The effect of student leadership roles and behaviours on motivation and well-being

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"It is not all about wearing a badge: How leadership identity in a secondary school is associated with motivation, hope and wellbeing."

Introduction

The aim of this research is to investigate student leadership in secondary school and examine its relationship to self-determination, hope and wellbeing. We are interested in the academic motivation, hope (defined as willpower and waypower thinking) and well-being of students in relation to their perceptions of their own leadership behaviours. This quantitative study involved 247 pupils between ages 13 and 18 years (year 9 to 11 cohorts). There was also a comparison made between students holding positions of office and students who do not currently hold an official role within the School.

Literature review

Research indicates that opportunities for student leadership development in secondary education are still limited and driven largely by teacher's decisions over positions of responsibility for the selected few, such as prefects and school captains or structured after-school activities that restrict opportunities for student initiative. Students given formal leadership roles have been shown to develop maturity quicker (Neumann, Dempster & Skinner, 2009). However, this approach perpetuates the view that only a few pupils are deserving of leadership roles (Hine, 2014, Lizzio Dempster & Neumann, 2011). Recently some research has moved towards a youth-centric approach, respecting the student voice in gleaning an understanding of what leadership means to the students (Dempster, Stevens & Keeffe, 2011) and the evidence shows that they tend to perceive leadership as a relational process involving pro-social outcomes that can happen in various contexts (McGregor, 2007, Whitehead, 2009) rather than solely involving someone in a formal position.

One human strength shown to influence academic achievement, psychological adjustment and student wellbeing is the concept of hope (Gilman, Dooley & Florell, 2006). Snyder and colleagues (Snyder et al., 1991) characterised hope as having the capacities to clearly conceptualise goals, develop the specific strategies to reach those goals (pathways thinking) and initiate and sustain the motivation for using those strategies (agency thinking). Students with high hope typically are more optimistic, they focus on success rather than failure when pursuing goals (Snyder et al., 1997), they develop many life goals, and they perceive themselves as being capable of solving problems that may arise (Snyder et al., 1997). Higher levels of hope are related to greater

problem-solving abilities and academic achievements (Lopez, Bouwkamp, Edwards, & Teramoto Pedrotti, 2000; Snyder et al., 1997), as well as having a greater perceived purpose in life (Feldman & Snyder, 2005). For leaders, the development of high levels of hope is necessary to be an effective leader if we conceive of leaders as being purveyors of hope in others (Shorey & Snyder, 2004).

To date there is no research investigating whether secondary school pupils' perceiving opportunities to practice informal and formal leadership roles is related to their level of hope. The current study seeks to investigate whether leadership experiences are predictive of hope in pupils between 13 and 16 years of age and whether this is mediated by need satisfaction through their sense of school belonging and academic self-regulation.

Research design

This research was a quantitative design involving 5 short questionnaires taken by 247 students to explore the links between self-perceptions of leadership alongside self- perceptions of school membership, academic self-regulation, hope and wellbeing. Survey participants were pupils from Sevenoaks school from across year groups 9-11 (middle and upper school). The ages of the pupils were from 13 to 18 years. Both male and female pupils were included.

The questionnaires were selected for their credibility, reliability and validity. The exception were the few additional questions included in the self-perceptions of leadership scale that relate to their actual school leadership experiences. The scales selected were as follows: Leadership identity (Hiller, 2005 – slightly adapted for school children); Experiences of informal and formal leadership at school (researchers' own questions); Sense of school membership (Goodenow, 1993); Academic self-regulation (Ryan & Connell, 1989 – this version was adapted for easier reading so that is would accommodate those with learning disabilities - Deci, Hodges,Pierson, & Tomassone,1992); Children's Hope Scale (Snyder et al, 1997 – scale for all participating pupils as it has been shown to have validity for respondents up to 19 years of age (Valle, Huebner, & Suldo, 2004) and wellbeing (Cummins& Lau, 2005, PWI-SC). The participating pupils were introduced to the questionnaires through a link taking them to the online questionnaires prepared in Qualtrics. The form teachers provided the link to all the pupils in the class. The responses of each participant was recorded within Qualtrics so that all responses for subsequent data analyses could be downloaded using SPSS software.

Multiple regression statistical analyses were used to examine whether there were associated predictive relationships between these variables and to examine cross-sectional relationships between these variables, examining both direct and indirect associations (mediators). For example, the analyses examined whether greater leadership self-perceptions are associated with greater perceptions of school membership and academic self-regulation and whether the latter were related to higher levels of hope and personal wellbeing.

The key hypotheses were that higher levels of perceived leadership would predict a higher sense of belonging and internal self-regulation which will in turn predict higher levels of both hope and student wellbeing.

Additional research questions were also examined statistically such as whether there are differences between age, gender and informal and formal leadership experiences on sense of school belonging, self-regulation, hope and wellbeing. As statistical assumptions were met for parametric statistical analysis, Multivariate Analysis-of-Variance tests were used.

Ethical implications

Pupil consent to participate in the completion of self-report questionnaires and survey was provided through opt-out consent by parents / guardians following the receipt of an email providing details of the research project. In the instructions, the children completing the questionnaires were reassured that if the questions were upsetting then they could stop the survey at any time and they were also given the contact number of the school counsellor and invited to see the counsellor if they had any concerns as a result of taking part in completing the survey. Moreover, the debriefing was thorough and accompanied by reading materials delivered through the form or PSHE class tutor on the topic of 'Pupil Leadership and You'. This information sheet informed the pupils that leadership is within every pupil through making use of everyday opportunities and informal leadership experiences.

Research findings and discussion

247 pupils between ages 13 and 16 (Year 9 to Y11 cohorts) completed the online questionnaire (108 boys and 139 females). Preliminary findings suggest there are gender differences in hope and wellbeing; T-Test analysis shows a significant difference between boys and girls i.e. boys have greater sense of hope and wellbeing than girls.

Preliminary results suggest that formal leadership is positively correlated with leadership identity and responsibility and with school membership. Informal leadership is positively correlated with leadership identity and responsibility, school membership and hope. This suggests that there is a need to think more about informal leadership as maybe informal leadership increases student hope which in turn enhances student achievement.

Regression analyses indicated that leadership identity and responsibility, school membership, academic self-regulation and hope are strong predictors of student wellbeing (R=0.73). All predictive variables together accounted for a high 52% of the variation in student wellbeing. School membership is a strong and significant predictor of wellbeing (regression coefficient - 0.56); Hope is a strong and significant predictor of wellbeing (regression coefficient - 0.50.) Patterns of findings so far suggest that both formal and informal leadership are associated with self-concepts and experiences of leadership. Only informal concepts and experiences are related to pupils' sense of 'hope'. The greatest predictors of wellbeing are a sense of school membership and higher levels of hope.

The findings suggest that having a formal role per se might not be the key driver for student leadership and that building a leadership identity through informal leadership behaviours such as community service, mentoring, helping others and involvement in organising school event or activities may be just as important as being selected to wear a badge.

Dissemination and future plans

This research has been accepted as a presentation at the European Congress of Positive Psychology in Iceland. It is hoped that the findings will be disseminated through further peer reviewed journal articles. The longer term aim is to promote the understanding of these links and choices that might be taken to create change in schools.

There is also scope for further research examining the influence of student leadership on academic outcomes and a potential impact case study if this research project could be developed into an intervention.

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