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**Young People and Leadership:
Questions of Access in
Secondary Schools**

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By Sue Emerson, Lesley Ferkins, Gaye Bryham and Mieke Sieuw



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Young People and Leadership: Questions of Access in Secondary Schools

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Abstract

There is seemingly an abundance of leadership opportunities available to youth within school environments, including sport captaincy, sport coaching, prefect roles, and assigned arts or cultural leadership. For many students, the opportunity to captain a sports team, or lead an event or activity is perceived as their first taste of leadership action. However, as evidenced in a growing body of literature (Jackson & Parry, 2011), leadership is increasingly being conceived as much more than an assigned formal position. Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that formal leadership roles may be presenting barriers for students wishing to access leadership opportunities in a more informal capacity (McNae, 2011). In this conceptual article, we examine the value and nature of informal leadership practices, and from this, identify questions of access to leadership for youth in secondary school settings.

Specifically, the aim of our paper is to advance current conceptualisations about youth leadership and

to offer future research directions (via questions) to establish a deeper evidence base for better understanding access to leadership for youth. To achieve this, we explore three interrelated themes: leadership practices and accessibility for youth; learning through leadership for youth; youth access and the notion that leadership belongs to everybody. As a result of the platform provided by our conceptualising, a series of questions are presented for future research. Directions for future research relate to understanding more about formal and informal leadership opportunities in the secondary school context, what we will hear when we listen to the student's voice about access to these opportunities, and how informal leadership opportunities might influence overall access to leadership for students.

Keywords: youth leadership, young people and leadership, student leadership, student leadership in secondary schools.

INTRODUCTION

At the core of this article is the premise that leadership appears to be an opportunity available to a privileged or capable few rather than seen as the application of a set of common skills inherent in humans, the development of which should be available to all young people. Fish (2011) eloquently summarised this issue:

If the concept of leadership is identified with extraordinary, finished products – the Gandis and Goodalls of the world – the bar is set so high, the exercise of skill so refined, it places the whole field beyond our reach. But as soon as we say that leadership is composed of common, human skills, the matter is turned on its head. (p. 83)

In this conceptual article, we examine the value and nature of informal leadership practices, and from this, identify questions of access to leadership for young

people in secondary school settings (usually age 12-18). We do this by drawing together literature directly related to youth leadership as well as referring to trends in the broader leadership literature to inform our focus on the youth context. We use the terms 'young people', 'youth' and 'adolescent' interchangeably as per the convention in the literature. However, when we refer to 'student' we mean students within the secondary school setting as noted above. This introduction particularly focuses on the broader topic of leadership, positioning our interpretation of leadership and establishing the beginning of our argument for why a focus on youth leadership is needed. At the conclusion of the introduction we present our statement of aim where, sitting at the heart of our interest, are issues of access to leadership (i.e., opportunities to enact leadership) for young people in secondary school contexts.

As noted above, youth leadership is related to the much broader topic of generic leadership and, therefore, leadership itself requires some discussion in order to show how our present argument is positioned. Leadership is a sociological concept that has been researched extensively in an attempt to interpret and understand its meaning across various societal contexts. However, as James MacGregor Burns once famously stated, "Leadership is one of the most observed, yet least understood phenomena on earth" (cited in Rosch & Kusel, 2010, p. 29). Indeed, although researchers and leadership experts have produced a myriad of definitions of leadership it is a concept that is yet to be conclusively defined (Bass, 1990; Jackson & Parry, 2011; Weinberg & Gould, 2003). The lack of agreement on its definition can create confusion regarding how leadership should look and be practised, leading to inconsistencies in understanding, or worse, people interpreting that they cannot be leaders (Rosch & Kusel, 2010; van Linden & Fertman, 1998).

Nonetheless, there appear to be common threads throughout most definitions of leadership, with many scholars referring to leadership as requiring a leader, followers and a common goal (Bass, 1990; Rosch & Kusel, 2010; Yukl, 2012). Other authors seek to define leadership in a more simplistic form; for example Maxwell (1998) describes the true measure of leadership as "influence, nothing more, nothing less" (p. 11), while Covey and Merrill (2006) suggest that leadership is a way of leading your life, rather than a position. Tania, a Year 12 student in a New Zealand Catholic girls secondary school says: "Leadership is guiding others from where you are" (cited in McNae, 2011, p. 39). Evident within many definitions of leadership are notions of the leader-follower relationship, and relationships featuring influence and guidance (Jackson & Parry, 2011). The common element to most definitions is the

idea of leadership being a relational behaviour, highlighting "its social, collective nature" (Ospina & Shall, 2001, p. 2).

