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Fostering a Positive School Climate through Spiritual Leadership in High Schools

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between Spiritual Leadership Practices (SLP) and Positive School Climate (PSC) of 38 student leaders enrolled in the Polytechnic University of the Philippines Laboratory High School during SY 2024–2025. A researcher-made questionnaire was employed to gather data on spiritual leadership dimensions – vision and purpose, hope and faith, altruistic love, and meaning and belonging – along with perceptions of positive school climate, these were analyzed through Pearson's correlation analysis and Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis to ensure result reliability. A weak but statistically significant positive correlation between SLP and PSC was found, suggesting that stronger spiritual leadership practices are associated with a more supportive, collaborative, and inclusive school environment. Spearman correlation indicated a similar positive direction but did not reach statistical significance. Both tests supports the conclusion that spiritual leadership practices positively relate to perceptions of a positive school climate. It is recommended that schools provide spiritual leadership development programs for student leaders to further enhance positive school climate, promote cooperation, and foster holistic student growth.

Keywords: spiritual leadership, positive school climate, student leadership development, high school education, leadership traits.

1. Introduction

The development of leadership in high school students is an important part of an education as it molds the future leaders into individuals with the values and skills that enable them to become successful in their lives. In addition, student leadership fosters students for societal issues and builds civil responsibility. The study of Li (2024) emphasizes the importance of cultivating leadership behavior, which is crucial for community engagement, thru student-centered learning. In relation to societal and community. With respect to the social and community Naheed et al.

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(2023) noted the important power of student leadership in higher education for addressing social problems such as poverty, healthcare, and sustainability through collaboration. In addition to overall leadership, the involvement of Student leaders in decision-making and management of discipline also contributes to better school climate because it builds accountability and responsibility within students as explained in the study of Umurisa et al. (2024).

Spiritual leadership greatly influences the leadership experiences of students. The study of Allen et al. (2023) provided an in-depth analysis of the importance of spirituality in facing life's challenges and empowering leadership of black male college students. It also highlights the need for inclusive approaches to integrating spirituality in students' leadership development. Prabhu and Mehta (2023) underscored the importance of spiritual values in fostering holistic student growth by identifying eight attributes of Spiritual Intelligence (SI) that influences student leadership development in higher education, providing a framework for applying spirituality to their academic lives, regardless of personal beliefs.

In this study, spiritual leadership is not defined by specific religious or spiritual traditions, but as a leadership model based on universal values – such as hope, vision, altruistic love, and a sense of meaning and belonging – that contribute to a positive and inclusive school climate (Fry et al., 2017; Zaharris et al., 2017). Therefore, the focus is on the enactment of these values by student leaders, rather than on their personal or religious spiritual beliefs.

The relevance of measuring spiritual leadership among students in schools extends globally, addressing critical issues in character development, moral education, and academic performance. Spiritual leadership helps develop values like honesty and tolerance, as well as cooperation, which are essential for the creation of ethical and supportive schools. For example, students' active participation in spiritual activities such as congregational prayers and Quran recitation of students at SMK Islam Al Fadhlila Demak, Indonesia resulted in stronger character development and improvement of vocational education quality (Maulidin, 2024). Moreover, when it comes to schools run by the Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA) faith in Zimbabwe, student-led initiatives for spiritual leadership have been instrumental in promoting discipline and high academic standards in these schools, highlighting how spiritual leadership can address moral decline and train individuals to become holistic humans (Ngwenya, Nyakora, 2024). Spiritual leadership working on promoting universally accepted concept values, such as hope, faith and altruistic love, can foster a positive school culture whereby students experience ongoing personal growth and, in turn, academic success (Zaharris et al., 2017). This emphasis on student spiritual leadership underscores the global importance of nurturing students who are ethical, motivated, and socially responsible leaders who can give back to their communities, serving as an invaluable addition to the educational systems in nations worldwide. Thus, this study contributes to international discourse by exploring spiritual leadership in the context of a Philippine secondary school providing localized insights with global implications.

