

# **Creating a Positive and Effective School-Wide Learning Environment: The Effects of a Student Leadership Development Program on Twenty-Two Middle School Students**

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## **Abstract**

This mixed methods study investigates 22 middle school students' understandings of leadership distribution, the process of leadership development, and the affects this process has on school-wide climate and personal growth. The study was conducted as a follow-up to the implementation of a student leadership program that focused on personal and school-wide leadership development. All students in this study had participated as Leadership Ambassadors in the program and were two years removed from the school where the program was implemented.

Key findings suggest that: 1) the student ambassador program had a positive impact on the respondents' personal development; 2) learned leadership skills contributed to academic success at the middle school level; and 3) leadership development opportunities should be extended to the middle school for continued personal growth. Based upon the results, four key leadership practices emerged that created a positive and effective school-wide learning environment: 1) distributed leadership among all school stakeholders is necessary for positive change to occur; 2) meaningful content and instructional deliveries are critical support mechanisms; 3) leadership development is nurtured by providing adequate time and coherency in support and instruction; and 4) leadership effectiveness is determined by how well the school community builds relationships, collaborates, and trusts one another.

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## Introduction

When Friedman and Mandelbaum (2011) asked four different types of employers (high-end white collar, low-end white collar, blue collar, and the Army) what they were looking for in an employee, they all said the same thing: people who add value by solving old and new problems in new ways. In other words, the workforce must be creative and innovative. Additionally, employees and employers continue to invent and reinvent the work environment and associated jobs each and every day. One of the areas of inventing and reinventing focuses on the constant struggle between the American economy's desire to increase productivity and the desire to maintain blue-collar and white-collar jobs. Since many of the middle jobs have been eliminated, there's no place for the ill-prepared workers to go. Employers now have access not only to cheap labor, but also cheap genius.

Schools have a major role to play in preparing the American workforce (Abeles, 2015). Because of this schools must focus on communication, collaboration, and creativity. As the world has moved from the information age to the conceptual age, Daniel Pink (2011) explained that students need different skills to adapt and be productive members of the new workforce.

Thomas Friedman (2016) in his book, *Thank You for Being Late*, suggests that we've moved from a merely connected world to a hyper-connected world where technology doubles every two years. Technology is also impacting in our schools in numerous ways. Students are coming to school with vast experiences with technology. Educators are being pushed to use technology for assessment purposes and personalized and blended learning and districts are struggling to stay abreast of rapidly changing technology. According to Burrell, Hoffman, and Murray (2005) for school leaders, "the critical key is developing a vision and culture of technology-enhanced learner-centeredness focused on student voices, values, and personal visions leading to higher levels of student engagement and responsibility for their own learning and leadership" (p. 114). Schools must transform from a factory-based model to one where technology is used as a tool to personalize learning.

Part of this transformation must be in the distribution of leadership. School leaders need to focus on developing other leaders because principals cannot make the needed transformation alone. To be successful, the use of teacher leaders is essential (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002). By embracing teacher and even student leadership, the role of the principal is not reduced, but instead enhances the effectiveness of the schools (Henderson, Henry, Saks, & Wright, 2001). Spillane (2006) wrote that "in distributing leadership, the division of labor can be shared at the student level" (p. 33). Spillane is not alone in believing that students need to be involved in the leadership of school. Shoho, Barnett, and Toom (2010) noted that "sharing leadership with students is critical" (p. 41) and Hattie (2009) suggested that as educators we need to "bring out the leadership from within each student" (p. 60).

Not only must formal leaders such as principals distribute leadership responsibilities to teachers, teachers must include everyone in the classroom in leadership (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008, p. 90). According to Armstrong (1998), "...students have wonderful gifts to share but who may never be recognized by anyone unless they are given the opportunity to lead" (p. 51). These opportunities to lead must be developed and nurtured in the classroom through relationships (White, 2009, p. 183), a collaborative goal-setting process, and support for leadership instruction and practice (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 74). According to Steven Farr (2010), students must have opportunities to learning leadership skills and have classroom-based leadership opportunities in the classroom (p. 43).

