



Servant Leadership Supports Wellness Development in Adolescents

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Abstract

Feldman questioned “what is the impact of being a servant leader on the servant leader himself/herself?” (2014, p.13). Keith (2008) positioned that servant leaders live meaningful lives and find deep happiness. Russell (2016) stated that there is an ongoing tangible and intangible benefit cycle between the servant leader and the followers. Chan (2016) argued that servant leadership cultivates grit and growth mindsets in learners as they develop a capacity to serve others. This empirical study explored the connection between servant leadership practice and servant leaders’ wellness development. Learners aged 15 to 18 of a Hong Kong school have participated in various service-oriented extracurricular programs for several years. They completed an online questionnaire and their reflections were analyzed thematically. The results showed that practice of servant leadership in adolescent promoted their spiritual, occupational, intellectual, social and emotional wellness. Hence, while serving others, the servant leader is benefited in this process. Servant leadership brings betterment for both the servant leader and the followers.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Wellness Development, Adolescent

The term servant leadership was first coined by Greenleaf (1970) in his seminal essay, *The Servant as Leader*. Servant leadership studies show promising benefits, for the followers as well as the organizations, such as job satisfaction (Guillaume, Honeycutt & Savage-Austin, 2013), team effectiveness (Mahembe & Engelbrecht, 2013), and reduction of employee turnover rate (Ng, Choi & Soehod, 2016). However, there is limited research on the benefit of servant leadership for the servant leaders, especially among youngsters. Thus, this paper explores how the practice of servant leadership leads to wellness development in the servant leaders among adolescents.

The literature review of this paper begins with an examination of a servant leader's role, motive, attributes, actions and impacts. It also defines health and discusses the six dimensions of wellness development. After stating the purpose of this study, it outlines its method of study. From an interpretative paradigm, results are analyzed thematically, followed by discussion of findings and conclusion. The author argues that the practice of servant leadership supports wellness development in adolescents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Servant Leadership

In his seminal essay, *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf (1970) discussed the being, motive, purpose as well as assessment of a servant leader. The ontology of a servant leader is a servant. His/her motive is "to serve and to serve first" (p.13). His/her life purpose is that "other people's highest priority needs are being served" (p.13). A servant leader asks two essential questions. They are: "Do those served grow as persons?", and, "Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (p.13).

Spears (2010) identified a set of ten characteristics of a servant leader from Greenleaf's writing. They are: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Spears believes that these traits are essential for the development and success of servant leaders.

Community building is emphasized by Spears (2010) as an attribute of a servant leader, and by Laub (2000) as an action of servant leadership. Laub envisioned that:

Servant leadership promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the providing of leadership for the good of those led and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual, the total organization and those served by the organization (p.25).

The author argues that the work of community building (Laub, 2000) supports the character development of a servant leader (Spears, 2010).

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Keith (2008) states that servant leaders live meaningful lives because “it is about living closely to your most important sources of meaning, and thereby finding more meaning and deep happiness than are available in any other way” (p.66-67). Keith believes that meaning is an intrinsic motivator, an indicator of good mental health, and a key to deep happiness. Hence, servant leadership is not about self-sacrifice nor self-denial, but self-fulfillment.

Furthermore, Russell (2016) claims that there is an ongoing tangible and intangible benefit cycle between the servant leader and the followers.

Servant leadership’s cycle of benefit begins when one decides to be a servant leader. The decision drives a keen awareness and prioritization of the needs of the follower. The follower benefits from that service by having his or her needs met. The follower in turn is then able to serve the needs of the leader, and from that service the leader benefits (p.60).

While serving others, the servant leader benefits in this process. Servant leadership brings betterment for both the servant leader and the followers.

Based on Russell’s (2016) conceptual work, Russell, Maxfield, and Russell (2017) conducted a qualitative grounded theory research on senior level leaders’ perceptions of personal impacts, effects, and benefits, resulting from serving the needs of their followers. Fourteen senior level leaders from multiple for-profit organizations responded to an open-ended written questionnaire. It was found that these leaders perceived leadership validation from their followers as well as freedom from management of their followers. This study supports Russell’s (2016) claim that “servant leader realizes tangible and intangible benefits from serving followers” (p.52).

