

Difficulties Encountered by Student Leaders in the New Normal: Basis for a Leadership Enhancement Program

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ABSTRACT

This study determined the difficulties encountered by Supreme Student Government officers in the new normal and used the findings as basis for a leadership enhancement program. A descriptive research design was employed among 91 Supreme Student Government officers from one medium-sized Schools Division in Region III during School Year 2021-2022. The study described respondents according to age, sex, school category, and average monthly family income; assessed their difficulties in knowledge, ability, and attitude; and tested whether significant differences existed across respondent groups. Data were gathered using a researcher-made questionnaire validated by three experts with an excellent validity rating of 4.81 and a reliability index of .967. Frequency, percentage, weighted mean, Mann-Whitney U test, and Kruskal-Wallis H test were used

in the analysis. Findings showed that most respondents were younger learners, female, from medium schools, and from families with higher monthly income. Overall, student leaders experienced a high level of difficulty in knowledge ($M = 3.64$), ability ($M = 3.57$), and attitude ($M = 3.53$). The most difficult areas were planning and creating the General Plan of Action, using accessible platforms for smooth delivery of programs, and managing time and energy in the new normal. No significant differences were found when difficulties were grouped by age, sex, school category, and family income. The study concludes that student leaders shared similar leadership challenges during the pandemic regardless of profile. A leadership enhancement program focused on digital leadership, online program planning, time management, communication, and youth-formation support is recommended.

Keywords: *leadership enhancement, new normal education, student leaders, Supreme Student Government, youth formation, pandemic leadership*

INTRODUCTION

Student leadership is an important component of school life because it develops learners' capacity for responsibility, participation, service, and democratic engagement. In the Philippine basic education system, the Supreme Student Government provides learners with opportunities to plan activities, lead peers, communicate school concerns, and support programs aligned with the goals of the Department of Education. During the new normal, however, student leaders were required to perform these roles in unfamiliar and often difficult conditions.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed how student organizations planned, implemented, and evaluated programs, projects, and activities. Face-to-face meetings were limited, student participation shifted to digital platforms, and school activities had to follow health protocols and learning-continuity arrangements. For SSG officers, leadership was no longer limited to traditional school-based interaction; it required digital communication, online coordination, flexible planning, and emotional adjustment to uncertainty.

The Youth Formation Division recognizes the role of student leaders in developing proactive Filipino learners who can contribute to societal growth. Its programs support the K to 12 curriculum by strengthening societal engagement, technical skills, social skills, creativity and innovation, affective skills, and self-mastery. In this context, the difficulties encountered by student leaders should be assessed not only as barriers but also as indicators of areas where training and institutional support are needed.

This study was anchored on Perkins' Theory of Difficulty, which explains that learning and performance problems should be analyzed based on the nature of the difficulty rather than simply blaming learners. Applied to student leadership, this means that difficulties in knowledge, ability, and attitude must be identified so that appropriate support may be designed. The study therefore examined the difficulties encountered by Supreme Student Government officers in the new normal and used the findings as a basis for a leadership enhancement program.

Literature Review

Student Leadership in the New Normal

Student leadership remained important during the pandemic because learners continued to need representation, peer support, and youth-led initiatives. Johnson (2020) emphasized that student leadership becomes even more meaningful during crisis because leaders can provide hope, positivity, and support to their peers. Poltorak (2020) likewise noted that student leaders faced unexpected responsibilities during the global pandemic and needed support networks to manage uncertainty.

In the Philippines, DepEd (2020) documented youth leaders who supported fellow learners through donation drives, social media engagement, and communication initiatives. Hernando-Malipot (2021) also reported DepEd's virtual leadership and character development training for Supreme Student Government officials, showing the need to capacitate student leaders during distance learning.

These perspectives show that student leadership in the new normal required more than enthusiasm. It required planning, communication, digital readiness, emotional resilience, and institutional support. Student leaders were expected to continue service while adapting to restrictions, online environments, and changing learner needs.

Knowledge, Ability, and Attitude as Areas of Difficulty

The study examined student-leadership difficulties through three areas: knowledge, ability, and attitude. Knowledge refers to the information, understanding, and decision-making foundation needed to plan and implement programs. In the new normal, student leaders needed knowledge about online planning, program protocols, digital materials, task delegation, and problem-solving strategies.

