

## The Role of School in Fostering Leadership Skills

*Shaikah Al-Taneiji and Omar M. Khasawneh \**

### ABSTRACT

Identifying potential leaders is essential, but developing their skills and their abilities is more imperative as societies face social and technological challenges. This study explores the role schools play in helping students, who are members of the school council; develop their leadership skills in order to reach their full potential as future leaders. The research sample consisted of seventeen participants who were student council members from Al-Ain educational district in the United Arab Emirates. The two researchers interviewed the participants - eight males and nine females - during the spring semester of the academic year 2005/2006. The participants reported that their teachers, peers, and school administrators played a significant role in enhancing their leadership skills. The findings of this research emphasize the need for schools to maintain nurturing relationships and caring environments in order to foster leadership skills in students.

**KEYWORDS:** Leadership Skills, The Role of School.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Increasing attention has been paid to improving the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) educational system since the formation of the Federal Government 36 years ago. In order to sustain development, UAE leaders have emphasized the need to educate generations who are capable of sustaining and leading the development of the Country in a competitive global environment. A school is regarded as a community institution with a key role in identifying and preparing leaders for later community leadership roles.

Leaders are made from experience, having great mentors, and engaging in different tasks (Abell, 2005). Therefore, it is important that students have the circumstances necessary to help them to develop and use their leadership skills (Smyth, 2006). Schools can play a vital role in providing students with opportunities to identify their abilities and develop leadership skills at an early age (Hung, 2005).

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), each school has a student council, which consists of a president, a vice president, a secretary, a treasurer, and a social committee chairperson. Committees are convened to represent

science and education, fine arts, and sports. The school social worker usually selects committee members. Students with confidence, social abilities, and active involvement in school activities, such as sports and arts, are selected to contribute to meetings. One representative from each student council is selected to an educational district student council, which meets twice a month. The goals of the district councils are to motivate students to serve their communities, prepare them for their future roles, meet student needs, develop student skills and talents, and prepare students to be collaborative, independent, responsible, and problem solvers (Ministry of Education, 1997).

Student council members are required to coordinate and follow up on student council activities, coordinate with community organizations to support the district council, coordinate and organize parent/teacher association activities, coordinate with other district student council activities, and help address students' problems (Ministry of Education, 1997).

### Statement of the Problem

There has been little or no research into ways in which schools in the UAE can help students in general and council members in particular to be leaders. The purpose of this study is to explore the role schools play in fostering leadership skills in students who are members of school councils.

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\* Educational Foundations, College of Education, United Arab Emirates University, Al-Ain, UAE; and Educational Administration and Foundations, College of Education, Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan. Received on 31/5/2007 and Accepted for Publication on 23/1/2008.

### **Significance of the Study**

The results of the study are expected to contribute to the literature on students' leadership skills. The study would also provide some recommendations for school principals and teachers to help them foster students' leadership skills.

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Schools are not responsible for simply delivering curricula; they are also responsible for providing students with learning experiences that promote their leadership skills. School conditions play a vital role in fostering leadership skills in students. The school principal is considered a key element in creating schools that foster leadership skills in youngsters. Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) surveyed 1,762 teachers and 9,941 students in a Canadian school district to explore the effects of principal and teacher leadership on student involvement in schools. They found that the principal had a greater effect than teachers did on student engagement.

The principal is the one who is responsible for providing an organizational culture that meets students' needs, building positive relationships between teachers and students, and creating a learning community where everyone in the school works towards shared goals (Michelle, 2005). Schools can promote leadership skills by motivating students to do their best and by giving them different opportunities to learn how to be leaders. Schools may offer leadership training through assigning pupils as class monitors, school club leaders or activity coordinators. At all times, school administrators and teachers should be role models before their students.

The school principal creates conditions that play a vital role in fostering students' talents and skills. School conditions are defined as purposes and goals, school structure and social networks, people, and organizational culture (Hallinger and Heck, 1998). Further, Osberg, Pope, and Galloway (2006) found that engaging students in school reform by identifying school problems and designing and implementing reform helps these students become future leaders as they take responsibility for making changes.

