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## The Role of the Primary School Principal in Developing Student Leadership

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## The Role of the Primary School Principal in Developing Student Leadership

### **Abstract**

The development of student leadership potential is an important issue to investigate (Archard, 2009; Hine, 2013; McNae, 2011). Yet to date, little research efforts have focussed on student leadership development programs within primary schools (K - 6). This research examined three aspects of student leadership within eight Catholic primary schools in metropolitan Perth, Western Australia. These aspects included the principals' understanding of the term 'student leadership', their perception of the most appropriate form of student leadership in Catholic schools, and how they envisaged their role within a student leadership program. Qualitative data were collected through the exercise of semi-structured interviews and researcher-generated field notes. A summary of findings indicated that principals understood student leadership programs as structured and deliberate opportunities for student development to occur. The most appropriate form of student leadership encompassed programs focussed on service, collaboration, and reflective of the school's ethos and vision. Principals envisaged their responsibilities as role models, as servant leaders, and to involve key people in the school's leadership program.

## **Introduction**

Schools have a serious responsibility to develop leadership potential in young people. While schools do not have a monopoly on such development, they are in a perfect position to nurture and cultivate the leadership potential of children during the formative years of their primary and secondary education. Certain questions thus become apposite for schools: When should leadership development begin? How should leadership development be undertaken? What type of leadership should be promoted? And, who should be responsible for student development? This article begins to scrutinise such questions through an exploration of the experiences and perceptions of eight Catholic primary school principals from metropolitan Perth, Western Australia. Underpinning this research is the belief that: (a) the role of the principal is pivotal in the development of student leadership in primary schools; and (b), children can be challenged to exercise leadership at a very young age.

This research into the role of Catholic primary school principals in developing student leadership is a replication study (Neuman, 2006) of an investigation that the researchers undertook into the role of Catholic secondary school principals in the development of student leadership (Lavery & Hine, 2013). In most cases a replication study is not carried out identically with the original study. That is, some feature or features of the original study are altered “in an attempt to stretch or move beyond the original findings” (Gay & Airasian, 2012, p. 67). In this study, the researchers chose a different cohort, specifically eight principals of Catholic primary schools as compared with eight principals of Catholic secondary schools in the original study.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Four theoretical constructs form the conceptual framework underpinning this research into the role of the Catholic primary school principal in student leadership formation. These constructs are: Christian leadership in Catholic schools; student leadership; the notion of student leadership in primary schools; and, the role of the primary school principal in fostering student leadership. First,

the literature concerning Christian leadership presents Jesus' preference for servant leadership as the model for leadership activities within Catholic schools. Specifically, this literature examines Jesus' teaching within the Gospels, and the notions of service and spirituality. Second, the construct of student leadership is explored regarding the importance of leadership development opportunities for school-aged students, as well as the roles and responsibilities of student leaders themselves. The third construct highlights how student leadership programs have been designed and implemented in primary schools, with commentators outlining the philosophical and structural features of such programs. Fourth, the role of the primary school principal *vis-à-vis* student leadership is explored. Current literature positions the school principal in an essential and supportive role for student leadership to develop in any school. Concomitant to this role – and according to various authors – principals can be directly or indirectly involved in school leadership programs.

**Christian leadership in Catholic schools.** Jesus is the primary model for Christian leaders. Christian leaders inherit from Jesus a foundational tenet for all leadership: “This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12). What distinguished Jesus as a leader was his “all-abiding and foundational belief in God’s love” (Sofield & Kuhn, 1995, p. 33). Jesus’ mission centred on proclaiming “a counter wisdom to that of the world, a subversive wisdom based on love and compassion” (Jolley, 1997, p. 136) as opposed to domination and power. Such wisdom is clearly evident within the Gospel tradition where the most distinctive aspect of Jesus’ teaching on leadership is his emphasis that a leader is essentially a servant. All four Gospels unmistakably demonstrate that Jesus’ understanding of leadership is one of service (Mk 10:42-45; Mt 23:8-12; Lk 22:24-27; Jn 13:12-17).

