



The Impact of the Practical Wisdom for Agile Leadership (PWAL) - Executive Education Program on Educational Leaders

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of the Practical Wisdom for Agile Leadership (PWAL) program for K-12 leaders from Nov 2022 to May 2023. Grounded in Aristotle's notion of practical wisdom, it emphasizes the "how" of teaching practical wisdom. The PWAL Program applies the Practical Wisdom Framework (PWF) to develop leaders' ability to make wise decisions aligned with their school's goals. The impact study, using a mixed-method approach, indicates significant growth in participants' wise reasoning, and their commitment to adopting the PWF practices, resulting in changes to their leadership practices, and shifts in their dispositions. The observed outcome of the study provides some evidence that growth in practical wisdom can be cultivated through intentional educational experiences.

Introduction

Schools are formative institutions with noble aims and ambitions for the students, faculty/staff, and families they serve. Yet school leaders face daily challenges impacting the flourishing of their students, teachers, families, and school culture (Bohlin, 2022). How do they learn to stay agile and focus on what matters most? How do they learn to help their colleagues do the same? To create an environment conducive to virtue and flourishing, school leaders need to know how to adjudicate competing goods, such as when and how to exercise justice and mercy in specific cases. They need to know how to shape practices, protocols, and policies that are formative rather than punitive. In each of these conflicting circumstances are opportunities that can contribute to the flourishing of those they lead and serve if they learn to apply practical wisdom adequately. The Practical Wisdom for Agile Leadership Executive Education (PWAL) program explores Aristotle's practical wisdom - developed into a framework -, as a guide for educational leaders to grow in the skill of decision-making amidst competing aims.

Aristotle posits that practical wisdom or *phronesis* is an intellectual virtue, that helps us to deliberate and adjudicate competing aims, so we can take the right action, at the right time for the right reasons. Distinct from moral virtue, which he argues is learned through habit and practice, practical wisdom, he tells us is learned by "teaching and experience." (Aristotle, 1999). An essential question Kristján Kristjánsson raises is "What kind of teaching and what kind of experience" might Aristotle mean? The PWAL Program offers one possible response to this question. While Kristjánsson and Fowers (2022) provide an illuminating conceptual account of what practical wisdom is from a neo-Aristotelian perspective, the PWAL Program teaches an applied approach designed to equip leaders with the mindset and skill set they need to exercise practical wisdom in their day-to-day work. Bohlin (2022) developed the Practical Wisdom Framework (PWF) as a leadership intervention to facilitate the process of deliberation and good judgement school leaders need to engage in making mission-aligned decisions that support their formative goals. The PWF provides school leaders with theoretically grounded practices—scaffolded steps and guiding questions they can follow as they navigate daily challenges and dilemmas.

The Practical Wisdom Framework (PWF™)

To shift from a reactionary mode in the face of daily challenges to a responsive one aimed at flourishing and high performance, educators need to apply what Aristotle called phronesis, practical wisdom, or good sense. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes practical wisdom (phronesis) from two other types of wisdom: scientific/theoretical knowledge (episteme) and creative knowledge (techne). Scientific/theoretical knowledge deals with universal truths and aims at understanding, while creative knowledge focuses on knowing the most effective means to create, and aims at doing, producing, and performing (Aristotle, 1999). Practical wisdom or phronesis stands apart from these forms of knowledge because it involves ethical judgment and decision-making beyond just facts or technical expertise (Birmingham, 2004). Practical wisdom aims at taking the right action. It requires, therefore, the disposition to perceive and deliberate well in context, to aim at what matters most, and to adjudicate competing goods, so we can take the right actions, at the right time, for the right reasons, and help others to do the same (Bohlin, 2022). Individuals with practical wisdom know what to do and want to do it (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). Practical wisdom entails making judgments informed by a sensitive reading of context and reshaping one's initial reactions into a wise, action-guiding response (Bohlin, 2022; Jefferson & Sifferd, 2022). In a 21st-century educational landscape, where complex challenges often make it difficult to discern the right course of action, Kristjánsson (2022) also asserts that cultivating context-sensitive practical wisdom is crucial.

