A unique educational experience for adolescents: What do students and parents love and fear about the School for Student Leadership?

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Abstract

The School for Student leadership (SSL) provides a unique educational experience for Australian Year 9 secondary school students at a time when parental expectations may not necessarily be in alignment with student engagement and motivation. Yet there are often concerns amongst both students and their parents about spending time outside 'traditional' educational settings and the potential impact on development and achievement. This paper discusses part of a longitudinal project between Monash University Gippsland and the SSL, investigating how parents and students experience their involvement with the school through focused reflection over time. Initial findings suggest that parents have broader concerns than their adolescent children but that both acknowledge significant positive developmental changes. Interestingly, there was no concern expressed in relation to missing a term of traditional academic schooling by either parents or students, with suggestions that the social-emotional development that occurred far outweighed the loss of a term of schooling. The project will continue to conduct follow-up research to determine whether the reported benefits are sustained over time.

Introduction

The School for Student Leadership (SSL) was set up in Victoria, Australia, in 2000 to provide an avenue for Year 9 students in government secondary schools to experience an alternative to the 'traditional classroom'. The three campuses of the school, located in diverse regions of the state, provide nine-week fully residential programs that promote the development of leadership skills and relationship building, within a framework underpinned by experiential education and cooperative learning practices. The first campus, known as the Alpine School, at Dinner Plain in the Australian high country, opened in 2000. In 2007, the Snowy River campus opened at Marlo in East Gippsland, followed in 2009 by the Gnurad-Gundidj campus in Victoria's Western District.

The opportunity for participation is offered to students from a mix of urban, regional and remote areas. For each of the four school terms, 45 students from a range of government secondary schools live at one of the three campuses. Schools apply for up to four or five of their students to attend at any one time. According to Dyson and Zink (2007), "selection is not based on excellence, but on the quality of the students' applications" (p. 3). The SSL is not involved in the selection process, and it is up to each of the participating home schools (the schools where the students originate from) to determine their final selection process. Eleven full-time teaching staff plus a number of support staff are based at each campus and are rostered on in shifts covering both day and night.

The students participate in a full-time residential program where they undertake a curriculum designed to stimulate leadership ideals. In informal learning settings the students learn about leadership and individual learning styles including how their own brain works based on Herrmann's 'brain theory' (Herrmann, 1996). Physical activities, such as bike riding, rafting, skiing, bridge building and hiking incorporate many aspects of outdoor education (Plunkett & Dyson, 2010). Another core element of outdoor education activities include expeditions or what is referred to as the 'Expo,' which lasts for three or four days and occurs twice during the nine-week stay. The expeditions vary

from campus to campus and are tailored to suit the environment, whether it be alpine, beach or rural (Plunkett & Dyson, 2010). In the SSL environment students are also encouraged to develop a reflective journal of activities, to work in teams on a community-based project (CLP) to take back and implement in their home school and/or local community, while using technology to work with and record their experiences.

The goals of the SSL, which are currently still operational, are specified in the original Alpine School Charter (Reeves, 2004), outlining the major aim as "the delivery of high quality educational services to students from Victorian government schools, developing enterprise and leadership capacities as a special focus". This Charter also outlines how Leadership and Enterprise education will emphasize:
- Students taking responsibility for their own learning
- Connectedness to programs and initiatives developed in the home school
- Creation of links between the classroom and the outside world
- Teamwork in learning inside and beyond the school
- Self-initiated appraisal of learning and outcomes
- Use of technology as a tool for learning and communication (Reeves, 2004).

The school was established to provide an engaging environment for students desiring to develop leadership potential. In practice this involves providing a reflective environment that encourages students to take responsibility for themselves and their learning. The intention is to develop, in its young leaders, persons who are capable of articulating their individual and group strengths and weaknesses, to work collaboratively, and to develop a strong sense of community responsibility (Reeves, 2004; Dyson & Plunkett, 2010; 2012).