This notion of service is a key facet of the vision of leadership within Catholic schools (McLaughlin, 1997; Lavery, 2012). For example, McLaughlin observed that service forms the basis of genuine and authentic leadership in Catholic schools. He stressed, moreover, “anything less might well be a charade and reflect a distortion of the vision that lends legitimacy to Catholic education” (p. 22). Lavery argued that the most appropriate model of leadership for principals in Catholic

schools is transcendental leadership, a model based on the twin notions of service and spirituality. The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education promotes a plain message for school communities to nurture and develop young people within a culture of faith, illuminated by the Gospel message. Four documents published by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education outline authoritatively how community, culture and witness are related to the task of Catholic education itself (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1965; 1977; 1988; 1997). Collectively these documents provide a framework within which Christ's model of leadership can operate. This framework is promoted through a unilateral message for school communities to train and develop young people within a culture of faith, illuminated by the Gospel message. Specifically, the Sacred Congregation calls for all within Catholic school communities to develop a special relationship with Jesus, and for those in positions of leadership within such institutions to model their leadership on the servant approach lived by Jesus (Vatican Council II, 1965; The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977; 1988; 1997).

The Catholic Bishops of Western Australia (2009) explicitly emphasise that all who are called to leadership positions in Catholic schools must undertake their leadership in a spirit of Christian service. Specifically, the Bishops note that such leaders "are to reflect the Christ who came to serve rather than to be served" (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 95). The Bishops highlight, moreover, the importance of leadership through witness as critical for the success of the school community. They argue that all school leaders "are called to embody the vision, values and outlook of the Catholic school" (para. 95).

### **Student leadership.**

The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born – that there is a genetic factor to leadership. This myth asserts that people simply either have certain charismatic qualities or not. That's nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born. (Bennis, n.d.)

If leaders are 'made', then ostensibly leadership theory and skills can be taught and developed. When might that teaching and learning begin? Moreover, what type of teaching and learning is

appropriate? Such questions have a particular poignancy when considering student leadership, especially for children of primary age. Various authors have recognised the rising importance of the early years in the development of young children emotionally, intellectually and socially (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2005). Furthermore, since the 1990s there has been an increased understanding of student leadership as centred on ministry, namely civic responsibility (van Linden & Fertman, 1998), civic service (McGregor, 2007), leadership as ministry (Willmetts, 1997), and servant leadership (Lavery, 2007), wherein students develop a belief that their talents are to be used for others and for the common good (Ryan, 1997).

An appreciation of student leadership based on service has implications for the manner in which students are elected to formal positions of leadership, how they are prepared for their leadership positions and, particularly, what they do in their leadership roles. Leadership based on service debunks the myth that leadership is all about heroics. One does not have to be a super-heroic Katniss Everdene or a charismatic James Bond. Students need not be members of the netball, volleyball, basketball, or football teams to exercise leadership (Lavery, 2007). Rather, leadership based on service and ministry turns traditional notions of leadership on their head and fosters a collaborative approach where leaders exercise their leadership in the interests of others and for the greater good. It is an approach that not only casts doubts on an attitude of leadership where people “shoulder their way into leadership positions, driven by upward mobility and a thirst for personal success” (Beare, 1998), but it also suggests an alternative that is “selfless, large-souled, and expansively visioned” (Beare). Sofield and Kuhn (1995) talk about such leaders as generative people who tend to place their own needs second to those of others.

The importance of a teacher-mentor working with student leaders cannot be over-emphasised. Lavery (2003) argued that the actual responsibilities of a teacher-mentor might well vary according to the needs of the students. Hunter, Bailey and Taylor (1997) proposed that the ability to listen, to explore ideas, to share experiences, to facilitate processes, to share information, to give advice (sparingly) and to provide feedback would seem to be central in any mentoring role.

Appleton (2002), drawing on her own experiences in supporting student leaders, highlighted the need for a mentor to be both flexible and consultative so that “students genuinely experienced leadership in designing and planning and not merely in the implementation phase” (p. 19). Gray (2002), writing of student participation in schools, recommended that members of a student representative council “discuss who they would prefer as their advisory teachers, then contact those teachers to seek their support and involvement” (p. 12). Furthermore, Buscall, Guerin, Macallister, and Robson (1994) argued that strong staff support was an essential feature of any school student leadership program, noting that “if there is one reason for the failure or death of a Student Representative Council it was largely due to lack of staff support” (p. 34).