From Aristotle to Schwartz & Sharpe (2010) and Kristjánsson et al, (2019, 2021, 2022), there is ample scholarship on what practical wisdom is and why it is crucial to the ability to make wise, ethical decisions. In business, practical wisdom has been identified as crucial to the “Wise Leader” and the Wise Company (Ikujiro Nonaka & Hirotaka Takeuchi, 2011, p.59) to stay agile in a changing landscape, remain distinctive in a global market, and “ensure that their people adhere to values and ethics.” Yet there seems to be not enough explicit training of leaders in how to develop practical wisdom in context.

Bohlin (2022) crafted the Practical Wisdom Framework (PWF) as the fruit of her experiences in the trenches of education. It serves as a structured and comprehensive guide, akin to a practical roadmap, to help school leaders navigate the complexities of their roles. Not to be confused as merely a mechanical or theoretical concept, the principles of the framework activate the innate potential of every individual to apply practical wisdom adequately. Grounded in the teachings of Aristotle, it offers a structured approach to applying practical wisdom through repeated experiences.

Practical Wisdom for Agile Leadership (PWAL)

Practical Wisdom for Agile Leadership: Formative Education's Core DNA, is an executive education program for leadership teams eager to operationalize their commitment to educating for character and flourishing. While applicable across institutional contexts, the inaugural PWAL program was designed specifically to help K-12 school leadership teams understand what practical wisdom is, why it is vital to educating for character and flourishing, and how to activate it in real-time using the Practical Wisdom Framework™ (PWF).

Participants in the PWAL program engage in a transformative learning journey that centers on understanding and appreciating the significance of practical wisdom in effective leadership for flourishing. Through the program, they cultivate the ability to recognize and temper initial reactions to various situations. The program also guides them to evoke subtle shifts in others, guiding them from initial reactions toward practical and wise responses. Emphasizing problem-solving approaches that

foster both individual and collective flourishing, participants learn to model the Practical Wisdom Framework (PWF™) within their school communities. Overall, the PWAL program equips leaders with the skills and insights needed to integrate practical wisdom into their leadership practices, contributing to the flourishing of both individuals and the broader school community.

Existing research illustrates the effectiveness of various attempts to teach practical wisdom. Cantrell and Sharpe (2015) demonstrate that practical wisdom, far from being an inherent trait, is a learned and intentionally acquired skill that can be cultivated through practice, within the legal profession. Stenberg and Maaranen (2022) provide suggestions for teaching practical wisdom to teachers, particularly within a practicum experience. Additionally, Bassett (2011) proposes strategies for educators to foster the development of wisdom in themselves and their students. These studies are a few among many that offer perspectives on applied approaches to teaching practical wisdom across professional and educational contexts. This study presents the impact of a unique learning experience and journey aimed at cultivating practical wisdom in educational leaders. It shows that as participants engage with the PWAL program, they not only grasp the conceptual foundations of practical wisdom but also acquire the applied skills essential for effective leadership in the dynamic landscape of education.

Method

Context of the Study

This study was conducted over nine months, involving 17 Executive Educators who formed the cohort for the pilot PWAL program. The program took place from November 2022 to May 2023, comprising six online modules, two school-specific coaching sessions conducted over Zoom, and a needs assessment meeting with each participating school. Each interactive module had a structured format, incorporating both small and large group breakouts to optimize collaboration, application, reflection on practice, and feedback. The last session got the participants involved in the development of a twelve-month plan aimed at deepening and sustaining the application of learned PWF principles in their various school contexts. These 17 educators were school-based teams, representative of a variety of settings, including public and private institutions, as well as those situated in rural, urban, and suburban areas.