The campuses are suitable sites (and diverse enough) to deliver, each in its own way, a youth leadership and enterprise program. The isolation, open spaces and proximity to mountains, sea and plains, along with the activities offered, provide an opportunity that encourages young people to take responsibility for themselves, to accept responsibility for their learning, to see the purpose of their learning, to perceive themselves as learners and thinkers, to recognise and articulate their individual and group strengths and weaknesses, to work collaboratively, and to develop a strong sense of community responsibility (St Leger & Bell, 2007).

At a time when engagement and expectations are not necessarily in alignment, an opportunity to experience education in a unique way is enticing for both students and their parents. Yet there are also associated fears, particularly for parents. For example, it would be anticipated that there would be concerns that the experience provided, which deviates substantially from the traditional school curriculum may impact on student progress. There are also fears about how fifteen year olds will cope with sharing dormitories, taking responsibility for their own washing and cleaning, helping with cooking, taking part in physically challenging expeditions, having limited access to social media and surviving without 'junk food'.

Review of Literature

There is a dearth of literature focusing on either parental or student expectations of involvement in alternative or nontraditional educational settings, either in the Australian or international context. While literature examining student expectations is

particularly lacking, studies have examined parental expectations and aspirations in relation to education in general, some of which relates to the current study.

For instance, parental involvement has been found to positively influence academic achievement, attitude towards school, improving homework habits, reducing absenteeism and dropping out and improving overall well being of students (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern & Duchane, 2007; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 2006, Wilson, 2011). Moreover, family involvement appears to be a better predictor of student achievement than other factors such as socio-economic status (SES), ethnicity, parent education, gender, or family structure (Fan & Chen, 2001; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Herrell, 2011; Desimone, 1999 cited in DePlanty et al., 2007). Many researchers have examined barriers to parent involvement (Stevenson & Baker, 1987; Eccles & Harold, 1993, both cited in DePlanty et al., 2007; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Kohl, Lengua & McMahon, 2000; Mapp, 2003) and the United States of America's "No Child Left Behind Act" of 2001 stipulates parent involvement as one of the six target areas (Harris & Goodall, 2007). Yet despite this widely accepted notion and extensive research, there is a distinct lack of research on parent involvement or opinion on educational experiences that take place in alternative or residential settings.

Parental involvement in education is multifaceted in nature. There are complexities in the degrees and types of parent involvement in education, and parents perceive participation differently to teachers and students (Wilson, 2011). Henderson and Berla's (1997) review of more than 50 studies asserts that parental involvement in any form appears to produce measurable gains in student achievement (cited in Edwards, 2002, p. 19). Wilson (2011) also argues that parental involvement produces positive academic, behavioral and/or social outcomes for students, and at times parents, the school and the community. Overall, policy makers and educational researchers expect increased parental involvement in education will improve school quality and enhance children's learning (Ho Sui-Chu, 1997). The most powerful influencing factor is the parental values and aspirations, communicated explicitly to their children and indirectly through moral support, motivation and discussion.

However, parents of students in alternative educational settings seem to have been largely overlooked. The only times researchers have stopped to ask what outcomes they are hoping for or indeed whether they have been achieved, is when their children have learning disabilities or challenging behavior (McGill, Tennyson & Cooper, 2006), or when a camp is looking at marketing strategies (Powell, 2006). One of the few exceptions to this appears to be a survey conducted by Marquis (2008) who asked military parents if they had expectations that they wanted military sponsored youth camps to meet, to what extent these expectations were met, and if they were satisfied with the experiences their children had. Marquis' (2008) study investigated the particular needs of military families and related anxiety and anger felt by the children of deployed military personnel. While Directors of military youth camps generally did not consider parental expectations prior to planning the camps, the vast majority (89%) of parents felt that their expectations were met.

Hobbs (2011) also published (non refereed) his research involving a small specific population; students participating in 'Wambana', a twenty-seven day Outdoor Education School Program provided by Prince Alfred College in Adelaide. Hobbs (2011) asked parents about personal qualities they wanted developed over the duration of their Extended Stay Outdoor Education School Program (ESOESP). Parents' top five responses

included planning and organization, belief in own abilities, communication, confronting fear, and taking care with effort. Hobbs also asked how an ESOESP could assist the development of adolescent boys. The major emergent themes were: 1) confidence and self-belief; 2) risk taking; 3) decision making; 4) leadership; 5) independence; 6) practical skills; 7) acknowledgement of existing qualities; 8) friendship; and 9) goal setting. Hobbs (2011) concluded that the Wambana program did meet many of the parental expectations but also argued that values education and development of personal qualities should be a focus implemented across all middle school education.