**The notion of student leadership in primary schools.** Since the 1990s, the literature concerning student leadership in primary schools has steadily grown. Over this time, researchers and educators alike have heralded the value of developing the leadership potential of young people (Fertman & van Linden, 1999; Karnes & Stephens, 1999), developing this potential as early as possible (Bisland, 2004; Sacks, 2009), and developing it carefully according to the developmental stage of youth concerned (Armstrong, 2013; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Additionally, commentators have written on various aspects of how leadership is developed at the primary school level. These aspects include involving students in leadership education and training events (Myers, 2005), and offering students opportunities to exercise leadership through structured school programs (Chappell, 2012; Moore, 2011). Such structured programs typically endorse a positional leadership model (e.g. Head Boy, Head Girl, Sports Captain, Ministry Captain) where students prepare and deliver a speech before their peers in the year prior to formal election (Chappell, 2012). Other structured programs use teacher-facilitated, student leadership teams whereby all senior students (i.e. Year 6) nominate their preferences before allocation as a member of a team (e.g. Arts, Sports, Environment, Media) (Moore, 2011). Several authors emphasise that primary school students engage particularly well with leadership roles when presented with significant service-learning opportunities (De Simone, 2012; DesMarais et al., 2000; Metzger, 2007) or collaborative tasks (De Simone, 2012; Roach et al.,

1999; Sacks, 2009). Conversely, Johnson (2005) warns that student leadership initiatives can become counter-productive if students are not engaged in meaningful leadership tasks, or if the student leadership program is not supported by teaching staff.

**The role of the primary school principal in fostering student leadership.** There is a paucity of literature concerning the role of the primary school principal in fostering student leadership. Despite this paucity, writers have indicated the importance of the principal's role *per se* (Covey, 2008), outlined possibilities for the principal's level of involvement (Lavery & Hine, 2012), and offered recommendations for making student leadership initiatives succeed (Johnson, 2005). By virtue of their position, principals assume full responsibility for all learning and personal development opportunities within their schools, including the facilitation of student leadership activities. To this end, Covey (2008) underscored that "after all, the principals are the ones who lead the meetings, approve the plans, and agree to the activities that will reinforce the culture" (p. 102). Lavery and Hine (2012) proposed that principals can be involved in student leadership activities within their schools directly or indirectly. Through direct involvement, principals work closely with elected student leaders and planning specific events that promote leadership development. Indirect involvement requires principals to appoint key staff members to plan, organise and facilitate all student leadership activities (i.e. to be directly involved with the student leaders) while they assume responsibility for the philosophical and organisational facets of the leadership program.

Johnson noted various limitations associated with a primary school student leadership program, including "a lack of support shown by the teachers, a limitation of S[tudent] R[epresentative] C[ouncil] business to subjects on which the adults believed that students should comment, a lack of student engagement with the SRC" (Johnson, 2005, p. 4). In earlier literature, Hart (1992) warned that student participation within such a program becomes little more than manipulation, decoration or tokenism. To address those limitations, key strategies were enacted: students received leadership training for key roles and events (e.g. to become school 'ambassadors' for school tours and school events), and several staff were allocated release time to visit other

schools to discuss with students and teachers how to promote student voice. To enable a culture of authentic student leadership participation, Johnson (2005) recommended primary school principals consider “the allocation of human, financial and physical resources congruence of all the school’s structures and systems; and staff commitment to student voice” (p. 6).

### **Epistemology**

Epistemology can be defined as a branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, methods and limits of human knowledge (Wiersma, 1995). Within research, epistemology provides a philosophical underpinning for determining what types of knowledge are possible and the value and legitimacy of such knowledge (Crotty, 1998). This research into the role of the primary school principal in developing student leadership is qualitative. The underlying epistemology of qualitative research is not concerned with numbers, but rather mainly with words (Punch & Oancea, 2014).

Qualitative research, however, is not a unified, single approach to conducting research. There are various traditions or “subdisciplines” (Wiersma, 1995, p. 212) within qualitative research. The specific tradition that underscores this inquiry is that of interpretivism. The goal of interpretive social science is to understand the complex world of lived experience from the viewpoint of those who live it. Interpretive inquiry strives to discover what is meaningful or relevant to people being studied and tries to gain a feel for their social reality (Neuman, 2006).