Study Design, Participants, and Data Collection

Measuring practical wisdom and its related domains presents complex challenges with no straightforward approach (VanderWeele, 2022) due to its multidimensional and sometimes subjective nature. In an attempt to carry out a robust assessment, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, taking into account the recommendations from Kristjánsson's systematic review, which recommends the use of multiple sources to measure (Aristotelian) virtue and suggests triangulation as a means to achieve a comprehensive understanding (Arthur et al., 2015). The following qualitative and quantitative data sources were used:

1. *Situated Wise Reasoning Scale - SWIS*: The 21-item scale developed by Brienza et al. (2018) was designed to assess an individual's ability to reason wisely and make informed decisions in complex situations. To simulate these situations as much as possible, the SWIS guides respondents to provide details such as the "what, where, when, and how" aspects of a given situation or conflict as well as their thoughts and emotions at the time. This survey designed to help participants reconstruct scenarios and decision-making processes step by step, was adopted since the PWF leadership interventions follow a similar scaffolded approach.

2. *PWAL Executive Education Program Pre and Post Test*: Administered in November before the start of the program and in May at the end of the last Module, this questionnaire is designed to measure participants' knowledge and skills gained. This test measured: (a) Respondents' knowledge of the concepts of Practical Wisdom, Human Flourishing, and the understanding of their school aims. (b) General questions about their experience handling complex situations, conflicts, and working with teams.
3. *Reflection on Learning Module Feedback Surveys*: Administered at the end of each module to capture participants' key learnings, the Reflection on Learning Survey consisted of the following: (a) Open-ended questions for participants to describe their key learnings/takeaways from each module. (b) Quantitative Likert measure using a scale of 1-5 to provide feedback on their learning experience, explicitly rating the usefulness and applicability of the module's content, readings, and acquired knowledge.
4. *Reflection on Practice Pre-Module Survey*: Conducted at the beginning of each module to invite participants to reflect upon and share practices they tried and applied in their schools between modules. This survey consisted of the following: (a) Open-ended questions to describe which of the practices participants used between modules, the context, and the subsequent changes they observed as a result. (b) Quantitative measures to account for participants' ratings of the practices used and the frequency of use in daily practice.

Additional qualitative data was collected from discussions within modules and in team coaching meetings. Supplementary field notes were collected from program coaching meetings, discussions, and breakout sessions within modules. These notes captured valuable insights, feedback, and suggestions for improvement, enhancing the overall study with a nuanced and contextual understanding of the participants' experiences.

Data Analysis

The examination and analysis of the collected qualitative dataset involved the utilization of NVIVO software version 14. A thematic analysis approach was applied to the open-ended questions, to abstract the main themes. These themes transcend participants' explicit statements and were discerned through a comparative exploration of the independent interviews with the school-based teams (Goodrick & Rogers, 2015). For the quantitative dataset, the analysis was done using the R package version 12, to obtain the mean values for the pre-program and post-program Situated Wise Reasoning scores independently. Subsequently, paired sample t-tests were conducted to determine if the difference in pre and post-program SWIS scores was statistically significant.

Findings

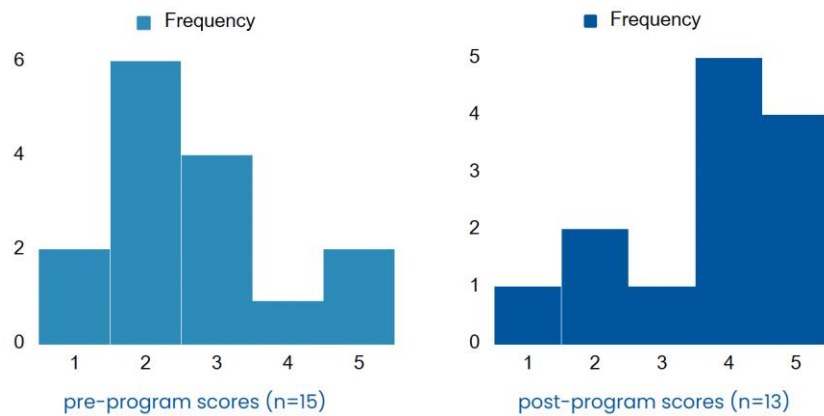
The results from the study showed the program's impact on participants in four main areas. First, the outcome of the SWIS showed significant evidence of growth in wise reasoning, when comparing their wise reasoning indices before and after the program. Second, the participants expressed their key takeaways in the form of commitments to adopt the practices of the Practical Wisdom Framework. Third, they reported that adopting these practices resulted in changes to their leadership practices. Finally and in the fourth place, they identified small shifts in their dispositions as a result.

