feel that they are important in that child's eyes. I love that we are giving the students a little more responsibility because I feel like they are learning more because they must teach it also. We’re working and learning together about CLASS.”

One teacher stated: “I believe that any time you can create new relationships among people that might not otherwise connect, you have a good thing. That is what this program has done. It has unified the school and created a climate of ownership by all, not just the principal or teachers.”

Regarding how students have shared in the leadership and learning, one teacher commented: “The students have begun to see the school as their own; they take pride in making it a safe place to be. This change is because they DO have more responsibilities in the building.”

Sharing leadership and learning with the students, one teacher stated: “It shows that we think children are valued as leaders and that we are a team. The more people you get involved in the goal of positive climate, the faster it will be accomplished.”

**Leadership teams are a critical support mechanism**

Each of the schools in this study had established a team of teacher leaders to aid as a support mechanism to staff members and students in facilitating the ambassador program. These leaders, some described as coaches, were identified by their peers as persons who were passionate about the student ambassador initiative and who were motivated and intrinsically inspired to lead the Student Ambassadors through the learning process. Respondents described their coaches as a significant factor in how the Student Leadership Ambassador Program was implemented throughout the school building:

“The ambassador coaches take the largest role in leading the ambassador groups; but all the teachers have an important part. Their feedback is vital to the success of the ambassadors. There is definitely a positive impact arising from this program.”

“The school's leadership team has used the students' demonstrations of the lifelines as a positive role model for other students and staff. This interaction has had a positive effect on the school climate, both students and staff are more aware of their own personal actions.”

The actions of each of the leadership teams in the schools assisted with developing other leaders, both students and staff members, who then began to work together. Reeves (2010) suggests that this type of interaction whereby 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 appreciation for helping to keep them focused and committed to the program. One respondent stated:

“Our coaches are wonderful! They really keep us on track and give us the tools to help us support the students.”

Another respondent added:

“Our entire staff works very well together. Our Support Team brings different ideas and suggestions to the staff, and they are warmly accepted.”

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

**Growth and development is nurtured using adequate time**

Consistent in all four schools was the understanding that the Student Leadership Ambassador Program is a change that will take time to build and develop. Teachers indicated that there was never a mandate or time set as a deadline for implementing a particular part of the curriculum model. The teachers frequently acknowledged that implementing any new initiative in a school brings issues of adoption rate (how fast the initiative is implemented school-wide) and adequate time for individuals to adopt the initiative. They revealed that because the principal and the leadership team worked so closely with the day-to-day issues of implementation, time was provided for teachers and students to embrace the initiative.

The dichotomy is wide in range from innovators who are described as active information seekers about new ideas and who are likely to be the first to adopt a new idea, such as the ambassador coaches in this study to what Rodgers (1995) describes as laggards who are generally suspicious of any change and are often people who need additional time for buy-in. One teacher responded: “The principal and the leadership team gave me the time I need to understand and implement C.L.A.S.S. Some colleagues did not need the time that I needed and I appreciate the supportive atmosphere at my school.”

The principal and the support team in each building worked together in establishing expectations and the support systems needed to help those who are struggling with the adoption and implementation. It was clear from the discussions with the teachers that this type of diffusion takes great patience from the principal and the team leaders. The principal must be willing to be flexible and understanding of those who are struggling while maintaining the lead on staff development expectations. Just as important was the perseverance of the leadership team members in helping those that were falling behind. One respondent commented: “Our principal and team leaders are viewed as both coaches and supporters. They reach out to us and give us individual attention as needed.”
It is important to note that although the teachers describe their school climate as one that is flexible and supportive when it comes to implementing the new initiatives, there are expectations that are agreed upon by the entire staff which hold each other accountable for their actions.

Several teachers reported that the program needs time to build success and understanding. The teachers frequently reported that students feel a great deal of ownership and pride in the school because of the good amount of time spent by student ambassadors teaching key points of the program. They also reported that in their own classrooms non-ambassador students felt like they too were Ambassadors.” One teacher stated: “One year will not do this program justice. Accumulating several years in the program will motivate younger students to strive to be in the program, have a better understanding of what ambassadors/leaders do and how they act, and the staff will have a greater understanding of how to support the Student Ambassadors. Parents and community members will also have a deeper understanding after several years and be able to make more connections and support the students.”

*Leadership effectiveness is determined by how well the school community collaborates and trusts each other*

Consistent across all schools was the value their staff described as a team who trusted each other and worked together to make the program a success. One respondent described it like this:

“It takes a great deal of collaboration and trust, an amazing staff, a supportive Principal, an involved support team, ambassadors willing to learn and grow, and a patient, caring, and amazing ambassador coach.”

Trust, if developed and leveraged, can have a significant impact in creating success and prosperity in all dimensions of the organization (Covey, 2006). 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. In this study, many of the respondents described this collaborative effort as having a positive impact upon the diffusion of the program. Some respondents described it like this:

“The ambassadors seem to be more confident in their own work and really take pride in the work with their ambassador classroom. I think that this change has been caused by the close relationship between the staff and the ambassadors working together to make this program a success.”

“There has been a great deal of collaboration on the part of Ambassador coaches, ambassadors, as well as classroom teachers to implement the program effectively. There has also been a lot of
flexibility on the part of the classroom teachers. I believe the leadership of the staff has helped to make the Ambassador Program a successful one.”

In building staff trust and collaboration, leadership must be willing to help and enable the staff to find their individual ways without stigmatizing them (Fullan, 2008). Several respondents indicated the importance of their principal’s use of leadership during this implementation process. Consistent across schools was the principal’s openness to distribute leadership roles and allow the opportunity for staff and students to gain ownership of the program and be a part of the decision-making process. These actions enabled strong commitment levels from staff members. Respondents described it this way:

“The greatest impact had come from staff buy in and commitment to the program and embedding the lifeline language in everything they do.”

“It has allowed staff buy-in to the program and commitment and understanding not only the logistics of what needs to happen monthly, but also a commitment to the importance of the purpose of the program.”

Discussion

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 climate (Bell, Bolam, and Cubillom, 2003). This study demonstrates the impact students can have on the implementation of a professional development model when school leaders invite them to participate in leading the initiative.

It is imperative that schools create opportunities for school leaders and school leadership teams to work together, united 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. 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 professional learning-centered community (that may include students), engages in school-wide professional development and, at the same time, works 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 and culture. This study reveals what
previous 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).

Research on shared decision-making in schools has identified barriers preventing decision-making that focuses on pedagogy and quality instruction (Griffin, 1995). This is due mostly to 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. This study, however, demonstrates that when teachers view their principal as a member of a school-based leadership team whose purpose is to support and monitor the initiative, provide adequate time to implement the initiative, and engage students in leadership regarding the initiative, the depth of implementation of the initiative will be dramatically increased.

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 is increased (Pedersen et al., 2010).

Further research is needed in the area of how leadership is distributed and the impact it has on the implementation of professional development initiatives. A finding in this study was that in schools where students are part of the shared leadership for the implementation of a professional development initiative, the depth of implementation is improved. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the teachers viewed the principal and team leaders as learners alongside them. 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, which include students, are prepared to support and monitor the implementation.

References