**Theoretical perspective.** Within interpretive social science there are a number of theoretical perspectives which emphasise different elements of human action. One such theoretical perspective, and the one which underscores the approach within this study, is symbolic interactionism. Pivotal to the notion of symbolic interactionism is the placing of oneself in the setting of the other, of considering situations from the point of view of “the actor”. Procedurally, symbolic interactionism directs investigators to take, to the best of their ability, the standpoint of those being studied (Crotty, 1998). Consistent with this perspective, the current study allowed the researchers to examine the two specific aims of the study. These were to (i) investigate what principals in Catholic primary schools understood by the concept of student leadership, and (ii) to

explore what these principals see as their role in the promotion and development of student leadership in their schools.

**Methodology.** Collective case study, which formed the methodological structure of this research, involves exploring a number of cases jointly in order to examine a phenomenon, population or general condition (Stake, 1994). Particular cases in the collection are chosen because “it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases” (Stake, p. 237). The population studied in this collective case study was primary school principals who actively promote student leadership in their schools.

**Methods.** As with the original study (Lavery & Hine, 2013), the researchers used two qualitative research methods to collect data: semi-structured interviews and researcher-generated field notes. The three specific research questions were:

1. What do Catholic primary school principals understand by the concept of student leadership in a Catholic school?
2. What do Catholic primary school principals believe to be the most appropriate form of student leadership in Catholic schools?
3. What do Catholic primary school principals envisage as their central role in the promotion and development of student leadership?

All eight Catholic primary school principals lead schools in Perth, Western Australia. The interviews were conducted on-site, and each interview lasted approximately 50 to 60 minutes. The researchers endeavoured to interview principals who were actively engaged – directly or indirectly – with student leadership development at their schools. All eight principals were purposively selected to participate in the study due to the established student leadership programs at their schools, and the considerable place student leadership has within each of their school communities. Website information and personal contact with school leaders and teachers formed the basis for participant selection. The schools which these principals lead are all coeducational — representative of Catholic primary education in Western Australia. Four of the principals were male and four were female.

Seven questions formed the interview guide used to initiate discussion with the principals (Appendix 1). As a precaution, these questions were trialled with two highly experienced, former Catholic primary school principals before data collection commenced. The feedback provided by the former principals indicated that no changes were needed for the questions to be used with the primary school principals. The eight interviews were audio recorded with the principals' permission, and the researchers took field notes during each interview. Interview transcription occurred after all interviews had taken place. A third party undertook these transcriptions. Subsequently, each participant was offered a transcribed copy of the interview that he or she had participated in to check and verify that the conversation was captured accurately. Following verification, each copy was re-collected for analysis and safe storage.

*Data analysis.* Content analysis was the approach used in this replication study to examine data from the eight interview transcripts and researcher-generated field notes. Berg (2007, p. 303) defines content analysis as "a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings". Typically, content analysis is performed on various forms of human communication which may include written documents, photographs, videotapes or audiotapes.

When analysing the collected data, this project adhered to the framework and guidelines offered by Miles and Huberman (1994). This framework attempts to identify relationships among social phenomena, based on the similarities and differences that connect these phenomena. The approach itself is comprised of three main components: data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions. These components themselves involve three main operations: coding, memoing, and developing propositions. Within each of the components, the researchers employed a continual process of coding, memoing and developing propositions. Codes, as Miles and Huberman (1994) explain, "are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study" (p. 56). These codes were attached to the data gathered through interviews and field notes, and were selected from those data based on their meaning. The

researchers then used memoing to synthesise coded data together so that they formed a recognisable cluster grounded within one general leadership concept. The memoing process also captured the ongoing thoughts of the researchers as the process of coding took place. Lastly, as a study proceeds, there is a greater need to “formalize and systematize the researcher’s thinking into a coherent set of explanations” (Miles & Huberman, p. 75). For this project, the researchers generated propositions about connected sets of principals’ statements, reflected on the findings, and drew conclusions about student leadership from the study.

