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Student leadership development within the primary years

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Published in:
Education 3-13

DOI:
[10.1080/03004279.2024.2377092](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2377092)

Publication date:
2024

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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

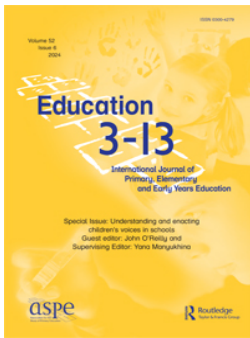
Citation for published version (APA):
Raudoniute, R., & Beresford-Dey, M. (2024). Student leadership development within the primary years: perceptions of leaders and teachers in an Eastern European International School. *Education 3-13*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2377092>

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Education 3-13

International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rett20

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To cite this article: Rita Raudoniute & Marie Beresford-Dey (11 Jul 2024): Student leadership development within the primary years: perceptions of leaders and teachers in an Eastern European International School, Education 3-13, DOI: [10.1080/03004279.2024.2377092](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2377092)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2377092>



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Student leadership development within the primary years: perceptions of leaders and teachers in an Eastern European International School

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores primary-student leadership (PSL) cultivation and identifies the leadership characteristics and skills valuable to its enhancement. Although scholars emphasise the importance of PSL, they also recognise the limited research in this area. In response to the research questions: *How do school leaders and teachers perceive the importance of PSL? What are the perceived key characteristics of PSL? How do leaders and teachers inculcate and promote PSL?* This case study sought the perspectives of school leaders and teachers from one international school in Eastern Europe. Qualitative research methods were employed to capture rich and authentic insights through three semi-structured interviews with school leaders and one semi-structured focus group discussion with four primary teachers. Our findings indicate that PSL development is valuable and consists of several characteristics, including an entrepreneurial mindset and compassionate leadership. We conclude with recommendations for practice commencing with a focus on the school's vision and mission statement.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 February 2024
Accepted 28 June 2024

KEYWORDS


Primary student leadership; student leadership development; student leadership skills; leadership promotion; international schools

Introduction

Due to the continuous changes in societal, political, economic, and environmental factors, it is essential for learners to be prepared for the unforeseen challenges of the future (OECD 2018). In light of this, scholars have sought to determine the importance of leadership skills in students as a mediator for empowerment, engagement, and its long-term impact on their overall learning and development (Beachboard and Dause 2019; Covey et al. 2014; Hennes and Ball 2019; Tyrer 2010). Although scholars acknowledge that children of all ages can assume leadership roles (Karagianni and Montgomery 2018) and emphasise the importance of early commencement of leadership building (Murphy and Johnson 2011), Wagner (2008) reported the lack of leadership skills among young people as a concern.

Leadership is often defined as the ability to influence followers to achieve common goals and create dynamic, positive communities where all stakeholders are valued and supported (Sanchez, Paul, and Thornton 2022). Acting as stewards for student leadership and working directly or indirectly with students, school leaders who promote a pro-leadership environment across the

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2377092>.

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school are crucial (Coffey and Lavery 2018; Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay 2021; Hine and Lavery 2015; Lavery and Hine 2012). Inclusive leadership, where the whole school community shapes a leadership culture, is powerful in fostering student leadership (Coffey and Lavery 2018; Covey et al. 2014; Malloy and Leithwood 2017; Sutcliffe 2013). Schoolwide shared responsibilities and leading by example are considered effective elements in promoting student leadership (Covey et al. 2014; Sutcliffe 2013). Thus, inclusive leadership benefits the community by allowing each member to work towards shared purposes alongside enhancing leadership capacity (Bagwell 2019; Corlette 2016; Demara 2017).