## Methods

This mixed methods study investigates 22 middle school students' understandings of leadership distribution, the process of leadership development, and the affects this process has on changing school-wide climate and students' personal growth. The school-wide initiative used in this study is a comprehensive student leadership development program entitled "The Student Leadership Ambassador Program" created by Connecting Learning Assures Successful Students (C.L.A.S.S. Education), a non-profit organization located in the Midwest. The C.L.A.S.S. Model is a framework and philosophy aligned with effective learning environments including academics and social development.

The Student Leadership Ambassador Program is designed to distribute school leadership to student ambassadors. Student ambassadors are a select group of upper-grade level students within a school that systematically influence and challenge their peers to create a positive and effective learning environment. Each of the students in this study had attended an elementary school that implemented the Student Leadership Ambassador Program and had served two years as student ambassadors. In particular, this elementary school was one of seven elementary schools in the school district, all of which feed into one middle school. Furthermore, this elementary school was the only school in the district that participated in the Student Leadership Ambassador Program.

Data for this study were collected approximately two years after the participants had completed their elementary education. At the time of data collection, the subjects (12 females and 10 males) were current seventh grade middle school students.

Data collection began with an online survey that was administered to the student participants by the school district administration's office. A follow-up visit by the researchers was conducted at the middle school to facilitate face-to-face focus group interviews with the students in a round table discussions format. Two focus groups were conducted with 11 students in each group.

## Findings

The study was conducted as a follow-up to the initial School Leadership Ambassador training that focused on personal and school-wide leadership development. The students were two years removed from the training. Key findings suggest:

1. A positive impact on the respondents' personal development.
2. Learned leadership skills contributed to academic success at the middle school level.
3. Participants would like to see the program extended to the middle school.

### Positive Impact on Personal Development

Based on the survey data and the focus group interviews, 100% of the respondents indicated a positive impact on their personal development in becoming a productive student and citizen of the community through the experience of the Student Leadership Ambassador Program. Of those respondents, 41% indicated a very positive impact. Respondents stated:

"I have become better as a person because I worked through fears, set goals, and helped make

an impact with my existing friends, new friends that I made, and the community around me. Throughout the days that we were there, I became more aware of how I made an impression on my siblings, parents, friends, and also how their actions impacted me. I learned responsibility, integrity, leadership, respect, courage, and so many more life skills.”

“My ability to speak in front of my classmates has improved dramatically as a result of the Student Leadership Ambassador program. I use the lifelines on a daily basis.”

“When no one is looking or watching, you still have to do the right thing. I also learned that if you want people to treat you nice, you have to do the same. Finally, I learned that you should speak up when people are hurt or are getting picked on.”

“How to get along with other people that I might have never related to. Learning how to talk in front of large groups of people”

“Don't be afraid to do things you are scared to do; Be respectful to everyone you meet; And teach people what they could do to make the world better.”

“This experience has made me become a better person because I got to teach younger children to become their very best that they could and to not give up.”

### **Learned Leadership Skills Contributed to Middle School Academic Success**

The second key finding was that 88% of the respondents indicated that the leadership skills learned in the Student Leadership Ambassador Program contributed to their current academic success in middle school. According to respondents:

“Being an Ambassador transitioned me from being guided by my teacher to helping me be more independent.”

“My time as an Ambassador helped me get to know people easier and helped with my confidence and to care about my grades.”

“I have helped tutor students and I am more aware of kids who are struggling.”

“I have used my leadership skills from the Ambassador Program to help others in middle school when they do not understand content.”

“A lot of times you have a group of people that has to work together in class and one person needs to step up and explain and speak up for the group. Even though it is hard, I try to step up and be that person and help others.”

### **Continue the Ambassador Program at the Middle School**

The third finding was that respondents indicated they would like to see the Ambassador

Program they experienced at their elementary school be extended to the middle school and was noted by 53% of the student ambassadors. Respondents who were in favor of extending the program into the middle school stated:

“This program could teach students that weren't able to be an ambassador life skills and then go on and help other people in the community and around the world. I believe that a lot of people would benefit from this involvement and be able to use it in their everyday life. It would be a heartwarming thing to see, and I think many students, and possibly teachers or parents, would enjoy the program.”

“I think as kids mature it can be even more helpful and there are more issues that need to be addressed by students in middle school and high school.”