As noted, despite a lack of full consensus in the conceptualisation of leadership, there are some common threads. Similarly, alongside some common themes there are complexities and tensions in the theories and practices of adult leadership in relation to youth leadership. Much of the writing about youth leadership relates to adults discussing why leadership is important and their definitions of leadership development or training (Dial, 2006; Holdsworth, 2002; Mitra, 2005; Ricketts & Rudd, 2002). There is a temptation and tendency to use the abundant theories and concepts of leadership developed from an adult lens to attempt to understand adolescent leadership (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). After all, it is most often adults who plan, implement and evaluate student or youth leadership programmes and it is tempting for them to approach leadership for young people with a 'we know best' attitude. However, employing adult leadership theories and concepts may not offer the best insight for understanding student leadership (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007). To be meaningful to adolescents, any leadership learning or experience needs to take into consideration youth idealism, and the quest for both identity formation and independence (van Linden & Fertman, 1998).

Whilst acknowledging a perception of an oversupply of ideas on adult leadership, Dempster and Lizzio (2007) agree there is an ongoing interest in leadership from the young people themselves, to try to better meet their needs. Many researchers refer to the work by Roach et al. (1999) as ground-breaking in the analysis of the issue of sustainable development of youth through leadership and the relationship this has to adult leadership. Roach et al. (1999) posit that theories relating to adult leadership seem to focus on individual abilities, such as the abilities required to be a principal in a school or a chief executive of a company. These writers go on to describe theories of youth leadership as being first and foremost situational, with the development of self-knowledge as a primary component in situational leadership and therefore in youth leadership. Dempster and Lizzio (2007) agree with the importance of the development of self-knowledge as a focus for youth leadership, whereas adult leadership research, and associated theorising, has tended to focus more on the leader's charisma and influence. This thinking has changed in more recent years, with recognition that leadership is a social construct, is about relationships and influence, and that everyone can enact leadership (Jackson & Parry, 2011; O'Boyle, Murray, & Cummins, 2015; Ospina & Foldy, 2010).

When we focus on student leadership it is potentially the

process of leadership development that is a key ingredient in providing youth with the skills and understanding necessary to initiate positive change across peer groups, school, families and communities (Funk, 2002). Outside the home, it is the school environment where most youth spend the majority of their time (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). Today, students expect what Chapman, Toolsie-Worsnup and Dyck (2006) call “meaningful involvement in the educational process, engaging all students as stakeholders, recognising their unique knowledge, experience and perspective” (p. 1). The opportunity for students to have a voice seems to vary from school to school. Key issues to be considered include: how listening to students is first initiated, for what purpose the student voice was sought, and who is controlling the dialogue (Dempster, Stevens, & Keeffe, 2011; Lodge, 2005). Still, empirical evidence that draws on the student voice remains an under-developed field of enquiry (Hazel, 2016; Whitehead, 2009). In addition, there is evidence to suggest that many schools and youth organisations struggle to provide youth or student leadership education or to offer leadership opportunities to all but a select few (Karnes & Stephens, 1999).

The aim of our paper is therefore to advance current conceptualisations about youth leadership and to offer future research directions that establish a deeper evidence base for better understanding access to leadership for young people (especially from their perspective). To achieve this, we next cover three interrelated themes: leadership practices and accessibility for young people in schools; learning through leadership for youth; youth access and the notion that leadership belongs to everybody. The outcome of our conceptualising is a series of questions for future research, presented in our concluding section.

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES AND ACCESSIBILITY

This theme explores the secondary school as a context for students to experience leadership and the practices affecting access to leadership. Issues foremost in the literature discussed in this section are: adult leadership in contrast to youth leadership practices; informal and formal leadership; and distributed leadership.



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Adult vs. youth leadership practices

The difference between adult and youth leadership phenomenon is highlighted in the findings of a commonly cited ten-year participant-observer study of youth-based organisations carried out by Roach et al. (1999). In this study, young people were found to emphasise elements such as the group context, as distinct from the individual leader. Cassell, Huffaker, Tversky and Ferriman (2006) similarly report that elected forum leaders (aged 9-16) typically used leadership styles that focused on the needs of the group, and did not engage in traditional adult styles of presenting ideas and using power-based language. It is in identifying these differences in needs and goals between adults and youth in leadership contexts that we begin to see the opportunity for different meanings of leadership that may also inform our understanding of accessibility to leadership for youth.