Although extensive research has been conducted on leadership skills development in secondary education and beyond (Coffey and Lavery 2018; Hennes and Ball 2019; Kapur 2021; Mays 2016; Shau-nessy and Karnes 2004), few studies focus on the primary sector (Ogurlu and Emir 2014; Swantner 2016; Thomson 2012). While there is limited research surrounding primary students' leadership (PSL) development, particularly within international schools, existing literature affirms its importance and effectiveness from the early years onwards (Bisland 2004; Covey et al. 2014; Kremer 2018; Raybans 2014). Moreover, Murphy and Johnson (2011) note the malleability of young children's behaviour, skills, and attributes at an early age and identify childhood as a 'sensitive period for development' (460) and 'a critical window of opportunity' for developing their full potential (UNICEF, no date). Therefore, as Parlar, Turkoglu, and Cansoy (2017) point out, empirical studies in this area are urgently needed, which leads us to explore the following research questions: How do school leaders and teachers perceive the importance of PSL? What are the perceived key characteristics of PSL? How do leaders and teachers inculcate and promote PSL?

This paper has been organised in the following way. Initially, the background literature is examined, highlighting some of the key concepts of PSL promotion. Subsequently, the qualitative research design is described before presenting data collected from school leaders and teachers in one Eastern European international school. Lastly, we conclude by emphasising the characteristics of PSL promotion and recommending a range of actions.

Background literature

Alongside school leaders, teachers have the closest interactions with students to foster leadership, they also play a crucial role in fostering a leadership culture (Covey et al. 2014; Parlar, Turkoglu, and Cansoy 2017). Additionally, various studies (Beachboard and Dause 2019; Covey et al. 2014; Kremer 2018; Sherrington 2017) have identified six essential characteristics that promote PSL, which include: student voice, relationships and social integration, social emotional learning, effective communication, service-learning, and self-development and reflective practice – which we will now consider.

Student voice is endorsed throughout a large and growing body of literature identifying this characteristic as fundamental to empowering students, developing their leadership skills and, in turn, promoting academic attainment (Beachboard and Dause 2019; Covey et al. 2014; Cowley 2018; Griffith and Burns 2015; 2017; Kremer 2018; Sherrington 2017). When voice is followed up with action, promoted student voice and choice set the foundation for students' ownership which is one of the essential leadership development features (Beachboard and Dause 2019). Likewise, Mitra (2008) and Duwe (2017) report that student voice catalyzes change in schools, aiding improvements to teaching and the curriculum and cultivating student-teacher relationships. Komives, Dugan, and Owen (2011) suggest adopting a stance of student-centred learning, inquiry, flexibility, and innovation to promote student voice, choice, and agency. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the importance of student voice in developing children's leadership skills, enhancing academic achievement, and empowering students. They highlight how promoting PSL can lead to a greater sense of ownership and initiate positive change.

To enhance PSL development further, Lavery and Hine (2012) advocate that service learning should form an underlying component. Service is the fundamental purpose of every job that promotes student agency in schools (Beachboard and Dause 2019). Studies suggest that service

learning endorses students' leadership skills by allowing them to practice soft skills, find fulfilment and connect learning to reality (Beachboard and Dause 2019; Raybans 2014). To amplify this, Des Marais, Yang, and Farzanehkhia (2000) claim that service learning is the most powerful approach in PSL development. Likewise, Hine and Lavery (2015) argue that primary students respond positively to leadership activities when combined with service-learning opportunities. Service learning is a mechanism that teaches respect and tolerance of others (youth.gov, no date) and, therefore, contributes to social integration and relationship development.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that social integration and relationship development strengthen PSL (Covey et al. 2014; Demara 2017; Griffith and Burns 2015; Sherrington 2017). Therefore, it is suggested that leadership events, and direct or integrated leadership activities, should be incorporated into daily learning (Beachboard and Dause 2019; Covey et al. 2014; Liang 2019; Raybans 2014). Similarly, Liesveld, Miller, and Robison (2005) suggest paradigm shifts for both teachers and students by introducing a more collaborative, dynamic, and leadership-empowered culture. These shifts aim to create a supportive environment where students feel valued and motivated to take on leadership roles. Implementing such a culture not only helps to develop leadership skills but also promotes a sense of belonging and community, which in turn can enhance students' social-emotional learning.

