

The Developing a Design Thinking Leadership Program for the Salesian Society Foundation Students in Thailand

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Abstract

This study aims to develop a leadership program for students of the Salesian Society Foundation in Thailand by integrating transformational leadership, the Salesian preventive system, and design thinking principles. The research has three main objectives: (1) to examine the leadership characteristics of students in Salesian schools in Thailand, (2) to develop a leadership training program that enhances these characteristics, and (3) to propose a validated program for implementation.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The study utilized a questionnaire distributed to 1,159 students across five Salesian schools in Thailand and semi-structured interviews with 15 educational experts. The questionnaire focused on seven leadership characteristics —commitment, communication, inspiration, morality, teamwork, service-mindedness, and vision. The interviews provided expert insights on how these traits align with Salesian values and offered suggestions for leadership development.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while the PNI_{modified} formula was applied to prioritize areas for improvement. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed, focusing on recurring themes related to leadership development. The findings revealed a significant gap between the current and desired leadership characteristics of students, with teamwork, commitment, and inspiration identified as the priority areas for enhancement.

The proposed 5-day leadership program, validated by experts, is designed to address these gaps by fostering empathy, creativity, and ethical leadership through the design thinking process. The program is aligned with the holistic principles of Salesian education, promoting the development of innovative and compassionate leaders capable of navigating complex educational and social challenges.

Keywords: Transformational leadership; Design thinking; Salesian preventive system; Leadership development

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, leadership development is increasingly recognized as a vital element for the success of students, especially within the context of Thailand's Salesian schools. However, many students in these institutions struggle to meet the growing demands for adaptive and empathetic leadership. Studies show a significant gap between the current leadership characteristics displayed by students and the skills needed to navigate complex societal and educational challenges. For instance, teamwork, commitment, and inspiration are often identified as critical areas requiring improvement (Hernandez & Castro, 2023). These gaps suggest an urgent need for a comprehensive leadership development program that aligns with the holistic principles of the Salesian preventive system and embraces innovative frameworks such as transformational leadership and design thinking.

The integration of design thinking into leadership programs presents a promising solution. Design thinking, a human-centered approach to problem-solving, fostering creativity, empathy, and collaboration, which are crucial for developing effective leaders. Previous research highlights its effectiveness in educational settings. Promoting not only academic success but also the development of soft skills like critical thinking and teamwork (Kelley & Kelley, 2019; Lee & Park, 2022). Given the unique cultural and moral foundations of Salesian education, incorporating these modern leadership frameworks into a tailored program for Thai Salesian students can address current shortcomings and prepare them to become compassionate and visionary leaders of the future.

Therefore, the pressing need for leadership development in Salesian schools underscores the importance of integrating innovative approaches such as transformational leadership and design thinking. These methodologies not only address the current leadership deficiencies, particularly in areas like teamwork and commitment, but they also align with the core values of Salesian education—empathy, moral development, and service. Through this research, a tailored leadership program is proposed, providing both practical and theoretical foundations that can equip students to become effective leaders, well-prepared to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the leadership characteristics of students in schools under the Salesian Society Foundation in Thailand.
2. To develop a leadership training program that enhances students in schools under the Salesian Society Foundation in Thailand.
3. To propose the leadership training program enhancing students in school under the Salesian Society Foundation in Thailand.

Literature Review

Salesian Educational Philosophy

The Salesian educational system, founded by Saint John Bosco, is rooted in the principles of religion, reason, and loving-kindness (Lutz, 2021). These principles shape a preventive approach to education, emphasizing moral and character development over punitive measures. The Salesian philosophy encourages holistic student development, focusing on leadership, empathy, and community development (Hernandez & Castro, 2023). In Thailand, Salesian schools have incorporated these values into their curriculum, aiming to prepare students for leadership roles in their communities. This preventive approach aligns with leadership development by fostering a nurturing environment where students learn to lead through compassion, understanding, and ethical responsibility (Sopon, 2022). The literature suggests that Salesian values are essential for molding students into leaders who are not only academically successful but also morally upright and community-centered.