Feldman (2014) questioned “what is the impact of being a servant leader on the servant leader himself/herself? That is, how does being a servant leader shape one’s self-concept and one’s self-esteem?” (p.13). Chan (2016) advocates that servant leadership cultivates grit and growth mindset in learners and they develop their capacity to serve others. The author further argues that development and practice of servant leadership in adolescent promotes their wellness.

Wellness

The World Health Organization (2006) states that “health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity”. Wellness is a process that requires ongoing work to obtain optimum health (Zwetsloot & Pot, 2004).

The concept of wellness, as developed by Hettler (1976), has six dimensions: occupational, physical, social, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional. The occupational dimension encourages one to seek satisfaction and enrichment through work. The physical

dimension emphasizes the importance of physical activity and good diet. The social dimension highlights the interdependence of people with others as well as their environment, which leads to sense of belonging in a community. The intellectual dimension promotes one's desire to acquire new knowledge and skills, develop his/her potential, and share his/her gifting with others. The spiritual dimension leads one to search for meaning and purpose of one's existence in relation to the universe as well as aligning one's values and beliefs with his/her actions. The emotional dimension brings awareness, acceptance, and regulation of a wide range of feelings in self and others. Hence, healthy living is about balancing and developing these six wellness dimensions.

Research findings show that wellness has a positive effect on academic and individual success (Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008; Gieck & Olsen, 2007; Horton & Snyder, 2009). One possible explanation for this argument can be reasoned by Loehr and Schwartz (2003) that "to be fully engaged, we must be physically energized, emotionally connected, mentally focused and spiritually aligned with a purpose beyond our immediate self-interest" (p.5).

Therefore, the author aims to discover if the practice of servant leadership fosters the development of wellness in servant leaders. While servant leaders take an active role in serving, leading and building their community, not only those who are served become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous as described by Greenleaf (1970), the servant leaders, in return, incorporate the elements of wellness in their daily life.

METHOD

This empirical study explored the connection between servant leadership practice and servant leaders' wellness development. Hettler's model of holistic wellness was a suitable framework for this study as it was used to promote wellness in university and community settings (Baldwin, Towler, Oliver, & Datta, 2017). This study was conducted in a secondary school in Hong Kong. The participants of this research were learners aged 15 to 18.

This was a qualitative study exploring the written reflections of learners aged 15 to 18, who had chosen to participate in an extracurricular club. Through the lens of an interpretivist, knowledge was constructed experientially by each of the subjects through their social interaction with their context (Creswell, 2003; Crotty, 1998).

Context

The participation of this extracurricular club was voluntary and there was no credit bearing for joining this program. It aimed to provide an avenue for learners aged 12 to 18 to become active citizens through sustainable volunteering opportunities and youth leadership development. Its vision was to raise awareness and care for the less fortunate of the city.

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The club was divided into four groups and these groups partnered with different non-government organizations. Group 1 held a reading program where volunteers had the opportunity to hold storytelling sessions with children from low-income, single parented families, ethnic minorities and new immigrants. Group 2 reached out to the elderly living in nursing homes. Group 3 taught local Chinese primary students English through games, drama, and songs. Group 4 ran an art workshop for children of refugees and asylum seekers.

Participants

Each of these four groups was led by two to three student leaders, one teacher from the school and one staff from the respective non-government organization. Each group had about twenty members and the student leaders had joined the extracurricular club for several years. A total of nine student leaders were invited to provide their reflection.

Data Collection

Using a Google Form, a questionnaire with written prompts was sent to all participants. There prompts were general questions, probing participants to reflect on their role, responsibilities, and memorable moments.

This approach was intentional to safeguard the credibility of this study. The data collected were records of participants' experiences, which prevented them from giving answers with what they thought would please the researcher. The researcher was conscious of researcher's bias and avoided asking questions which could steer participants to respond in particular ways (Babbi, 2010).

Prior to obtaining the data, participants gave their written consent and acknowledged their understanding of this research. The written reflections were analyzed thematically as outlined in the Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It consisted of (a) affixing codes, (b) sorting the codes by patterns of commonality and differences, (c) identifying themes, and (d) generalizing key findings. The focus was to record and then analyze participants' perceptions, feelings, knowledge and behavior as embedded in the text (Bernard and Ryan, 1998).

Findings and Analysis

Seven themes were identified from the codes. They were (a) being a servant leader, (b) becoming a servant leader, (c) spiritual wellness, (d) occupational wellness, (e) intellectual wellness, (f) social wellness, and (g) emotional wellness. Quotations were selected among the sorted codes as evidence to support the identified themes. Reference to a quotation is indicated with an altered code.