The SSL is neither an outdoor education camp nor aimed specifically at students with behavioral problems. Rather, it is an alternative to mainstream education where students continually perform well despite being seemingly removed from the reach of their parents' involvement. However, the SSL parents' positive attitudes are demonstrable through their preparation, commitment and support of the SSL. Much communication is required between students, parents, home schools and the SSL in the 'pre'-months. The effort required (i.e. travel) to deliver students to the remote campuses and attend open evenings is a clear demonstration of their interest and perceived value of the SSL experience.

Methodology

This paper reports on part of a longitudinal study that began in partnership with Monash University in 2000. The most recent aspect involved a mixed methods study to collect data from students who were participating in the program at the SSL during Terms 3 and 4 in 2012 and their parents/guardians. Ethics approval was granted from Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) plus approval was obtained from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and the SSL. As the SSL is the only school of its kind in Australia, it was not possible to guarantee anonymity regarding the school but a guarantee was provided that through de-identification of data, individuals would not be identifiable.

Pre and post surveys were conducted as well as interviews with both parents and students. Data was analysed using SPSS and NVivo, however the focus of this paper will be on the initial qualitative aspects of the findings from the interviews. Data from the parent and student interviews were analyzed using constant comparison and inductive analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) to develop and consider emergent themes. Constant comparison (Patton, 1990) was used as the main tool in examining the data. Representative quotes were drawn from the interviews, after repeated reading and re-reading of the data. This formed the first-order analysis, which showed thematic descriptions of areas that were perceived as either a factor that students or parents felt positively about (loved) or saw as challenges (feared). In the first instance, descriptive codes were used to identify potentially interesting ideas, behaviours and events associated with the dichotomous variables. More inferential coding then followed in which conceptual linkages were made and used in the development of new categories, including overlap where an event or idea was described as both challenging and positive, so was both loved and feared. This second order of analysis, which is still occurring, is exploring emergent patterns.

Findings and Discussion

Students

Preliminary findings from 12 focus group and 24 individual interviews conducted with student participants, suggest a high level of respect for and engagement with the

program offerings. In particular, they relish the opportunity to demonstrate their leadership skills through the expeditions and activities in which they participated, to build on their sense of independence, and to develop their sense of community. Findings also support the notion that the understanding of self is important to them and cite various classroom programs as part of their learning, especially the classes on the functioning of the human brain. While initial concerns about coping with physical and social-emotional challenges were expressed, educational concerns were almost non-existent. A major theme that emerged from the data was the importance of relationships, with the vast majority perceiving that lifelong friendships had been forged with their peers. Students also drew clear distinctions between the positive relationships they had developed with SSL teachers compared to teachers at their home schools.

The following representative commentary from student interviews outlines the themes that emerged in relation to loves and fears relating to the SSL experience:

Learning to be part of a community was one of the major themes to emerge in student interviews. Some students categorized this from either a positive or challenging perspective, such as Jess, who stated, "*Community means to me now family … like everyone here is like a family now, and so … and like basically I just treat everyone like I would my family … like, you know, you love and you care for them*". Yet others interwove responses. For example, the following students all discussed challenges associated with community living but they also acknowledged the positives related to learning to overcome those challenges:

Ah, yeah, living in community has helped me to be more independent … but you always have to be on top of your room or else you will have your room-mate nag at you so you are more independent doing your own cleaning, your own washing, and you've got duties and all that stuff so you have to be more independent, and to help out the community because if you're independent and willing to do it like if you're selfless it helps out the community a lot. (Allen)

The hardest thing I found out living in community was … living with different people. Like everyone has their own beliefs and values and they know how to do things their way but being able to learn about different people, where they come from, what they've learnt, and the mixture of city and country, is different because more people would be, I don't know, active and some would be less active and it's just a variety and you have to learn to be able to cope with both sides of it. (Henry)

