

A STUDY ON STUDENTS' PERCEIVED LEADERSHIP PRACTICE LEVEL AT JINAN X COLLEGE IN SHANDONG PROVINCE, CHINA

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Abstract: This study mainly adopted the Leadership Practice Behavior Scale of college students to investigate the college students perceived leadership practice level at X College in Jinan, Shandong Province, China. It adopted convenient sampling to conduct sampling. Among the 11,000 students at X College, 371 college students were selected according to the Morgan Table and divided into groups of different genders, grades, birthplace, and class cadres. Three hundred fifty-eight valid questionnaires were obtained, and the effective return rate reached 96.50%. Through descriptive analysis, independent samples t-test and one-way ANOVA analysis of variance, the results showed that the overall college students perceived leadership practice level in X College of Jinan City, Shandong Province was moderate. Among them, the mean scores of challenging the process were the highest, followed by encourage the heart, inspire a shared vision, and model the way. The mean scores of enabling others to act was the lowest. There were gender differences in the college students perceived leadership practice level, and the level of perceived leadership practice of males was higher than that of females. Freshmen were lower than juniors and seniors, sophomores were lower than seniors, urban students were higher than rural students, and class cadres were higher than non-class cadres. Suggestions for improvement were put forward according to the research results, emphasizing model the way as the core element of leadership and cultivating.

Keywords: Leadership Practice Level, Challenge the Process, Model the Way, Encourage the Heart, Enable Others to Act, Inspire a Shared Vision

Introduction

In the 1970s, the United States was in a leading position in global higher education, and its outstanding universities and colleges were responsible for cultivating new leaders who adapted to the trend of globalization and pluralism (Zhong, 2008). Western leadership research and practice made progress in the late 1980s, and it was widely believed that everyone had the potential to become a leader

and should possess leadership skills (Dugan & Komives, 2007). By the end of the 1990s, 800 colleges in the United States had set up leadership education programs for college students. By 2006, nearly 1,000 colleges had participated in related educational activities (Huang & Sun, 2016). As Pennington (2005) stated, the United States was the first to transform "leadership development" into "leadership education". And, for the first time, it implemented leadership education programs for college students. American universities attach great importance to the cultivation and research of class leadership, which showed that the research of class leadership has become an extension of American leadership theory in the education system (Susan, 2010). The practice of leadership education for American college students showed a diversified trend, and the evaluation system for class leadership education was also becoming increasingly perfect (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). Since the 21st century, there has been a continuous strengthening of leadership development in American universities. The University of California, Berkeley, has fully integrated measures to enhance talent leadership into its entire talent development process, making the leadership program a hatchery for student leadership (Zheng et al., 2019). The cultivation of leadership has received global attention, with London universities practicing an organic approach to leadership (Wu, 2020), Israel (Hu, 2023) and many countries in Latin America implementing education leadership training and development (Zheng, 2021; Xiong, 2018). It was evident that leadership had become a globally focused issue in education.

In the then-current international context, Chinese universities and departments generally took leadership courses (Zhang, 2015). High-quality talents were regarded as the potential driving force for China's future economic development and national rejuvenation.

Therefore, the responsibility of higher education lay in cultivating more elite talents with higher quality, more vital ability, and more comprehensive development, and leadership was an indispensable and essential ability (Wei, 2022). With the rapid growth of China's economy, the evaluation standard of college students' comprehensive strength was continuously improved. Statistics showed that in 2022 alone, the number of fresh graduates from ordinary colleges in China reached 10.76 million, a record high (Zhang, 2023). The talent competition was fierce, and enhancing the strength of college students and cultivating their competitiveness in employment was one of the essential tasks of current education (Zhang, 2019). It required the efforts of college students and the joint support and cooperation of schools, families, and society. Only in this way could more talentedly people with high quality and high competitiveness be cultivated, making more significant contributions to the prosperity and development of society. Boosting employment competitiveness was also crucial for college students to realize their personal and social values (Li, 2023).

Leadership education was crucial for college students' personal growth and profoundly impacted their lifelong development (Ye & Xia, 2023). Becoming a leader in all walks of life was the rational aspiration of current Chinese college students. In the highly competitive social environment,

college students generally realized that only with strong leadership could they stand out in their respective fields and become leaders in leading the development of the industry (Yang, 2019).

