AN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY OF YOUTH PERSPECTIVE ON EFFECTIVE YOUTH LEADERSHP PROGRAMMING

by

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COMMITTEE APPROVAL AND RECOMMENDATION

Having read the dissertation entitled An Appreciated Inquire of Youth Perspective on Effective Youth Leadership Programming, authored by doctoral candidate, Maure Ann Metzger and having been present for the final defense of the dissertation held on May 9, 2007, we hereby recommend that this dissertation be accepted by Saint Mary's University of Minnesota toward the fulfillment of the dissertation requirements of the Doctor of Education degree in Leadership:

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Abstract

In this study, at-risk high school youth who participated in leadership programs at two different alternative educational settings were interviewed to obtain their perspectives on what constitutes effective leadership programming. Appreciative Inquiry interviews were utilized to explore the elements, processes, and practices that contribute to optimal leadership programming. Additional documents, including youth-generated visual imagery and written representations, were collected as collaborative evidence for the narrative interviews. Key themes that emerged were organized into a model representing the positive core of the Leadership program. The model included three main categories consisting of learning strategies, learning culture, and learning outcomes. Study findings indicated that elements such as experiential learning, empowerment, and impact were important for effective leadership programming.

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Chapter 1

Statement of the Problem

Research Problem Description

Fraenkel and Wallen (2003) described a research problem as something that is in need of exploration, change, or solutions. More specifically, research problems involve areas of concern to researchers, conditions they want to improve, difficulties they want to eliminate, or questions for which they seek answers. This section is organized into six areas: description of the study, purpose of the study, delimitations and assumptions, research questions, justification for the study, and definition of terms.

Description of the Study

In this study, at-risk high school youth who participated in the Leadership programs at two different alternative educational settings were interviewed to obtain their perspectives on what constituted effective leadership programming. Some of the students had IEPs (Individualized Educational Plans) ranging from Level I to Level IV settings.

Each of the two Leadership programs were located in different cities and counties. The alternative settings that housed these Leadership programs were located in a Midwest, geographically-diverse school district defined as an educational cooperative. It is geographically diverse in that the district covers a three-county area that includes both suburban and rural areas bordering a large, metropolitan city. The school district serves the needs of low incidence and high risk learners for seven member districts. Approximately 350 students are enrolled in the various programs throughout the district.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was utilized as the primary methodology for the inquiry process in this research. Appreciative Inquiry is a “co-constructive process that searches

for everything that 'gives life' to organizations, communities, and larger human systems when they are most alive, effective, creative and healthy in their interconnected ecology of relationships" (Cooperridder & Avital, 2005, p. 6).

Additional documents and artifacts, including youth-generated journal entries, pictures, and other visual and written representations of youth leadership, were collected as collaborative evidence for the narrative interviews. Data analysis consisted of coding, organizing themes and patterns, and mapping the positive core of the Leadership programs. Research findings were reported in the form of narratives, tables, and pictorial displays. The implications and applications of the findings are discussed in the final section of the dissertation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the elements, processes, and practices that contributed to successful youth leadership programming for at-risk youth (see Definitions of Terms section) from the perspective of youth who were currently engaged in leadership programs. It also sought to investigate the potential of these and other leadership programs when they are at their best, as experienced by the youth who participate in them.

On a broader, societal level, this research sought to highlight the value and need for developing and improving leadership opportunities for youth who are typically disenfranchised from traditional educational systems (institutions) and society at large. Gergen and Gergen (2000) purported that the goal of research ought to be one of inciting dialogue that continues to evolve as it moves through an extended network of participants, audiences, and society. They raised the question of whether the research(er)

empowers both the participants being studied as well as the discipline under study. Moreover, the authors noted that qualitative research has the opportunity, and perhaps even obligation, to affect cultural transformation.

Hence, this research aspired to raise awareness around the issue of youth leadership and at-risk youth. It strove to initiate and deepen conversations and understandings relevant to the potentiality, value, and empowerment of youth, especially youth with multiple risk factors in their lives. Gergen and Gergen (2000) asserted that research efforts of this sort that serve to transform common beliefs and practices require active cultural engagement and relational processes such as those proposed for this current social science endeavor.

Delimitations

Limitations

As with all studies, this research had limitations and assumptions relevant to its design and implementation. Delimitations pertain to the parameters of the study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) and assumptions include factors that are accepted at face value when direct evidence is not apparent or available.