Having to learn that … having to learn to live in a community. Not being given the option but having to do it not you have to get along with everybody, because obviously you can't…just that … Analysis is what it helps you work on living in community. That's really good, being able to sorta meet new people, and over nine weeks sort of learn, observe, and see how they act, because you have to do that because if you don't you're not going to survive…. it's just that analysis in knowing what makes people tick … and also realising what makes you tick as well. Because in a community, if you do something wrong, you are going to know about it. (Micky)

I think living in community is like having a sense of belonging, and like P said, at the start of this we didn't know anyone and we felt like we didn't belong but once we got to know each other, we became comfortable. And yeah, we expanded our comfort zone and now

we're like a huge family. So getting out of your comfort zone and meeting new people, really improves. (Karo)

First, it was really weird, like having two other people in my room, especially when one snores and I have never shared a room with someone who snores before, not even my friends back at home, so that was my first like 'wake up' that I'm not a home any more. And then it's going out to breakfast, because I come from a family of 5, I normally just sit there with my two little brothers having breakfast, but now you like wake up and have breakfast with 44 other people, plus staff, and it just makes your morning just so much brighter than just at home where you are just sitting at the bench and you can actually have conversations with people like what happened last night with the big 'thump' or something like that ... it's gonna be hard to leave ... it's a big family. (Chris)

Karen concentrated on the importance of relationships and support, stating, "*like when you need help with something you've always got someone there to lend you a hand or just if ... like if you are lonely, you've got someone to talk to or even if you're just like sitting out there it's just knowing that you've got the support of people around you and you can tell at least someone in the group what's on your mind, whereas at home sometimes what's on your mind is your parents ... and you can't exactly say to your parents- look you're really annoying me, whereas your friends you can, but your friends you don't live with as here you do*".

Like a lot of students, Pip found that learning about herself was a major benefit of involvement, stating, "*I think I have grown a lot, like on the inside. If that, that's a bit corny, like I can ... I make my own ... well I haven't been but I used to make my own bed, and I washed my own clothes, and I control what I eat, and I do my own dishes, and I keep my space clean, and I rely on myself to do things. Oh sorry, I am just very proud of what I am able to do and what I can do for myself*". Others raised positives about getting to know themselves as learners, highlighted in Kelly and Barb's comments:

It's letting you experience it [making one's own decisions] for yourself ... and so just, like what X said, it is sort of just talking in the class room it allows you to make your own mistakes and that, and learn from them and then you know, teaches you what to do and what not to do in the future. (Kelly)

I found that [learning about brain function] really helpful, especially working in a team, knowing if your blue range is logical ... and maths, those people can delegate more. People who are more creative can do designing things. Just knowing where people fit in, what they would be best at, but then also knowing that people might not be as good at other things but giving them a chance to do things they wouldn't normally do to develop them. (Barb)

Perhaps the following comment by Pip sums up the powerful influence that the SSL experience means for student participants,

I think my personal goal was to change and to be myself. And I think that has been the hardest thing for me ... since I have realised that I want to change, and I haven't been able to ... and I think that I progressed here, and I think it was one of the hardest things that I have had to do. But I have been able to, like you know, it's okay to be weird... It's okay, and like people will either accept it or they will just think, what the ... that's a bit weird that. And I think it was one of the hardest things, but ... I think it's something that has made me really happy.

Parents

Parents were also overwhelmingly positive about the experiences they perceived their adolescent children had while at the SSL, despite initial fears including their capacity for involvement. The only contact between parents and students during the nine weeks is by letter, email and one visit midway through the program. While some parents may see this as a concern, Gina saw it as a positive, claiming the time away from Jake gave her "*a break from him and his socialising*".

Interviews with 15 parents illustrated that they did have a number of concerns that were both educational and social, which was different to the focus of the students. However the reality for these parents was that these fears did not come to fruition, and thus they ended up sharing their child's enthusiasm for the program, which they felt had supported both cognitive and social development in their adolescent children to a greater extent than traditional education.