The leadership education model for American college students could more effectively carry out practical leadership education and training models for Chinese college students (Zhang, 2022). Leadership development influenced by internal and external factors had significant cognitive feedback on students' cognition, emotions, and behavior (Huang & Sun, 2016). Colleges should scientifically formulate training strategies for students' leadership according to their cognitive level and comprehensive ability to meet the needs of personnel training and achieve the goal of higher education reform and development (Weng & Fang, 2007). At the same time, practical leadership education for college students gradually received attention. This educational model was not only limited to imparting theoretical knowledge but also emphasized cultivating students' leadership consciousness and ability in practical activities, which had directional value for promoting college students' practical cognition of leadership.

Research Objectives

(1) To understand the demographic backgrounds of X College students in Jinan City, Shandong Province, including their gender, grade, birthplace, and whether to serve as class cadre or not.

(2) To determine the current status of students' perceived leadership practice level at X College in Jinan City, Shandong Province.

(3) To analyze the differences in the students' perceived leadership practice level at X College in Jinan City, Shandong Province, under different demographic backgrounds, including gender, grade, birthplace, and whether to serve as class cadre or not.

Literature Review

Research on the Connotation of Leadership Practice Level

The research on the connotation of leadership practice level mainly came from the concept of leadership. Leadership was essentially the influence in interpersonal relationships and leadership was a particular part of the relationship between leaders and followers. Each member of the organization had a specific impact on others and could also be influenced by other members, so each member was considered a potential leader with leadership potential (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). The "Modern Chinese Dictionary" explained "leadership" showed that leadership was the ability of a leader to lead and guide others in organizational activities. Leadership was the unity of the leader's power, ability, and influence. Persuading followers to work hard for specific goals reflected common values, motivations, aspirations, and ideals (Cao, 2012).

Cockerell (2023) emphasized that the practical leadership level among college students

reflected their comprehensive abilities, including the leader's values, personality charm, communication, collaboration, problem-solving, decision-making, team building, motivation, and learning and development abilities. These abilities were reflected and improved through practice, which helped college students to play leadership roles better, achieve team goals and play an active role in their future careers. Improving leadership practice levels among college students requires continuous learning and practice to cultivate their leadership abilities.

Research on the Dimension of Students' Perceived Leadership Practice Level

Research on model the way. Among the many leadership behaviors in the leadership challenge model of college students, the most important one was "model the way" (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). While leaders could be given titles, it's the actual action that really earns respect. It needed to clearly recognize and define our values, find and voice our voice, and set a good example for others by modeling the way, so that our actions were highly consistent with these shared values. In addition, Yang & Huang (2021) believed that setting an example for others through actions and making them consistent with their words is also the performance of leading by example. Through leadership practice, individuals align their behaviors with their values and the values shared by the team. In other words, model the way emphasized that leaders should set a benchmark of excellence for team members, model the way, become a model, guide team members to follow, and jointly realize values and vision (Zhang, 2021).

Research on the inspires a shared vision. Inspire a shared vision existing between leaders and managers. The former focused on envisioning the future, while the latter focused on the present. Chen & Zheng (2022) emphasized that "inspire a shared vision" was one of the five essential leadership behaviors in the class leadership challenge model. This behavior aimed to shape a future vision, inspire exciting possibilities, and unite others through a inspire a shared vision (Hyatt, 2021).

Research on challenging the process. Challenge the process not only meant actively seeking opportunities and new ways to promote change. Leadership was closely related to innovation, and the core job of outstanding leaders was to challenge the status quo and lead change, regardless of whether the factors driving change came from external challenges, themselves, or their teams. A great leader had to seek opportunities and new ways to promote change proactively (Zhang, 2021).

Research on enabling others to act. Others to act was the most crucial way for excellent leaders to focus on the growth and development of team members and even "empower" them as successor leaders. For better performance and initiative of team members, excellent leaders needed to "empower" team members to think and judge independently so that they could think, judge, and make their decisions alone. When team members encountered difficulties completing tasks independently and felt that their abilities were insufficient or lacked self-confidence, outstanding leaders encouraged members to learn and improve their abilities actively, promoted personal growth and development, and improved

their self-confidence (Dugan & Komives, 2007).

