COMMUNICATION OF LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES: A CRITICAL NEED FOR LEADERSHIP EDUCATION FOR UNDERREPRESENTED GRADE SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE BRONX, NEW YORK

MICHAEL A. ALTAMIRANO

ABSTRACT

The term leadership has gained popularity over the last twenty years as an area of research and education for scholars and those seeking to understand and improve their method of transforming others within their constituency. While the term has transcended all levels of society, this article seeks to explore why grade school students of urban areas like the Bronx, New York struggle to surpass their social status through education and professional achievement. In an area of the United States that represents enormous wealth, the economic and professional disparity between those who prosper and those who struggle can be expounded through an understanding of poor communication, levels of education, and cultural background(s). The majority of children who grow up in New York City are from underrepresented groups in American society. These groups are Black, of American, African, and Caribbean heritage; Latino (Hispanic), of Central American, South American, and Caribbean heritage; and Asian and Middle-Eastern heritage. Poor communication emerges from the fact that a large proportion of grade school children in NYC are first-generation students, many of which struggle with language mastery. The vast majority of school-aged students live in economically challenged areas of the City where income levels are at or below the standard of poverty. The cultural impact of this study further examines the struggle of these students to learn and relate to espoused leadership principles from educators, community leaders, and organizational leaders.

Keywords: Leadership, Education, Communication, Economic Disparity, Culture.

INTRODUCTION

The communication of any principle would seem like a simple action to most academicians. This paper seeks to explore the challenge of communicating the principle of leadership to grade school children in the Bronx, New York. The Bronx is a
diverse and economically disparate area within the United States that is not a universally understood demographic. This study attempts to add to a growing discussion on accurate cultural struggles of the urban student (Woodson, 2015, p. 23). A sociological challenge for most students in this environment is the development of leadership traits that could help transcend their economic and cultural boundaries. This challenge is further exasperated when those charged with serving this community are from different backgrounds (Allard, Mehra, & Qayyum, 2007).

The education of leadership principles to students of under-represented ethnic communities has several challenges. The system of education in the Bronx, New York is not adequately prepared and funded to meet the challenges of educating the most diverse student population in the world. Barriers to education include language, cultural differences, and the vast disparity in educational competency levels (Birney & McNamara, 2018, p. 9). Socio-economic reasons also hinder success such as economic disparity and immigration issues (Smith, 2009, p. 49). Most public-school students in the Bronx live at or below poverty levels, and many of these kids grow up in homes where parents have to work full-time and often do not have sufficient time to work with their children on lesson plans and overall guidance (Johnson, 2018, p. 39). Unfortunately, this presents an irony of events where the school system bears most of the responsibility of guiding children through educational and sociological development issues.

This article purposely focuses on issues that pertain to grade school children between the first and eighth grade. High school aged teenagers were deliberately omitted from the research to study a narrower focus on this topic. Grade school children are more receptive to learning new ideas and tend to be more impressionable than their teenage counterparts are. Kitsantas, Steen, and Huie suggest that learning at an elementary aged level has a direct correlation to motivation, academic performance, and self-regulation (2017). Exploring how the concept of leadership is communicated among grade school aged children presents an idealistic opportunity to enhance and develop leadership traits at an early age.

**Methodology**

The topic of this article was researched qualitatively and presented in a case study method. There were several participants interviewed for this study, and some were grouped as one participating group. The participant breakdown is as follows:

- Participant A – Teacher
- Participant B – Teacher
- Participant C – Teacher
- Participants D – Nuclear Working Family with Three Children
- Participants E – Single Working Mother with Two Children
- Participants F – Undocumented Single Mother with Four Children
- Participant G – School Principal

The nature of this study is exploratory with a focus on the communication and education of leadership within a specific group and geographical location. It is important to note that this research is from a limited sample in one geographic area and does not represent the communication challenge from an entire city, region or
country. A case study format of this research presented an intimate exploration of issues that impede the learning of leadership development principles for a specific population. Case study research method focuses on specific situations, using information from multiple sources (Cronin, 2014). Cronin goes on to explain that "everything" can or may be relevant in the scope of the proposed study including individuals, groups, activities, or specific phenomenon (2014).

