Title: Year 12 students as leaders: an inclusive approach

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Introduction

Schools need leadership, particularly the sort of leadership provided by students, for you have the capacity to influence student values, attitudes and behaviour with an effectiveness that School Principals can only dream about. (Hawkes, Headmaster of The King’s School, 1999, p. 21)

The (student) leadership that the College asks for is one that requires integrity and good values. It has its cost in time, energy and emotion. Essentially it is for the service of others. (Wilding, Headmaster of St Kevin’s College, 2001, p. 1)

Student leadership matters in a school. When leadership is strong and positive in a year group, success seems to follow automatically. It is well worth helping our student leaders to think about their roles and to recognise the power they have to really make a difference. (Moore, Principal of Pymble Ladies’ College, 1999, p. 19)

The capacity to influence student values and behaviour, the requirements of integrity and a focus on service for others, and the power to really make a difference are all powerful ideals and challenges for students to embrace. Student leadership, as denoted above by Hawkes, Wilding, and Moore, has a special role in developing such virtues in students. Yet what is student leadership? What form should it take in schools? Is it for all students or only for some? In what ways might students need to be prepared for and nurtured in leadership? And how do we ensure that what students do is, in fact, authentic leadership as opposed to something tokenistic or decorative?

This paper reports the findings of a recent study of student leadership, the purpose of which was to review the leadership experiences and self-perceptions of Year 12 students from three Australian Catholic schools, to highlight ways leadership might be better promoted, developed and nurtured in the entire Year 12 student body. Underpinning this purpose was a belief that all Year 12 students should have the opportunity to exercise leadership in their school setting, not only for the benefits and learnings students can gain from such leadership, but also for what they can contribute to their school communities. The three schools included a single sex boys’ school of around 1400 boys from kindergarten to Year 12, a single sex girls’ school of approximately 800 students from Years 7 to 12, and a Year 11 and 12 coeducational school with an enrolment of 900 students.

Design of the Research

The methodological structure underlying this research was collective case study, in which “snapshot” (Rose, 1991, p. 194) case studies were conducted, to better understand the phenomenon of senior student leadership.

Data collection in each of the three schools comprised:

a) a document search focusing on senior student leadership;

b) an interview with a key informant staff member;

c) a survey questionnaire to all Year 12 students about student leadership issues; and

d) two focus group interviews with up to nine Year 12 students in each group.

Document collection took the form of (1) memoranda and correspondence concerning student leadership, (2) official publications such as the College Prospectus, Handbook, Year Book,
periodicals to the school community, and (3) student leadership programs. The key informant staff interview took place with a teacher from each school who was purposely selected because of their work and connection with Year 12 students in leadership. This interview, and the relevant document search, provided the background information about each school’s understanding of senior student leadership.

Data about student experiences and self-perceptions of leadership were generated by a student survey questionnaire and two focus group interviews. The questionnaire was “group administered” (Austin & Crowell, 1984, p. 229) to students at the three schools for convenience and to maximise response rate. Focus group interviews were based on “homogeneous samples” (Patton, 1990, p. 173), that is, one focus group comprised elected student leaders, while the other was made up of students not elected to formal office. All participants in the student focus groups were volunteers. The number of participants from each school, and the manner of their involvement, is described in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1
Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Site</th>
<th>Key informant Staff Interview</th>
<th>Student Questionnaire</th>
<th>Student Focus Group Interview Elected a</th>
<th>Student Focus Group Interview Non-Elected b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls’ College</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys’ College</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coeducational College</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>368</strong></td>
<td><strong>24</strong></td>
<td><strong>23</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aFocus group comprising elected Year 12 students.
bFocus group comprising Year 12 students not elected.

**Research Questions**
The inquiry focused on seven questions:
1. What do Year 12 students understand by the concept of senior student leadership?
2. What do schools understand by the concept of senior student leadership and how is this understanding articulated?
3. How are Year 12 students prepared, supported, and encouraged to exercise leadership?
4. What are Year 12 students called to in their role as leaders?
5. What are the potential benefits for Year 12 students from being involved in leadership activities?
6. What are the concerns of Year 12 students, and of their schools, about the involvement of Year 12 students in leadership?
7. How can all Year 12 students be provided with opportunities to exercise leadership?

It is important to note that Year 12 students can provide leadership in a school community without consciously being aware that their actions are, in fact, leadership actions. Leadership does not have to be deliberate or intentional to be effective. What is important is that schools build a leadership culture among their senior students, where they are challenged and made aware of their potential as leaders, are given opportunities to develop and exercise leadership skills, and supported in their leadership initiatives and activities. Not every senior student may want to be a school leader, but every senior student can be invited to choose whether they wish to develop their innate ability to lead.

Discussion
There was a firm belief amongst Year 12 students from the three schools that senior student leadership entailed duty. Students believed they exercised duty by being role models, setting a good example, and acting responsibly according to their principles. Duty was regarded to involve promoting a positive image of the school, taking pride in their school, and enhancing the school’s reputation. At one school senior students saw duty in terms of supervising younger students.