“I think even more kids should be able to experience the effects of the ambassador program as these skills will help all students in all aspects of life.”

However, not all respondents were in favor of extending the same program they had experienced in elementary school. They stated:

“This question for me would be considered as ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ I could see it working at the middle school in certain areas, but some things would need to be changed in my opinion.”

“At the middle school and high school level students wouldn't take fellow students seriously if they try and teach them the pride skills.”

One respondent had an alternative perspective by stating:

“When in elementary school, you are young and it is a good time to learn skills such as leadership. Although the program was great, it would only have the positive impact on younger children, not old ones who have already decided on morals and how they live life.”

### **Changing the School Climate**

In addition to the focus group responses, students were asked to rate their middle school climate on a scale from one to ten (1 = very poor; 10 = excellent) on how well they believe their school community including students, teachers, and administration treat people right and do the right thing. The mean score was 2.29 on a 10-point scale ( $SD = .95$ ).

The students were prompted to reflect upon their leadership training and discuss how they would approach changing their current school climate. Based upon the results, four key leadership practices emerged from the students' reflection on creating a positive and effective school-wide learning environment:

1. Distributed leadership among all school stakeholders is necessary for positive change to occur;
2. Meaningful content and instructional deliveries are critical support mechanisms;

3. Leadership development is nurtured by providing adequate time along with coherency in support and instruction; and
4. Leadership effectiveness is determined by how well the school community builds relationships, collaborates, and trusts each other.

Each will be discussed in turn.

**Distributed leadership among all school stakeholders is necessary for positive change to occur.** Recent studies suggest that the advancement of social skills in schools have a long-term effect on student development. Researchers examined kindergarten teachers' ratings of their student's social skills (e.g. kindness, sharing, and empathy) and discovered a strong correlation to adult outcomes such as higher educational attainment, stronger employment, and better mental health, in addition to reduced criminal activity and substance use and abuse (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015). Furthermore, researchers studied the economic impact of six social emotional learning programs and found that on average, every dollar invested yields eleven dollars in long-term benefits, ranging from reduced juvenile crime, higher lifetime earnings, and better mental and physical health (Belfield et al., 2015).

Distributing leadership roles among the school community and teaching these types of social skills have attributed to success in creating a positive climate and personal leadership development (Pedersen, S. Yager, & Yager, 2010). Based upon the student round table focus groups, all of the respondents indicated that a distribution of leadership including the principal, teachers, and students played a critical role in disseminating and teaching social skills to the student body during their time at elementary school.

When teachers distribute leadership, provide student autonomy within their classroom, and relinquish control of behavior to the students, student engagement levels are likely to increase as a result (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004). One study participant described their experience as a student leader this way:

“As a Student Leadership Ambassador, I learned to gain respect for others, to lead others to do the right thing, and to stand up for what's right.” Another student stated, “I learned how to lead others, developed good social skills, and learned how to discuss issues with peers.”

When asked if distributed leadership in the middle school would be effective in creating a positive climate, the majority of the respondents said “Yes.” The student ambassador participants stated that,

“Students should be the one who steps up because we are the problem. If it comes only from the teacher, they say it all the time so you are kind of numb to it. But if it comes from a student, it has a different meaning. It means a lot more.”

“I think students and teachers should work together on it.”

“In middle school it would look different. The popular kids in the upper grades, especially 8th grade, could be helpful. The 6th graders would follow and respect them.”

When asked who else should be involved in creating a positive climate, students responded with

several suggestions: 1) a guest speaker, 2) a celebrity, 3) “I think it would be good if we had something where students shared about success and about being strong in character. A way to share with others,” and 4) “I think if a student our age came in and talked about treating people right, they would pay attention.”

**Meaningful content and instructional deliveries are critical support mechanisms.** It is imperative that students are engaged in meaningful content through relevant activities. Research indicates that if students do not consider a lesson worthy of their time and effort, they might not engage in a satisfactory way, or may even disengage entirely in response (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

In creating a positive and effective school environment, students must be immersed in content and exercises that are relative to them. When asked to describe their current middle school’s content and lessons connected to behavioral expectations and creating a positive school-wide climate, the respondents described it this way:

“We have the 5 points of pride... but we don’t do that anymore.”