Ability refers to the capacity to perform leadership tasks. Student leaders needed to use accessible online platforms, simplify concepts during asynchronous activities, address student concerns, provide technical assistance, monitor programs, and use digital technology for activities. Studies on online learning during the pandemic, such as those by Sriwiyanti et al. (2021) and Kimura and Farrer (2020), emphasize that engagement and interaction become difficult when students lack reliable technology, support, and online communication opportunities.

Attitude refers to dispositions, values, motivation, and readiness to act. During the pandemic, student leaders needed to uphold DepEd core values, manage time and energy, remain honest, commit to self-improvement, adapt to change, recognize team efforts, and transform challenges into opportunities. These leadership attitudes are essential because student leaders had to balance school responsibilities, personal well-being, and online service delivery.

School Support and Leadership Enhancement

The related literature shows that student leaders benefit from structured guidance and supportive systems. Bishop Tyrrell Anglican College (2020) described leadership as the development of relationships, communication,

values, and shared goals. O'Scanaill (2021) stressed that students need opportunities to make decisions, collaborate, take risks, and practice leadership in supportive environments.

Local studies likewise support leadership training and development. Siscar and Ojales (2021) found that student government officers need improvement in planning skills and require adviser support for effective implementation and coordination. Teh et al. (2018) found that SSG officials were generally competent but needed stronger teamwork and applied leadership skills.

A leadership enhancement program is therefore necessary when student leaders encounter high levels of difficulty. Such a program should address digital leadership, program planning, time management, communication, teamwork, and access to resources. It should also involve school heads, teacher-advisers, Youth Formation Coordinators, and local stakeholders.

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a descriptive research design. This design was appropriate because the study determined the current level of difficulties encountered by Supreme Student Government officers in the new normal and compared these difficulties across selected respondent profile variables without manipulating any condition.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in the Schools Division Office of Zambales, a medium-sized Schools Division in Region III. The division includes public and private schools across four zones and thirteen districts. The locale was appropriate because the study focused on Supreme Student Government officers who implemented youth-formation programs during the new normal.

Respondents and Sampling Technique

The respondents were 91 Supreme Student Government officers during School Year 2021-2022. Complete enumeration was employed among the identified respondents, with purposive selection based on their role as student leaders. The distribution was 21 respondents from Zone 1, 21 from Zone 2, 28 from Zone 3, and 21 from Zone 4.

Table 1. *Distribution and Profile of Respondents*

| Profile variable | Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Zone | Zone 1 | 21 | 23.08% |
| Zone | Zone 2 | 21 | 23.08% |
| Zone | Zone 3 | 28 | 30.76% |
| Zone | Zone 4 | 21 | 23.08% |
| Age | Younger (14 years old and below) | 49 | 53.80% |
| Age | Older (15 years old and above) | 42 | 46.20% |
| Sex | Male | 23 | 25.30% |
| Sex | Female | 68 | 74.70% |
| School category | Small | 29 | 31.90% |
| School category | Medium | 39 | 42.90% |
| School category | Large/Mega | 23 | 25.30% |
| Average monthly family income | Lower (below Php13,000.00) | 45 | 49.50% |
| Average monthly family income | Higher (Php13,000.00 and above) | 46 | 50.50% |

Research Instrument

The study used a researcher-made questionnaire. The first part gathered respondent profile information, including age, sex, school category, and average monthly family income. The second part measured the level of

difficulties encountered by student leaders in the new normal according to knowledge, ability, and attitude. A five-point Likert scale was used, with responses interpreted from Very Low Level to Very High Level.

Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire was subjected to content validation by three experts in education and research. The instrument obtained a validity rating of 4.81, interpreted as Excellent. Reliability testing was conducted among 30 student leaders from the Schools Division of Olongapo City who were not part of the actual respondents. The instrument obtained a reliability index of .967, interpreted as Excellent.

Data Gathering Procedure

Permission was sought from the Schools Division Superintendent and school heads through the Public Schools District Supervisors. Because face-to-face transactions were discouraged during the health crisis, the survey questionnaire was administered through Google Online Survey Forms. Instructions and clarifications were provided through call, text, email, or Facebook Messenger as needed. The responses were retrieved, tallied, tabulated, and analyzed.

Data Analysis

Frequency and percentage were used to describe the respondents' profile. Weighted mean was used to determine the level of difficulties in knowledge, ability, and attitude. Mann-Whitney U test was used for two-group comparisons such as age, sex, and income. Kruskal-Wallis H test was used for school-category comparisons. The level of significance was set at .05.

