

To what extent can leadership opportunities impact students' academic aspiration in all male, state, secondary education?

'Leadership skills make you feel like you have skills for the future'.

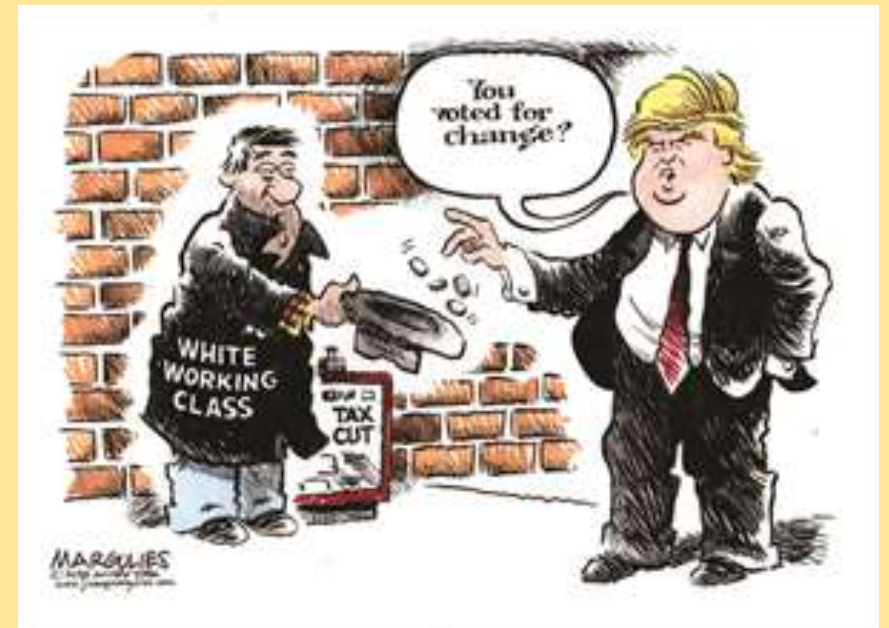
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'Teachers don't care when you are good at sport. They just want you to be good at learning'.

The Context and Rationale

*'Working-class families lack aspiration and drive'
(Amanda Spielman, Lead Ofsted Inspector 2018)*

- Aspiration is an increasing concern within modern educational and political discourse, though literature is lacking in concrete methods of addressing a lack of aspiration.
- My Part 2 research revealed that some students are perceived as being indifferent towards their education, though no students identified themselves as being indifferent.
- Leadership opportunities were suggested as a means of improving aspiration, though there is a gap in the literature with regards to student leadership.



What does the Literature Say?

What is aspiration and how is it different to academic aspiration?

- Aspiration was mentioned 23 times in the most recent White Paper Document with numerous calls for increased aspiration among white, working-class students. The term is problematic with the majority of policy makers asserting this indifference based upon a disparity of students from working class backgrounds attending further education than their wealthier counterparts.
- This measure of aspiration is not only flawed as it fails to recognise non-academic aspirations, but also disregards the numerous cultural, ingrained self-concept and socio-economic barriers that such students face.
- Aspiration is therefore identified as a capacity to embrace inspiration and to have ambitions.
- Academic aspiration is identified as a willingness to endeavour to gain the most promising educational capital possible, in order to realise one's ambitions. This clarification is relevant when asserting claims about a lack of aspiration among large proportions of the population.

What does the literature say?

How can academic aspiration be increased?

Hart and Sarjioni, 2012, have identified ‘conversion factors’ in aspiration: eliminating conflict between:

- an established measure of aspiration (namely outcome based data) and students varied ambitions;
- increasing student voice and realising their suggestions;
- and a supportive school environment with a broader concept of recognition.

The findings of my Part 2 Study support the third conversion factor, implying that leadership opportunities can increase student aspiration.

What does the literature say?

How can student leadership impact aspiration?

- Student leadership is widely accepted as a positive facet in education, with little research on how best to implement it or the impact that it can have. Some theorists have cited the development of competencies as a set of essential skills that students require to be successful in their futures. These are ‘knowledge, values, abilities and behaviours that help an individual to contribute to or successfully engage in a role or task’ (Seemiller, 2014).
- Some leadership models have been implemented within schools, such as Kouzes and Posner’s Student Leadership Challenge, with some positive results. These have exclusively been taught as a discrete subject, which whilst holding effective potential is an unlikely reality for most facilities where the timetable is already stretched. My research was intended to incorporate their leadership model within the curriculum, enabling analysis of how far leadership opportunities can increase academic aspiration.