### **Findings**

The intention of this research was to explore the role of the principal with regards to student leadership development within primary schools. Specifically, through the use of three research questions, the researchers sought to identify (a) what the principals understood by the concept of student leadership; (b) what these principals considered to be the most appropriate form of student leadership in Catholic primary schools; and (c) what the principals envisaged as their central role in the promotion and development of student leadership. An analysis of the gathered data generated various themes stemming from each research question. These themes are presented under the broader categories of student leadership, student leadership in Catholic primary schools, and the role of the principal.

**Student leadership.** The principals consistently reported that the concept of student leadership provided students with opportunities for personal growth and development. In addition, principals articulated how student leadership required a formal structure to operate effectively.

**Development opportunities.** All eight principals affirmed that student leadership provided students with opportunities for personal growth and development. In their responses, principals listed an array of projects, activities and events for which the student leaders in their respective schools were responsible. These included representing the school at public events (e.g. ANZAC Day Service), running school assemblies, and organising various school or community service activities. Through engagement in these opportunities principals contended strongly that students were able

to develop leadership skills, values, and dispositions. One principal declared that student leadership held a prominent place in her school:

[Student leadership] is part of our school responsibility in nurturing physical, social, recreational, spiritual and educational needs of the child. It involves respecting students as decision makers. It involves the school's role in developing skills, attitudes and framework that will allow the growth of them as the best person they are capable of being.

Another principal commented specifically on the types of values and skills that student leaders developed as a result of engaging in leadership opportunities. He explained how student leadership is:

An opportunity for us to develop the value of being accountable for [our] actions. It's an opportunity to enhance and develop 'friendship elements'. It's an opportunity to build student self-esteem, communication skills, problem solving skills and decision making skills. It also provides a focus for team building, goal setting, awareness of diversity and conflict resolution.

After listing various specific ways students benefitted personally from their involvement in leadership activities, one principal spoke of how student leadership required reflexivity from student participants. He stated that for leadership development to occur,

A display of receptiveness [is] needed from the children themselves; an acceptance that they can grow and develop within themselves through such an undertaking to become a 'better' person. It's to provide them with an opportunity to see the individual growth and development rather than constantly compare self with others.

Principals also communicated how leadership opportunities enabled students to be active participants in the school and parish community. Regardless of the particular skill, value or disposition cited, principals' comments highlighted how leadership opportunities were essential in preparing students for future roles (both as leaders and non-leaders), and contributing positively towards character development.

**Structure and process.** All principals were able to identify and articulate the structure of the student leadership program within their respective schools. Responses from interviews transcripts and researcher field notes indicated that all leadership programs involved chiefly the Year 6 cohort (i.e. the oldest students in a Western Australian Catholic primary school context). From the eight

principals interviewed, five identified a program where students prepared and delivered a speech in front of their peers and teachers before formal election into a role. These roles were reported either as positional (e.g. Head Boy, Head Girl, Faction Captain, Ministry Leader) or non-positional. For non-positional roles, two principals described how students work collaboratively on leadership tasks without a hierarchical, positional structure. After election, students typically receive leadership support through key events (e.g. a Leadership Camp/Retreat), or periodically. Periodic support generally involved scheduled leadership meetings and school-based leadership training sessions. The structure and process of the eight schools' leadership programs are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

*Structure and process of leadership programs*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>How do students become involved?</b>	<b>Which students are involved?</b>	<b>Leadership Positions available</b>	<b>Support</b>
A	Speech and voting	Elected Year 6	7 key roles; students placed into leadership groups	Retreat; weekly meetings
B	All involved; Successful application	Years 4 – 6	Students apply for key roles in specific events	Retreat; weekly meetings
C	Speech and voting	Elected Year 6	Head Boy, Head Girl, Prefects, leadership teams	Retreat; weekly meetings
D	Speech and voting	Elected Year 6	Head Boy, Head Girl, Faction Captains, leadership groups	Fortnightly meetings
E	Speech and voting	Elected Year 6	12 key roles, students placed into leadership groups	Ongoing training; weekly meetings
F	Volunteer	Year 6	Service Ministry groups	Camp; weekly meetings
G	Speech and voting	Year 6	4 Team Leaders to run groups of elected leaders	Fortnightly meetings
H	Successful application	K – 6	Student driven ministry projects	Determined by students and teachers