“Teachers give out tickets. Then that stopped.”

“Then you could get a chance to win 5 dollars. I won it then I got burned. They didn’t even give me the 5 bucks.”

When prompted if they were still doing tickets, the respondent stated: “Yes, sort of. Well, no not really. I’m not sure. Well, some are and some aren’t. Not really sure.” Another respondent followed up by stating: “It doesn’t work anyway. It’s kind of a joke.”

According to Anderman and Patrick (2012), students’ mastery orientation versus their performance orientation can have a significant impact on their level of engagement. When students pursue an activity because they want to learn and understand (i.e. mastery orientations), rather than merely obtain a good grade, please their parents, or outperform peers (i.e. performance orientations), their engagement is more likely to be full and thorough.

When asked to reflect on their experience at their elementary school compared to their current middle school regarding meaningful content and experiences, the students replied this way:

“I remember at the elementary school, my teachers would put a lot of things in about leadership and say things connected to stuff like sports. But in here it is just more criteria. Nothing really about being a better person.”

“And the teachers that do it, it almost feels like they are forced to do it. That they really don’t want to.”

“It just seemed that the teachers at our elementary school were always putting things in about being a successful person, like integrity and not to give up, perseverance, but here there is nothing like that. It just seems like that stuff isn’t important here.”

When following up with two of the students during the round table focus groups on what kind of changes they would immediately make to the content and lessons at their middle school, they responded: “I would educate the students about character and what to say to other people and what happens when you say something hurtful” and “Get people to understand to watch their words... think twice before saying something. It could hurt others.”

**Leadership development is nurtured by providing adequate time along with coherency in support and instruction.** Implementing any new initiative in a school system brings challenges related to the adoption rate, coherency, and adequate time for individuals to adopt the initiative (Pedersen et al., 2010). A dichotomy occurs due to the wide range of perspectives on any new initiative from active information seekers who are likely to be the first to adopt a new idea, to what Rogers (1995) describes as laggards who are generally suspicious of the change and who need additional time for buy-in.

It was clear from the student round table discussions that adequate time and coherency was necessary in changing the climate and teaching others how to grow as leaders in the school. Respondents described it like this:

“Back at our elementary school, I remember always walking in and there was a morning message with life goals and lifelines. Yes, they really focused on it. It was really consistent every day.”

“It doesn’t happen overnight. It takes a lot of time to get people to start to act like leaders.”

“I know sometimes we would get frustrated that the other students in school wouldn’t be working as hard as they should, but as ambassadors we kept helping them and supporting them. Finally, they would start to do better.”

Rogers (1995) describes this type of support as *opinion leadership* defined as the degree to which an individual is able to influence other individuals’ overt behaviors or attitudes informally with relative frequency. The actions of each of the opinion leaders, in this case student leaders and to some degree, their teachers, were able to develop other student ambassador leaders, who then began to work together. This type of continual growth and collaborative effort culminates in 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 the school community members act within the vision of the expected change.

When asked during the student round table focus groups how they think this process would look in their middle school knowing it takes time and coherency, respondents stated:

“If you stop someone and say watch what you say... some, not all, but some would take it the wrong way. Some won’t listen and they will come back on you and say that’s your opinion...but I think if you do that enough, that it will slowly start to change.”

**Leadership effectiveness is determined by how well the school community builds relationships, collaborates, and trusts each other.** Based on an aggregated Search Institute sample of 148,189 middle school and high school students surveyed from 202 cities in 27 states, 29% indicated that their school provided an encouraging, caring learning environment (Benson,



2006). Students in this study expressed similar viewpoints as their counterparts across the country. One respondent described it this way: “There are a lot of teachers who don’t have respect from students.” Another respondent followed up with this remark: “All the way from kindergarten to middle school, there is less respect. The older the people get, they have less respect for teachers.”

High-quality teacher-student relationships are a significant factor in increasing student engagement, especially in the cases of difficult students and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Fredricks, 2014). Without these relationships, the success of creating a positive climate decreases that are attributed to lower levels of trust within the school community and higher rates of behavioral misconduct, including bullying. Respondents expressed their school environment like this:

“Because people think that when you get in middle school you get tough. When you get into middle school, there are harder problems to deal with.”