Discussion of Findings

Growth in Wise Reasoning Scale

The results of the study showed that participants' wise reasoning scores improved after completing the PWAL Executive Education Program. The SWIS scale index is measured on a scale of 1-5 (low to high). The average score of the 15 who completed the SWIS before the program was 2.64, with very

few scores between 4 and 5. After the program, the average score of 13 participants was 3.34 with many participants scoring between 4 and 5. The average Situated Wise Reasoning Scale (SWIS) score of the 15 participants who took the pre-program survey was 2.64 on a scale of 1 to 5. Although a few participants had relatively high SWIS mean scores of 4 and 5, the overall distribution of scores was skewed toward the lower end. After the program, we observed a shift in mean scores in a positive direction, suggesting greater wise reasoning skills were acquired through the program. The distribution appeared right-skewed, indicating that the majority of participants achieved higher average scores. The average SWIS score for this group was 3.34, representing a significant increase from the pre-program scores. Unlike the pre-program distribution, many participants in the post-program assessment recorded relatively high average scores of 4 and 5 on the SWIS scale.



This suggests that the program positively impacted participants' wise reasoning abilities, as evidenced by their elevated scores in post-program assessments. To confirm these claims, a null hypothesis paired sample t-test was conducted on the assumption that the program had no significant impact in improving participants' scores; that is, the observed difference may have only been by chance. The result from the paired t-test showed that there were significant differences in means SWIS scores when comparing the same participants before and after the program, supporting the existence of an association in the wider population ($t(df=26) = -2.95, p < 0.005$), hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. Under similar conditions, it is expected to find similar results, if the PWAL Executive Education Program is repeated with another group of US K-12 educational leaders.

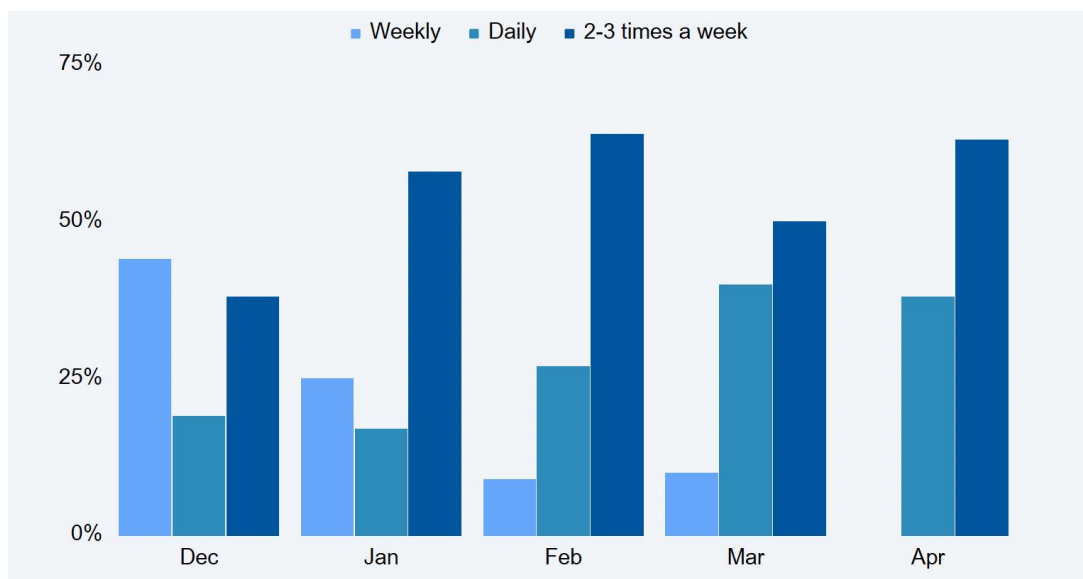
Commitments to adopting the Practical Wisdom Framework

At the end of each module, participants were asked to respond to the question: "What are your three takeaways from this module?" Their responses went beyond an understanding of key concepts. Instead, they framed their answers in the form of commitments to action, to apply specific practices of the Practical Wisdom Framework in various aspects of their lives. This is an important indicator because knowing about concepts is not the same as knowing how to apply them in real-world situations (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2007). The participants' ability to bridge this gap, highlights the practical value of their learning experiences.