As noted above, there is a lack of strong empirical research into young people's understandings of leadership, which includes student access to leadership, that could inform leadership practices for youth (Dempster et al., 2011; Whitehead, 2009). Much of the literature on this topic refers to the need for teachers to guide students, whereby some teachers confuse guidance with telling (Dempster et al., 2011). There can also be issues in gaining access to true and authentic answers from young people about their perspectives on leadership as "youth have been found to reflect back what they think adults want to hear rather than their own authentic views" (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007, p. 281). This constraint requires the implementation of new approaches to underpin practice.

Informal and formal leadership opportunities

Leadership experience and activities for young people can be assigned to two broad categories: formal and informal leadership (Harris, 2004). Informal leadership is defined as an "emergent property of a group or network" (Gronn, 2000). Informal leadership opportunities present themselves in day-to-day situations for young people: at school, in the playground, after school, in whānau and family settings, on the sports field, and so on. A more formal authority of a role or position, such as a prefect or sports captain, tends to be the more traditional view of student leadership in a school. We argue that this view, based on role or position alone, can limit access to leadership for the majority of students in a secondary school setting.

The concept of informal leadership can extend a school's perceptions of leadership and potentially engage significantly more school members in leadership activity (Harris, 2004). Nonetheless, informal opportunities are often ignored, or seen as trivial or not leadership. Lizzio, Dempster

and Neumann (2011) agree that formal or position-based leadership roles, such as sports or class captain, engage a small minority of students; whereas informal leadership activities and opportunities within classroom practices and school culture offer the potential for much wider student engagement. McGregor (2007) refers to 'process more than position' and 'relationship more than role' as being a dominant theme in engaging students in leadership, resulting in schools focusing on the process of leadership learning, rather than the position of leadership.

Distributed leadership practices

Similarly, distributed leadership encourages the sharing of responsibilities and decision making, allowing all group members to be involved. As Higham, Freathy and Wegerif (2010) highlight, the opportunity for distributed, shared leadership must be real and authentic. Interestingly, Mitra (2006) refers to the traditional view of some young people being 'natural leaders' having been replaced more recently with a greater emphasis on participative and distributed leadership, across both adult and youth populations. In this context, participative leadership refers to "sharing decision making with group members and working with them side by side" (DuBrin, 2013, p. 113). Distributed leadership models also allow for the sharing of the leadership role amongst participants. We consider that this broadened view of leadership has the potential to increase access to leadership opportunities for more young people.

Finally, there is some evidence to suggest that adolescents often feel they either do leadership or they don't. As van Linden and Fertman (1998) assert, "The problem is that most adults and adolescents rely on a definition of leadership that focuses on the transactional model of 'doing leadership tasks.'" (p. 16). If we are to deeply understand leadership we need to consider the value of leadership as more than just 'doing tasks', distributed amongst a group of people (Higham et al., 2010). From this point of view, leadership education is essentially learning and development to equip any young person for the future. Considered this way, a lack of access to leadership for young people becomes a significantly more critical issue to address.

LEARNING THROUGH LEADERSHIP –

WHY BOTHER?

Leadership is a resource that is often used in schools to provide opportunities for the student to achieve academic and sporting success, as well as social advantage and personal fulfilment (Keeffe & Andrews, 2011). This theme

focuses on whether there is worthwhile or essential learning and development for all young people through leadership. The issues highlighted include: the perceived value of leadership in schools; and acts of service as a potential focus of the leadership experience.

The perceived value of leadership

The perceived value of leadership for youth has been documented in the literature in terms of youth development (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004), employment opportunities (van Linden & Fertman, 1998), and development of school culture (Keeffe & Andrews, 2011). Hamilton and Hamilton (2004) discuss youth development principles most central to any programme as being for the purposes of allowing youth to thrive, and to develop healthy relationships and personal resilience. The reference to the opportunity for all youth to thrive is a significant one for the purposes of this article. Van Linden and Fertman (1998) state simply that employers are interested in adolescents who display leadership. This draws attention to the idea that if some students have leadership opportunities they are perhaps given an unfair advantage over others. Schools as organisations gain much from student leadership within the education context, particularly from a culture-building perspective, and there is evidence to suggest that leadership education is a way to enhance a school's public image (Keeffe & Andrews, 2011).

Propp's (2007) work is considered a landmark in terms of finding out from the students themselves their perceptions about the value of leadership. In doing so, Propp concludes that leadership for this age group is personal, relational and non-hierarchical. The Sport New Zealand (2014) Growing Leaders programme in New Zealand secondary schools has as its underlying philosophy that we are all leaders if only to lead ourselves. Experiences and learning that focus on development of the identity of self may well strengthen adolescents' personal growth. Bonner, Jennings, Marbley and Brown (2008) agree that self-knowledge is an important component in the development of youth leadership. This should not be available to just a select few. Accessibility of leadership relates to some extent to students' motivation for and interest in leadership, and what they see as being gained from a personal perspective. Cheung and Tsang (2002) make the observation that where students lack the power to influence their own environment, psychological needs are unlikely to be met. This sometimes results in students finding alternative ways to meet these needs, through more socially unacceptable behaviours (Cheung & Tsang, 2002). The argument follows that leadership opportunities may provide a harness for these basic needs.