Research on encourage the heart. It emphasized that when exploring the multi-dimensional aspects of leadership, the research could not ignore the critical element of "encourage the heart" (Stephen, 2023). An outstanding leader "Encourage the heart" by "Recognizing contributions". Yan (2022) analyzed the emphasizing the importance of confirming each individual's positive performance, ensuring that each member's efforts and outstanding performance received attention and encouragement. This expectation played an important role and could stimulate the potential of individuals to the greatest extent, making individuals more willing to face various challenges and complete tasks well (Liu et al., 2021).

Research on Measuring Students' Perceived Leadership Practice Level

The measured scope of college students' leadership was rich and complex, and different research results showed multidimensional measurement standards. Among them, the leadership of contemporary Chinese college students mainly covered information operation ability, project execution ability, unity and cooperation ability, and interpersonal communication ability, which decreased in order of importance. The research constituted college students' leadership from political judgment, decision-making ability, execution, and development (He, 2013). Liu et al. (2015) divided leadership among college students into four categories through a survey: expectations and challenges, motivation, work execution, and templates.

In the related research on the leadership model of college students in China, Huang (2010) compiled the first local evaluation tool for college students' leadership ability, "Leadership Model of College Class cadres," based on semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The questionnaire consisted of 15 items and was divided into four dimensions: cooperation ability dimension, task execution ability dimension, information processing dimension, and dimension. The Class Leadership Questionnaire compiled by Wang (2019) was based on the leadership challenge model, which investigated class leadership based on self-awareness, self-management, interpersonal relationship, enterprising spirit, leadership awareness, and decision-making execution.

Based on the above analysis, it could be seen that the research and practice of college students' leadership were closely related. Because there were many practical projects on college students' leadership training in foreign universities and supported by a large number of sample data, the theoretical model of college students' leadership proposed by researchers was relatively mature. Therefore, this study adopted the widely used class leadership challenge model in selecting scales. Kouzes & Posner's (2006) Class Leadership Practice Behavior Scale was used to measure the current students' perceived leadership practice level, which was divided into five dimensions, namely, challenge the process, model the way, encourage the heart, enable others to act, and inspire a shared vision.

Research on the Students' Perceived Leadership Practice Level under Different Demographic Backgrounds

The factors influencing youth leadership involve three levels: individual, family, and society. In China, the research on the influencing factors of leadership was rich and varied, exciting individuals, organizations, culture and education, such as gender, birthplace, family structure and other factors that impact students' leadership practice (Li & Zhong, 2018).

And Huang (2010) also believed that students of different ages, grades, majors, and identities have vastly different levels of leadership performance, which means that various demographic backgrounds affect class leadership.

Although there were many studies on the influence of individual factors, it was not difficult to find through literature analysis that the factors affecting the practical level of personal leadership were often multi-dimensional and comprehensive. Moreover, Gao (2022) proposed that an individual's artistic literacy was essential to leadership. This inherent trait could enhance an individual's communication ability and stimulate self-leadership. Chen & Zheng (2022) pointed out that the leadership of female cadres was significantly affected by factors such as career development prospects, innovative work thinking support, and leadership support. At the same time, the demographic characteristics of female cadres, such as age, job level, and length of service, would also significantly impact their leadership.

In addition, many scholars have also explored, analyzed, and summarized the influencing factors of leadership among college students. Zhang (2012) summarized the factors influencing leadership among four college students: cognitive ability, personality traits, achievement motivation, and practical experience. Zhang et al. (2020) believed that learning leadership theory, student organization development, multi-subject participation in writing, and individual talent differences were the main factors affecting college students' leadership.

To sum up, it was not difficult to find that the development of individual students' leadership practice level was a complex and multidimensional process influenced by many factors. Individual factors were among the most direct and significant influencing factors. These factors included gender, birthplace, family structure, and political outlook, which to some extent, shaped students' personality traits, values, and behavioral patterns, thereby affecting their leadership practice level. In addition, the research should not ignore the macro control of educational factors, which played a vital role in the quantity of practical experience and the qualitative change of leadership, and it was a necessary measure to transfer the quantitative change of practical experience to the qualitative change of leadership.