Design Thinking in Educational Leadership

Building on the foundation values of Salesian education, the concept of design thinking has emerged as a powerful tool for leadership development. Design thinking, a human-centered, iterative problem-solving approach, emphasizes empathy, ideation, and prototyping (Brown, 2008). By adopting this methodology, educators can enhance students' ability to tackle real-world challenges through creativity and collaborative solutions (Kelley & Kelley, 2019). Recent studies highlight the effectiveness of design thinking in leadership education, noting that it fosters essential skills like adaptability, empathy, and innovation —qualities that are critical for modern leaders (Lee & Park, 2022). The iterative nature of design thinking encourages continuous improvement, making it an ideal framework for developing leadership characteristics that align with the ever-changing demands of both educational and social environments (Kim & Lee, 2024).

In connection of design thinking to Salesian education is particularly meaningful because both frameworks emphasize empathy and ethical problem-solving. As students learn to lead with compassion and creativity, they become better equipped to navigate complex educational and community issues, thus bridging the gap between traditional leadership models and the innovative approaches required today.

Transformational Leadership in the Salesian Context

A critical element of the proposed leadership program is transformational leadership, which focuses on inspiring and motivating followers to exceed their self-interests for the collective good (Bass & Riggio, 2019). Transformational leaders are visionary, inspire intellectual stimulation, and provide individualized consideration for their team members (Northouse, 2022). In the context of Salesian schools, transformational leadership can be seamlessly integrated with the Salesian preventive system, as both emphasize the development of moral character, community service, and ethical behavior.

Studies show that transformational leadership fosters a sense of purpose and motivation in students, encouraging them to take on leadership roles that are not only effective but also empathetic and inclusive (Choi et al., 2024). Additionally, the alignment between transformational leadership and design thinking has been well-documented, with both approaches emphasizing creativity, empathy, and ethical decision-making (Brown & Wyatt, 2010). When combined, these two leadership models provide a robust framework for

cultivating leaders who can inspire change and foster a culture of collaboration and innovation within their communities.

Therefore, by integrating the principles of Salesian education, design thinking, and transformational leadership, this literature review highlights the interconnectedness of these frameworks in fostering holistic leadership development. Each element plays a crucial role in shaping students who are not only capable of leading but also grounded in empathy, morality, and innovation. The synergy between these models forms the foundation for the proposed leadership program, which aims to address the unique needs of students in Salesian schools in Thailand. Through the combination of preventive education, human-centered design, and transformational leadership, students will be better prepared to meet the challenges of leadership in both their educational environments and broader communities.

Research Methodology

Research Methodology

This study aims to develop a leadership program for students in the Salesian Society Foundation in Thailand, integrating principles of transformational leadership, the Salesian preventive system, and design thinking. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the leadership characteristics of students and the potential impact of the proposed leadership program. The research follows a sequential design where qualitative insights guide quantitative data collection, and the findings were further analyzed using advanced statistical techniques to prioritize key leadership characteristics.

Population and Sample

The population for this study comprised 3,093 students from five Salesian schools in Thailand. Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula for determining sample size, 1,159 students were selected as the sample. These students were from Grades 10 to 12 in the following schools: Don Bosco Vitthayalai School, Saengthong Vitthaya School, Saint Dominic School, Hua-Hin Vitthayalai School, and Sarasit Phitthayalai School. The sample was selected to ensure representation across various regions and socio-cultural backgrounds, allowing for a robust and generalizable understanding of leadership characteristics within Salesian schools.

Research Tools

Two primary research tools were employed in this study: a questionnaire and an interview protocol.

Questionnaire. A leadership characteristics questionnaire was developed based on an extensive literature review of transformational leadership and the Salesian preventive system. The questionnaire was divided into sections addressing the seven leadership characteristics identified in the literature: commitment, communication, inspiration, morality, teamwork, service-mind, and vision. A pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted with 30 students to ensure reliability, yielding a Cronbach's alpha value indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Interview. In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 experts in educational leadership from Salesian schools. These interviews focused on validating the leadership characteristics identified, exploring how these traits align with the Salesian values, and gathering expert insights on how to develop these qualities through educational interventions.