In order to have an effective teaching and learning experiences for students, a school needs to provide a clear vision to encourage students to participate in decision-making and to share experiences, and maintain a caring culture where students' needs are recognized (Glover and

Law, 2004). The classroom climate also contributes to enrich secondary students' leadership skills. A classroom climate includes the physical and material resources available, the teacher's attitude, peers' attitudes, and rules and regulations that facilitate or obstruct learning processes (Mehndiratta, 2005).

The nature of the relationship between teachers and students is very essential to develop students' personalities. For instance, Leren (2006) noted that a healthy relationship between teachers and students is imperative in order to have an environment that is conducive to learning. Barbuto (2000) recommended two types of teacher leadership that help students grow transformational leadership and servant leadership. A transformational leadership style fosters students' desires to be self-motivated, to want to improve themselves, and to face challenges. Servant leadership is based on principles and moral issues, influencing behavior and fostering students' independence. Further, Torney-Purta (2002) administrated a survey to 90, 000 14 year-old students from 28 countries, and it was found that having an open classroom climate and giving students the chance to discuss different issues in the classrooms fostered their civic engagement.

Strong leadership promotes not only teacher recruitment and retention, parent and community involvement, but also student engagement. Leadership is acquired most effectively through practice parents, and educators are able to make a difference in the lives of students provided that they are given the opportunities to realize their leadership potential. Once students are given the care and support, they may be able to build a successful future (Krovets, 2007).

When students find their school environment to be supportive and caring, they are likely to develop positive attitudes, pro-social attitudes and behaviors toward themselves and others (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott and Hill; 1999, Battistich and Hom, 1997, Resnick, 1997, Schaps, Battistich and Solomon, 1997). Research has shown supportive schools foster positive outcomes when promoting students' sense of "connectedness", and "belongingness" and/or "community" (Schaps, Battistich and Solomon 1997, Resnick, Baumeister 1997 and Leary 1995). Connectedness, belongingness, and community refer to students' sense of being warm and respectful relationships with colleagues and school staff, in addition to contributing and being influential school members (Schaps, 2005).

**Table 1. Background Information on Participants**

Student	Grade level	Academic level	Role of student on school council	Father's level of education	Mother's level of education	Number of siblings
M 1	12	90+	President	Preparatory	Preparatory	13
M 2	11	90+	Vice President	Preparatory	Preparatory	13
M 3	10	90+	Educational Cultural Committee Coordinator	Ph.D.	Bachelor degree	4
M 4	12	85+	Art Committee Coordinator	Illiterate	Illiterate	21
M 5	12	80+	Financial Committee Coordinator	Preparatory	High School	12
M 6	12	80+	Sports Committee Coordinator	High School	Illiterate	16
M 7	9	90+	Council Secretary	Illiterate	Illiterate	7
M 8	12	80+	Financial Security General	Elementary	High School	10
F1	11	82%	President	Preparatory	Bachelor degree	5
F 2	11	95%	Council Secretary	Elementary	High School	11
F 3	9	94%	Art Committee Chair	Preparatory	High School	17
F 4	9	84%	Financial Committee Coordinator	Bachelor degree	High School	10
F 5	11	80%	Vice President	High School	Bachelor degree	3
F 6	11	88%	Culture Committee Chair	Elementary	High School	14
F 7	9	88%	Financial Security General	Master degree	Bachelor degree	13
F 8	11	85%	Educational Culture Committee Chair	Preparatory	Elementary	9
F 9	5	95%	Sports Committee Coordinator	Bachelor degree	High School	1

Students in high-community schools are likely to be thoughtful, reflective, self-directing, accept the authority of others, concerned for and respectful of others, avoid courses of action that harm themselves or others, and maintain higher standards of ethical conduct (Osterman, 2000; Schaps, Battistich and Solomon 2004). If their basic psychological needs such as safety, belonging, autonomy, and competence are satisfied, students are likely become engaged in school bonding, act in according to school objectives and values, develop social skills and understanding, and contribute to both their school as well as their community (Schaps, 2005).

