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Leadership Development for High School Students in a Summer Performing Arts Program

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a summer performing arts (SPA) program using elements of a servant leadership model to assess potential impacts of a SPA program on leadership skills development. High school students enrolled in a SPA program were given both a pre- and post-survey that included leadership questions. There was a growth in all five servant leadership factors with an overall standardized effect size of $d = 0.48$. The largest growth was for enabling others to take action through cooperation. Summer performing arts programs can positively impact student servant leadership abilities. The idea of youth leadership education may resonate with community business leaders when it comes to funding support for summer arts activities.

Keywords: service, community, servant leadership, agency

Performing arts programs give young people a chance to experience the arts first hand. Summer programs can provide a concentrated artistic experience over a short period. These programs can bring large groups of diverse children together with a common goal of working together to produce an artistic event. The learning experiences possible in these programs can span over a large spectrum of beneficial outcomes. Catterall (1998) reported that students involved in the arts perform better on standardized tests, watch fewer hours of television, report less boredom in school, and perform more community service. Ruppert (2006) stated six major types of benefits associated with exposure to the arts. The benefits include: a) reading and language skills; b) mathematic skills; c) thinking skills; d) social skills; e) motivation to learn; and f) positive school environment. Students experience gains both academically and personally. Brouillette (2010) adds that exposure to the arts, especially drama activities, develops emotional expression and comprehension of what to expect from others, particularly to better read the social script for diverse situations. A key additional aspect of development can be leadership skills.

What is unknown is how much a summer performing arts (SPA) program can influence leadership skills for its participants. This is important to know, because the development of leadership skills in a SPA program brings a dimension of outcomes that can have a long-term impact on a child's life beyond just intrinsically experiencing the arts. The development of young leaders can also have a profound impact on the quality of students' lives as they come into adulthood and enter leadership roles in the work force (Bloomberg, Ganey, Alba, Quintero, & Alcantara, 2003; MacNeil, 2000). According to Bloomberg and colleagues (2003), young leaders show higher career goals, increased self-esteem, and greater high school completion rates. Strong leadership skills can also benefit the community. As stated in Zeldin and Camino (1999), youth leadership can result in an increase in community service efforts. Conner and Strobel (1999) discuss how important characteristics of youth leadership programs should use a framework that includes a group process and collective action for positive youth leadership development. Although these elements are not unique to the arts, they are key elements of this high school SPA program studied in this work. SPA experience could be the beginning of self-actualization for young people in seeing themselves as leaders.

SPA programs have been around for several decades and are a popular way to give young people experiences with the arts. There are numerous summer programs (i.e., acting, singing, photography, musicianship, and dance) available nationwide that can give children a concentrated experience in the arts.

Our team evaluated a SPA program located in the Midwest. It is a summer theater and music program that was founded in 1987, led by art educators from around the region. This program gives students the opportunity to develop their artistic talents—whether they are novices or experienced. The program also includes opportunities for English language learners and children with special needs. The high school SPA experience covered in this work is more intense than the normal school year arts experience, with a combination of music and drama classes with students from many schools in the community. Students participate in community service-learning projects: in the recent past SPA students have conducted food drives, visited nursing homes, and cleaned up public spaces. Following the projects, mentors and students

talked about the reasons they participated in the activity, what they learned, and how it helped people and the community.

To assess the potential impact of a SPA program on leadership skills, we evaluated a summer program using elements of the servant leadership model (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). We evaluated this program using a pre- and post-evaluation.

Literature Review

Leadership Development in the Arts

The arts can develop many important life skills beyond artistic abilities. An important aspect in the mission of SPA programs is to promote and educate students in lifelong skills including: teamwork, cooperation, conflict resolution, tolerance, and good character (<https://www.spacompany.org/>). Each of these skills is an important trait present in a strong leader. Many jobs expect or even demand their employees to have strong leadership skills.

What is leadership? According to Rost (2000, p. 102), “Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect mutual purposes.” There are several models that have been implemented to develop leadership (Northouse, 2007; Rost, 2000). One of those models is known as servant leadership. Servant leadership is an influence relationship between leaders and followers through which the leader puts the good of those led—over the self-interest of the leader or organization—to bring about real changes that reflect mutual purposes (Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Laub, 1999; Spears, 2002). It does not involve commanding one to do something, but is more about collaboration between the leader and followers (Bommarito, 2012). According to Laub (1999), servant leaders have the following characteristics: valuing people, developing people, building community, displaying authenticity, providing leadership, and sharing leadership.