Young people face numerous challenges that require a different approach than in the past (Fish, 2011). As described by Hodder (2007), "Among the challenges to be faced are an uncertain transition to work, the rising cost of higher education, family breakdown and isolation from parents" (p. 180). Hodder identifies self-leadership and the character-based qualities developed through leadership learning and opportunities as aiding in building a foundation for facing life challenges. In sum, evidence from the literature about the perceived value of leadership adds to our building a rationale for why access to leadership for youth is an important topic of investigation.

Acts of service

A helpful view of leadership, for the purposes of our discussion, is one where leadership is essentially considered to be an act of service to others (Greenleaf, 1977), which, according to Hackett and Lavery (2011), has the capacity to offer all students the opportunity to develop leadership potential. A key word here is 'all' students. Young people seem to agree, as in McNae's (2011) study where "The young women indicated a disposition to serve others and show leadership for the good of other people" (p. 42). These students in a New Zealand secondary school saw leadership as a duty of service as they progressed through the school. Hackett and Lavery (2011) go on to say that making a difference in a small way can develop a sense of hope in young people by allowing them to control their own 'circle of influence'. This, they say, leads to young people making better decisions about the world in which they live.

In accordance with the above, in the growing number of studies that focus on leadership as an act of service or a civic engagement, results have indicated positive impacts for youth development (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004; Lizzio et al., 2011; Stukas, Clary, & Snyder, 1999). Interestingly, Dempster et al. (2011, p. 17) concluded that, "It appears...young people are likely to hold collaborative views and that they see a connection between leadership and civic engagement as leading towards a greater good". Importantly, schools also consider that part of their role is the development of good citizens, assisting youth to develop their sense of responsibility (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). Corroborating this in an earlier study, Stukas, Clary and Snyder (1999) identified the positive effects service learning has on self-enhancement, understanding self and the world, value expressions, career development and social expectations. These factors are expected curriculum outcomes in secondary schools, possible outcomes of leadership experiences and, arguably, opportunities to enact leadership that should be



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accessible to all students. As with the focus on understanding the perceived value of leadership from youth perspectives, approaching leadership through the lens of acts of service contributes to our rationale for why we have chosen to concentrate on access to leadership for youth. It is to this, specifically, we now turn our conceptual discussion.

STUDENT ACCESS: LEADERSHIP BELONGS TO EVERYBODY

This theme explores whether leadership opportunities are equitably accessible to all students and whether in fact they should be. Issues arising around constraints include: the value of 'small' or 'moment by moment' leadership experiences; perceived outputs for change; and changing student perspectives. Interestingly, Schneider, Holcombe, Ehrhart and Ehrhart (2002) found a strong correlation between peer nominations of leaders and teacher ratings. It seems there is often a predictability about who gets chosen for assigned positions. In contrast, there is also strong consensus in the literature that leadership indeed belongs to

everybody (Hackett & Lavery, 2011). Hackett and Lavery (2011) identified that schools offering opportunities for service across the student body tended to help a greater majority of students to 'step up' and develop their confidence through leading or through being able to enact their leadership in a less formal manner. These were developmental opportunities that allowed students to slowly learn leadership through acts of service, both formal and informal, large and small.

'Moment by moment' experiences

There is some literature which provides insight into the value of getting students involved in leadership through acts of service and/or 'moment by moment' experiences which open up accessibility and allow young people to discover their leadership potential through service (Hackett & Lavery, 2011). It seems that providing all students with an opportunity to experience leadership benefits more young people than approaches that focus on a few. As Hackett and Lavery (2011, p. 59) found in their study, "By the time the students reached Year 12, many had become stand out

leaders characterised by a quality of humility as students who were quietly getting on with it". Adding to this study, Dempster and Lizzio (2007) found that teachers and schools often have a picture of the 'ideal student'. They caution that it is important to distinguish between imposed ideals and the emerging reality, namely understanding student leaders as "who and what we would like them to be' as opposed to 'who and what they are'" (p. 282).

Fish (2011) believes that developing the competencies of our students becomes a question of finding and applying the right pedagogy. In a study by Miller-Johnson et al. (2003) about patterns of peer group leadership in American seventh-grade students, the authors found the students least likely to meet adult behaviour criteria were more likely to be influential with their peers. This supports the argument that leadership learning and opportunities should be more open to all students.

