Student leadership: necessary research

Neil Dempster
Alf Lizzio
Griffith University

Interest in student leadership or leadership by young people has always existed in school and community settings and while there are many programs devoted to leadership development and training, we believe that there is a need for focused research into what young people conceive leadership to be and in what circumstances they would see it being important. This article is speculative in nature. We ask and discuss questions about why there seems to be an upsurge in interest in student leadership and what some of the available literature is saying about student leadership before putting forward suggestions for the kind of research we feel is necessary if our understanding of student leadership, particularly in secondary schools, is to be enhanced.

A renewed interest in student leadership

Why are we seeing renewed interest in student leadership? Is it because interest in aspects of schooling waxes and wanes? This could be so. After all, there was a period not so long ago when the topic of ‘student voice’ was prominent in scholarly writing about education; and when student activism was an everyday occurrence. We refer to the 1960s and 70s when at secondary and tertiary levels of education, student voices were raised strongly in forums of various kinds, when ‘sit ins’ in university chancelleries were common, and when adolescent protesters marched for one cause after another. We also refer to research such as that led by Jean Rudduck and others in the 70s into the involvement of students in decision making about their schools, the curriculum, their learning, its assessment and their communities.

Is interest in student leadership being heightened by a perceived shortage of people willing to take on leadership roles in their adult lives? Is it because the leadership literature is replete with studies of adults in leadership roles and student leadership offers a new point of entry for researchers interested in new insights? There is some evidence to suggest that the answer to these questions is in the affirmative. There seems to be a growing shortage of people willing to take on leadership roles in their careers. In fact, so short is the pool of leaders in the corporate world that a report by McKinsey and Company (as cited in Michaels, Kartford-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001) has suggested that there is a ‘war’ being waged for leadership talent. In the education sector, the pool of potential leaders is known to have declined from that available even a few years ago (Gronn, 2007; MacBeath, 2006).
There also seems to be a decline in general civic participation that may contribute to a declining interest in community leadership. If the picture painted at the turn of this century in the United States of America is anything to go by, there is a problem for democracies such as ours, which rely on voluntary activity across a whole range of social institutions. The work of Gannon (2001, pp. 112-113) for example has shown the following:

- between the early 1960s and 1990, voter turnout had declined by nearly a quarter;
- the number of Americans who reported that ‘in the past year’ they had ‘attended a public meeting on town or school affairs’ had fallen by more than a third—from 22% in 1973 to 13% in 1993;
- every year during the decade of the 1990s ‘millions more have withdrawn from the affairs of their communities’;
- the proportion of Americans who reply that they ‘trust the government in Washington’ only ‘some of the time’ or ‘almost never’ has risen steadily from 30% in 1966 to 75% in 1992; and
- ‘participation in parent-teacher organisations has dropped drastically over the last generation, from more than 12 million in 1964 to barely five million in 1982 before recovering to approximately seven million now’.

Gannon (2001, pp. 116-117) has summarised his concerns thus:

More Americans than ever before are in social circumstances that foster associational involvement (higher education, middle age and so on), but nevertheless aggregate associational membership appears to be stagnant or declining ... American social capital in the form of civic associations has significantly eroded over the last generation.

There is some evidence to suggest that the general decline in civic engagement seen in the US may be apparent in Australia. In the education profession, for example, studies of teachers and their association memberships (Dempster, Sim, Beere, & Logan, 2001), show similar trends to those experienced in the US. Over three survey periods (1979, 1989, 1999), in research initiated by the Australian College of Educators, active memberships by teachers declined in church, cultural and social groups, as well as in parents’ and citizens’ associations and political parties. The proportions of teachers actively engaged in sporting clubs and charitable groups remained static across this period. It will be interesting to examine the 2006 census data to see whether the trend seen amongst teachers in 2001 is continuing, and whether there is deterioration in general community civic engagement across the country. It is our belief that this is likely. Based on that assumption, our interest in leadership amongst the young has been aroused. The need for a renewed commitment to student leadership has been reinforced for us in a report released recently by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), lamenting the poor performance of young Australians on tests of citizenship knowledge (Mellor, 2007). We believe that the report, while highlighting a very important issue, does little to point the way to how citizenship knowledge might be gained in action rather than in preparation for tests.
It would be misleading to couch the argument primarily in terms of the implications of young peoples’ individualism and self interest for contemporary society (Putnam, 2000). While civic participation among the young may have declined in conventional spheres (e.g., loyalty to institutions, joining political parties, etc) there is some evidence to suggest that this change in ‘community mindedness’ may be more a matter of form than substance. Alternative forms of community building, social engagement and identity building are emerging among young people, such as different patterns of political involvement, volunteering and the use of the internet (Rainie & Horrigan, 2005), and disaffection with political engagement is balanced by record levels of volunteering and community service by the young (Delli-Carpini & Keeter, 1997).