One principal (Participant B) outlined that all Year Four to Six students in his school are involved in the leadership program. For instance, he stated that at the start of the school year key Year Six staff place Year Six students in one of the various ministry groups. Throughout the year student leaders rotate through each ministry group to experience different roles and ministries. This principal stated that students could apply formally for different key roles in specific events (e.g. Sports Captain, School Leader) in addition to their involvement within a ministry group. Successful applicants performed their key role knowing that they could only hold the position for a limited time so others could exercise leadership during these events. In a similar vein to Participant B, another principal (Participant H) explained that students of any age at his school needed to apply for a leadership role. When asked about the student leadership program structure, Participant H responded “I think that a kind[ergarten] kid could be a leader in this school” and acknowledged that “every student has leadership potential, but not everyone wants to be a leader”. In outlining the leadership application process he stated that “when students come up with an idea or [a] project I encourage them to put it in writing and then drive it themselves. If they can’t organise this themselves they learn that this particular project or idea is impracticable”. Participant H continued by delineating how successful students engage in collaborative ministry projects with staff guidance and assistance.

**Student leadership in Catholic primary schools.** The collected data indicated that principals were able to identify various forms of student leadership in Catholic primary schools. Principals outlined these forms at both philosophical and operational levels. At a philosophical level, principals posited consistently that any form of student leadership in Catholic primary schools needed to be focused on service. In addition, attention was drawn towards any student leadership program reflecting both the Catholic ethos and the vision of the school. At an operational level, principals

noted that student leadership programs were best conducted by emphasising collaboration between students and key staff.

***Focused on service.*** At a philosophical level, all eight principals insisted that the most appropriate form of student leadership in Catholic primary schools was focused on service. Moreover, these principals highlighted that the notion of service was modelled on the servant leadership approach espoused by Jesus of Nazareth. One principal (Participant H) stated that the leadership program at his school is “a program that is all about service; to serve [others,] not to be served”. In a similar vein several principals commented that by following a servant leadership model, students were able to understand the reality of what is meant by service to others. On the notion of service, one principal (Participant C) offered that student leadership is:

an ideal opportunity to link and reinforce leadership, service with reference to the Gospels. It is interesting to note that we have a student population that increasingly expresses a desire to become involved in service work. A key challenge in implementing this model is identifying the best service opportunities.

In identifying how students could give to the community, one principal (Participant D) described how student leaders at his school identified a social justice project and a realistic time frame to achieve some leadership goals. To amplify, he offered an example of how “the recent student RE team had decided to work with a charity to raise funds for remote aboriginal children”. At the same time, this principal recommended that key staff avoid making activities competitive for students and at all times ensuring that the leadership program is driven by the “desire to do service”.

***Reflects Catholic ethos and vision.*** Following the identification of service as an appropriate form of student leadership in Catholic primary schools, six of eight principals emphasised that student leadership programs must reflect the Catholic ethos and principles of the school, especially that of service. All of the principals articulated how the student leadership program had been designed to reflect the charism of their respective school’s patron or patroness. In doing so, principals noted that spirituality should feature prominently in the decision making process of student leaders; that is, “in this situation what would Jesus do?” One principal supported this line of

thought by offering how using a Servant Leadership model offered “an ideal opportunity to link and reinforce leadership and service with reference to the Gospels”. Two principals (Participants E & F) argued that any student leadership program needs “to reflect key Catholic values that align with the school’s vision and ethos”. Moreover, one of these principals hypothesised that “these values are reinforced from beginning of schooling so by Year Six, students are ready to engage in realising some of these”.

**A collaborative exercise.** A majority of principals (five of eight) expressed that a collaborative approach was the most appropriate form of student leadership. Such an approach was characterised typically as students working collaboratively on service ministry projects with guidance from key staff. A principal (Participant G) explained the student leadership model used at her school:

Rather than prefects, having leaders allows for the notion of being part of a team serving others. What is required is a collaborative, cohesive team model. A number of the ‘service projects’ are fundraising events arranged and conducted by the student leadership team. There are one or two larger service projects which involve collaboration of teams; for example, [the School] Choir performing for senior citizens.