#### **Research Question**

The primary research question addressed was "How do schools foster leadership skills in students?"

#### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms are defined as:

School: "an institution primarily for education"

(Mehndiratta, 2005, p.819).

Leadership: "every person who leads a group of people, a community, a society or a nation is termed as a leader. He is obeyed, heard or honored by his followers. He unifies and embodies the opinion of the people and mobilizes it to a dignified goal" (Mehndiratta, 2005, p.502).

#### **Study Limitations**

Some limitations must be addressed with respect to this study. The study sample was limited to only one district, and caution ought to be exercised when trying to interpret or generalize the study findings to other district, Emirates or Countries. The study was conducted in the spring semester of the 2005/2006 academic year, and analyzed in the fall semester of the 2006/2007.

#### **Method**

Qualitative methodology was utilized in this study to

explore the perceptions of students about the roles of the school in helping students attain leadership skills.

### **Sample**

The sample was purposefully selected from one educational zone because the participants represented different types of schools elementary, preparatory, and secondary. Further, the council students were selected based on their performance leadership roles in their schools, and they were selected by their schools whether the students nominated themselves or by their social worker. The study sample consisted of seventeen students (eight males and nine females) from different schools in one district. These participants represent grades, 5th, 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th. Additionally, the academic achievement of the participants ranged from 80 to 95 GPA. The participants' family ranges from three to twenty-one members. Further, the educational level of parents ranged from illiterate to PhD degrees (see Table (1), which provides details of participants' backgrounds).

### **Instrument**

Semi-structured interviews were designed based on a review of the study literature to gather data about how schools foster students' leadership skills. Interview was selected to provide the reader with in-depth information about the study participants' knowledge and thoughts (Johnson, Christensen, 2000). In general, the study participants were asked open-ended questions such as: How does the teacher treat you in the classroom? How does the teacher treat you outside the classroom? How did your teachers help you in becoming a leader? What are some of the characteristics you wish your teachers had? What are some teachers' characteristics that you like? How does school principal treat you? (Appendix A).

### **Procedure**

Two lists of student council members (one list of males and the other of females) were obtained from one Educational Zone. Each researcher took one list to prepare a schedule to interview each participant at the school. The social worker in each school helped the researchers to arrange to interview each student individually. The researchers explained the purpose of the study to each respondent, and obtained the student's permission to record the interview for later transcription and translation into English. Interviews ranged in length from 45 to 60 minutes and were guided by the prepared questions. (See Appendix A).

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed and the data were coded, process of labeling text data with words or category names by both researchers. Then the data codes were compared for consistency to have inter-rater reliability that examines the degree of agreement between the researchers (Johnson, Christensen, 2000). Themes were developed from the most commonly stated codes. The findings are presented as a descriptive report.

## **3. RESULTS**

Themes such as trust, teachers' characteristics, supportive peers, and supportive administrators emerged in answer to the question, "How do teachers foster leadership skills in students?" from the participants. Not all participants were mentioned in the results because they had similar answers, so we selected the represented responses. Each of these themes will be discussed next.

### **Trust**

An overwhelming number of respondents (90 percent) declared that their teachers trust them to accomplish different school activities. For example, M.1 and M.2 reported that their teachers motivate them in developing their leadership skills by giving them leadership tasks, thanking them and appreciating their performance, including them in different tasks, asking them to talk to some students (instead of having the teachers talk to the students), preparing some extracurricular activities, and providing them with a lot of advice. M.1 said, "One teacher entrusted me with holding on to the exam papers until the time of the test, and by placing me in the principal's office for one week to perform his duties and responsibilities."