Changes to Leadership Practices

At the beginning of every new module, the participants were asked if they had applied any of the practices of the Practical Wisdom Framework™. If yes, they were prompted to respond to the following:

“Tell us which practice you used; Describe one situation in which you used it.” Notably, 100% responded in the affirmative. Their subsequent responses revealed a step beyond the commitments to action they had articulated. In these self-reports, the participants perceived themselves taking action, i.e. using specific practices of the PWF and sharing the contexts and scenarios within which they applied them. The chart below provides insight into the frequency with which the participants reported to have used PWF™ practices over 5 months. In December, shortly after they began the Executive Education Program, the majority admitted to applying practices of the PWF weekly, (44% of participant responses). In January, there was a noticeable shift towards more frequent application - a higher percentage of the participants (58%) reported applying the framework 2-3 times daily. This increased again in February to 64%. Interestingly, in April, all the participants reported having applied the PWF™ practices at least more than 2 times a week, with no participant reporting only weekly use. Overall this data presents a positive trend in adoption and impact on leadership practice.



Identified Shifts in Dispositions

When asked the question: *“Describe any small changes you observe in yourself as a result (if any)?”* participants’ responses consistently revealed their perception of small shifts in their dispositions, encompassing increased patience, enhanced listening skills, positive impacts on relationships, improved conflict resolution, heightened focus on goals and priorities, and reduced stress and anxiety.

Limitations

While this study provides suggestive evidence of participant growth in wise reasoning and the practical application of the Practical Wisdom Framework, there are acknowledged limitations. First, given that all the data was self-reported, some participants' responses may have been influenced by factors such as personal biases, mood, or simply guessing expected answers as a result of familiarity with the question patterns. Self-reported data may be influenced by personal biases or mood, and future studies should consider complementing subjective assessments with objective measures and standardized scales for a more comprehensive evaluation. Secondly, the study's reliance on a relatively small sample size restricts the ability to generalize the findings and also makes it difficult to assess the strength of the relationship between intervention and outcomes. Related to the small sample size, is the discrepancy in participant numbers between the pre and post-program phases which was as a result of unforeseeable attrition. To enhance representation and broader application of the results, future studies will adopt a larger and more demographically diverse sample population, including a more systematic approach to data collection for consistency. Thirdly, due to the study's short duration, it was not possible to have a control group, hindering the possibility of establishing causal relationships.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Practical Wisdom for Agile Leadership Program (PWAL) focuses on executive education because any sustainable effort to support formative and flourishing institutions begins with building leadership capacity. To create and sustain a formative commitment to character and flourishing, leaders need a compass, a shared approach to decision-making guided by practical wisdom. This impact study provides evidence to suggest that growth in practical wisdom can be accelerated through participation in the PWAL executive education program, as shown in the SWIS measure.

Additionally, the participants' engagement with each module of the PWF appears transformative, evolving into a mental model for deliberation and practical action. Monthly reflections reveal a desire to adopt PWF practices, and the subsequent self-reported changes in perceived leadership practices demonstrate the program's effectiveness. As participants repeatedly apply the PWF, they practice reflective listening and patience, intentionally engaging each person's agency and considering multiple aims. This iterative process leads to enhanced decision-making, reduced stress, and internalization of PWF principles in their leadership practices. These findings underscore the potency of shared leadership interventions, particularly the PWF, in activating practical wisdom in educational leaders and their teams.

This exploratory study suggests that practical wisdom can be acquired through intentional educational experiences, presenting the PWAL program as a valuable initiative to help educational leaders activate their practical wisdom compass. The demonstrated impact on leadership practices and the internalization of practical wisdom principles underscore the program's efficacy in nurturing the essential qualities for fostering flourishing educational communities.

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