The data for this case study was gathered using semi-structured interviews, thus creating an exploratory opportunity for forming the research, as explained by Piekiewicz and Smith (2014). The use of predetermined questions aided in discovering relevant information on the topic of this investigation. The research study used purposeful sampling through the selection of individuals directly involved in grade school public education in New York City. The research questions explored were as follow:

R1. Are grade school students in the Bronx learning leadership principles as part of their academic education?
R2. What are the challenges of communicating and teaching leadership to grade school students in the Bronx?
R3. What methods are used to teach leadership principles to grade school students in the Bronx?

Leadership Education from the Perspective of Three Educators

Teachers in New York City public schools are expected to fulfill their duty of education and teach life lessons synchronously (Shoffner, 2018, p. 3). The participants of this study had varying opinions on the topic of leadership education, but they all agreed that it is difficult to teach a topic, where one has no expertise. A lack of expertise is not an indictment on their qualifications or education on the subject of leadership. In fact, they are quite qualified, but because they never specifically studied the subject, they fail to understand their capacity to educate others on the topic. Simply stated, leadership education begins with the understanding that anyone has the ability to influence the future actions of others. Teachers can exceedingly influence school-aged children, between first and eighth grade. Through their actions, educators can inspire students to achieve, they have the ability to teach positive life lessons through curriculum and role modeling, and they have a daily opportunity to motivate students to learn and complete their assigned tasks (Harris, 2017). Unfortunately, many teachers will focus on their charge of ensuring the completion of academic teaching requirements and will often fail to find a balance that includes essential life lessons such as leadership education.

Participants A, B, and C were interviewed separately outside of their school environment and were eager to participate. They are from different schools located in different areas around the Bronx, New York. The interviews began with the inquiry as to whether they knew the definition of leadership. The three could not define it accurately but attempted to explain the concept with outdated perspectives. Participants A & B described themselves, and leadership as a person in charge. Since they describe themselves as being in charge of their respective classrooms, they identify themselves as leaders. Participant C defined leadership as heroism and that leaders are often government officials and people that are capable of achieving great
things. Interestingly, participant C did not perceive teaching as heroic or something a leader would do.

After discussing leadership and its definition, the participants were asked to analyze and relate whether or not they are effective at teaching this concept. Participants A & B who initially defined themselves as leaders continued to do so with validated vigor.

Participant A felt that leadership was adequately taught within the curriculum through educational lessons that focus on responsibility and a visionary approach toward student's future aspirations. Participant A also believes that the example of leadership teachers' model is instrumental for student development of this skill. The participant was also asked if any child is capable of being a leader. The participant responded, "No.," explaining that some children are natural born leaders and those who are not, have a difficult time leaning this concept. When asked, if students from the Bronx are capable of learning leadership, the participant again responded, "no," further clarifying,

"Many kids in the Bronx have language issues and are from cultures that have poor leaders. Their home upbringing has a lot to do with their success. If their parents are successful, they are probably leaders and their kids will probably grow up to be successful. Unfortunately, a lot of these kids come from homes where parents struggle professionally, and their kids tend to struggle academically."

The views of participant B were similar to participant A except for in regard to the capacity of learning leadership. Participant B feels that all students are capable of learning leadership but that many students in the Bronx come from immigrant households and they have cognitive learning issues due to language issues. The participant further clarified that students with language issues are often placed in ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, but these sections are so overpopulated that if students can minimally express themselves in English, they are then placed in regular classrooms. According to participant B, this poses a challenge for teachers that only speak English. The participant described communication with immigrant students as being a focal educational challenge, and this is partly a reason why immigrant students initially perform poorly in school.

Participant C did not view teachers as leaders, therefore, had a difficult time understanding how a teacher could or should be responsible for teaching leadership to students. This participant views leadership as a direct correlation between achievement and professional success, and that grade school students are not capable of learning leadership because they have yet to accomplish anything significant. Even after being informed of the definition of leadership, the participant dismissed it as "everyone keeps trying to define things differently nowadays." For clarification, this participant was older than participants A & B, and has been a New York City teacher since 1978.