Methodology

The population of this study was college students at Jinan X College in Shandong Province,

with a total of 11,000 students in X College. According to the Krejcie & Morgan (1970) Table, 371 college students were selected. Through convenient sampling, 371 questionnaires were collected, and 358 valid questionnaires were finally managed, the effective return rate reached 96.50%. Groups of different genders, grades, birthplaces, and whether or not to serve as class cadre were treated as subject data.

The Leadership Practice Level Scale tool came from the Class Leadership Challenge Model questionnaire developed by Kouzes & Posner (2006). It consisted of 30 items, which evaluated model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart, with 5 dimensions and 6 questions in each dimension. The overall Cronbach's α of leadership practice level in this study was 0.922. Each dimension was modeled the way (0.915), inspire a shared vision (0.925), challenge the process (0.912), enable others to act (0.904) and encourage the heart (0.909), which showed that this survey scale had strong reliability. The KOM of this study was 0.950, and the Bartlett spherical test was 3262.594, which showed that this study was suitable for factor analysis. The total variance explanation of the questionnaire on the leadership practice level of students was 47.663%, which exceeded the standard of 40%, and the factor extraction effect was good, indicating that the validity of the questionnaire on the leadership practice level of teachers and students was good, which showed that the questionnaire was highly valid.

Results

Demographic Analysis of Questionnaire Participants

In this study, the students at X College in Jinan City, Shandong Province, were investigated by questionnaire, and 358 valid questionnaires were finally collected and sorted out. The demographic backgrounds mainly included gender, grade, birthplace, and whether to serve as class cadre or not. In the valid questionnaire, the proportion of males and females was equal, with 181 males accounting for 50.6% and 177 females accounting for 49.4%. The proportion of grades was similar, with 95 freshmen, accounting for 26.5%, 97 sophomores, 27.1%, 85 juniors, 23.7%, and 81 seniors, accounting for 22.6%. Regarding students' birthplaces, the number of people in cities was 148, accounting for 41.3%, and the number of people in rural areas was 210, accounting for 58.7%. The number of class cadres was 106, accounting for 29.6%, and the number of non-class cadres was 252, accounting for 70.4%, which was more in line with the demographic backgrounds of college students.

Descriptive Statistics on the Level of Students' Perceived Leadership Practice Level at X College in Jinan City, Shandong Province

1) The overall students' perceived leadership practice level at X College in Jinan City, Shandong Province, was $M=3.437$, which was moderate. The means of each dimension were model the way (3.423), inspire a shared vision (3.486), challenge the process (3.518), enable others to act (3.266),

encourage the heart (3.493), among which challenge the process meant the highest, second was encourage the heart, followed by inspire a shared vision and model the way, and enable others to act the lowest. Therefore, the overall students' perceived leadership practice level at X College in Jinan City, Shandong Province, was moderate. The specific results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Students' Perceived Leadership Practice Level

Dimension	N	M	SD	Interpretation
Model the way	358	3.423	0.528	Moderate
Inspire a shared vision	358	3.486	0.537	Moderate
Challenge the process	358	3.518	0.534	High
Enable others to act	358	3.266	0.509	Moderate
Encourage the heart	358	3.493	0.503	Moderate
Overall leadership practice level	358	3.437	0.431	Moderate

Differences Analysis on the Level of Students' Perceived Leadership Practice Level at X College in Jinan City, Shandong Province Compared with Demographic Backgrounds

The statistical analysis showed the differences in different demographic backgrounds of students' perceived leadership practice levels in X College of Jinan City, Shandong Province. Therefore, this study used an independent sample T-test and single one-way ANOVA analysis of variance to analyze the differences in gender, grade, birthplace, and whether to serve as class cadre or not.