Research Methods

Stage 1– Practitioner Research

Aims:

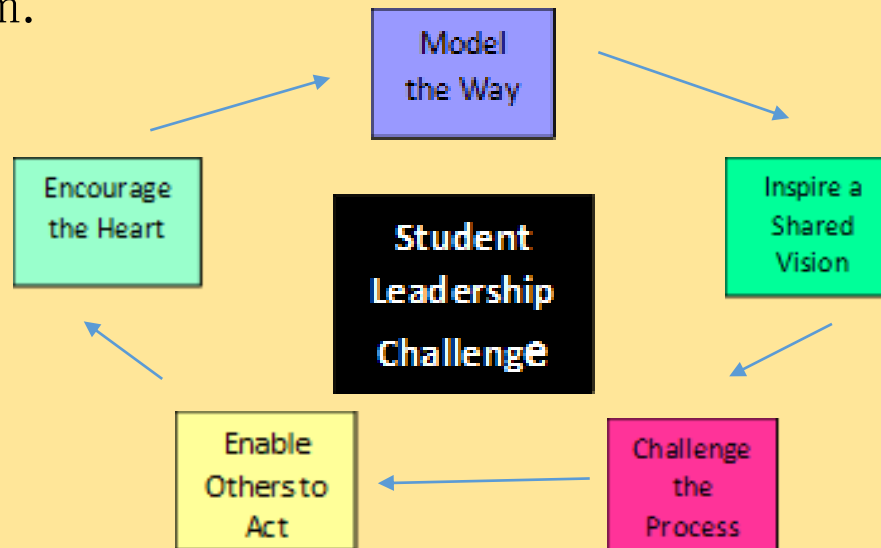
- To establish student perspectives on aspiration and leadership within the specific school context.
- To gather baseline data with regards to student's 'Attitude to Learning' grades.

Actions:

- Broad questionnaire – tailored to meet the five stages of the Student Leadership Challenge
- Three classes of mixed ability, ethnic, social and cultural origin were questioned.
- Semi-structured interviews – six students selected using stratified randomisation process, quality assured through students volunteering.

Stage 2– Action Research

- **Aims:** To implement a five lesson sequence to be taught to three classes of Year 10 students. All students assessed prior to the intervention to ascertain baseline data.
- **Cycle1**– Intervention taught in History and Physical Education lessons. Lessons were tailored to the specific subject, but followed the same structure and enabled students to research the best methods for answering GCSE questions in groups, with specific, self-appointed roles. All students presented their findings and were assessed with the same question post intervention.
- Broad Questionnaire repeated. Semi-structured interviews following a progressive focus method.
- **Cycle2**– The second Year 10 class in History undertook the programme in the same way. For their initial lesson, the modelling was taught by students from the initial trial class.
- Findings shared with staff team.



Findings

- In **History**, 100% of students maintained or improved their assessment grade, with one student gaining the same mark, and one student gaining a 75% increase in their result.
- Six students increased their result by 12.5%, a notable 15 students increased their result by 25% and 4 students increased their result by 50%. This suggests that the intervention had a significant and positive impact on student attainment in History.
- In **Physical Education**, the results were slightly more variable, though proportionally still showed improvement overall. It should be noted that one student's result was 4% lower than that previously achieved, while one student maintained their result. The other outcomes achieved by students all showed an improvement: one student increased their result by 4%, another by 12%, another by 20% and a fourth by 36%. Two students improved their result by 8% and two by 32% respectively. The highest marked improvement was 36%.

Findings

- With one exception, all students maintained or improved their assessment data post-intervention, with a large proportion gaining full marks.
- All students interviewed felt that the intervention was useful and made them aspire to do better within the subject.
- All students improved their ‘attitude to learning’ grades within the relevant subject, though grades across the curriculum were still variable.
- The only students who passed their Physical Education V-Cert examination were the four students who had been elected as leaders.
- The two students who had participated in the intervention within their Physical Education **and** History classes significantly improved their assessment outcomes in both lessons and their ‘Attitude to Learning’ scores across the curriculum.

Conclusions and Implications

- The Student Leadership Challenge effectively increased students' academic aspiration through leadership opportunities within the specific school context.
- The intervention had most impact within the subjects where the intervention was taught, however, there was some impact on the students' whole school academic aspiration.
- The Student Leadership Challenge can be successfully amended and embedded within the existing curriculum.

Implications

- Aspiration is a concept that needs to be considered within school agendas, with a clear definition and clarity over how it is being cultivated across the key stages.
- Leadership programmes present opportunities to improve student aspiration within curriculum lessons.
- Student Leadership Programmes need to be embedded within school practice in order to improve academic aspiration across subject disciplines and therefore cater to future aspirations of the student.