Other participants also emphasized the teachers' roles and claimed that they are more effective than parents in fostering leadership skills. "My teachers give me different opportunities to participate in different activities and support my painting talent, while my mother just asks me to study, and most of the time she is sleeping (F.9)"

When asked about what helped him to develop his leadership skills, M.2 commented that he valued "...participation in field trips, friendship, and . . . a very good relationship (with his teachers)." Female students, too, confirmed that trust was the most common characteristic that they have from teachers. F.1 said, "My teachers trust me; they ask me to lead my groups. They

ask me to plan and organize parties for different occasions.”

### Teacher Characteristics

The respondents indicated that most of their teachers were working hard to give them opportunities to learn and be responsible. M.1 stated, “They provide incentives for distinguished performance, not getting back at students for other reasons, continuous motivation, fairness, and work ethics, role model, and mutual respect.” Further, several respondents viewed their teachers as colleagues, educators with awareness and rich thoughts in different life matters, who give their students, especially the student council members, some autonomy, “they elected me to be in charge of the boy scouts (M. 2).”

Female participants stressed that most of their teachers influence them through their professionalism. They explained that their teachers tried to do their best in order for students to learn and develop their skills. Female students mentioned the following characteristics of their teachers: “She has much information, and she is a good communicator (F.1).” F.2 mentioned, “She is understanding and patient, particularly with local teachers.” Another student (F4) said, “She is kind, firm, she has a smiling face, and she helps us.”

### Supportive Peers

The participants had supportive peers, who shared similar characteristics. They also shared similar activities, and were close to one another in terms of academic achievement. “We respect each other, we work together and love each other, and we listen to one another and we always keep in touch (M.1).” Additionally, M.7 confirmed that he shares with his friends “seriousness, commitment, trust, performing good deeds, especially worship, morals and ethics, loving to learn leadership skills as well as new knowledge, and we respect each other.”

As well, F.1 said, “We are interested in the same activities, and we have similar personalities, we all have strong personalities.” Another student (F.2) mentioned, “We like to have fun activities, and we are honest.” F.3 stated, “We have the same way of thinking in almost everything, for example, if I think of something, the next day, I find that my friends have thought of the same thing.” F.6 asserted, “. . . my friends like to work hard like me.”

It is noteworthy that some of these respondents have a strong relationship with their friends because their mothers are friends with their friends’ mothers. “I knew my friend because of my mother (F.3).” Other students (for example, F7) noted that they had been friends because they have been together since elementary school.

### Supportive Administrators

Some respondents commented on the role that administrators played in encouraging them to take leadership roles. For example, F.4 stated: “My classroom supervisor and the school social worker support and encourage me to participate in different activities.” Other participants remarked on the school principal’s role as a leader. They commented positively about their principals who fostered a school environment where students could happily exercise their leadership roles. M.1 and M.2 summarized what most male students reported:

Continuous follow-up, and at the end of each week, he makes sure we are doing alright. He also provides us with suggestions and advice, in addition to encouraging us to lead the school, to be responsible, and make the right decisions.

One student (M.1) said that his principal treats him like a brother: “The school principal even knows every single student at the school by name.” Indeed, most students (80 percent of the participants) stated that their school principals were active and visible in the school. However, some participants (20 percent) indicated that they rarely see their principals because the principals have many things to do.

On the other hand, some female students (30 percent) stated that their school principals encouraged them to do their best and to keep up with their achievement. “If I receive an award, she (the principal) congratulates me and encourages me to get another one (F.1).” In addition, F.7 claimed that the principal is “. . . very affectionate, and she is always encouraging me to do my best”.

Nevertheless, some female students (40 percent) stated that they see their principal, but there is no interaction between them and the principal. “I see her at school activities and in the classroom when she comes to watch how the teacher teaches us (F.5).” F.8 confirmed this, saying, “My principal just says hello”. Some respondents (30 percent) stated that they interact more with the vice principal than with the principal. For example, F.2 said, “Most of the time, I talk with the vice

principal if I need anything, and she is mostly the one who encourages me.”