Another principal (Participant C) reflected this statement and stated “student leadership at primary school level needs to be a model that is not hierarchical — I would prefer that we didn’t have a Head Boy and Head Girl”. Instead, this principal avowed that what is needed is:

most definitely a team model...with a manageable number of students. As part of the model students need to be introduced to collaborative strategies. It needs to be a model that allows students to emerge from the often discomfort of associated interactions and responsibilities to a position of confidence in carrying out their duties.

Participant C concluded that students working collaboratively on projects and activities promoted a sense of community within the school. A third principal described how the student leadership program at her school had moved away from a ‘positional leadership’ approach to one requiring collaboration:

At times in the previous model I felt that the school leaders were ‘giving’ without any reflection or awareness of this as being part of the service ministry. I decided an opportunity needed to be identified where Year Six students could experience working in small service groups. Thus the [Leadership] Camp allowed for team

building, the principal presenting as a 'service role model' and for decision making experiences. At the camp the Year Six students identified the service ministry groups they would become involved with. The 'Assembly Group' provides students with a relatively 'high profile' school example of students committing to service ministry.

This principal stated that since the adoption of a collaborative model, there is no leadership hierarchy (e.g. Head Boy, Head Girl). The elected student leaders commit to their service group and collaboratively identify tasks and responsibilities.

**The role of the principal.** The eight principals identified various elements of what they perceived to be their central role in the promotion and development of student leadership. All principals stated they needed to model visibly good leadership behaviour with staff, students and parents. In order to promote and develop student leadership effectively, all principals shared how they based their personal leadership style on service. Principals also underscored the relational and participatory nature of their role by highlighting the necessity to involve key people (staff and non staff) in the leadership development process.

**Role model.** All eight principals underscored how they envisaged their key role within a student leadership program as a role model for staff, students and parents. Central to this key role was the notion of lending support to student leadership activities through direct involvement. To illustrate the notion of direct involvement, one principal (Participant B) described how he would schedule and convene a 'Milo meeting' every week with the student leaders. In his capacity as role model to these student leaders, this principal underscored how students needed to observe leadership role models and the principal "is probably the most accessible one they should encounter". He added that it was important for students to see him "blocking out time [to] be with them" and so they could "experience me listening to them, hearing my decisions and then see me acting on some of their suggestions". Five other principals expressed similar statements regarding their capacity as a role model for student leaders. These statements included "empowering students to take action within the school" (Participant C), ensuring all student leaders had 'a voice' (Participant E), and to "ensure that student leadership doesn't lapse into an exercise of tokenism"

(Participant F). Some principals (three of eight) stated how they felt role modelling effective leadership behaviour was carried out by “encouraging and enabling staff and students to be the best they can be” and by “displaying appropriate interactions with staff, parents and students”. Irrespective of whom they interacted with, all principals identified that their actions as role models were drawn directly from the Catholic ethos reflecting service in the example of Christ.

***A servant leader.*** As a corollary of their statements regarding role modelling, all eight principals classified their own personal leadership as one of service. To varying degrees, principals shared how the notion of servant leadership was central to their role in the promotion of student leadership. For instance, one principal (Participant B) stressed that “the principal’s role is to model service, to be seen engaged in this, for example doing yard duty, and doing it because it’s the right thing to do”. When working directly with his student leaders, this principal added that he would reinforce often the concept of service as a key characteristic of Christianity. Participant C felt that she displayed a servant leader approach in her interactions with student leaders by emphasising the notion of ‘humble leadership’. For her, humble leadership is a form of service where an individual engages to the best of his or her ability without an expectation of reward or recognition. Participant A outlined that his servant leader ‘message’ was communicated consistently to staff and students, in that “doing service is good...leadership needs to be life directed, and service is always the emphasis”. He added that his staff “get it because they see me doing it”. Two principals expressed how they, as servant leaders, needed to be “perceived as walking alongside the student leaders as they engage in service ministry actions”. Doing so enabled them to nurture leadership skills and make student efforts visible to the whole school community.

***Involve key people.*** A majority of principals interviewed (five out of eight) expressed that involving key personnel was central to their role in the promotion and development of student leadership. According to the principals, key personnel included a range of staff members (e.g.

Assistant Principal, classroom teacher). One principal (Participant A) explained how key staff fulfilled a role in the student leadership program:

Each [Year Six] leadership group has an adult role model. Their [sic] function is to be supportive, encourage decision making and introduce leadership protocols as the need for them occurs. In this school it's not just teachers who are the role models; for example, the gardener is the Role Model for the Environmental Team.