1. A number of limitations defined the parameters of this study. This study was limited to high-school age students who qualified for alternative education programming. Leadership programs were limited to programs that were part of a formal, public alternative educational setting (program or school) that served at-risk and special needs high school students. Furthermore, this study was limited to the two designated Leadership programs in the chosen school district.

2. Only the first phase of the Appreciative Inquiry process, discovery, was utilized in this study. Formally addressing the latter phases of AI (dream, design, and destiny) was beyond the scope of this study due to the specific purpose and time limitations of this study. It should be noted, however, that these phases overlap; they are not self-contained stages of inquiry and development constrained by rigid boundaries. As such, information elicited in the initial Appreciative interviews could be utilized for the latter phases of the Appreciative Inquiry process. Although the primary focus in this study was the discovery phase of AI, the school district could choose to continue with the other phases after the research is completed.
3. This research was meant to examine *what is* and *what can be,* rather than *what is not*, hence the focus remained on the attributes and processes that enhanced the existing Leadership programs. A positive bias is inherent with the AI process and was reflected throughout the study. Also, the goal in this study was to illuminate the collective experience as opposed to the individual experience. Although individual members were interviewed, the intent was to capture and depict the commonalities and wholeness of their experiences.
4. This study did not intend to investigate what leadership is, nor did it seek to judge level of effectiveness of the current Leadership programs or its members. Instead, the study sought to uncover the elements and processes that were vital for enhancement of the current Leadership programs under study and possibly for other existing or potential programs. Moreover, the

intention of this study was to elicit the voices and perspectives of participating youth. The researcher's role consisted of inspiring, collecting, analyzing, and reporting the youth's input.

Assumptions

Several conditions were assumed for the purpose of this study.

1. It was assumed that students participated in the study with good intent, that is, they took the research process seriously and responded to the best of their ability.
2. For the purposes of this study, it was assumed that participants had the ability to recall past experiences from their time in the Leadership program. Moreover, it was assumed that participants were able to recall and create positive images and narratives relevant to the Leadership program.
3. It was assumed that the participants' willingness to be interviewed and their previous relationship with the researcher (who also functioned as the Leadership program facilitator) created a beneficial level of trust and rapport for the study.
4. Also, unless otherwise noted by participants, the interview environment was assumed to be comfortable and conducive to dialogue.

Research Question

Good research questions embody four essential characteristics (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Research questions should be feasible, clear, significant, and ethical.

The research question posed for this study was, "How do youth in leadership programs at alternative educational settings define effective leadership programming?" The intent of this study was to understand the elements, dimensions, and experiences that contributed to effective leadership programs as perceived by the youth who participated in them.

Justification for the Research

The need for leadership-based decision-making and for leaders in all cultures is on the rise in our society (Karnes & Chauvin, 2005; Karnes & Stephens, 1999). Burns (1978) claimed that the vast majority of influence is exerted in everyday relationships through local, unofficial, and unrecognized leaders of opinion. Transformation is no longer determined single-handedly by the great man; rather, it comes from the collective effort and achievement of a great people (Burns, 2003). Given the growing need for leaders and leadership capacity, leadership development for our youth is essential (Karnes & Stephens, 1999).

Despite the importance of quality leadership in our culture, leadership development for students remains one of the least discussed curricular areas in the literature (Karnes & Chauvin, 2005; Roach, Wyman, Brookes, & Chaves, 1999). Leadership development with at-risk youth is an even more recent and limited phenomenon (Grothaus, 2004; Imada et al., 2002; MacGregor, 2006; Simon, 2001). Moreover, the general construct and dimensions of youth leadership are not yet well-defined (Oakland, Falkenberg, & Oakland, 1996; Roach et al., 1999; Shaunessy & Karnes, 2005).

Schools are an ideal environment in which to teach the higher level social and emotional skills that prepare youth to be effective citizens (Ross, Powell, & Elias, 2002).

However, schools do not tend to incorporate leadership education as a part of their formal programming despite the benefits that leadership education has for all students (Bickmore, 2001; Karnes & Chauvin, 2005; Karnes & Stephens, 1999; Leventhal, 1999; Roach et al., 1999; Rosenberg, Mckeon, & Dinero, 1999). In addition, leadership skills are mostly effectively acquired through practice, yet few schools put forth the effort and resources to identify students and provide opportunities to help students realize their potential (Karnes & Chauvin, 2005; Karnes & Stephens, 1999).