Data Collection

The data collection process involved qualitative and qualitative methods. The questionnaire was distributed to 1,159 students, and responses were collected through an online platform. In parallel, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with experts, each lasting 30-60 minutes. The interviews were divided into four sections: opinions on leadership characteristics, ways to enhance leadership among Salesian students, alignment with Salesian values, and suggested activities for leadership development. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically to complement the qualitative data.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using statistical methods, including descriptive statistics to summarize the students' leadership characteristics and inferential statistics to determine significant differences across schools and demographic groups. The $PNI_{modified}$ formula was applied to prioritize which leadership characteristics required the most attention based on the students' responses.

Qualitative data from the expert interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Codes were developed based on recurring themes, and these codes were grouped into broader categories that reflected experts' insights on leadership development. The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative analyses were then integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the leadership gaps and areas for development in the student population.

Research Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this research integrates three key elements:

Transformational Leadership. The study uses Bass and Avolio's (1990) transformational leadership model, focusing on four key components: individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence. These components were mapped onto the Salesian leadership characteristics to understand how transformational leadership principles could be incorporated into the program.

Salesian Preventive System. The preventive system's three pillars —reason, religion, and loving-kindness —serve as the ethical and moral foundation of the leadership program. These values are infused into leadership training activities to ensure that students not only develop leadership skills but also embody the holistic educational principles central to Salesian philosophy.

Design Thinking. Brown's (2009) five-step design thinking model —empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test —was employed as a method for structuring a leadership development program. This iterative process encourages creativity, empathy, and adaptability, key skills for leadership in dynamic environments. The design thinking framework ensures that the leadership program remains flexible and responsive to the needs of students and their communities.

Research Results

Research Objective One

To examine the leadership characteristics of students in schools under the Salesian Society Foundation in Thailand, this study identified seven leadership characteristics through a systematic literature review as follows: firstly, each mentioned keyword or phrase derived from the transformational and Salesian preventive system concept was recorded. Secondly, the keywords' meanings were analyzed, and words with similar implications were named a unified term. Thirdly, these words were selected and grouped into different categories according to the synthesized elements' meanings. Then, the results of the seven leadership characteristics included commitment, communication, inspiration, morality, teamwork, service mind, and vision as presented in Figure 1.

Commitment. A person who finds ways to improve things to succeed and achieve goals, introduces new ideas and develops them objectively, knows how to plan effectively and creatively, listens to opinions and criticism, and allows others to provide feedback and collaborate for the common purpose.

Communication. A person who can communicate effectively, clearly, and with reliable expression, including linguistic, gesture, and language adaptations, can also perceive the changing world simultaneously.

Inspiration. A person who has an understanding of others and oneself and is empowered to develop behaviors that meet the requirements of acceptance, praise, and success, including being motivated to work with others.

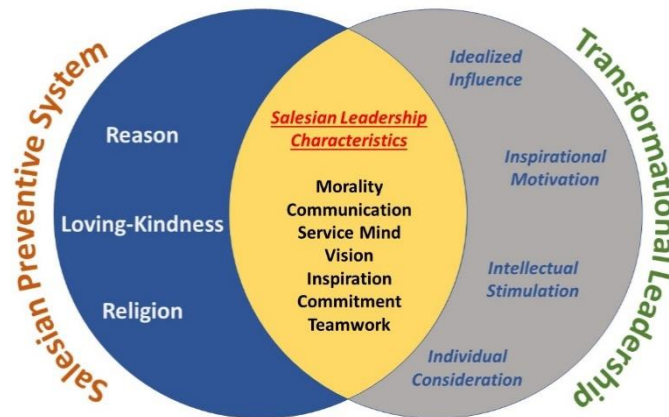
Morality. A person who demonstrates dignity, ethics, responsibility, and morality in life and their interactions with others, such as self-compassion and compassion for others, mission intolerance, and respect for their overall integrity.