Although there is a depth of research done on spiritual leadership with adults especially in higher education (Allen et al., 2023; Prabhu, Mehta, 2023), it can be noted that little attention has been focused on adolescent leaders at the high school level, resulting in a lack of knowledge around how adolescent leaders experience spiritual leadership and the impact it has on them in high school settings. This is a noticeable gap and indicates where more exploration of spirituality in adolescent leadership is needed.

This research gap should be addressed, as the current study will thus provide insight into the influences linking spiritual leadership to the development of adolescent leaders and a positive school environment. It will also help teachers and administrators develop a more holistic leadership programs, which foster responsible, empathetic leaders in high schools. Such an exploration is critical for promoting leadership practices that advance spiritual values in the secondary school context. To achieve these objectives, the study adopts a quantitative research approach. This method enables the examination of the relationship between spiritual leadership practices and school climate using measurable data and statistical tools. It promotes objectivity and supports the study's goal of identifying whether significant correlations exist among the variables.

Specifically, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do high school student leaders agree or disagree with the practice of spiritual leadership?
2. To what extent do high school student leaders' responses reflect a positive school climate in their schools?

3. Is there a significant relationship between the perception of spiritual leadership practices and the perception of a positive school climate in high schools?

Review of Related Literature

Leadership in High Schools

For most individuals, school serves as the first formal organizational experiences that shapes our early understanding of organizational culture and roles. School is often perceived as the most significant organizational experience during childhood and adolescence (Montgomery, Kehoe, 2015). In addition, Murphy (2012) posited that behaviors in adult organizational settings are deeply influenced by experiences in school as individuals spend an extensive time in school, an average of 12 years or approximately 15,000 hours, making it a central institution in formative years.

Schools have the greatest influence on the leadership development of young people due to the unique set of both formal and informal opportunities they provide. Research shows that student leadership not only motivates and boosts the confidence of learners but it also solves trust issues between students and teachers thus developing even sturdier relationships (Lavery, Hine, 2013). Student leaders are also key actors of discipline within schools, by their activities such as controlling the behavior, organizing events, and maintaining order that boosts a positive school environment (Kirea, 2015; Njue, 2014). For instance, prefects act as the main link between students and the school communication administration and therefore they can carry out disciplinary duties with ease as well as supervise the entire operation of the school (Kirea, 2015). On the other hand, leadership training like the one discussed by Lau (2004) prefects are awarded practical skills that help them develop personally and equally support the flawless operations of their institutions. The prefect system of Botswana, analyzed by Morapedi and Jotia (2011), moves further as it even shows the role of student leadership in teaching civic responsibility and engaging with the democratic cause. These studies point out that student leadership has a huge impact in increasing discipline in the school community, helping individual and groups to grow, and even building up the personal and collective levels of thereof.

Spiritual Leadership

Researchers and scholars have been describing the concept of spiritual leadership in various ways by concentrating on two main aspects which are spirituality and leadership. The term spirituality, as defined by Hindmarsh (2018), is an animating principle of existence that gives the living a sense of purpose and precious meaning. This means that spirituality is something that influences an individual's behavior and how they perceive the meaning of their actions. While on the other hand, a leader is one who exerts influence, inspires, and motivates the others to the accomplishment of specific goals or the following of particular values (Frost, 2019; Smith et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2019). Thus a leader's function is the influence of followers' behavior as well as their guidance toward mutual goals. When including spirituality into the actual practice of leadership, it means that leaders advise their followers to have a more profound and intimate engagement with their work. Furthermore, spiritual leadership makes it possible for followers to understand that their work has a bigger meaning and therefore get more attached to their job, thereby bringing out the best of them in what they do (Gjorevska, 2021; Siddiqi et al., 2017). This means of leadership underpins the need to create a sense of purpose and attachment to organizational duties which are significant and this finally translates to a more engaging and motivating experience.