Not only are leadership programs lacking in schools, when they do exist, they are particularly void of youth who have special needs or multiple risk factors (Grothaus, 2004; Imada et al., 2002; Simon, 2001). Furthermore, the outlook for implementing leadership programs in schools does not appear to be promising. Schools are perceived as an unlikely environment for leadership programming to emerge. One study declared that realistically, leadership programs will most likely need to be based in summer and out-of-school or after-school programming (Roach et al., 1999).

There is also a lack of youth voice, participation, and contribution in this field of study that so directly impacts them (Roach et al., 1999). Roach et al. reported that, "Leadership programs with youth need to derive from field-based studies the ways the youth themselves define, value, and enact leadership" (p. 13).

Likewise, Hancock (1994) asserted that it is essential that youth be empowered as leaders in the process of developing action plans and implementation strategies that affect their development. Moreover, youth leadership programs need to reflect the conditions and climates that young people create within their own peer structures and activities,

rather than replicating adult models of leadership that lack relevance and resonance with youth (Roach et al., 1999).

Given the current state of limited discussion, research, and programming in the area of youth leadership, especially as it pertains to at-risk youth in a school setting, there appeared to be a need for expanding the base of knowledge and practice in this field. There was an additional need for youth voice to help define and refine the body of knowledge and practices for effective leadership programs.

This study addressed the need for additional research pertaining to school-based leadership programming with at-risk youth and for youth perspective on effective leadership programming. The results of this research provided the means to improve leadership programming and practices in the school district selected for this research. Likewise, these study findings may also be of use to other schools that currently implement or are considering implementing youth leadership programs.

Significance of the Research

The significance of this research was that it added to the limited pool of research and literature that currently exists around this topic. It helped to address and narrow the gap that was frequently cited in the literature by researchers and practitioners in the field of youth leadership. This research also provided a growth opportunity for the programs involved in the study. Research findings could be directly applied to the Leadership programs under study for purposes of program improvement or transformation.

Moreover, this research could offer the necessary inspiration, information, and starting point for more schools to support and expand leadership programming for at-risk youth. This study also has the potential to help change the perception and definition of at-

risk youth from one of youth who have deficits and limitations, to one of youth who have potential and assets to contribute to the world, that is, youth of promise and competence versus youth at-risk.

At-risk youth may become at-risk citizens (Hancock, 1994; Ross et al., 2002). As such, the current study revealed the importance of leadership programming for at-risk youth as a means of uncovering or recovering their sense of personal and civic power. This research also promoted the valuation and empowerment of youth by directly involving them in a discovery process that informed practice and improved the opportunities available to youth for full participation as competent community members.

Operational Definitions

Several key terms were operationally defined for use in this study. They will be applied as stated for the context of the study.

At-risk Students

The term, at-risk students, was operationalized using the qualifying criteria provided by the state department of education for the Midwest state selected for this study: students under the age of 21 who: a) are performing substantially below grade level; b) are at least one year behind in credits for graduation; c) are pregnant or parenting; d) have experienced physical or sexual abuse; e) are chemically dependent; f) have mental health problems; g) have been homeless recently; h) have withdrawn from school or been chronically truant; or i) speak English as a second language or have limited English proficiency (Minnesota Department of Education, 2005). This study included at-risk youth of high school age (16 to 20 years old) who may or may not have had an individualized educational plan (IEP) and formal special education services.

Alternative Educational settings

Alternative educational settings consist of programs or schools that provide academic and other related programming (i.e., mental health, work experience) to at-risk youth (Knutson, 2002; Lange, 1998). They provide non-traditional structure and programming for students at risk for academic failure as noted in the previous definition. For purposes of this study, alternative educational settings were limited to public schools and programs, and did not include magnet schools, charter schools, or private schools. The two specific alternative education programs selected for this study were described earlier in the chapter.

S*pecial Education and IEPs*

Special education and IEPs are components of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).With regard to schooling, IDEA states that all children with disabilities have a right to free, appropriate public education and related services to meet their needs (Title 34-Education, n.d.). Disabilities include impairments such as autism; mental retardation; emotional disturbance; learning disabilities; traumatic brain injury; visual, speech, or hearing impairment; orthopedic impairment; and other health impairments. Special education means specialized instruction that is intended to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. An IEP (individual education plan) is a written plan for a child with a disability that is developed, reviewed and revised in accordance with designated criteria.

Youth Leadership

Youth leadership was defined by combining elements from the definitions provided by Des Marais et al. (2000), Fertman & Van Linden (1999), Karnes & Chauvin