Researchers widely acknowledge the importance of social skills in developing student leadership capacity (Beachboard and Dause 2019; Boswell, Christopher, and Colburn 2018; Covey et al. 2014; Demara 2017; Kremer 2018; Liang 2019). Wagner (2008) argues that collaboration across networks and leading by influence are essential skills for effective leadership cultivation. Additionally, emotional intelligence is closely associated with social development. Sutcliffe (2013), Demara (2017), Kremer (2018), Liang (2019), and Beachboard and Dause (2019) examine emotional intelligence as a vital leadership determinant because mindful self-awareness and self-regulation are decisive traits for effective leadership: it positively impacts school leaders, staff, students, parents and the wider community (Siegel and Goleman 2020; Sutcliffe 2013). Taken together, Andersen (2011) and Goleman (2011), quoted in Covey et al. (2014, 37) advocate that social-emotional learning provides students with essential life skills and, in turn, promotes a more caring and safer environment. Likewise, Siegel and Goleman (2020) advocate implementing social-emotional learning in schools to promote holistic education that encourages compassion, gratitude, resilience, connection and positive self-development.

Subsequently, in accordance with contemporary literature, effective communication (Beachboard and Dause 2019; Kremer 2018; Liang 2019), including emphatic listening (Covey et al. 2014; Demara 2017; Kremer 2018) is widely regarded as a key leadership quality. It is essential for leaders to effectively communicate, find a common language and unite with shared goals (Kremer 2018; Raybans 2014). Moreover, school leaders must develop the competence of cross-cultural understanding and effectively communicate shared ideas with enthusiasm and focus (Wagner 2008). Kremer (2018) recommends that student leaders prioritise listening, embrace criticism and diverse viewpoints, and remain open-minded to align with their self-development (Covey et al. 2014; Demara 2017).

Self-development and reflective practice are essential components of successful leadership, as they contribute to building a strong leadership capacity (Kremer 2018; Raybans 2014). The broad category of self-development encompasses inquiry, curiosity, self-motivation, and a growth mindset (Beachboard and Dause 2019; Covey et al. 2014; Kremer 2018). Within this, reflection is considered to be important for leaders and student leadership development (Beachboard and Dause 2019; Demara 2017; Kremer 2018). The implementation of reflective practices can positively impact collaboration and the overall school climate (Beachboard and Dause 2019). Accordingly, reflection helps to foster an awareness of progress and areas for improvement, laying the foundation for lifelong learning and student leadership cultivation.

Finally, PSL-promoting characteristics also include decision-making, problem-solving, conflict management, goal setting. Therefore, diverse, creative and critical thinking are depicted as necessary student leadership traits (Beachboard and Dause 2019; Boswell, Christopher, and Colburn 2018; Covey et al. 2014; Demara 2017; Kremer 2018; Liang 2019; Raybans 2014). More specifically, critical

thinking and problem-solving are essential to master in a dynamic environment of diverse cultures (Wagner 2008). Additionally, courage, endurance, strength, and risk-taking are endorsed as vital student leadership traits (Beachboard and Dause 2019; Boswell, Christopher, and Colburn 2018; Demara 2017; Kremer 2018; Liang 2019; Raybans 2014). Finally, Kremer (2018) argues that perseverance and endurance cultivation aid students in building confidence and progress despite any obstacles they may face.

The nurturing of student leadership involves various characteristics, which collectively aid in the formation of all-round and efficient leaders. However, it is important to critically appraise the extent to which these practices foster inclusivity and fairness. By maintaining a critical approach, educators and policymakers can enhance and refine student leadership programmes to better cater to the changing requirements of the educational sector and society in general.

Materials and methods

This study adopted an interpretive lens and aimed to gather the perspectives of primary school leaders and teachers concerning PSL. As Sarantakos (2013) and Robson and McCartan (2016) argue, qualitative approaches prioritise human construction of social situations and the multiple realities that emerge from them. As a result of 'our desire to understand complex social phenomena' (Yin 2014, 4), we employed a case study design as it allowed for a descriptive, holistic, interpretative analysis that provided unique examples of real people in a natural, yet complex setting (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). In international schools, which enact global educational policies within a local environment (Ledger, Vidovich, and O'Donoghue 2014), the typical complexities of school environments are further compounded. Characterised by a detailed examination of a small sample (Tight 2010) and a narrow focus on individual participants (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018), case studies catch the dynamics of unfolding situations (Yin 2014). Therefore, we deemed a case study appropriate for our study since we were seeking authentic perceptions from school leaders and teachers in the primary sector of one international school.