Spiritual leadership refers to the process of inspiring and motivating others by guiding them through spiritual values that reflect one's beliefs about the meaning of life. These values include concepts such as love, compassion, justice, and equality. Spiritual leaders use these values to influence their followers positively and foster a sense of purpose and community. This form of leadership is applicable across various sectors, including education, where leaders inspire students and staff to connect with their work on a deeper, more meaningful level (Rafsanjani, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Transformational leadership theory which was defined by Burns (1985) and later elaborated by Bass comes with the concepts of inspiring followers to reach their potential. Leadership based on spiritual values and transformational leadership have common elements which include the ability to inspire and motivate followers through core value-based leadership. Transformational

leaders are the ones who wield the idealized influence to spur on the employees to aspire to the highest levels of performance, impart the necessary motivation to the employees to pursue the goals, encourage the employees to think out of the box, and be in the connections with the employees as well (Bass, 1985; Northouse, 2018). In the same vein, the spiritual leadership that values the principles of love, compassion, and justice is the kind of leadership that will help the followers to find the deeper meaning and purpose in their work (Rafsanjani, 2017).

Meanwhile, both of them focus on forming a common goal and promoting ethics which could be specifically positive in school settings. For high school student leaders, integrating spiritual and transformational leadership principles can help cultivate leaders who are not only motivated by academic goals but also by a sense of personal and communal growth, enhancing their leadership qualities and connection to others.

2. Methodology

This study used a quantitative research design to analyse the relationship between spiritual leadership characteristics, and the school climate perception of student leaders. The sample of the study were 38 student leaders which include homeroom presidents, homeroom vice presidents, organization presidents and organization vice presidents from the Polytechnic University of the Philippines Laboratory High School. Respondents were intentionally sampled using purposive (criteria) sampling (i.e., chosen based on leadership level, with the assumption that they possessed traits likely to be relevant to the study). While there are only 38 student leaders in the sample, this number is adequate for correlational analysis of the small and organic population of student leaders within the school. In general a minimum sample size of 30 is required to detect medium sized relationships (Cohen, 1992). In addition, the study aimed at representativeness across the organization and not generalizability.

A researcher-made survey questionnaire with two sections was developed for the study: Section I focused on spiritual leadership practices that included vision and purpose, hope and faith, altruistic love, meaning and belonging whilst Section II assessed student leaders' perceptions of positive school climate. The instrument underwent content validation by two experts who rated each item on a four-point scale: 1 – Not Relevant, 2 – Somewhat Relevant, 3 – Quite Relevant and 4 – Highly Relevant. The S-CVI was 0.95, which reflects excellent content validity. Finally, a pilot test was performed on student leaders with profiles similar to those that participated in the study. Its (0.75) calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficient also showed an acceptable internal consistency reliability of the tool for its application in data collection of the study.

The assumption of Pearson correlation coefficient was verified prior to the analysis. The two variables – spiritual leadership practices and perceived positive school climate – were continuous constructs in this study and assessed separately. Normality of the data was evaluated by Shapiro-Wilk test and Q–Q plots. Analysis results spiritual leadership practices ($W = 0.939$, $p = .039$) was somewhat less than normal, and found that perceived positive school climate ($W = 0.957$, $p = .156$) was normally distributed. The Q–Q plots of both the variables in visually appeared to be closely lying on the diagonal line representing approximate normality. Linearity and homoscedasticity were tested with a scatterplot that showed an overall positive linear association between the two variables, no large outliers, and an equivalent spreading of data. Based on these results, the conditions required for Pearson correlation were assumed to have been met and Pearson correlation was accepted as a valid test for examining the relationship between spiritual leadership and school climate (Ghasemi, Zahediasl, 2012). Nonetheless, since the spiritual leadership practices deviated a bit from normality, Spearman rank-order correlation was also calculated to supplement Pearson analysis. Both tests were incorporated in order to corroborate the reliability and sound methodological relationship between spiritual leadership and perceived school climate.

The study has been performed in compliance with the policy of Polytechnic University of the Philippines and after obtaining ethical clearance. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects, and confidentiality of the participants' responses was strictly maintained to ensure their privacy.