Shifts in patterns of both participation and leadership among young people need to be understood in terms of pervasive generational influences such as greater speed of change and corresponding expectations of rapid adaptation, stronger commitment to a balanced life and a weaker psychological contract with work and social institutions (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). The unifying meta-theme for young people appears to be that ‘relationships matter more than institutions’. Such generational factors shape young peoples’ perceptions of appropriate leadership and strategies for political and community change. As has been noted, the key social challenge may not be so much that youth idealism is in decline but that local and relational forms of contribution favoured by young people do not translate into more profoundly structural forms of political or civic action (Sax, 1999).

Abundant evidence of an extensive literature on general adult leadership exists. If scholarly writing in education is anything to go by, there is a litany of leadership theories abroad. There have been studies producing explanations of heroic, autocratic and charismatic leadership; transactional, transformational and moral leadership; situational, contingent and parallel leadership; educational, managerial and participative leadership and the list goes on (MacBeath, 2004, cites 25 models of leadership in recent education literature). In business, we have even seen the extremes of ‘godlike’ leadership (Fox, 2007) and leadership as ‘art and aesthetics’ (Parry, 2005).

These comments are not intended to disparage the great number of leadership research studies that have added substantially to our store of knowledge. Rather they are offered as a reminder that if there is a growing academic interest in leadership amongst the young, then any new research should focus on what they think about it, where they think it is needed and who should be involved. New findings may well add interesting nuances to the extensive theory already extant. It would be too easy to assume that using adult leadership theories and adult concepts offers the best routes to an enhanced understanding of student leadership (but more of this later).

While a focus on leadership amongst the young may be a logical response to a perceived oversupply of ideas in adult leadership, we believe that there has been ongoing interest in student leadership amongst young people themselves, even though it has not been the subject of extensive research. From a study of the expectations of school leaders almost a decade ago, we were struck by the common
Sharing school leadership was by far the most dominant theme in the student data. Students perceived a lack of leadership opportunities for members of the school community other than the principal. Students thought that the responsibilities of leadership should be extended to include staff, parents and, more often, students. Indeed, most student responses advocated the participation of students in school leadership irrespective of age. Their tone ranges from rational suggestion to direct demand.

Examples of student comments illustrate this point.

Quite often the leadership in schools is determined by teachers, with minimum input from students. This needs to be changed so that the students have a lot more say.

I think that a strong leadership team consists of student leaders, teachers, deputy principals and parents.

Generally, I think that leadership in schools is concentrated too highly in the people high in the hierarchy of schools. I think that leadership opportunities should exist in the staff and with students at all year levels.

Some 10 years later and with research interest in student leadership increasing, we believe that the students’ cry for leadership opportunities should be investigated to better understand it through their eyes, and to explore how greater leadership depth may be developed. Before sketching the kind of research we believe is necessary, we provide a brief commentary on literature related to student leadership to show where the emphasis seems to have been placed in recent years.

**Some recent studies of student leadership**

Our analysis of literature related to student leadership in schools shows that there is an identifiable gap in our knowledge of students’ understanding of leadership and how they see, experience and interpret it in different situations. Indeed, much of the research writing deals with adults saying why student leadership is important and what those adult views define as leadership development or training (Holdsworth, 2005; Mitra, 2005, Ricketts, & Dudd, 2002; Thomson & Holdsworth, 2003).

One example of how adults define approaches to student and youth leadership is found in the work of McMahon and Bramhall (2004). They use entertainment media to inform leadership teaching and practice in higher education. They claim that using entertainment media to teach leadership concepts can be especially powerful. Entertainment media, they say, have the ability to make complex concepts visible, a necessary but rare ingredient, they argue, in successful leadership development efforts. Their work results in a pedagogical framework for using selected movies, television, literature, and music to teach leadership.
example is found in Mitra’s (2005) work, which draws on qualitative data to broaden the concept of distributed leadership to include ‘student voice’ in school decision making. Specifically, this research focuses on how adults foster youth participation and leadership in school reform efforts. Further interesting developments in this regard are contained in the concept of ‘parallel leadership’ which Crowther, Hann and McMaster (2001) argue is fundamental to sustained school success. This concept has focused to date on teacher leaders and principals, but has been shown to be heavily dependent for success on student engagement in the processes of school culture building, pedagogical development and professional learning (Andrews & Crowther, 2006). Indeed the concept of student leadership has recently been described as intrinsic to student engagement (Andrews, 2007; Andrews & Crowther 2006; Chesterton & Duignan, 2004).