Similarly to student responses, there was a crossover in areas which were identified as both challenges and positives. One parent, Jane, spoke of the food issue as a real challenge for her son, stating "*Unfortunately he really struggled with the food. Not the fact there was no junk, just that it was very boring. It was very different from what we eat at home but he was so hungry by meal times he ate it. In his words it was sloppy and bland*". Whereas another parent, Rita, claimed that it had been a positive experience, suggesting her son's "*Attitude towards food and fitness is now self motivated rather than Mum nagging. Lost any interest in junk food he realized he does not really like it or need it*".

A number of parents mentioned self-development across all three areas – physical, cognitive and social-emotional, as outlined in the following representative quotes:

Opening up his academic and social mind to other experiences with positive risk-taking. (John)

I am pleased to say she is fast becoming a very independent young lady with good values and morals and I believe the SSL experience helped this. (Sarah)

John grew up a lot while he was at Gnurad. Physically, mentally and certainly emotionally. He learnt to step back and become part of a team, to realize that it's not always just about him, he had to be considerate to others/ feelings as well. (Graham)

Peggy's comment about the way in which she felt her son Edward grew, despite a shaky beginning, illustrates how the positives grew from the challenges:

What I loved about the experience Edward had was that he made mistakes and nearly had himself removed from the school, this was possibly the best thing that could have happened to him, he learnt from this and was able to talk through the experience, I loved that he took ownership and responsibility for those mistakes and that the teachers were able to help him identify areas for improvement, I loved that they respected him as a young adult and treated him that way. He also learnt a great deal about leadership and how different people are. I think he also learnt about situational leadership and understands that one size does not fit all. Henry learnt skills in leadership and about relationships with people that most don't get to learn until they are in the workforce and generally struggle with changing behaviors and concepts that they have habitually applied over their working life.

Interestingly parents did not appear to be concerned about missing a term of schooling, as illustrated by Jayne's comment, "*When friends asked me whether I was concerned that he would miss a term of school, I reminded them of their experience as a year 9 student and had them reflect on what work they actually did in that year, not one person said oh I did a lot of work!*" This was supported by Lisa's claim that "*The 'personal growth' in Paul as a person however was the biggest benefit, and in my opinion, far more valuable than losing a term of normal class*es".

Bruce and Claire summarized what they felt their son Clive, had gained in terms of development, claiming that they felt he had learned to be:
   a. *More independent*
   b. *More confident*
   c. *Mindful and more tolerant of others*
   d. *He is more organized and better able to plan things*
   e. *I think he noticed other people's personalities and traits and could 'read people better'.*
   f. *I think it gave him perspective – he doesn't worry about little things so much now.*
   g. *Better able to resolve conflict.*

Finally the thoughts of Paula and Irene align with what students stated, that the SSL experience was for most, overwhelmingly positive and one that was likely to have far reaching impact,

I cannot speak highly enough of Joe's experience at Gnurad. He benefited enormously from the experience, he grew as a person and he made some enduring friendships. The staff were wonderful and the program was inspiring. I feel grateful and privileged that Joe was able to attend SSL and I am sad that more young people do not get this opportunity. (Paula)

Again, I will mention (having already had a child go through this program) my wish would be for every child in Australia (in Year 9) be given the wonderful opportunity of being able to attend this fantastic leadership camp. Yes, I am the first to admit as a parent it is definitely the hardest time of my life, but for what my children have gained out of it, it is well worth it. THANK YOU. (Irene)

Conclusion

While the SSL offers a unique educational experience for Year 9 students in Victorian government schools, the students who choose to undertake the program do not go into it without some trepidation. Yet their concerns focus on very different matters to those of their parents, who tend to be have broader concerns across all three areas of development – cognitive, physical and social-emotional. Students tend to be most concerned about how they will deal with the physical and social-emotional factors associated with a nine week residential experience but few voice any concerns related to cognitive factors. This is despite many of the student participants being described as 'high achievers' by their home schools. In fact for many of the students, the challenges they face and overcome turn into the positives of their experience. This longitudinal project will gather data from students and their schools as they progress through their secondary schooling to determine how students and their parents feel about the benefits and/or challenges resulting from involvement in the SSL.

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