3. Results

As shown in Table 1, the Vision and Purpose factor has a grand average of 4.58 ($SD = .51$), which is an indicator of great agreement among the leaders' students. This means that they maintain a clear direction and strong commitment to the school's mission and values. The item with the highest mean – "I emphasize the importance of individual contributions to the school's

success ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 0.45$) – indicates a high acknowledgement of teamwork and collective responsibility. In the meantime, the item that received the lowest score – “I articulate a compelling vision that inspires others to contribute” – although it remained high, suggests a need for its further improvement in communicating vision with more inspiration. The total SD (0.51) points to a similar response pattern, common perceptions shared with student leaders in terms of vision- and purpose-driven leadership.

Table 1. Vision and Purpose Scale

Statement	Mean	SD
I articulate a compelling vision that inspires others to contribute.	4.42	0.50
I encourage a focus on long-term goals aligned with the school's mission.	4.58	0.55
I provide clear direction for achieving our shared objectives.	4.61	0.46
I emphasize the importance of individual contributions to the school's success.	4.74	0.45
I consistently align my actions with the school's core values and vision.	4.53	0.60
Grand Mean and SD	4.58	0.51

Table 2. Hope and Faith Scale

Statement	Mean	SD
I inspire confidence in achieving our school's goals, even in challenging times.	4.50	0.56
I model optimism and a positive outlook for the school community.	4.47	0.60
I encourage resilience and perseverance among staff and students.	4.58	0.64
I instill hope by recognizing and celebrating small achievements.	4.79	0.47
I trust in the potential of others to overcome obstacles and grow.	4.82	0.39
Grand Mean and SD	4.63	0.53

Table 2 presents the results for the Hope and Faith dimension. A grand mean of 4.63 ($SD = .53$) demonstrates significant overall agreement across student leaders. This reveals how they are optimists, who have faith and the ability to lead. The item with the highest mean score – “I trust in the potential of others to overcome obstacles and grow” ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 0.39$) – indicates the belief that student leaders have in other people's potential, whereas the item with the lowest mean score “I model optimism and a positive outlook for the school community” ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.60$) – indicates that optimism could vary between respondents even though it was evident among them. The total standard deviation ($SD = 0.53$) implies rather similar responses that express a common conviction for keeping faith and hope even under trying circumstances.

Table 3. Altruistic Love Scale

Statement	Mean	SD
I create an environment of mutual respect and trust within.	4.61	0.56
I demonstrate genuine concern for the well-being of students.	4.74	0.50
I prioritize empathy and understanding in addressing conflict.	4.71	0.57
I encourage selflessness and service among members of the school community.	4.39	0.72
I value each individual for their unique qualities and contributions.	4.76	0.43
Grand Mean and SD	4.64	0.56

Table 3 shows that the grand mean of the Altruistic Love dimension was 4.64, ($SD = 0.56$), which indicated a very high degree of agreement among student leaders. This finding indicates students experience empathy, respect and acts of compassion throughout the school. The item with the highest mean – “I value each individual for their unique qualities and contributions” ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 0.43$) – underscores character appreciation, while the lowest-scoring item on the scale – “I encourage selflessness and service among members of the school community” ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.72$) – suggests that across leaders, degrees of encouraging selflessness may differ slightly.

The overall SD (SD = 0.56) indicates relatively uniform responses across all the items, indicating a general perception in a caring and trusting leadership environment.

Table 4. Meaning and Belonging

Statement	Mean	SD
I help individuals find purpose in their roles within the school.	4.45	0.65
I foster a sense of belonging by promoting inclusivity and community.	4.63	0.49
I encourage meaningful reflection on personal and professional growth.	4.45	0.65
I create opportunities for collaboration that strengthen team bonds.	4.55	0.60
I celebrate achievements to enhance members' sense of purpose and connection.	4.66	0.53
Grand Mean	4.55	0.58

As presented in **Table 4**, the Meaning and Belonging factor yielded a grand mean of 4.55 (SD = 0.58) suggesting a high degree of consensus among student leaders. This indicates they work to create a school culture of purpose and inclusivity. The statement with the highest rating – “I celebrate achievements to enhance members' sense of purpose and connection” (M = 4.66, SD = 0.53) (M = 4.66, SD = 0.53) – draws attention to recognition as an aspect of belongingness, while scores for the lowest-rated items – “I help individuals find purpose in their roles within the school” and “I encourage meaningful reflection on personal and professional growth” (M = 4.45, SD = 0.65) – demonstrate opportunities to enhance reflection and individual purpose. The average SD (0.58) suggests some degree of consistency, however there is a small fluctuation in practice according to how student leaders enact meaning and belonging within their position.