A similar framework is the Leadership Challenge model developed by Kouzes and Posner (2002). The model consists of five practices that are demonstrated by exemplary servant leaders, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
The Five Practices of Exemplary Servant Leaders

Practice	Action
1. Model the Way	Set the example by aligning actions with shared values.
2. Inspire a Shared Vision	Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared goals.
3. Challenge the Process	Look for opportunities by seeking innovative way to change, grow, and improve.
4. Enable Others to Act	Encouraging collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust and using your own personal power to help strengthen others.
5. Encourage the Heart	Recognize contributions from others and celebrating the values and victories by instilling a feeling of community.

Note. Adapted from *Five Practices of Exemplary Student Leadership*.

Table 1

The act of casting a diverse group of young people and giving them a task of developing and staging a theatrical performance could require emergent servant leadership skills from the participants. Examples of these leadership skills include tasks like leading warm-ups, helping with teaching dance choreography, facilitating the flow of rehearsals, and staging the performance.

In fact, the experience of a SPA program could be one of the best leadership experiences students could hope to be a part of in a fun and fast paced learning environment that requires their responsibility for producing a theatrical performance. Frost (2006) found that when students experience learning tasks that are well matched to their preferences, the students experience success and develop a strong belief in their capacity. In modeling leadership practices in the production of a theatrical performance, students can develop agency—the capacity to make a difference. Frost views this as central to the relationship between leadership and learning.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to assess self-reported student leadership growth after attending a SPA program. Specifically, we looked at the five factors of a servant leadership model shown in Table 1. We wanted to know if students' perceived an increase in servant leadership skills while participating in a SPA program.

Leadership Curriculum Elements in a SPA Program

The high school SPA program is a summer performing arts training program focusing on drama, singing, and dance. The program runs over 30 days for the 9th and 10th graders and 40 days for the 11th and 12th grade students. The final product is two full publicly performed musical productions, one for the 9th and 10th graders, and one for the 11th and 12th graders. At the beginning of every high school SPA season, students are given a student handbook. Among the various items in the handbook is a section on leadership. Below shows the content of one section of the handbook on leadership:

LEADERSHIP

People are more important than your title or role.

90% of leadership is attitude—it is not what you can do or can't do...it is WHAT you do.

You can't lead others until you lead yourself.

We measure you by what you give, not by what you have.

You can only give what you have...that is why we practice...so we will have something to give.

Lead by preparation...lead by professionalism...lead by ACTION!!!

During the orientation session, the SPA staff reads the handbook with the students. With this section, the discussion is about how important leadership is to the success of not only the SPA program for that season, but also for SPA students later in school and in their future lives. Students are told that the SPA staff will be looking for signs of leadership throughout the summer and will be acknowledging leadership behavior.

During the summer high school SPA session each Friday, there is a "Share Day" where all production groups within the high school SPA Program meet in one location to "show and tell" scenes or other work from the week. During the Share Day, a few students are recognized with Star Awards, (One of the overall themes for the SPA program is that each student will "someday be a star"). These students were selected by staff throughout the week based on observed actions during rehearsals/classes. Students are asked to share examples from the week where a student or staff member had displayed good leadership.

At the conclusion of the summer, students are also given Star Awards for individual actions over the summer. One senior student is selected to be the Super Senior. Leadership is one of the various attributes that is considered for the award. Leadership is reinforced in other ways. For example, within student groups the staff asks more experienced students to help lead whatever the task may be. Students may be assigned a specific task or area to be "in charge of" for the summer.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were high school students who voluntarily enrolled in a SPA program. The program is offered by one high school, but any high school student in the community can enroll. It is possible for a student to receive elective credits for participation. The student participants were a complete sample of all the high school age students in the SPA program for one summer. A total of 157 students participated in the program, and 92 completed both the pre- and post-matched surveys for a response rate of 58.6%. The completed sample included 23% freshman, 29% sophomores, 18% juniors, and 30% seniors. This work was approved by an Institutional Review Reviewer.