Being a Servant Leader. Nine student leaders shared their reasons for joining the extracurricular club. They said that they wanted "to serve", "to contribute back to their

community”, and “to step out of their comfort zone”. It began with a desire to serve others and that led them to step up to be the leaders.

These participants described their responsibilities such as “leading meetings and discussions”, “planning and executing activities”, “coordinating and organizing activities”, as well as “collaborating and training other group members”. These are evidence of their leadership in their groups.

The student leaders articulated their goals as to “devote time to restore the injustice in the society”, “stop abuse”, “extend its impact to others in the society”, “care for those who are not as privileged as us”, and “make a positive change in the society”. Their reflections concurred with Greenleaf’s definition of servant leaders who begin with a serving heart. They stepped up to lead and wanted to support the less fortunate through their leadership.

Becoming a Servant Leader. The ten characteristics of servant leaders as identified by Spears (2010) are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. These student leaders had opportunities in developing these traits while serving others.

One student leader emphasized the importance of patience in his work. Patience allowed this student leader to be an empathetic listener, to bring healing in his workplace, and to be mindful of others’ needs. His verbatim was:

4VII3: I have learned that patience is really important in serving. During the buddy reading sessions, patience plays a huge role especially when the children are not familiar with communicating in English. In the process of planning sessions, patience also plays a role as everyone in the group is busy, it takes time for them to reply and respond to what we have asked.

Another student leader was aware of her commitment to become a servant leader. Her conceptualization skills had grown over the years. Her verbatim was:

5VII4: I have learned to step out of my comfort zone. Be proactive. Strive to serve the group and put the needs of others first. I have also enhanced my organizational skills in terms of planning the program and outlining clear objectives for myself and the other members. Moreover, I have further developed my communication and interpersonal skills, especially in collaborating with partnering organizations, empathizing with others and motivating my team to actively participate in the activities planned.

A veteran student leader who had been with the extracurricular club for four years felt responsible to develop others. His verbatim was:

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4VI2: My work is to equip future leaders to take on the role in leading the groups and to encourage more students to join.

Spiritual Wellness. These student leaders initially joined the groups as members. Instead of opting for other extracurricular activities, they stayed on this particular one for years. They found their work meaningful and desired to make positive contribution to their beneficiaries. Two verbatim comments were:

1III1: What I am doing is meaningful. I can contribute back to the society and get to know my community better. I am encouraged to step out of my comfort zone to help other people who are in needs.

6IX4: I treasure the opportunity to serve the community, meet people from all walks of life, and make new friends.

Occupational Wellness. Being the student leaders was not an easy task. It required them to overcome various difficulties. Three verbatim comments were:

6VIII5: I constantly get stressed out because I want the activities to be interesting. It is also hard to deal with some of the members in my group.

6VIII8: I didn't really know how to respond to them if I disagree with what they say.

6VIII9: It was nerve wracking. We don't know the kids well and some kids showed boredom in classes which made us worry about the quality of our program.

Despite these challenges, the student leaders found satisfaction in their work. They were willing to give up their free time during the weekends or school breaks to reach out to their community. Two verbatim comments were:

6IX1: I really treasure the bonding moments between members, and between us and the beneficiaries. Seeing everyone growing and improving really becomes the motivation for me to continue leading and serving my community, even if only little impact was made.

6VIII4: It is challenging for me to lead a group of student volunteers who are new to volunteering but I am glad that these new members are now actively participating in the sessions.

Intellectual Wellness. The student leaders acquired new knowledge and skills. They had opportunities to communicate with other non-government organizations. They initiated, coordinated and organized various programs involving: planning and executing different activities, training other team members, as well as ordering and allocating resources. Furthermore, they learned to promote their work to their peers so that they could gain others' support. Two verbatim comments were:

3IV4: I am responsible to lead a team of student volunteers to conduct a buddy reading program at an elementary school, planning the buddy reading sessions with other members, contacting xxx and other collaborating parties, and planning and executing other activities.

2III1: I assist younger members and give advice to them, teaching them the right way to approach their beneficiaries. I work with other leaders to plan out yearly projects and campaigns. I share among ourselves about the positives and challenges during our service. I want to raise awareness in the school and educate the student body about the social issues in Hong Kong.