What the work cited above does not do, and where the literature in general is short on explanation, is in the production of credible accounts of leadership from the inside, that is, from the student’s point of view. In fact Dial’s review of the literature on student leadership found that ‘much of the available literature is quantitative in nature in that it investigates the relationship between one or more variables as they relate to leadership development programs.’ Dial regrets the fact that ‘few scholars have chosen to address the development of leadership ability or leadership identity’ (2006, p. 8).

That said, Komives, Mainella and Longerbeam (2006), working from the US, have begun to pick up Dial’s challenge by arguing that potentially there is a fruitful way into understanding student leadership through grounded theoretical work on leadership identity. They have created a leadership identity development model (based on interviews with a very small number of young people [N=13]) to explain how educators might facilitate student leadership development and how they might understand ‘the processes a person experiences in creating a leadership identity’. Again, this work is largely driven by an ‘outside-in’ view of leadership with only some reference to student voice. There also seems to be an assumption that leadership identity development is driven by adults. Indeed, an adult-centric view of leadership as ‘position’ seems to be the starting point for their leadership identity development model. This assumes that young people, at least at one point in time, agree with a singular and assigned, rather than possibly an inclusive and non-assigned perspective on leadership. We argue that this ‘outside-in’ view of what student leadership identity is leaves the research terrain from the students’ perspective largely untravelled.

The dominance of ‘outside-in’ approaches to describing student leadership is exemplified in Posner’s (2004) survey instrument which used content analysis of sentences and phrases about leadership categorized into five themes originally proposed from work with private and public sector managers. Again, what we have in this research is the perspective of experienced adult leaders used as the trigger for responses from younger people about leadership.

While Posner reviews some literature on student leadership briefly, none refers to students speaking for themselves, however he does point to the kind of research we would favour when he says:
Studies investigating just how leadership development occurs would be invaluable not just for those involved and responsible for student leadership development, but also for people who provide leadership education for corporate, civic and community organizations (2004, p. 444).

Posner’s suggested research direction is supported by Fielding (2004), who sees student leadership contributing to what he calls ‘civic renewal’, a process relying on ‘new wave’ student voice. He puts it thus:

The re-emerging field of ‘student voice’ has the potential to offer an important contribution to education for civic society. An exploration of what ‘student voice’ aspires to and what it actually does, suggests quite different sets of possibilities for educational and civic renewal (2004, p. 217).

Evidence that youth and adult leadership may be separate phenomena comes from the findings of a 10-year participant-observer study of youth based organisations and the ways in which young people enacted leadership (Roach, 1999). Young people were found to emphasise ‘the group, the situation and the moment’ and accordingly to value ‘mutual, shifting and emerging’ types of leadership. Roach characterised this as ‘wisdom in spontaneity’, in contrast to the ‘wisdom through experience’ accounts of adult leaders. The focus for young people in this study was more on ‘how leadership happens’ and less on who leads. There are striking parallels between these findings and the noted shift in leadership styles among Generation X and Y workers away from heroic and positional models (endorsed by the preceding Boomer generation) towards ‘leaders who will work with followers as intimate allies’ (Merrill Associates, 2004). This clear emphasis on the relational has also been emphasised in young peoples’ leadership behaviours in online communities. Cassell, Huffaker, Tversky and Ferriman (2006) report that elected online forum leaders (ages 9 to 16) typically adopted linguistic styles that focused on the goals and needs of the group and did not engage in traditional leadership styles of contributing many ideas and using powerful language.

There are extremely positive and optimistic resonances in this pattern of findings emphasising the relational functions of leadership among young people. Young people’s emerging notions of leadership can be seen as an appropriate response to a social context that is characterised by high levels of cultural change and social pluralism. The tasks of inclusion and social cooperation have perhaps never been more challenging and complex. The defining leadership skills of the new context appear more than ever to be capacities to self regulate in the face of challenge and change, and to successfully negotiate diversity and difference. Given that reciprocal social exchange is the basis for social trust and cohesion (Dasgupta & Serageldini, 2000), we should perhaps be optimistic that such forms of leadership may develop new forms of social capital and organisation rather than bemoan the perceived loss or decline in more traditional social forms and institutions.