The idea of service emerged in all three schools as an important facet of students’ understanding of Year 12 leadership. Helping and supporting others, making them happy, providing compassion and care, were all ways students believed they served as leaders in their schools. Students also saw giving time to extra-curricular activities, supporting sports teams and helping out in tutor groups as valuable ways of exercising their leadership. There was a strong sense amongst students of the Christian notion that leadership is “for others, not yourself”. Voluntarily picking up litter and keeping the common room clean were also advanced by senior students as ways they might serve as leaders.

Year 12 students in two of the schools highlighted involvement with younger students as a worthwhile way to exercise leadership. Involvement took the form of talking with the younger students and providing advice, or as formal interaction such as class visitation. The overall aim was to make the younger students feel welcome and comfortable. At the coeducational school, where the only younger students were Year 11s, Year 12 responses tended to highlight involvement in school organisations, in particular committees and sporting teams, as a means of exercising leadership.

There was a strong sense amongst senior students in all three schools that every Year 12 student should have the opportunity to be involved in leadership. Three main reasons were given. Firstly, it was seen as the right of Year 12 students since they were the “oldest and wisest” in the school. Secondly, it was a way for Year 12 students to give something back to the school. Finally, students identified advantages associated with leadership activities, in particular, personal benefits such as increased self-esteem, confidence, and maturity.

Elected student leaders at all three case study schools were specifically prepared for their leadership role. In the case of two schools this preparation involved a school-based overnight camp in November. One school made extensive use of previous College leaders in running their program, while the other drew upon the expertise of staff. Alternatively, the third school sent its College Captain and Vice Captain on a leadership weekend in February with
student leaders from other Victorian Catholic schools. That school’s remaining senior student leaders participated in a leadership day in March. At present, within the case study schools there appears little organised leadership preparation for those Year 12 students not elected to formal office. Students in all three schools believed that leadership experiences in earlier years were a valuable preparation for leadership in Year 12.

Elected student leaders in all the schools were supported through mentoring by staff. At one school the Year 12 Coordinator worked with the Student Representative Council. At another school the Headmaster met weekly with the College Captain and two Deputy Captains, and attended student leaders’ meetings. At the third school the Pastoral Care Coordinator had responsibility for the elected leaders, while interested staff attended the various student run committees. No formal mentoring system appeared to operate for the general body of Year 12 students in any of the case study schools.

The students specified three benefits, common to each school, which they believed stemmed from involvement in leadership activities. These were: personal development and growth through leadership opportunities; preparation for the future through skill development and experience; and the fostering of interpersonal skills, such as increased tolerance, the ability to listen, a greater awareness of people’s feelings, and the capacity to work as a team member. Students identified “having a sense of pride in yourself” as the most enjoyable and positive aspect of senior student leadership. The opportunity of helping others and the resulting satisfaction were regarded as important benefits of student leadership. Similarly, the schools indicated a sense of involvement and fulfilment, personal growth and outreach to the community, and community building as the main advantages of leadership involvement.

Students at all three schools noted concerns associated with their role as leaders, in particular the stress of added responsibility, the need to balance leadership commitments with study, and the constant pressure of being a role model and exercising leadership “all the time”. Similar, concerns were raised by the schools, specifically the danger of students becoming over-committed, the difficulty of dealing simultaneously with the demands of study and leadership, and also the requirement to meet their leadership responsibilities. In two schools students highlighted the risk of elected leaders becoming isolated from their peers. This isolation was perceived to be the result of a lack of any formal means by which elected student leaders might inform their peers of projects they were undertaking, or of challenges and roadblocks they faced as leaders. Students also mentioned misgiving about the apparent motives of some who aspired to elected leadership positions. In particular there was the concern that elections might be little more than popularity contests in which the loud or popular people got their way.

An Inclusive Approach
This research presents a notion of Year 12 student leadership which extends beyond the election of certain students to formal positions of responsibility. A high percentage of senior students surveyed in the three case study schools (Girls’ College – 89%; Boys’ College – 81%; Coeducational College – 87%) believed that all Year 12 students should have the opportunity to lead. An even larger group (Girls’ College– 93%; Boys’ College – 91%; Coeducational College – 88%) believed they actually exercised leadership. The principal means by which these students perceived they exercised leadership was by adopting a positive image of their school, acting as role models, setting a good example, interacting with younger students, and by representing their school in the wider community. These Year 12
students were able to list a range of benefits associated with such involvement: preparation for the future, improved relational skills, a sense of pride, a sense of recognition, and a variety of individual benefits associated with personal growth. In addition, students identified concerns and difficulties associated with senior student leadership, notably the need to balance commitments, and the pressure of being role models.

These factors form a compelling argument for a model of inclusive senior student leadership. Not only did many senior students in all the schools believe they were able to exercise leadership in a positive and worthwhile manner, they also showed the willingness and enthusiasm to do so. A spirit of service appeared to underpin their leadership. While students judged they received a range of benefits because of their involvement, many also saw leadership as a way of giving something back to the school. Furthermore, a considerable number of the total group perceived they exercised leadership without any formal school training (Girls’ College – 80%; Boys’ College – 81%; Coeducational College – 77%).