Ethical Consideration

The study observed voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and responsible handling of data. The respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and were asked to answer the questionnaire honestly. Since the respondents were student leaders and may include minors, the final submission should explicitly confirm parental or guardian consent, learner assent, and the institutional approval or ethics-review reference number when available.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Supreme Student Government Officers

The results showed that the majority of respondents were younger student leaders aged 14 years old and below (53.80%). Female respondents represented 74.70% of the sample, while male respondents represented 25.30%. Most respondents came from medium schools (42.90%), followed by small schools (31.90%) and large/mega schools (25.30%). In terms of average monthly family income, 50.50% belonged to the higher-income category, while 49.50% belonged to the lower-income category.

Level of Difficulties Encountered in Knowledge, Ability, and Attitude

Student leaders encountered a high level of difficulty across all three areas. Knowledge obtained an overall mean of 3.64, ability obtained an overall mean of 3.57, and attitude obtained an overall mean of 3.53. The findings indicate that the new normal affected not only what student leaders knew about planning and implementation but also their capacity to use platforms and their disposition toward time, energy, and adaptation.

Table 2. *Summary of Difficulties Encountered by Student Leaders in the New Normal*

| Area | Overall mean | Interpretation | Highest-rated difficulty | Lowest-rated difficulty |
|-----------|--------------|----------------|---|--|
| Knowledge | 3.64 | High Level | Planning and creating the General Plan of Action in the new normal (M = 3.75) | Preparing infographics, videos, and slide presentations (M = 3.44) |

| | | | | |
|----------|------|------------|---|--|
| Ability | 3.57 | High Level | Using an accessible platform for smooth delivery of programs, projects, and activities (M = 3.69) | Training in digital technology to match online activities (M = 3.41) |
| Attitude | 3.53 | High Level | Managing time and energy wisely in the new normal (M = 3.73) | Adapting to change and pushing change forward (M = 3.42) |

The knowledge result shows that planning and creating a General Plan of Action was the most difficult task. This suggests that student leaders struggled with designing organized, realistic, and responsive activities under pandemic restrictions. The ability result shows that selecting and using accessible platforms was a major challenge, confirming that digital access and platform familiarity were important leadership concerns. The attitude result shows that managing time and energy was most difficult, indicating that student leaders experienced pressure in balancing leadership work with academic and personal responsibilities.

Difficulties When Grouped by Respondent Profile

When grouped by profile variables, the level of difficulties varied descriptively but remained generally high or moderate. Younger respondents reported higher overall means than older respondents in knowledge, ability, and attitude. Medium and large/mega school respondents generally reported higher difficulties than respondents from small schools. Respondents from both lower- and higher-income families reported high difficulty in several areas.

Table 3. *Selected Overall Means of Difficulties by Profile Variables*

| Grouping variable | Knowledge | Ability | Attitude | Synthesis |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|--|
| Age: Younger | 3.79 High | 3.69 High | 3.78 High | Younger leaders reported higher difficulty across all areas. |
| Age: Older | 3.48 Moderate | 3.44 Moderate | 3.25 Moderate | Older leaders reported moderate difficulty overall. |
| School: Small | 3.33 Moderate | 3.31 Moderate | 3.34 Moderate | Small-school leaders reported lower descriptive difficulty. |
| School: Medium | 3.82 High | 3.69 High | 3.60 High | Medium-school leaders reported high difficulty. |
| School: Large/Mega | 3.73 High | 3.72 High | 3.78 High | Large/mega-school leaders reported high difficulty. |
| Income: Lower | 3.63 High | 3.50 High | 3.43 Moderate | Lower-income respondents experienced high difficulty in knowledge and ability. |
| Income: Higher | 3.65 High | 3.64 High | 3.63 High | Higher-income respondents still reported high difficulty. |

These descriptive patterns suggest that leadership challenges were experienced across groups, although some groups reported higher mean levels. The higher means among younger respondents may reflect their greater need for support in planning, delegation, platform use, and self-management. The high means among medium and large/mega schools may reflect the wider scope of student participation and activity management.

Significant Differences in Difficulties Across Groups

The inferential analysis showed no significant differences in the level of difficulties encountered by student leaders when grouped according to age, sex, school category, and average monthly family income. This was true across the areas of knowledge, ability, and attitude. All computed p-values were greater than the .05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted.