There are of course, a number of methodological challenges in studying youth leadership. These range from the impact of: tacit norms—for example, adolescents do not acknowledge or use the notion of ‘peer leadership’ (Carter, Bennetts, & Carter, 2003); social influence and authority—for example, youth have
been found to reflect back what they think adults want to hear rather than their own authentic views (van Linden & Fertman, 1998); and the potential over-statement of the divergence of adult and youth conceptions of leadership—for example, Schneider, Ehrhart and Ehrhart (2002) report significant correlations between peer nominations of leaders and teacher ratings of leadership behaviour. Perhaps most importantly we need to distinguish between our imposed ideals and emergent realities, namely studying student leaders as ‘who and what we would like them to be’ as opposed to ‘who and what they are’. This can be very challenging conceptual and political territory. Miller-Johnson et al. (2003), for example, in a study of contrasting patterns of peer group leadership in American seventh-grade students found unconventional (controversial) students were more likely to be influential with their peers than conventional (adult-sanctioned) students.

There is sufficient evidence from the limited research done to date that both conceptual and practical progress in our understanding of youth leadership will not be achieved by seeking to discern which adult notions of leadership best match young peoples’ experiences. Komives et al. (2005) convincingly demonstrate, through their intensive study of student leaders that the appropriate focus for inquiry is a first-principles understanding of how young people develop and negotiate their leadership identities.

**Suggestions for research**

Our brief review of some of the relevant recent research has led us to argue that there is little evidence that leadership is a concept that has been adequately described from the student’s point of view. We suggest that this kind of knowledge is a critical precursor to reconceptualising approaches to student and youth leadership training and development. It is to the kind of research we believe is necessary that we turn in the final part of this article.

Having shown that there has been a lack of attention paid to developing a deep understanding of leadership through the eyes of secondary school students, we move to add some further justification for the kind of research we feel is now needed. We do this by referring to a study of leadership and learning undertaken in the Gap State High School in Queensland, Australia (Dempster, 2006). While the primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between leadership and learning, there were a number of outcomes in that school which have indicated that further investigation of leadership as a concept may well help secondary schools in their ongoing work with adolescent students.

Over the last five years, the Gap State High School has given significant prominence to leadership development as an embedded part of its curriculum for all students across the five years of their secondary schooling. Using a purpose-built, adventure-style leadership centre with ropes courses, ladders, climbing walls and obstacle courses, each student participates in one six-week leadership training module every year. In these modules, they undertake, among other things, activities concentrating on personal development, teamwork, leading self and leading others. They also participate in leadership development camps and projects that benefit others within and beyond the school. This concentration on leadership
development seems to have contributed to the enhanced engagement of students with their school, a continuing commitment to learning and to good relationships between the school’s administration and its students, particularly boys (Hay & Dempster, 2004). While we acknowledge the limitations of such a small study, we are encouraged by what is happening at this school—however, yet again, the leadership development curriculum employed by the Gap State High School has not been built on knowledge or understanding provided by secondary school students themselves.

Our discussion in this paper has led us to the view that there are a number of matters related to student leadership on which research should now be focused in secondary schools. We argue that we need:

• studies which try to get inside the heads of adolescents to understand how they conceptualise the abstract concept of leadership;
• studies which provide responses to the who, how and why of leadership amongst young people;
• studies which lead to understanding the purposes of leadership as seen through student’s eyes;
• studies of leadership relationships and the situations in which they are played out; and
• cross-cultural studies of adolescent views of leadership.

Our last suggestion helps to underscore the importance of the kind of knowledge we are saying is necessary. Assuming that adult views of leadership are acontextual or that in secondary schools there is a single view of leadership held by adolescents from different cultural backgrounds is counter-intuitive.

To sum up, the kind of research we believe is now necessary is that which will provide a grounded understanding of the meanings attached to leadership by adolescents. This seems to us to be an important next step. Without it, programs of development and training are likely to continue to be built on adult assertion about what adolescent leadership is regarded to be, or even worse, what some adults believe it should be.

**Conclusion**

We have presented an argument in this article that began with an assumption that there is discernable decreasing active civic engagement in the community. This, together with an adult literature on leadership that seems to dominate leadership development processes amongst the young, has acted as a spur for renewing our interest in student leadership. The result of our thinking is the claim that leadership development and training for secondary school students will only be improved when there is a much more substantial knowledge base and indeed, theoretical explanation about student leadership, than exists at present.

**Keywords**

leadership  leadership training  student attitudes
student leadership  student responsibility  teacher attitudes
References


**Authors**

Professor Neil Dempster is Professor of Education at Griffith University and President of the Australian College of Educators.

Email n.dempster@griffith.edu.au

Associate Professor Alfred Lizzio is Head of School in the School of Psychology at Griffith University, Brisbane.