The viewpoint from educators is significant to understand the reciprocal relationship between educators and students. The topic of this research is to understand if there needs to be more leadership education and if there are barriers that currently exist to that process. The teachers interviewed represent a cross sample of this relationship. The participants responded in the affirmative when asked if there was a need for a formalized way of teaching grade school students' leadership, but all three participants expressed concern with over-saturating an already robust educational curriculum. All
three also claimed that they do their best to incorporate education principles and examples into their daily lessons albeit with little guidance or support from educational administrators. The three participants further lamented on the consuming factor of a directive called CCSS - Common-Core State Standards. This edict is a teaching standard that was updated over five years ago that affects math and English language arts education. According to the educational participants of this study, it has taken several years to re-educate themselves on how to teach this new curriculum, and it leaves them little time to focus on extra teaching agenda items. Participant C added, "I've been teaching for many years, and I believe I do it well. Teaching an old dog new tricks is not easy, but I do what I'm supposed to do. Back in the days when we discussed leadership, we talked about astronauts, Martin Luther King Jr, and people like that. Now everyone talks about leadership like it's something anyone can do and frankly, it's not. This world has leaders and followers. Not everyone can be a leader, and it's not that simple to become one."

Leadership Education from the Perspective of Three Families

Three families with multiple children in grade school were interviewed for this study. They represent a diverse cross-section of race, ethnicity, and economic segmentation. The participants agreed to be interviewed in their private residence. The parents approved for their children to be interviewed one by one first, as the parents observed without interference. Then the parents were interviewed, followed by every participant in the household being interviewed together.

The three families interviewed consisted of three different and distinct sets of under-represented groups of American society. Participants D are a nuclear family where both parents work full-time. They are first generation Americans of Hispanic heritage. Their children range in age from 3, 10, and 13. Participants E represent a single-parent household. The sole parent is an African American female, and the children are aged 10 and 12. Participants F also represent a single-parent household except that they are undocumented residents and residing illegally in the United States. The family is from the Dominican Republic. The parent is female, and children are aged 3, 5, 9, and 15. The information gathered through this set of interviews was rich with data because of the cross-segment of participants and the disparity in ages. All the contributors spoke openly after they were assured that all identifying information would be kept confidential. This was a main source of concern for the parents participating in this study. Their initial apprehension was potential retribution in one form or another from school officials. The undocumented parent's foremost fear was deportation if her name and location was to be divulged.

Participants D are a male and female couple in their 40s. Their youngest son is a boy aged three. Their other two children are females aged 10 and 13. The youngest child did not participate in the interview process. The parents work full-time, and all three children are in school from 7 AM until 3 PM and participate in afterschool programs until 6 PM when one of the parents picks them up. The three-year-old is in a pre-school/daycare program from 7 AM until 6 PM. After explaining their schedule, the father added, "we spend more time apart [from each other] than we do together." At the start of the interview, the parents were asked if there was any way they could spend more time with their kids. They expounded that their schedules were a result of financial necessity and cutting back on work hours would create pressure on what they
described as an already strained financial situation. They are renters that pay a premium to live in a better neighborhood where they can send their kids to a public school that offers a better educational opportunity for their children. Their opportunity cost is a better external environment for their children but at the same time, sacrificing time spent with their children. They conveyed remorse over the lack of time they spend together but feel they have no choice. The mother expressed the following:

"As much as I want to spend more time with my kids, I cannot because doing so would mean I have to quit my job and doing that would put us in a financial bind. The crazy thing is that we're working only to pay bills, and we're not saving any money. We dream about buying a house but, we find it's impossible to save that money. So we're like trapped, and the ones who need us most [children] have to basically grow up on their own."

The parents of participant group D were very expressive and needed to be redirected toward the original topic of this study, leadership. When asked if they knew the definition of leadership, they explained that they knew what it was but could not put it into words. After they were enlightened as to the definition, they were then asked if their children were learning it, they both replied, "yes and no." The father explained that his children learn leadership from both him and his wife. They described how their children are forced to be independent and that this aspect is critical in their development of leadership. The parents of this group were correlating independence with leadership development. The parents were then asked to describe a typical day for their children and how they feel their children develop a leadership aptitude because of it. The father communicated the following:

"We teach our kids from the time they are young to be independent. They spend about 12 hours a day without our supervision. They know they have to take care of themselves. School is for learning, but they don't learn everything there. The only way they learn proper leadership is through what we teach them. They don't learn it from their teachers, or their friends. School is all about school work. School's important because education is the way to success. I don't want my kids growing up like me...I sometimes feel bad when it is 8 PM, and they are still doing HW, but in this world, only smart people succeed."