In summary, students articulated several factors that shaped and fostered their leadership skills at schools: trust, teachers' characteristics, supportive peers, and supportive administrators.

In addition, there was no a significance difference in the responses of males and females. However, a slight difference occurred when participants were asked, “What are some of the characteristics you wish your teachers had? And what are some teachers' characteristics that you like?” While males indicated that, their teachers provide incentives for distinguished performance, continuous motivation, fairness, and work ethics, being role models, and showing mutual respect, females mentioned the following characteristics of their teachers: “She has much information, and she is a good communicator (F.1).” F.2 mentioned, “She is understanding and patient, particularly with local teachers.” Another respondent (F4) said, “She is kind, firm, she has a smiling face, and she helps us.”

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The findings of the current study indicated that schools play a significant role in terms of fostering the leadership skills of the student council members. Teachers foster leadership skills in students by trusting them to perform different tasks. This finding is consistent with what Osberg, Pope, and Galloway, (2006) found in terms of giving students responsibilities that help them become leaders. The study participants talked about the positive characteristics of their teachers that encourage them to be leaders in their schools.

The most important finding of this study was that students perceive that caring teachers and administrators help them to be leaders, especially if their parents are busy. F.9 said, “My teachers give me various opportunities to participate in different activities and support my painting talent, while my mother just asks me to study.” The participants expressed that most of their teachers are working hard to give their students opportunities to learn and to be responsible. In general, they articulated that they like to take some responsibilities such as class control; demonstrating commitment to class rules, and having the chance to play the teacher's role every now and then (microteaching) and that they appreciate their teachers' generosity.

This study showed that, regardless of the different educational levels of parents, family size, or the social or economic status of the participants, teachers provide students with various opportunities to practice their leadership skills. In addition to having supportive adults, they have supportive peers with similar achievements, as Reis, Colbert and Hébert (2005) suggested.

In addition, the study findings revealed that other supportive adults in the schools fostered leadership skills. Where principals were not available to students, it was often reported that vice principals or social workers provided support. These responses support the findings of Leren (2006), who noted that a healthy relationship between school personnel and students is important for creating an environment that is conducive to learning. The respondents did not mention financial support and resources but they emphasized the caring relationship between themselves and their teachers, and indicated that supportive friends and adults foster their leadership roles in their schools.

#### 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The primary goal of this study was to explore the role of the school in fostering leadership skills in United Arab Emirates students who are school council members. The researchers were interested in school practices that help in forming and enhancing leadership skills of students. The findings that resulted from interviewing seventeen student council members indicated that trust, positive teacher characteristics, supportive peers, and supportive administrators play a vital role in fostering their leadership skills.

Based on the emerging themes that resulted from the interviews with the seventeen student council members from one of the United Arab Emirates educational zones, the researchers recommend the following:

- Schools should provide various opportunities to build mutual trust, for example, by giving the students the opportunity to lead the school for short periods of time, and by involving students in planning and implementing different activities.
- Teachers should be conscious of their influence as role models for their students.
- Having supportive peers is very important in fostering students' leadership roles.
- School administrators should always be familiar enough with their students to be able to

acknowledge their achievements within the school.

Similar studies could be conducted to collect more information from more respondents, including several educational zones throughout the country. Different approaches to developing tomorrow's leaders could be

explored more directly, possibly with teachers, principals, and other students. Other studies could be conducted to explore parents' roles in fostering their children's leadership roles in their schools.

#### APPENDIX (A) (Interview Questions)

1. How do your teachers treat you inside the classroom?
2. How do your teachers treat you outside the classroom?
3. What are some of the characteristics you wish your teachers had?
4. What are some teachers' characteristics that you like?
5. How does school principal treat you?
6. What do your friends say about teachers?
7. Does your teacher motivate you to conduct some activities or you the initiative?
8. How does school principal deal with you?
9. What do your friends say about your school principal?
10. Who are your friends?
11. What are some of the common characteristics among you and your friends?
12. What are the activities you perform at school?
13. What are the activities you perform outside of school?

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