Service Mind. A person who dedicates oneself by giving time, energy, empathy, and sympathy to helping others, showing courage, and belonging is seen as a life mission of responsibility.

Teamwork. A person who attaches great importance to building good relationships. They can control their own emotions and can set work goals. They have a good ability to reach out to others. They understand and accept differences between individuals and treat others with respect.

Vision. A person who sees the big picture as a leader and follower and defines destinations that link with their mission, values, and beliefs toward the desired goal; able to imagine the possibilities of what is probable to occur in the future and reconcile it with current realities. Those destinations must be clear, challenging, powerful, and feasible.

Figure 1 Leadership Characteristics of Students for the Salesian Society Foundation in Thailand



Research Objective Two

To develop a leadership training program that enhances students in schools under the Salesian Society Foundation in Thailand.

The researcher designed and developed a leadership program. Therefore, in the development process, the researcher interviewed 15 experts who have worked in educational institutions with semi-structured interview, which took around 30 to 60 minutes and was divided into four main parts with sub-questions. The first part of the interview focused on the expert's opinions regarding leadership characteristics. The second part of the interview questions was to determine how the experts could help enhance students for the Salesian Society Foundation in Thailand reasonably as an educators in the educational setting. The third part involved interviewing the experts to evaluate if the seven leadership characteristics align with the Salesian concept. The last part was to ask the experts to provide some suggestions regarding activities to enhance the leadership characteristics of Thai Salesian students. As a result, the researcher proposed a draft leadership program for students of the Salesian Society Foundation in Thailand.

This program structure provides a balance of theoretical learning, practical application, and reflection, encouraging students to develop their leadership potential within the framework of Salesian values as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Draft of Leadership Program for Students of the Salesian Society Foundation in Thailand

Day	Morning Session	Afternoon Session
Day 1: Foundations of Morality	Icebreaker: An activity focused on building connections and trust within the group.	Case Study Analysis: Analyze case studies of leaders demonstrating strong moral principles. Encourage students to identify challenges and propose solutions based on ethical considerations.
	Interactive Session: Defining morality and ethics within the context of leadership. Discuss real-life examples of ethical leadership and the impact of ethical decision-making.	Reflection: Journaling activity prompting students to reflect on their own values and how they align with ethical leadership.
Day 2: Mastering Communication	Workshop: Effective communication skills, including active listening, clear articulation, and non-verbal communication. Incorporate role-playing and group exercises to practice these skills.	Group Project: Students work in teams to develop and deliver a presentation on a social issue they care about, focusing on clear and persuasive communication
	Guest Speaker: Invite a leader known for their excellent communication skills to share their experiences and insights.	Feedback Session: Provide constructive feedback on communication styles observed during the presentations.
Day 3: Cultivating a Service Mind	Discussion: Explore the concept of servant leadership and its importance in creating positive change. Discuss examples of leaders who embody a service-oriented approach.	Reflection and Sharing: Students share their experiences and insights from the community service activity, focusing on the challenges and rewards of serving others
	Community Engagement Activity: Participate in a local community service project, allowing students to apply their	Action Planning: Encourage students to brainstorm ways they can continue to serve their communities and make a difference.