Table 4. *Summary of Difference Tests by Knowledge, Ability, and Attitude*

| Area | Grouping variable | Test statistic | p-value | Interpretation |
|-----------|-------------------|----------------|---------|-----------------|
| Knowledge | Age | U = 860.50 | .179 | Not significant |
| Knowledge | Sex | U = 770.50 | .916 | Not significant |
| Knowledge | School category | H = 3.689 | .158 | Not significant |

| | | | | |
|-----------|-------------------------------|------------|------|-----------------|
| Knowledge | Average family monthly income | U = 940.50 | .446 | Not significant |
| Ability | Age | U = 929.50 | .428 | Not significant |
| Ability | Sex | U = 723.00 | .589 | Not significant |
| Ability | School category | H = 3.243 | .198 | Not significant |
| Ability | Average family monthly income | U = 890.00 | .249 | Not significant |
| Attitude | Age | U = 809.00 | .079 | Not significant |
| Attitude | Sex | U = 729.00 | .628 | Not significant |
| Attitude | School category | H = 1.907 | .385 | Not significant |
| Attitude | Average family monthly income | U = 919.50 | .358 | Not significant |

The absence of significant differences indicates that the difficulties experienced by student leaders were broadly shared. Regardless of age, sex, school category, or family income, respondents encountered comparable challenges in adapting student leadership responsibilities to the new normal. This supports the need for a leadership program that is inclusive and division-wide rather than limited only to selected groups.

Proposed Leadership Enhancement Program

Based on the findings, a leadership enhancement program is proposed to support Supreme Student Government officers in planning, implementing, and evaluating youth-formation programs in flexible learning contexts. The program focuses on areas where respondents experienced the highest levels of difficulty: online planning, platform use, time and energy management, digital content preparation, communication, and adaptive leadership.

Table 5. *Proposed Leadership Enhancement Program for Student Leaders*

| Program component | Basis from findings | Suggested activities | Expected outcome |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Digital leadership orientation | High difficulty in using accessible platforms and digital tools | Hands-on sessions on Google Forms, Messenger, online meeting tools, presentation tools, and basic digital safety | Student leaders can use appropriate platforms for online activities. |
| General Plan of Action workshop | Highest knowledge difficulty involved planning and creating the General Plan of Action | Workshop on needs assessment, activity design, timeline preparation, task assignment, and monitoring tools | Student councils can prepare realistic and responsive plans. |
| Online communication and engagement | Difficulty in encouraging students to participate in youth-formation activities | Training on online facilitation, social media announcements, student feedback, and inclusive communication | Student participation in SSG programs improves. |
| Time and energy management | Highest attitude difficulty involved managing time and energy wisely | Sessions on prioritization, calendar use, shared responsibilities, and self-care for student leaders | Student leaders manage leadership tasks without excessive overload. |
| Teamwork and delegation | Difficulty in delegating tasks and sharing ideas across teams | Role clarification, committee assignments, peer mentoring, and accountability check-ins | Student leaders collaborate more effectively. |
| Stakeholder and resource support | Limited resources and accessibility compromised planning and implementation | Partnership-building with teacher-advisers, school heads, LGUs, and stakeholders for internet and equipment support | Student leaders receive stronger institutional and community support. |

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Supreme Student Government officers encountered a high level of difficulty in performing leadership roles during the new normal. The respondents were mostly younger, female, from medium

schools, and from families with higher average monthly income. However, the difficulties they experienced were not limited to any one profile group.

Knowledge-related difficulty was most evident in planning and creating the General Plan of Action. Ability-related difficulty was most evident in using accessible platforms for the smooth delivery of programs, projects, and activities. Attitude-related difficulty was most evident in managing time and energy wisely. These results show that student leadership during the pandemic required cognitive preparation, digital competence, resource access, time management, adaptability, and emotional readiness.

No significant differences were found when difficulties were grouped according to age, sex, school category, and average monthly family income. This means that the challenges of student leadership in the new normal were generally shared across groups. Therefore, support programs should be inclusive, practical, and accessible to all student leaders.

Recommendation

The Department of Education, Youth Formation Coordinators, school heads, and teacher-advisers should implement a leadership enhancement program for Supreme Student Government officers focused on digital leadership, online program planning, communication, platform use, time management, and adaptive leadership. Student leaders should be trained before or at the beginning of their term so they can plan and implement activities more confidently.

Schools should strengthen access to internet resources, equipment, and technical assistance through partnerships with local government units, parent-teacher associations, alumni groups, and other stakeholders. Teacher-advisers should provide continuous coaching on General Plan of Action preparation, task delegation, monitoring, and youth-formation documentation.

Future researchers may conduct similar studies in other divisions, include private secondary schools, examine additional variables, and use qualitative or mixed-method designs to capture deeper narratives of student leaders. Further studies may also evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed leadership enhancement program after implementation.

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