Background context

The school selected for this study is a private international school located at the heart of an Eastern European city. City School (pseudonym) is a modern, purpose-built school that caters for over 500 learners across two campuses. Learning occurs from preschool (from the age of 5) through to secondary education (5–10 grades); the International Baccalaureate is offered at diploma level (11–12 grades). According to the school's website, its primary education offering focuses on developing students through integrated and experience-based learning and developing their capability of creation and self-sufficiency. We purposively selected the site for three reasons: (i) the school has a well-established education philosophy and a student development programme in operation (ii) it is one of a few bilingual international schools in the country (iii) pragmatically, it is a city that is well known to one of the researchers who also had access as a researcher.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection relied on three semi-structured interviews with school leaders (Appendix 1) and a semi-structured focus group discussion (Appendix 2) comprising four primary teachers from one purposely selected primary school. Neither data collection method relied on the other. Non-probability, purposive sampling of participants was also chosen to acquire in-depth, valuable information from the participants who are in a position to provide it. We sought approval and guidance from the school's principal regarding which teachers would be available across different subject areas. Pseudonyms were used to ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality. The participants comprised three leaders (Charlie, Taylor, and Sam) and four teachers (Lee, Ashley, Riley, and Brook).

Institutional ethical approval (E2019-121) had been obtained before data collection. Semi-structured protocols were employed to help focus the discussions and elicit insight surrounding the key themes of PSL. We designed ten interview questions (Appendix 1) and ten focus group questions as a result of our literature review. The data collection occurred online through Microsoft Teams, allowing for the recording of the discussion. Each online interview and focus group meeting lasted an average of 60 min. We transcribed the collected data verbatim. All the participants validated the interview and focus group transcriptions before data analysis commenced. After reading the transcripts multiple times for acquaintance purposes, the data were thematically analyzed through coding, linking noteworthy statements and patterns (Fossey et al. 2002; McGrath and Coles 2013; O’Leary 2017). While keeping the research questions in mind, we analyzed the data using flexible, inductive approaches, allowing us to move forward, backwards, and sideways when conducting research.

Results and discussion

This research intended to explore the importance of Primary Student Leadership (PSL) through the perception of school leaders and teachers within one international school. Specifically, the researchers sought to investigate (1) how school leaders and teachers perceive the importance of PSL; (2) the perceived characteristics of PSL; and (3) how leaders and teachers inculcate and promote PSL. The data analysis generated various themes from each research question, which we present using direct quotations as illustrations.

Importance and overall perceptions of PSL

To provide us with a grounding for the rest of the narrative, the first theme we explored was the participants’ perceptions concerning PSL. The perception that starting PSL development early was a common theme in the responses; if leadership cultivation ‘...starts from grade zero, it becomes a part of their everyday life ... otherwise when [students] reach teenagers they are just not interested’ (Brook). For some, PSL aligned with a progression to secondary and tertiary education; others viewed PSL as fundamental for personal development, such as building independence and confidence, and contributing to students’ future beyond education:

For children to learn that [leadership] ... and experience that from a young age its going to set them up for greater success as adults. Not necessarily success in the way that they will earn lots of money and have a very high corporate job. But success that they will live a true life for them because they will be able to take the initiative and have the leadership within themselves to make decisions, make the right choices and behave in a way that they would also want to role model to others. So being aware of who they are and what they are bringing and offering to the community and the society that they are part of. (Taylor)

Participants in the study also reported benefits including responsibility, teamwork, endurance, curiosity, empathy, and positive relationships at an early age. These benefits align with the tasks and skills outlined by Murphy and Johnson (2011) for students in preschool and elementary years. For example, ‘influencing others’, ‘social skills’, ‘emotional intelligence’, and ‘coordinating others in teams’ (466). Similarly, whilst some authors recommend leadership education to begin as early as preschool to set a foundation for future leadership (Bisland 2004; Kremer 2018; Raybans 2014), Tyrer (2010) and Andersen (2011) note the importance of social and emotional activities to increase confidence and responsibility for self and others.