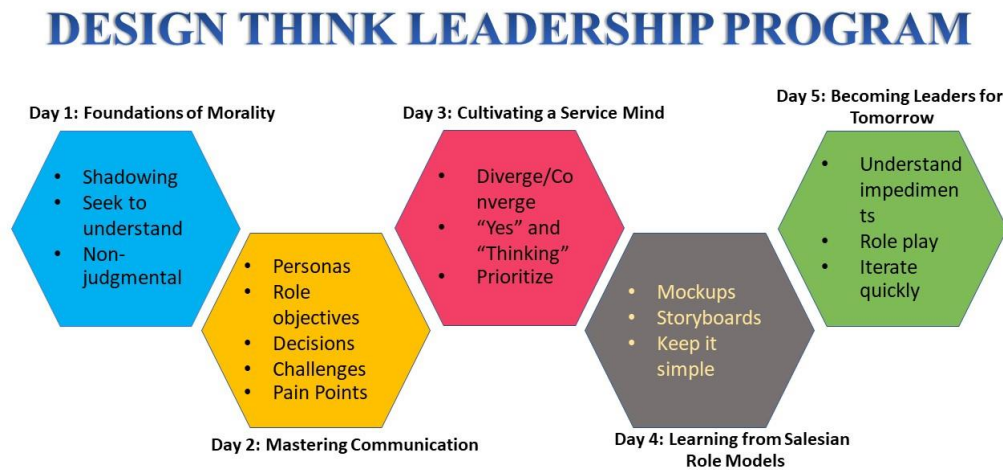
	leadership skills in a practical setting.	
Day 4: Learning from Salesian Role Models	Presentation: Introduce students to the lives and leadership qualities of prominent figures in the Salesian tradition, such as Don Bosco, Saint Dominic Savio, and Margarita.	Creative Expression: Students choose a Salesian role model who resonates with them and create a presentation, artwork, song, or other creative piece to share their understanding of the leader's impact.
	Group Discussion: Analyze the leadership styles and actions of these role models, identifying key takeaways and how they exemplify morality, communication, and service.	Sharing and Celebration: Students present their work, celebrating the inspiring legacies of Salesian leaders
Day 5: Becoming Leaders for Tomorrow	Workshop: Goal setting and action planning. Guide students to identify their leadership aspirations and develop concrete steps to achieve their goals.	Closing Ceremony: Celebrate the completion of the program with certificates of participation and a motivational speaker to inspire continued leadership development.
	Panel Discussion: Invite former participants of the program or young leaders from the community to share their experiences and advice for continued growth.	Networking and Refreshments: Provide time for students to connect with each other and program facilitators, fostering ongoing support and mentorship opportunities.

Research Objective Three

To propose the leadership training program enhancing students in school under the Salesian Society Foundation in Thailand.

After the draft was proposed, the development process was evaluated by 15 experts to complete its verification. The 15 experts are educators who have a function and are used to tasks in the Basic Education and Catholic context. Five experts held doctoral degrees, nine experts with master's degrees with 13 – 40 years, and one with a bachelor's degree of 40 years of professional experience in education in the Salesian Society Foundation of Thailand. According to the feedback from the experts, the revised opinions are sorted and presented the overview of the program through a diagram presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Design Thinking Leadership Program for Students of the Salesian Society Foundation in Thailand



Discussion

In the discussion section of this leadership program study for students of the Salesian Society Foundation in Thailand, the findings reflect a significant intersection between transformational leadership, Salesian educational principles, and design thinking as an innovative approach to developing leadership skills.

The research effectively highlights that transformational leadership and the Salesian preventive system provide a robust foundation for shaping leaders who are not only competent but also morally driven. By incorporating design thinking into this framework, the leadership program prioritizes human-centered approaches such as empathy, ideation, and iterative prototyping, which are crucial in adapting to modern educational challenges. These skills are critical in fostering adaptability and resilience among students, as highlighted by Kim & Lee (2024) and Kelley & Kelley (2019).

Kim and Lee (2024) echoes the findings of this study, particularly, in terms of the benefits of design thinking in educational leadership programs. They argue that the integration of design thinking into leadership development fosters critical skills such as adaptability, creativity, and empathy —traits that are vital for navigating the complexities of modern education. In line with Kim and Lee's findings, this study demonstrates that design thinking not only enhances the practical application of leadership skills but also deepens students' engagement with empathy and ethical problem-solving, which are crucial within the Salesian framework. The consistency between this study with Kim and Lee's results strengthens the argument that design thinking, when integrated with transformational leadership principles, significantly improves leadership development in educational settings.