This research then, suggests a number of ways to actively involve all Year 12 students in leadership activities:

(a) affirming the role of senior students elected to formal office and acknowledging that this role may vary from school to school;  
(b) recognising the importance of Year 12 students holding leadership positions on committees, sporting teams and other co-curricular activities;  
(c) promoting the membership of various committees, sporting teams and other co-curricular activities to all Year 12 students;  
(d) encouraging senior students to be role models for younger students;  
(e) acknowledging the importance and place of the Year 12 homeroom or tutor representative;  
(f) realising students can exercise leadership by representing the school in the wider community; and  
(g) appreciating that senior leadership involves exercising responsibility to younger students, as well as caring for one’s peers.

Linked to these issues is the need for schools to actively build a culture of Year 12 leadership. It is recommended that the entire Year 12 body be publicly acknowledged as leaders within the school community and that their general leadership responsibilities are recognised. All Year 12 students, not just the elected leaders, require leadership training. Such training could involve activities on a Year 12 orientation / leadership day, where the elected student leaders act as peer “teachers”. A follow-up time during the year is strongly recommended. In addition, the general body of Year 12 students will need to be mentored in leadership. This will necessitate particular teaching staff, such as level co-ordinators, house heads, homeroom teachers, and tutor teachers supporting Year 12 students in practical ways and may well require staff training and specific resources allocated.

It is essential that the leadership, which schools require of their senior students, is meaningful to the students and of value to the school community. A high percentage of students surveyed in the three schools (Girls’ College – 93%; Boys’ College – 91%; Coeducational College – 88%) believed they were exercising leadership. Such high percentages might well suggest that leadership had meaning for the Year 12 students, and was seen as valuable within the school communities. The leadership principles exercised by these students were firmly embedded in a spirit of service. All the schools involved in this research are Catholic. A notion of service in leadership is congruent with the principles of Christian leadership.
(Neidhart, 1998; Treston, 1994; Whitehead & Whitehead, 1993; Edwards, 1987), and with the foundational principles of Catholic school leadership (McLaughlin, 1997; Jolley, 1997; Grace, 1996).

The research suggests it is important to recognise Year 12 students as senior students, and identified as designated leaders. A common means of effecting such distinction is through exclusive Year 12 apparel. An additional advantage of this is that the Year 12 body is encouraged to develop a corporate identity, and hence, a corporate sense of leadership. This research suggests also that there may be value in Year 12 students accessing certain privileges by virtue of the fact that they are the senior class and thus have responsibilities as school leaders. Such actions and support may contribute to Year 12 students developing a sense of pride in themselves and in their school.

The notion of inclusive senior student leadership, moreover, has the capacity to address concerns associated with vision, transformational leadership, and shared values which lie at the heart of schools’ cultures and impact upon the very nature of young people’s involvement in leadership (Duignan & Bhindi, 1998; McLaughlin, 1997; Burn, 1990, Jolley, 1997; Carey, 1991). Questionnaire responses (Girls’ College – 89%; Boys’ College – 81%; Coeducational College – 87%) suggest that a majority of Year 12 students would be supportive of inclusive Year 12 leadership, although not without reservations. These concentrate primarily on understanding that such leadership needs to be invitational; that is, senior students must have the right to choose, and secondly, a belief that not every Year 12 student is suited to leadership. A vision of senior student leadership which encourages various levels of participation, might deal with these two issues. Senior students would then be free to choose their level of leadership involvement, either as candidates for an elected position, through committees, work groups and sporting teams, as models for younger students, as senior student representatives, or alternatively, as non-leaders.

**Conclusion**

Considering student responses one might ask, firstly, why principals, teaching staff and school authorities would not want to give all senior students training in leadership, and secondly, why we would not then invite them to exercise leadership in their schools? These questions are relevant in Australia today with the present environmental issues, fear of terrorism, threats of war, and concerns about immigration. Australia needs leaders who are transformational, collaborative, have vision, and exercise values attuned to the Gospel of Jesus. We need leaders imbued with a philosophy of education such as proposed by Vatican II, which emphasises the dignity of each person irrespective of “race, condition or age” (Declaration on Christian Education, par 1), views the role of the school as developing “right judgement”, “cultural heritage”, “a sense of values”, and preparation “for professional life” (Declaration on Christian Education, par 5), and stresses the “principle of subsidiarity”, (Declaration on Christian Education, par 3) so essential to any model of inclusive student leadership. Schools do not have sole responsibility for grooming the leaders of tomorrow – but they are in a unique position to make a major contribution. Many centuries ago Aristotle remarked:

> People become virtuous by performing virtuous acts, they become kind by doing kind acts, they become brave by doing brave acts (As cited in Hawkes, 1999, p. 24)

For our young people to be leaders for tomorrow, they need the opportunity to perform leadership acts today. They also require the confidence and guidance which schools are so well placed to provide.
References