It was clear during the interview that the parents did not fully understand the concept of leadership nor did they fully understand how their children could fully develop this skill. They were correct in certain aspects, for example, the idea that children learn leadership from their parents. That idea is correct, but to limit the scope of leadership education to teaching independence is restrictive in approach.

The children of participant group D were very insightful and well spoken. When asked if they understood what leadership was, the 13-year old said she knew but could not put it into words. However, the 10-year old said, "someone who leads by example." She could not recall when she learned this but was certain she learned it in school. Throughout the interview, they expressed how leadership is taught in school through project work, group activities, and lessons. They described how leadership lessons in school often related to historical examples. Their educational experience focuses on learning about great leaders and the accomplishments that made them great leaders. They were also asked if they received formal lessons on the topic of
leadership, to which they replied in the negative. The 13-year old expressed the following:

"We don't actually have lessons on leadership, but when we learn about great people in history, we learn why they were great leaders. We learn about great people like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. We learn that they were great leaders because they fought racism and made Americans treat everybody equally. They were great leaders because when they spoke, everyone listened. I think I'm a leader because when I speak, my friends listen to me."

Participants E was made up of a single mother and two boys aged 10 and 12. Like participants D, the mother of participant E worked full-time, but her boys were not in an after-school program. Their grandmother cares for them after they are released from school. The mother describes how this arrangement comforts her because she is confident her sons are well cared for while she is at work all day to try and build a better future for them. When asked if she knew the definition of leadership, the parent said, "someone who is charismatic and can get other people to follow them." This response was close to accurate, and it proved to be a harbinger of very profound responses from this parent. This single parent went on to respond to the question of leadership education this way:

I don't think it's a school's responsibility to teach leadership. We want our kids to get an education, first and foremost. Learning leadership is something that starts at home. It is my responsibility to teach my boys about this. I'm not saying they don't learn it in school. It's just that school and their friends just supplement what they know about leadership from me. I don't expect teachers and principals to worry as much as I do about my own children."

The mother went on to say, "a parent has more influence on a child than a teacher ever will." She was also quick to explain how she did not have a diminished view of educators, but the topic was about learning leadership and not academics.

The two sons of participant group E were shy and seemed initially introverted throughout the interview. Their responses were short, and they were hesitant to elaborate on my points. Their responses were in stark contrast to their mother who was very outspoken. They could not define leadership but did offer two examples of leaders Stephen Curry and Michael Jordan, professional basketball players. They also appeared very reserved because their mother was in the room observing the interview. Parental supervision during the meeting was necessary because of the age of the children. Both children said they learned about leadership mostly from participating on athletic teams and could not relate the same type of lessons to an academic environment. Throughout this interview, talking about sports seemed to elicit more animated responses than talking about school. They believed coaches were better suited to teach leadership through instructions and encouragement while celebrating athletic accomplishments. Teachers, however, "they're just focused on making sure everybody is equal," the 12-year old. He also said, "leaders aren't equal to anyone, that's why they're leaders." The boys were also asked how they could advise their teachers on how to educate children on leadership, the 10-year old said, "they should have more competitions in class and let the winners be class captains."

Participant group F did not yield any direct data with regards to leadership. The single parent is an undocumented female from the Dominican Republic. She is currently illegally residing in the Bronx with her four children. No one in the family
speaks English, three of the four children are in school, and two are enrolled in ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, the 9 and 15-year old. The mother did not understand what leadership is. She defined it as someone who tells others what to do. She could not say if her children were receiving any education on leadership. As far as she knows, her children are in school learning English and getting an academic education.

Only the 9 and 15-year old of participant group F were interviewed for this study. Both children were males, and both reiterated what their mother defined as leadership, "someone who tells other what to do." They seemed disengaged with their educational experience. The 15-year old should be in high school, but he is enrolled in the eighth grade. The 9-year old should be in the fourth grade but is enrolled in the third grade. When asked if they were learning leadership in school, the older child replied, "all we do is learn English and arithmetic all day." The youngest child said they learn about leadership when learning about historical characters but could not recall any specific lesson on leadership.