Influence of wider school leadership

Most participants highlighted that a school’s vision and mission statement should steer the fostering of PSL, reflect decision-making, and evolve with school life. Similarly, Steenbarger (2015) argues that followers become much more engaged if goals and actions are intrinsically demonstrated as productivity flows naturally from real, meaningful aims. In contrast, extrinsically imposed vision and

goals reduce engagement and productivity. Therefore, school members must own the vision and mission where PSL development is endorsed.

Fostering the development of empowering and exemplary schoolwide leadership through meaningful practices, role modelling, and active involvement of all members was reported by all participants as essential elements of PSL, for instance,

It is extremely important because ... everything starts with the culture that you create. (Sam)

The main thing we can do is set an example. Modelling the behaviour we want to see is super important if we want our students to approach people in the right way; if we want our students to listen and then make decisions, we model that behaviour for everybody to see; the whole school should model the behaviour that it wants to see. (Charlie)

Other participants commented that teachers automatically pass these aspects on to students if they feel supported, valued, and empowered. Similarly, Covey et al. (2014) and Leithwood (2021) argue that leaders should inspire, optimise, and empower diverse groups' collaboration to provide a model of leadership for students to learn from.

Within the discussion surrounding social-emotional learning in leadership, the concept of compassionate leadership was raised as a feature for modelling leadership:

If we want to see compassionate leaders, if we want to see leaders who consider the feelings of others, if we want to see empathy in the leaders of the future, hopefully, our students are the ones who [are] going to influence the next generation. We model that behaviour as well as we can, and if we get things wrong, we apologise and explain how we could have done things better. (Charlie)

Compassionate leadership is defined as an emotional experience where an individual recognises and alleviates, where possible, the suffering or perceived unmet needs of another or other individuals (Goetz and Simon-Thomas 2017). Further, the Center for Compassionate Leadership (2019) identify compassionate leaders as being 'on the leading edge of a new age of connection, creativity, and cooperation by acting with kindness, empathy, compassion and concern for others' (no page). Thus, empathy is central to the concept. For some participants, they valued a positive culture and empathy among all school members, including school leaders. For example:

Speaking for the kind of leadership I value having is [one who is] very used to getting their hands dirty in a classroom and can speak knowing what that experience of working and being in a classroom [is] ... then there is greater empathy and understanding in the needs of teachers. (Taylor)

According to Eades (2021), empathetic leadership increases follower engagement and performance, as evident in Taylor's above response. In turn, students' connections with teachers foster student engagement (Griffith and Burns 2017). Thus, an environment underpinned with compassionate leadership cyclically affects the whole school culture and positively influences PSL development (Sherrington 2017).

For many scholars, leadership is viewed as essential for the success of any organisation (Covey et al. 2014; Eades 2021; Northouse 2018; Sutcliffe 2013). Schoolwide leadership cultivation forms a core part of PSL as students are naturally exposed to leadership in all aspects of school life. To exemplify, Eades (2020) identifies role modelling, compassionate culture formation, open communication, and serving and empowering members as critical leadership elements in today's changing world. Overall, in response to the first question, 'How do school leaders and teachers perceive the importance of PSL?', our research findings indicate that school leaders and teachers perceive PSL as necessary and that development should commence from an early age. Moreover, schoolwide leadership has a positive impact on PSL development.