Social Wellness. The student leaders made connection with people from all walks of life. They found support from their teammates as well as made new relationships with those they reached out to. Two verbatim comments were:

5VIII1: It was difficult for me at first to approach and start a conversation with the elderly in the first home visit. However, as I watched the more experienced members to engage in the conversation, I started to relax and joined in the conversation. I find their life stories interesting to listen to, knowing that everyone is somewhat unique yet similar in some ways, and some of the stories can even teach me a valuable lesson.

5VIII4: I am touched that the kids from the community center we volunteered say hello to me whenever they see me on the streets.

Emotional Wellness. The student leaders described their feelings with words such as “honored”, “happy”, “fulfilling”, “privileged” “amazing” and “thankful”. They felt that the challenging work was worthwhile. They were motivated to persevere through the hardship. They felt connected with their teammates and those they met through this outreach. They were grateful for these community outreaching opportunities. Two verbatim comments were:

7XI5: I feel the sense of belonging to a group that is passionate about serving others, and this is something important in my high school life. Sometimes it might get pretty hectic when there are many agendas items, and I get frustrated when members are not responding to our questions, but most of the time, I enjoy being a leader and a part of this group.

7XI8: I am very thankful to be given the opportunity to lead and participate in this group these past three and a half years. I enjoy having face-to-face conversations with people I meet. My high school years would not have been the same without joining this group.

To sum up, the nine student leaders from four different groups worked on different social projects. They took the role of servant leaders and developed a capacity to serve others. They found their work meaningful and stayed on this school extracurricular club

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for several years. They stepped out of their comfort zones; reached out to other people, and overcame difficulties. They learned and applied new knowledge and skills. They developed friendships with their teammates and those they served. They were proud of their work. Through serving others, their spiritual, occupational, intellectual, social and emotional wellness were nurtured.

DISCUSSION

Feldman (2014) questioned “what is the impact of being a servant leader on the servant leader himself/herself? That is, how does being a servant leader shape one’s self-concept and one’s self-esteem?” (p.13). This study shows that while serving others, the servant leader benefits in this process. Adolescents, who choose to be servant leaders, enhance their capacity to serve through regular interaction with people of their community. They become better listeners and develop empathy. They become better team players and have opportunities to communicate with people from other sectors of the community.

Community building is an attribute of a servant leader (Spears, 2010), an action of servant leadership (Laub, 2000), and meaningful work for adolescents as discussed in this paper. Youngsters can build up their self-concept and self-esteem through actively serving a cause which they believe in. They acquire new knowledge and skills while overcoming hurdles and resolving conflicts. They develop confidence, patience and resilience. Being connected with like-minded individuals support youngsters’ social and emotional needs. As stated by Hettler (1976), the concept of wellness has six dimensions: occupational, physical, social, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional. While serving others, five out of the six wellness dimensions (spiritual, occupational, intellectual, social and emotional) of servant leaders are nurtured.

CONCLUSION

This empirical study presents evidence that adolescents, who choose to be servant leaders, bring positive impact to their community. As they serve their community, they further develop their attributes as servant leaders and capacity to serve others effectively. There is an ongoing tangible and intangible benefit cycle between the servant leader and those they serve (Rusell, 2016). The author advocates that servant leadership supports wellness development in adolescents and should be incorporated in schools through curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular programs’ design.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study is limited to the data collection of nine student leaders in the form of a written questionnaire. This method does not allow the researcher to ask the participants for any elaboration or clarification. As an extension, a deeper understanding of servant-leadership and wellness development of adolescents can be achieved through one-on-one interviews or focus-group discussions. An expansion of the sample size to include more participants could collect more data, further confirm the connection between servant leadership and wellness development in youngsters. Furthermore, it would be a worthwhile study of collecting journal entries of participants after each service. It can be a longitudinal study of a servant leader’s developmental journey over time.

Lastly, Parris and Peachey (2013) listed fourteen different instruments which were used in twenty seven empirical survey-based studies of servant leadership among adult participants. However, the researcher cannot find a specific survey tool designed to measure servant leadership among adolescents. Hence, it is worthwhile to develop an empirical instrument or modify an existing one, for the advancement of servant leadership in adolescents. This survey tool would be of great value to examine correlation between servant leadership and wellness development of youngsters.

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