**Leadership Education from the Perspective of an Administrator**

The final participant of this study was a senior principal for a school in the Bronx that educates children from kindergarten to the eighth grade. The interview took place in her office, and she was very gracious with her time. Participant G understood the concept of leadership. The school she leads is one of the top academic performing grade schools in New York City. The school's excellent performance is a result of an overall culture of excellence that the teachers subscribe to and they instill this belief in the students. This school principal appeared to be determined and focused on academic performance. The participant was asked if the students of her school were learning the concept of leadership. She replied, "I believe all our students are learning leadership through academic curriculum." She was then asked to describe specific programs or lessons that are specifically designed to teach leadership.

"I do not think the programs and curriculums purposely teach leadership. Leadership here is learned through the application of educational lessons and other programs. I believe leadership starts with academic success. This is our focus. Our teachers encourage our students to be independent thinkers, and I believe that is a necessary leadership trait. We encourage group work in all our class sections, and every student gets an opportunity to be a group leader at some point. We believe these kinds of activities foster leadership development."

Participant G is engaged in all aspects of educational programs in her school. There is no denying that through her leadership, this is one of the best performing schools in the Bronx. However, while most students in her care are excelling at academics and developing leadership skills, there is no specific leadership development program in place. The success of participant G does challenge the notion of an intentional approach to leadership education of grade school children if it can be developed through an intense focus on academic development.

**Analysis**

Several emerging themes ascended during the progression of this study. Should schools or parents be accountable for the leadership education of grade school
children? Grant and Mitchell suggest that for students to succeed in all aspects of education, the responsibility needs to be shared by educators, parents, and the child’s community (2017). Is leadership education necessary and should it be part of an academic curriculum? Research supports the idea of linking education to professional skills, such as leadership (Wiener & Pimental, 2017). What role does organizational culture play in communicating leadership traits? Organization culture can have a positive impact when it purposely designs a sustainable, collaborative network of inspirational behavior (Bushe, 2017). Finally, who is role modeling leadership for children of the Bronx? Studies show that the vast majority of teachers in urban areas do not racially represent the community they serve. An intentional approach to hiring multi-cultural teachers and offering multi-cultural training would bridge the gap of familiarity in urban educational areas (Sleeter, 2017).

The results of this investigation illustrate that parents feel that the teaching of leadership is the responsibility of educators. Educators believe they have a responsibility to carry on the educational process through programs and curriculum, suggesting that leadership development is an offset of their guidance and does not need to be added to what they already consider a fully loaded educational process. Unfortunately, both parties feel their responsibility is limited to fulfillment of their obligations as parents and teachers, respectively. This view of responsibility seems very one dimensional, without a focus on total quality leadership development by a community.

The teachers interviewed for this study believe that a specific focus on leadership education is not required if leadership lessons can be learned through regular educational programs such as history and social studies. The parents in this study believe that leadership is taught in school, but they are not sure how it is taught. This case study reveals that except for participant G, no one seems to understand what leadership is and how it can be developed as an additional focus of an education curriculum. Teachers believe they are role-modeling leadership behavior as instructors and through lessons that focus on influential leaders, past, and present. Parents feel they model leadership but do not necessarily understand what leadership is.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this case study is to focus attention on the phenomenon of leadership and its education in one specific area, the Bronx, New York, USA. Precisely, how it is learned, communicated, and role-modeled to elementary school children grades 1-8. The students in this segment range in age from 5 to 14 years with a few exceptions. Apart from attending school in an area of the United States where academic performance is usually poor, students and educators in this area are also challenged by immigration, language, cultural, and economic issues. All of these challenges affect the communication and teaching of academic principles, as well as soft skills that teach children how to interact with others. Presenting an educational environment that fosters education in leadership is a reasonable expectation, but parents or guardians need to also share in the accountability of this process.

This study revealed a few issues that should be explored further. Explicitly, the matter of understanding a shared definition of leadership and whether or not urban students should be taught this as part of their curriculum. Another concern is the assumption that teachers understand leadership and if they could benefit from more
training in this area. Lastly, is there a different approach to communicating these lessons to urban students? Administrators, teachers, and parents share a stake in this process and could benefit from transparent communication and a deliberate approach toward leadership education.
REFERENCES