Characteristics of PSL

Turning to the second research question, '*What are the perceived key characteristics of PSL?*', we identified several themes in the data which align with PSL characteristics identified across scholarly

publications and subsequently reflect those typically found in many leadership texts. For example, Covey et al. (2014); Demara (2017); Boswell, Christopher, and Colburn (2018); and, Beachboard and Dause (2019). The participating school leaders and teachers provided examples such as decisiveness, empathy, good listening/communication skills, teamworking, self-sustainability, entrepreneurial mindsets, courage, risk-taking, creativity, and open-mindedness:

An understanding that you cannot learn something new without mistakes is critical for the leader, and if you are trained in the environment where the mistake is something bad, you will not take the risk, so actually, you will never become a leader. We have to cultivate a very open environment for creativity and different views. (Sam)

According to Beresford-Dey et al. (2022), many of these features (e.g. courage, risk-taking, and open-mindedness) are characteristics of creativity in school leadership. Nonetheless, Sam's view chimes with Beachboard and Dause (2019) in that students should be encouraged to accept failure as learning is a messy process, and mistakes should be regarded as opportunities for growth (Dweck 2012; Griffith and Burns 2015). Additionally, some discussion was given to student agency (voice, choice, and ownership) and self-development, for example:

Leadership is almost like the leadership of myself and is connected to social skills, emotional skills, teaching the whole child ... and to [student] agency, so getting the child to just take learning on themselves. (Ashley)

Leadership [in primary students] is about ownership of their actual learning as they are still developing so many social, cognitive, and independence skills. It is quite challenging for young children to be put in roles where they are leading a group or leading a project. It has to start with them as individuals and taking that leadership and ownership of their own learning before I can expect them to apply it to a bigger group. (Taylor)

This thinking aligns with Bowman (2014), who suggests that PSL should start with self-development. Moreover, Cook-Sather (2020) recognises student agency as meaningful participation and an opportunity to 'exert influence in the learning context' (183) to elicit the co-creation of learning opportunities for themselves and others, thus forming an empowering culture. In this respect, some participants highlighted the need to create deep connections with students and know their likes and strengths:

It is about going back and playing to their strengths and putting them in situations where their strengths are greater. (Lee)

You need to find the key to each student's heart and head, which means that students will be much more open-minded and actively take some initiative when [they] will be brought into something that they are very much interested in. (Sam)

Getting to know the students well and focusing on students' strengths rather than deficits unlocks their inner heroes (Beachboard and Dause 2019). Likewise, Covey et al. (2014, 39) define leadership as 'communicating a person's worth and potential so clearly that they are inspired to see it in themselves'. That said, one participant, Riley, recognised the need to also focus on weaknesses to bring about balance, but perhaps this requires extending when considering that great leaders are not the ones who are always the expert, but the ones who build and inspire teams with talented people.

Inculcation and promotion of PSL

Turning to the final research question, 'How do leaders and teachers inculcate and promote PSL?', all participants recognised the need for continuous leadership development. Some highlighted that although a few students appeared to show innate leadership, most needed to develop their potential through diverse learning opportunities. However, even students with inherent leadership attributes require continuous development (Boswell, Christopher, and Colburn 2018; Corlette 2016; Kintigh 2013; Kremer 2018). Also, when the participants were asked how they develop PSL, the majority commented that they foster leadership through naturally occurring situations in daily learning, team-based methods, and sports activities.

Taylor emphasised the need for creating opportunities and environments that enable students to exercise leadership in diverse ways, as students have different likes, needs, and strengths. Differentiated environments and diverse leadership activities were greatly encouraged by other participants, for example:

We, as the educationalists, have to encourage leadership [and] give students that confidence. We have to make sure that we assign different roles and give different people a chance to take a different way of doing things in different circumstances. (Charlie)

These findings reflect those observed in earlier studies of individual, unique strengths and diverse leadership as valuable in helping students to find joy and inspiration in their lives (Beachboard and Dause 2019; Cowley 2018; Sherrington 2017). Moreover, upon being asked whether leadership should be incorporated into everyday learning or taught as standalone lessons, all seven participants concurred that leadership skills should be integrated into daily learning experiences. Ashley highlighted that when leadership and learning are interwoven naturally within the learning process, they become authentic and meaningful to students, even if not explicitly labelled as leadership learning. For example:

From the early years and into the beginning of primary up until about grade three, it needs to be more indirect and built in by the teacher. And although the teacher is aware of how he or she builds it into the day or lesson ... the children do not see it as a direct thing. They just go along with it, and without realising it, they are actually practicing, demonstrating and developing those skills. (Taylor)