Table 5. Positive School Climate Index (PSCI)

Statement	Mean	SD
I feel physically and emotionally safe in our school environment.	3.79	0.84
Our school provides clear rules and guidance to address bullying and conflicts.	3.97	0.86
I know where to go or whom to approach for help when I face challenges.	4.29	0.77
The school fosters a supportive environment where everyone is treated fairly.	4.11	0.92
Teachers and staff ensure that all students feel cared for and valued.	4.34	0.78
My teachers encourage me to actively participate in my learning journey.	4.63	0.54
Classroom lessons are engaging and help me develop critical thinking skills.	4.45	0.69
I receive helpful feedback from my teachers to improve my performance.	4.39	0.68
I have access to resources that support my learning needs.	4.45	0.65
The school recognizes and rewards students for academic and personal growth.	4.11	0.89
Students in our school treat one another with respect and kindness.	3.84	0.86
I feel a strong sense of connection and trust with my teachers.	4.21	0.66
My classmates and I work well together to achieve common goals.	4.45	0.69
I can openly communicate with my teachers and peers when I have concerns.	4.24	0.78
There is a sense of unity and teamwork among the students in our school.	4.32	0.78
Our school celebrates the diversity of its students and their contributions.	4.34	0.75
The facilities and resources available at school create a comfortable learning environment.	4.18	1.04
I feel proud to be part of this school and its positive reputation.	4.50	0.60
The school listens to students' voices and considers our feedback for improvement.	4.03	0.97
Environmental and social responsibility are emphasized in our school activities.	4.50	0.60
Grand Mean and SD	4.26	0.77

As displayed in **Table 5**, the Positive School Climate Index (PSCI) garnered a grand mean of 4.26 (SD = 0.77), which suggests strong agreement among student leaders. This indicate that

students feel their school to be supportive, inclusive and welcoming. The highest-rated items, "My teachers encourage me to actively participate in my learning journey" ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.54$) and "Environmental and social responsibility are emphasized in our school activities" ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.60$), suggest deep engagement and values-based education. The lowest-rated item, "I feel physically and emotionally safe in our school environment" ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.84$), suggests that perceptions of safety are positive but less uniform and might warrant further consideration. With an overall standard deviation of approximately 0.77, responses have moderate variation, suggesting that most students perceive a positive school climate while experiencing individual differences with respect to the safety, inclusivity, and support provided by schools.

Table 6. Correlation Matrix

Correlation Table

Variable	SLP	PSC
1. SLP	Pearson's r	—
	p-value	—
	Spearman's rho	—
	p-value	—
2. PSC	Pearson's r	0.321
	p-value	0.050
	Spearman's rho	0.301
	p-value	0.066

The correlation analysis indicated a weak and positive significant relationship between Spiritual Leadership Practices (SLP) and Perceived School Climate (PSC), $r(36) = .321$, $p = .050$. It appears that greater spiritual leadership amongst student leaders is related to more positive perceptions of the school environment. To check that this result was stable, a Spearman rank-order correlation was further performed, which also gave evidence of a positive relation in the same direction, $\rho(36) = .301$, $p = .066$. Although the Spearman result was not statistically significant, findings across both tests supports the conclusion that spiritual leadership practices are positively related to perceptions about a positive school climate.

4. Discussion

This study's findings indicate that student leaders demonstrate higher positive spiritual leadership practice by having a clear vision, optimism, empathy, and belonging. These characteristics seem to influence and pattern how they influence others in the school community. Such consistency in their answers seem to indicate that these behaviors are actually embedded nature of their leadership behavior and not mere theoretical or academic rhetoric, reflecting an organizational culture based on sense of purpose and unity. This is in line with some of the previous work on how clarity of vision align collective goals and foster direction among school stakeholders (Penolio, 2022). These practices can be traced back to the community-oriented nature of Philippine schools, in which values like pagkakaisa (unity) and bayanihan (cooperation) are ingrained in the educational environment.