Table 2: Comparison of Differences in Students' Perceived Leadership Practice Level of Different Genders

Dimension	Gender	N	M	SD	T	P
Model the way	Male	181	3.493	0.526	2.553*	.011
	Female	177	3.351	0.522		
Inspire a shared vision	Male	181	3.563	0.567	2.753**	.006
	Female	177	3.408	0.494		
Challenge the process	Male	181	3.594	0.523	2.759**	.006
	Female	177	3.440	0.534		
Enable others to act	Male	181	3.357	0.490	3.469**	.001
	Female	177	3.173	0.514		
Encourage the heart	Male	181	3.566	0.465	2.798**	.005
	Female	177	3.419	0.529		
Overall leadership practice level	Male	181	3.515	0.429	3.482**	.001
	Female	177	3.358	0.421		

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

(1) There was a significant difference in the perceived leadership practice level of college students ($t=3.482$, $p < .01$). In each dimension, model the way ($t=2.553$, $p < .05$), inspire a shared vision ($t=2.753$, $p < .01$), challenge the process ($t=2.759$, $p < .01$), enable others to act ($t=3.469$, $p < .01$), the mean of male students was higher than that of female students, indicating that male students' perceived

leadership practice level was higher than that of female students. The specific result is shown in Table 2.

Table 3: Comparison of the Differences in Students’ Perceived Leadership Practice Levels in Different Grades

Dimension	Grade	N	M	SD	F	P	LSD
Model the way	A. Freshman	95	3.318	0.529	3.751*	0.011	B<D A<C A<D
	B. Sophomore	97	3.363	0.515			
	C. Junior	85	3.488	0.523			
	D. Senior	81	3.549	0.521			
Inspire a shared vision	A. Freshman	95	3.382	0.522	4.729**	0.003	A<D B<D
	B. Sophomore	97	3.411	0.573			
	C. Junior	85	3.529	0.491			
	D. Senior	81	3.652	0.519			
Challenge the process	A. Freshman	95	3.477	0.508	1.095	0.351	
	B. Sophomore	97	3.464	0.569			
	C. Junior	85	3.576	0.491			
	D. Senior	81	3.568	0.559			
Enable others to act	A. Freshman	95	3.198	0.491	2.623*	0.049	A<D B<D
	B. Sophomore	97	3.196	0.518			
	C. Junior	85	3.333	0.512			
	D. Senior	81	3.360	0.502			
Encourage the heart	A. Freshman	95	3.395	0.475	4.890**	0.002	A<D B<D
	B. Sophomore	97	3.423	0.488			
	C. Junior	85	3.533	0.502			
	D. Senior	81	3.652	0.517			
Overall leadership practice level	A. Freshman	95	3.354	0.417	4.590**	0.004	B<D A<C A<D
	B. Sophomore	97	3.371	0.440			
	C. Junior	85	3.492	0.410			
	D. Senior	81	3.556	0.431			

Note: * p< .05, ** p< .01

(2) There were significant differences in the college students’ perceived leadership practice level (F=4.590, p < .01). Freshmen were lower than juniors and seniors, and sophomores were lower than seniors. In all dimensions, model the way (F=3.751, p < .05) was lower in freshmen than juniors and seniors, and lower in sophomores than seniors. The total vision (F=4.729, p < .01) was lower for freshmen and sophomores than seniors. Challenge the process (F=1.095, p > .05), no difference. Enable others to act (F=2.623, p < .05) in the freshmen lower than seniors, and the sophomores lower than seniors. Encourage the heart (F=4.890, p < .01) freshmen and sophomores were lower than seniors. In summary, there were significant grade differences in the other four dimensions except for challenging the process. The specific result is shown in Table 3.

Discussion

Current Status of Students' Perceived Leadership Practice Levels at X College in Jinan City, Shandong Province

According to the research results, the students' perceived leadership practice level in X College of Jinan City, Shandong Province, was generally at a medium level. The mean score of challenge the process was the highest, followed by encourage the heart, inspire a shared vision, and model the way, while the mean of people's actions was the lowest. The research results of Cui (2017) differed from this, it showed that model the way was the highest, while challenge the process was the lowest, and encourage the heart was in the middle. The result was based on students' perception and evaluation of leadership, and the actual situation might vary depending on individual differences.