In line with Covey et al. (2014), many interviewees emphasised the importance of social-emotional learning in fostering PSL. Ashley and Taylor recommended that teachers develop effective observation and facilitation skills, knowing when to facilitate and when to leave students to cultivate their social-emotional competencies by themselves. When the participants were asked how they develop social-emotional learning, the majority commented that they enable an open, positive environment and relationships where students feel supported and every voice counts. Similarly, positive framing is an empowering and effective tool (Covey et al. 2014; Sherrington 2017). Activities focused on kindness, gratitude, thankfulness, and humour enable the brain to follow familiar patterns and leverage students (Beachboard and Dause 2019).

Parental and community involvement

Most participants felt that parental and community involvement positively fosters PSL as it gives rich context for students (Taylor). Likewise, Charlie, Riley, Sam, Ashley, and Brook reported that parental involvement supports PSL as parents are more likely to encourage positive leadership development outside the school. As reported:

Speaking to parents about the importance of being independent in their learning or allowing them to make decisions ... so there is this follow-through of leadership in the classroom and at home. (Ashley)

Strong home-school relationships help get the best out of every student and create an open and positive environment for all school members (Covey et al. 2014; Cowley 2018). However, some participants revealed that unmatched school and home environments challenge PSL cultivation.

Shifting the focus to community learning, Charlie concluded that interacting with people from different backgrounds fosters empathy and raises students' awareness that *'what is best for themselves is not necessarily what is best for everybody else'*. Also, Sam outlined that their primary students are involved in community projects which develops higher responsibility and enhances trust and support. Moreover, Taylor proposed that community engagement enables students to encounter diversity and gain a deeper understanding of diverse leadership and its significance. However, the literature goes beyond this and recognises service learning as a powerful PSL development tool which connects learning to reality (Beachboard and Dause 2019; Des Marais, Yang, and Farzanehkhia 2000; Raybans 2014). Ultimately, the interconnection between school, home, and the wider

community is significant and can highly increase students' productivity if interconnection is effectively addressed (Covey et al. 2014; Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay 2021; Leithwood, Louis, and Anderson 2004).

PSL related activities

Some participants noted that although a few students appeared to show innate leadership, the majority needed to develop their potential through diverse learning opportunities. However, even students with inherent leadership attributes require continuous development (Boswell, Christopher, and Colburn 2018; Corlette 2016; Kintigh 2013; Kremer 2018). Further, when the participants were asked how they develop PSL, the majority commented that they foster leadership through naturally occurring situations in daily learning, team-based methods, and sports activities.

Within the data, we identified a series of PSL-cultivating activities that some participants carried out. For example, Riley reported that two students led an activity related to calendar and weather questions, exercising leadership through voice and choice, decision-making, and leading their classmates every morning. A 'Would you rather' activity was also suggested as an opportunity to develop decision-making and reasoning skills. Moreover, Riley outlined that the 'democracy definition', where every voice counts, was introduced at the beginning of the year. Storytelling and story-watching followed by discussion and reflection, letting students experience certain situations rather than being told by the teacher, were recommended. Also, Ashley claimed that effective communication and constructive reflection on their own and their peers' leadership practices are important, a feature recommended by Beachboard and Dause (2019). Riley and Taylor echoed these words and argued that personal and group reflection highly contributes to students', teachers', and school leaders' leadership potential.

Also, Lee commented that *'sharing an equal sense of value through teamwork and experience'* fosters good role modelling among students. To exemplify effective teamwork, Ashley suggested a 'train activity' where primary students leave the classroom and follow each other in line in the corridors, then open and hold doors for each other. According to Ashley, such simple activity increases the sense of teamwork. Additionally, student-led sports teams, extracurricular activities, student councils, and house or prefect systems were suggested to foster schoolwide student leadership. Sam echoed these words in terms of student governance:

I would like to have much more student governance. I believe [primary] students are capable to take responsibility on much broader aspects, not just the narrow environment [the classroom], but also the school ... they are capable to contribute, and that is a very big room for PSL.