The findings of high hope and faith in student leaders reveals that they manage to stay positive and optimistic despite their adversities. This supports Fry (2003) who believes Spiritual leadership offers vision and faith, persisting through perseverance and commitment. In a secondary school setting, that optimism may help prevent students from succumbing to academic & personal pressures.

Altruistic love appeared to be the dominant aspect of spiritual leadership across all dimensions. It shows that Filipino student leaders conceptualize leadership in terms of empathy, compassion and caring for others. Altruistic love has generally been considered the core of spiritual leadership theory as it underpins ethical decision-making and followers' trust (Martínez-Soto et al., 2024). In the Philippine context, where pakikipagkapwa (shared humanity) is a central value, these behaviors probably flow naturally as acts of caring, and not leaving any one out in school.

The dimension of meaning and belonging suggested the student leaders perceives their experience to be meaningful and supportive, although their levels of reflection and personal growth

may differ. This is congruent with previous evidence showing that belonging to school is associated with engagement and well-being (Korpershoek et al., 2020). It implies that, as Philippine schools' common culture generally promotes inclusion, there remains potential for deeper self-reflection and more personalized growth in leadership.

The overall positive rating of school climate shows student leaders feel supported and are able to work together. But there is some variability indicating not all individuals perceived safety and resources the same way. This is consistent with the perception that school climate is multi-faceted, including safety, relationships and support from the institution (Wang, Degol, 2016). These disparities might be accounted for by differences in access and support across lower-resource settings, including certain public secondary schools (Larson et al., 2020).

Finally, the positive association between spiritual leadership practices and positive school climate highlights that values-based leadership behaviors promote a supportive and connected learning environment. As Karadağ (2020) notes, spiritual leadership affects school culture in the sense it enhances common values and trust within the members. This connection could be amplified in the Philippines where cooperation and compassion are considered culturally instilled virtues. This infusion of spiritual values in adolescent leadership seems to create belonging and respect among students, two elements that are vital for the maintenance of a positive school climate. This is consistent with Neal's (2024) assertion that being spiritually aware may increase students' sense of meaning and connection to the school.

The small sample size and single-school setting are limitations to the generalizability of this study. The application of purposive sampling also may lead to selection bias because the participants were selected according to particular leadership positions. Future studies might recruit student leaders from different schools or educational grades to increase the representativeness of samples. Using a mixed-method approach or a longitudinal design could offer even richer understanding of how spiritual leadership plays out in school climate over the years. Overall, the results emphasize the formative potential of spiritual leadership for student leaders. Leveraged with empathy, mission and clear vision, this approach not only reinforces relationships but also helps to build a welcoming and affirming school climate that supports holistic development.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The results show that students sense high spiritual to lead in the school. These mean scores, all of which are significantly greater than average, suggest student leadership cultivates trust, collaboration, and a shared sense of purpose. Non-academic data, including qualitative measures such as the Positive School Climate Index, which reflects student perceptions of school conditions as supportive and engaging, though areas of focus such as emotional and physical safety warrant further attention, provide additional context regarding institution environmental factors shaping student achievement. Additionally, correlation analysis reveals a statistically significant but weak positive correlation between spiritual leadership practices and school climate, further implying that while these leadership practices certainly promote a positive school climate, they cannot stand alone as the only driving forces behind students' experiences.

In summary, the findings suggest that the work of developing spiritual leadership practices in schools should continue to be a key area identified by school administrators where attention to the positive school climate can be enhanced and developed even further. Creating a sense of belonging, encouraging hope, and ensuring that actions are consistent with the school's values can help create a supportive environment for staff and students. Also, consider focusing on areas that received lower ratings such as emotional and physical safety, as these improvements can lead to a more inclusive and safe school. Finally, additional research would help examine other influences on school climate, as well as the effect of specific types of leadership behaviors on various educational settings.

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