Additionally, Kim's research identified the iterative nature of design thinking as a key factor in fostering continuous improvement in leadership skills. Specifically, Kim and Lee found that students who participated in design thinking-based programs showed greater resilience and adaptability when faced with challenges, as they were trained to view problems from multiple perspectives and develop creative solutions (Kim & Lee, 2024). This study similarly identified that the iterative processes of design thinking —emphasizing, defining, ideating, prototyping, and testing —enabled students to not only improve their leadership skills

but also adapt to various leadership scenarios with greater confidence and flexibility. These results are consistent with Kim and Lee's conclusions, further validating the role of design thinking in building transformational leaders who are prepared to lead with empathy and innovation.

Moreover, the study also underscores that among the seven leadership characteristics identified—commitment, communication, inspiration, morality, teamwork, service mind, and vision—there are critical areas that need improvement, such as teamwork, commitment, and inspiration. The results show that while these qualities are desired, they are not yet fully developed in students, as evidenced by the gap between current and desired leadership characteristics. This prioritization aligns with the PNI_{modified}, which ranks teamwork as the most urgent aspect to be enhanced.

Furthermore, the discussion links these findings with the proposed Design Thinking Leadership Training Program. The program is designed to target these areas through its five-phase structure (Empathy, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test), which has the potential to significantly address the gaps by promoting a more innovative and empathetic leadership approach. The 5-day Salesian Leadership Program further emphasizes practical application, reflection, and continuous improvement, fostering leadership development within the Salesian ethical framework.

Overall, the integration of design thinking into this leadership program is a promising strategy for nurturing transformational leaders who are not only equipped with the necessary skills to lead but are also deeply connected to their moral responsibilities within the community.

Suggestions

Salesian Schools, Teachers and Administrators, Policymakers

Firstly, the leadership program developed through this research should be integrated into the curriculum of Salesian schools across Thailand. Given the alignment with the Salesian preventive system and transformational leadership, the program's five-step design thinking approach—empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test—should be implemented as a mandatory part of student leadership training. Educators should emphasize empathy and iterative problem-solving as key components of leadership development, ensuring students practice these skills in real-world contexts.

Secondly, teachers and school administrators in Salesian schools should undergo training in both transformational leadership programs and design thinking methodologies. This will equip them with the necessary tools to mentor students effectively and foster an environment of creative, ethical, and adaptive leadership. Training programs should focus on how to apply these leadership principles within the educational setting, ensuring consistency in the delivery of leadership training across different institutions.

Lastly, policymakers, especially those governing Salesian schools in Thailand, should adopt design thinking as a core element of leadership development programs. Policies should formalize leadership competency standards, incorporating the seven leadership characteristics identified in this study: commitment, communication, inspiration, morality, teamwork, service-mindedness, and vision. These standards can serve as benchmarks for evaluating leadership growth in students.

Future Research

Firstly, future research should focus on conducting longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impact of the leadership program on students. Tracking the leadership development of students over several years would provide valuable insights into how transformational leadership programs and design principles influence their ability to lead in various settings, including professional and community roles.

Secondly, future research could explore how the integration of transformational leadership and design thinking across cultural contexts. By comparing the results of this program in Thailand with similar programs in other countries, researchers can determine whether these leadership models are universally applicable or if they require cultural adaptation to be effective in different educational settings.

Thirdly, as technology continues to play a significant role in education, future research should investigate how digital tools and platforms can enhance the delivery of leadership training programs. This includes exploring how technology can support the development of key leadership characteristics such as communication, teamwork, and innovation. Virtual leadership simulations, online collaboration platforms, and digital prototyping tools could be integrated into the design thinking process to enrich the learning experience.

Lastly, although this research focuses on Salesian schools, future studies could extend this model to other educational settings, such as public or international schools. By examining how the leadership characteristics identified in this study apply to different types of educational institutions, researchers could refine and adapt the program to meet a wider range of leadership development needs.

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