Instrument

The pre- and post-surveys were identical and included six questions on leadership and the grade of the student. Five of these questions were drawn from the practices of exemplary servant leaders as shown in Table 1. The survey questions are shown in Table 2. For the leadership

questions, students rated their knowledge and abilities using a 10-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*none*) to 9 (*a lot*).

Design/Analysis

The pre- and post-answers to the questions were coded based on the students’ self-reported responses for all of the high school students combined. A dependent sample *t* test was used to compare the students’ matched pre-assessment with their post-assessment for growth in leadership abilities.

Procedure

The high school student participants were given a paper and pencil survey on the first day of the program by the program staff. They were given instructions to answer the survey questions as honestly as possible so as to give accurate feedback about the program. At the end of the program the students took the same paper and pencil survey.

Results

The reliability was satisfactory for the leadership questions with Cronbach’s Alpha being .87 for the pre-assessment and .84 for post. Table 2 shows the average pre- and post-scores for each of the five servant leadership questions and for the overall ability to be a leader. There was growth for all six leadership questions. The mean score difference showed a positive growth for the servant leadership questions from pre (*M* = 7.2) to post (*M* = 7.7). The average student growth was 0.5 points on the 10-point Likert-type scale (0-9) and was statistically significant, *t*(91) = 4.15, *p* < .05. The standardized effect size was *d* = 0.48.

Table 2
Pre- to Post-Survey Mean and Difference for High School Students in a SPA Program

Questions	Mean		Mean Difference
	Pre	Post	
1. My ability to show the way for action on a shared value is	7.04	7.46	0.42
2. My ability to inspire others in a shared vision is	6.57	7.18	0.61
3. My ability to innovate, change, grow, and improve is	7.66	7.96	0.30
4. My ability to enable others to take action through cooperation is	6.93	7.60	0.67
5. My ability to recognize and appreciate the success of others is	7.92	8.23	0.31
6. My ability to be a leader is	7.20	7.63	0.43

Note. Results based on a 10-point Likert-type scale 0 (*none*) to 9 (*a lot*).

Table 2

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the self-reported servant leadership skills development by students in a SPA program. The high school students in this summer arts program reported growth in their leadership abilities. The highest reported growth in servant leadership skills was related to their ability to enable others to take action through cooperation.

Involvement in the SPA program can develop many skills for the students (Ruppert, 2006). One of the most important skills developed could be leadership. Many benefits appear in students with strong leadership skills. As previously stated, those who exhibit leadership tend to have higher self-esteem, more career goals, and a greater rate of high school completion (Bloomberg et al., 2003). By participating in the SPA program and developing these qualities, students increase their chances at having greater successes in their future.

Being a strong leader can expand to aspects beyond the arts and academics. Students with exemplary leadership skills have also been known to engage in more effort to do community service. This was previously explained by Zeldin and Camino (1999). Rasmussen and Rasmussen (2006) conclude that “Facilitating students’ leadership development directly and indirectly helps communities, societies, families, and industries that these future adults will inhabit.”

Strong leadership skills are a quality that many businesses look for when hiring employees. With evidence that participation in SPA results in the further development of leadership skills, businesses may be more willing to fund these programs by knowing their investment in our youth today could lead to potential employees and leaders for their organization in the future. According to Berezin (2011), supporting organizations can have many beneficial aspects for the company itself, such as recruiting potential employees and enhancing the perceptions of their company. By demonstrating growth in the servant leadership principles of showing the way for action, inspiring others in a shared vision, improving ability to innovate change and grow, and enabling others to take action through cooperation the SPA program demonstrated agency. Agency is defined as “the capacity to make a difference” (Frost, 2006). Having agency means being able to pursue self-determined purposes and goals through self-conscious strategic action (Frost).

Implication for Practice

Summer performing arts programs can positively impact student servant leadership abilities. Besides the many obvious benefits that we normally think about from a summer arts program (Catterall, 1998; Ruppert, 2006), we can also attribute the experience to growth in perceived student leadership ability. Sutherland (2012) says that arts-based methodologies for leadership education affords experiential learning that improves participants’ abilities to navigate the complexities of contemporary organizational contexts. Sutherland argues that arts-based experiences allow the participants to engage in aesthetic reflexivity to form memories with momentum to inform future action.

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