Output for change is critical

Student understanding of leadership is a starting point to increase their interest in being involved. Fish (2011) goes onto say, "Once that happens, the output is the most critical for change. If students can see it's making a difference they are more likely to continue to engage" (p. 83). A core of engagement is, as Dempster and Lizzio (2007) describe, making students feel "safe, confident and encouraged" (p. 91). In support of this sentiment, Fertman and van Linden (1999) purport that similar to character education, "Leadership development is for all students" (p. 9). Similarly, "when young people were involved in civic activities that are related to their immediate contexts...they seemed to feel more confident in their capacity to bring about change" (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010, p. 20).

Further, if we are going to ask young people their opinions and place them in positions of leadership, adults need to listen. Banaji and Buckingham (2010) conclude that young people are repeatedly encouraged to 'have their say' but, arguably, there is little evidence that people in positions of power are in fact listening and responding to what they hear from youth. This evidence suggests that it is critical that young people are able to see the outcome of their leadership efforts.

Changing student perceptions

There is some evidence that negative attitudes amongst students about leadership, which limit engagement, come from the roles and tasks that teachers give students. McNae (2011) reports that not all students view leadership as a

positive experience. Furthermore, leadership experiences were also considered by some students as just doing jobs for their teachers. This has resulted in some students avoiding leadership. On this, Keeffe and Andrews (2011, p. 32) offer, "To invent a form of student leadership that has student fulfilment, academic success and social advantage at its core, our first task is to understand student leadership as students see it".

There is also some evidence that indicates that many teenagers do not possess an innate confidence in their leadership ability (Grothaus, 2004). Lizzio et al. (2011) refer to the quality of the teacher-student relationship as being pivotal in student access to leadership. Students may struggle to understand the difference between formal and informal leadership as outlined earlier in this review, and therefore avoid either or both experiences. Some students continually avoid being involved in extra 'stuff' as they find their loads heavy in terms of commitment. Paradoxically, the school environment can become both a source of stress for students and a source of opportunity (Cheung & Tsang, 2002). Potentially, the solution is about creating a balance for students between the stress of the challenge, which can motivate, and the stress caused by the fear of failure (Cheung & Tsang, 2002).

Another issue relating to student perceptions of leadership is, as van Linden and Fertman (1998) describe, an unwillingness to boss others, which can deter them from an interest in leadership for fear of what others will think. Mitra (2006) suggests a three-tiered pyramid of student voice where at the entry level students share opinions or problems and discuss potential solutions. At the next level of the pyramid young people work with adults to address problems and at the peak of the pyramid young people take the lead to bring about change. As a straightforward model, this may be a useful starting point in building accessibility.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The purpose of this article is to illuminate the issue of access to leadership opportunities for secondary-school-aged students by examining the value and nature of informal leadership practices. In drawing on the above discussion of literature, we argue that all adolescents have leadership potential; however, it appears that not all adolescents have access to leadership opportunities. In addition, as demonstrated above, we need to know more about practices which enhance access to leadership opportunities from the students' perspective in order to be able to increase accessibility.

As highlighted above, much of the literature seems to deal with adults discussing student leadership issues and solutions rather than presenting a strong student voice with students' needs expressed by students (Dial, 2006). We also conclude that while some of the literature reviewed identifies the use of student voice for institutional purposes, the improvement of learning for the students is really the underlying purpose (Dempster et al., 2011). In following this logic, we argue that if the opportunity for a student voice improves student learning then access to this opportunity should be for all students not merely a privileged few.

The discussion of the literature has also identified the possible role informal and distributed leadership experiences may play in access to leadership for youth, and there is potential to explore this further. Students and schools often see leadership only as formal leadership experiences in assigned leadership roles. This limits accessibility for the majority of students and requires new approaches to open up accessibility to a greater number of students. In addition, we have identified from the literature that considering

leadership as an act of service provides a platform upon which to present informal leadership opportunities, creating further accessibility.

As aptly asserted by Hackett and Lavery (2011), "Leadership belongs to everybody" (p. 58). We need to know more about access to informal leadership opportunities for students in the secondary school setting and about students' understanding of these. More specifically from our review, we offer the following questions to guide future research: What might be the informal leadership opportunities available to students within the secondary school context? What do students say about access to leadership opportunities in the secondary school context? And crucially, how might informal leadership opportunities influence access to leadership for students in our secondary schools? Answers to these questions will go a long way to advancing our understanding of the concept of informal leadership opportunities as a method of increasing access to leadership for students in secondary schools.



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