Covey et al. (2014) note that leadership development is a whole lot of unlimited imagination crafted by teachers to students, where staff members and students are welcome to employ their talents and creativity to design curriculums, programmes, activities, events, and assemblies to maximise its process.

Challenges to PSL implementation

The majority of participants noted various challenges to PSL implementation. Riley identified insufficient knowledge and expertise as a PSL concern as not all teachers are adept at integrating it into their teaching, requiring time and reflection due to its novelty. Taylor addressed several challenges related to group dynamics: effective student grouping, clear activities output expectation (group dynamics against academic output), and teachers as facilitators knowing when to support and when to leave students to thrive. Likewise, the right balance of facilitation and support is recommended by Sherrington (2017). Further, Charlie identified the issue of balancing dominating student personalities and letting everyone have a voice through positive role modelling, good class and seat groupings, roles assignments, rotations, and gentle enforcement.

Shifting focus to broader school leadership, micromanaging and empowering all staff members to lead was identified as a challenge (Charlie). Taylor added that PSL development could be negatively affected by different mindsets causing imbalance among school members and recommended active vision and mission application to align ambiguous perspectives. This resonates with research that recognises vision and mission alignment as critical elements in setting direction for all school members (Covey et al. 2014).

A final challenge that was reported surrounds external pressure, especially from parents regarding high academic expectations and any practices developing students' social-emotional skills are perceived as insignificant. Still, Taylor recommended embracing education beyond educational attainment and providing platforms to cultivate student leadership which are 'critically important ... [for] the twenty-first-century skills and success- children growing up to become successful adults'. Consequently, Brown (2015) examines play as deeply involved with human development and intelligence and urges educators to shift focus to skills, attitudes and habits development that support students to thrive in the modern world. Equally, Griffith and Burns (2015) associate students' low engagement with the lack of *soft* skills development. *Soft* skills are critical in responding flexibly and creatively to demands for new knowledge in a continuously changing and developing world (Sherrington 2017). Therefore, establishing trusting relationships with parents is essential for achieving shared school aims and objectives (Beachboard and Dause 2019; Covey et al. 2014; Cowley 2018).

Conclusion

Developing leadership skills should occur from a young age (Murphy and Johnson 2011), yet Wagner (2008) highlighted concerns surrounding children's lack of leadership skills, with Parlar, Turkoglu, and Cansoy (2017) highlighting that empirical studies in this area are much needed. The purpose of this study was to contribute to explorations regarding primary student leadership development, given the limited research in this area. Within the context of one Eastern European International School, this study emphasises the importance of PSL in children's development from a young age, where value was placed on developing leadership through responsibility, endurance, and curiosity, amongst other things. Our findings highlight PSL characteristics of decisiveness, effective communication skills, self-sustainability, entrepreneurial mindset (including creativity), and compassionate leadership. All of which were inculcated and promoted through student agency, empowerment, social and emotional development, team working, service learning, and parental and community involvement. Challenges to developing PSL were also noted, particularly in terms of parental and external pressures. Others included teacher leadership knowledge and the leadership or managerial approaches of senior school leadership.

Our data suggest several courses of action for PSL development. First, the importance of PSL being visible in the school's vision and mission statement to promote PSL throughout the school culture from senior leadership to the internal and external community. PSL should also be formally recognised in school development, policies, and lesson plans. Also, as all actors have a role to play, the school community must have relevant knowledge of leadership if they are to act as role models alongside providing leadership development opportunities. Therefore, professional development and leadership knowledge dissemination across actors are necessary.

Some limitations of the current study must be highlighted. Our data relied on a sample from one school; future studies must expand this understanding to determine the characteristics and inculcation of PSL across diverse contexts. It would also be beneficial to explore the student's perceptions of PSL, mainly through a longitudinal study throughout their primary years of education. Additionally, methods could extend understanding by employing quantitative studies to increase the data reach. Limited prior studies on the topic also inhibited the research design as we could not build upon previous studies. That said, our findings serve as a basis for future research to explore the perceptions of actors across all levels of the school system concerning PSL. Within these explorations, we recommend commencing with the school vision and mission statements as a point of reference.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the leaders and teachers who participated in this research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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