This study presented the highest level of challenge, indicating that students emphasized leadership performance in changing the status quo, promoting innovation, and encouraging personal development. It might be because modern college students were more independent, willing to face challenges, and eager to grow in the face of challenges. Encouraging the heart came second because students recognized the importance of encouraging the heart in the leadership process. Students needed more spiritual encouragement and recognition to maintain motivation in the fiercely competitive modern society. They inspired a shared vision and showed that students recognized the critical role of common goals and dreams in team cohesion. They could form a powerful, united collective only when the team members agreed with the common goal and vision.

The low level of model the way might be because students thought that some teachers or leaders were not good enough at modeling the way or didn't know enough about the importance of model the way. Leaders had to set an example and convey the organization's values and culture through actions. Minimizing everyone suggested that students might have felt that some leaders were lacking in mobilizing teams, promoting implementation, and cooperating for win-win results. The execution, coordination, and teamwork abilities of teachers and other leaders were vital to achieving goals.

Differences in Students' Perceived Leadership Practice Level at X College, Jinan City, Shandong Province, in Different Backgrounds

(1) There were differences in different genders, and males' perceived leadership practice level was higher than that of females. The research results of Zhao & Zhou (2017) were consistent with them. It might have been because males were usually given more leadership roles and opportunities in some social and cultural backgrounds, which could have led to males' perception and practice of leadership. On the contrary, females might have been expected to play more supportive or supplementary roles, limiting their leadership development and training. Family environment and socialization processes might have influenced males' and females' perceptions and attitudes toward leadership. If male family

members took on more leadership roles, males might have naturally accepted and identified with leadership. Furthermore, males and females might have received different leadership education and training opportunities in specific educational environments. It could have led to males becoming more proficient in practical operations and having a more positive perception of leadership.

(2) There were differences in different grades. Freshmen were lower than juniors and seniors, and sophomores were lower than seniors. The results of Chen et al. (2021) were consistent with these findings, possibly because freshmen had just entered universities and might have been still adapting to the new environment and role. Their understanding and practice of leadership were also in the exploratory stage. As time passed, they gradually adapted to college life, and their perception and practice of leadership also improved. Unlike freshmen and sophomores, juniors and seniors had more learning and practical experience. After a period of study and participation in various activities, their understanding and practice of leadership became more mature and in-depth. In addition, seniors had more opportunities to participate in and practice leadership due to their higher grades and experience. These opportunities helped them better understand and apply leadership, improving their perception and practical skills.

(3) There were differences in different birthplaces. Urban students' perceived leadership practice level was higher than that of rural students. Urban students had access to better educational resources, including better schools, richer curricula, more training opportunities, etc., which helped to enhance their leadership perception and practical ability. Urban students might be relatively more confident and daring to express their ideas and opinions, which makes them more proactive in their leadership practice. Rural students, conversely, might be relatively conservative and cautious, lacking sufficient confidence in their abilities and potential.

(4) Whether there was a difference in class cadres, class cadres perceived a higher leadership practice level than non-class cadres, and the results were entirely consistent with Lei (2014). It might have been because students who served as class cadres had clear responsibilities and roles and needed to take on leadership and management roles in class or school organizations. This role and responsibility required higher leadership perception and practical abilities to meet work needs. Class cadres usually received more leadership training and guidance, including effectively managing and coordinating teams, making decisions, solving problems, etc. These training and guidance sessions helped improve their perception and practical leadership level.

Conclusions

The overall college students perceived leadership practice level in X College of Jinan City, Shandong Province, was at a medium level, in which the mean of challenge the process was the highest, followed by encourage the heart, followed by inspire a shared vision and model the way, while the mean

of people's actions was the lowest.

There was a gender difference in the students' perceived leadership practice level at X College in Jinan City, Shandong Province, with male students having a higher perceived leadership practice level than female students.

There were grade differences in the students' perceived leadership practice level in X College of Jinan City, Shandong Province. Freshmen were lower than juniors and seniors, and sophomores were lower than seniors.

There were differences in the students' perceived leadership practice level at X College in Jinan City, Shandong Province, with urban students having a higher perceived leadership practice level than rural students.

There was a significant difference in the students' perceived leadership practice level at X College in Jinan City, Shandong Province, regarding whether to serve as a class cadre or not. Class cadres had a higher perceived leadership practice level than non-class cadres.

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