“Knowing older kids can really help, because they have your back in case you get in trouble. If you didn’t have these relationships, you could get bullied because you don’t have anyone that will have your back.”

Covey (2006) suggests that trust is one thing that is common in every relationship, team and organization that if developed and leveraged, can have a potential impact to create unparalleled success and prosperity in every dimension of life. When students form caring, positive peer relationships and similar relationships with adults such as teachers who respect and like them, they are fulfilling, in part, their developmental need for a connection with others and a sense of belonging in society (Scales, 1991). Furthermore, when students work effectively with others, their engagement may be amplified as a result (Wentzel, 2009), due in part by experiencing a connection to others during the activities (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Students in this study described the need for better relationships within their school this way:

“If the whole school got together and shared their experiences that would be powerful.”

“Yes, that would be really cool.”

“I feel like if we did that here, things would be different.”

“So, there are a lot of people who didn’t go to our elementary school so they didn’t get that experience. If everyone had the understanding that we had of the life goals, then things would be a lot different at this school.”

Safe and orderly environments that encourage and reinforce positive classroom behavior have been identified by research as one of the necessary conditions for academic achievement (Marzano, 2003). It was clear from the student round table focus groups that relationships between teacher-student and student-student were necessary and a priority for positive climate change.

## Discussion

In *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell (2000) writes about the tipping point which is often seen as “one dramatic moment where everything can change all at once” (p. 9). However, Gladwell builds the case that the “one dramatic moment” is really all the small moments that build up to the tipping point. This concept of the tipping point and the actions leading up to the “dramatic” event apply to school leadership and in particular the distribution of leadership.

The research is clear that “shared leadership is a challenge for many principals, but that shared leadership provides a basis for the development of ongoing, broad, inclusive leadership of all in the school--faculty, staff, and students” (Lindstrom & Speck, 2004, p. 81). When school principals are able to share leadership responsibilities, they take an important first step in getting to the tipping point. Carol Dweck (2008) encourages school leaders to “develop the [leadership] ability [of others] and watch the leaders emerge” (p. 142). She would refer to this as developing a leadership mindset. This mindset becomes the way of doing business for all those in the school, students included. Spillane and Diamond (2007) wrote that “even those with no formally designated leadership positions, could be engaged in the work of leading and managing” (p. 151). According to Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, schools should distribute leadership throughout the school including the students (2005, p. 101). In his book *What Matters Most for School Leaders*, Robert Ramsey wrote that “Every child gets a chance...[to] share the leadership” (2005, p. 19).

In order for students to become school leaders, “teachers must model and embed leadership skills and opportunities into their content lesson” (Danielson, 1996, p. 27). Developing leaders whether they be the adults in a school or the students, doesn’t just happen. George Barna in his book, *Master Leaders*, wrote that “selecting and growing leaders is an art. Student leader peers encourage others to be leaders” (2014, p. 54).

If schools are going to engage students in sharing leadership within classrooms and across classrooms, learning structures that allow for the development of deep leadership skills for principals, teachers, and students need to be part of the daily business (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). For students, this means embedding leadership content, skills, and opportunities to practice (Danielson, 1996). The result will be students leading their peers, modeling leadership, building a depth of understanding of what it means to be a leader, and demonstrating leadership in their daily actions. In reflecting on the voices of our participants, leadership of these various types of practices was discussed:

- Doing the right thing: “When no one is watching, you still have to do the right thing.”
- Standing up for others: “You should speak up when people are hurt or getting picked on.”
- Talking in front of a large crowd.
- Not being afraid to do things you are scared of.
- Being respectful to everyone you meet.
- Teaching people what they can do to make the world better.
- Being independent.
- Helping others.
- Working collaboratively.
- Showing and gaining respect.
- Discussing important items with peers.

- Setting life goals.
- Developing trust.
- Building relationships.

The result of training student leaders and utilizing them to teach leadership skills will as Daniel Pink describes in *Drive* create a school where “students refer to their school as ours, not theirs” and a school where the “talk is about we and our place” (2011, p. 157). The 22 student ambassadors in the Student Leadership Ambassador Program have not only learned about leadership skills, but become C.L.A.S.S. act leaders.

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