The principal added that she needed to seek advice and feedback from key staff before conducting a formal review of the student leadership program. Two principals asserted that, in their respective schools, teachers were appointed into mentorship roles. These Mentor Teachers were appointed due to their genuine interest in student leadership, and their chief responsibilities included: acting as a good role model for students, ensuring compliancy requirements were met by student groups through regular meetings, affirming and reinforcing examples of displayed leadership, and providing guidance and support for student leaders. One of these principals stated that Mentor Teachers were appointed because "it was too big a task to remain just in the hands of the principal. I also wanted to emphasise it's not just the 'boss' who is the leader; leadership isn't dependent on the job you have". Another principal concluded that whatever model of student leadership is exercised, the school needs to ensure staff and students have an appropriate amount of time to engage in their service commitments.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Student leadership is unmistakably an important consideration for the eight Catholic primary school principals in this study. These principals were keenly aware of, and took an active interest in, the student leadership programs operating in their schools. All were directly involved in some capacity, usually with the senior student leadership group. They considered themselves as role models for students, staff and parents through such involvement, giving witness that student leadership was highly valued rather than tokenistic or decorative. Of equal importance, they ensured that student leaders were consistently supported by staff-mentors in their leadership activities. Such a positive attitude by potentially the most influential person in a school would ensure that student

leadership had considerable opportunity to evolve and flourish (Lavery & Hine, 2012; Buscall, Guerin, Macallister & Robson, 1994; Hine, 2013).

The eight principals identified a range of opportunities for development and personal growth for their student leaders as a result of participation in student leadership activities. Such identification on the part of the principals indicates an astute awareness that benefits are linked with student leadership, a fact well documented in the literature (Lavery, 2007; Appleton, 2002; Hawkes, 1999; Rafferty, 1997). However, this realisation also raises a potential concern. Students not formally involved in school-based leadership might well be deprived of opportunities for personal growth and development. Considered another way, are mentoring programs, leadership preparation, and designated leadership opportunities only the purview of “the chosen few – the ‘elected’” (Lavery, 2003, p. 28)? The notion of inclusive student leadership is a challenge. Yet, given that a majority of the primary school principals saw student leadership as a collaborative exercise, it might be instructive to explore with principals the prospect of leadership in terms of a whole-school culture. Certainly, a number of the principals in this study questioned the hierarchical understanding of student leadership.

Each of the principals indicated that leadership based on service was the appropriate model of student leadership in Catholic schools. They pointed to the Gospel narrative and explicitly the person of Jesus as the archetype of such leadership. In one sense such a finding is not surprising. There exists a strong appreciation of Gospel-based servant leadership within Catholic educational circles in Western Australia. The Catholic Bishops of Western Australia (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009) explicitly indicate that leadership in Catholic schools should be undertaken in a spirit of service (para. 71). Further, various Catholic authors have, over the years, extolled the value of Gospel-based servant leadership, both within education and in a more general sense (Hackett & Lavery, 2011; Nuzzi, 2000; McLaughlin, 1997; Edwards, 1989). Given the predilection towards leadership as one that characterises service (all eight principals considered themselves as servant leaders), it is understandable that they might explain student leadership in

comparable terms. Whatever the reasons, it should be pointed out that the principals were adamant in their affirmation and vision of servant leadership as the appropriate model for their students. Moreover, the concept of leadership as service is well credentialed in literature on student leadership (Lavery, 2007; McGregor, 2007; van Linden & Fertman, 1998; Willmetts, 1997).

The eight principals in this study provided a valuable working interpretation of what student leadership might look like in Catholic primary schools. In particular, they highlighted the primacy of the senior class (Year Six students) in setting the tone of student leadership within the school. They indicated that student leadership should be collaborative and based on Gospel-based service. They clearly demonstrated the importance of adult mentors (themselves and other members of staff) in actively supporting students in their leadership. However, the principals' responses also raise particular issues. For instance, there was a tendency to view leadership preparation more as "on the job" training where students worked with appropriate adult role models. Important as these considerations are, the value of preparing students prior to their leadership role cannot be overestimated (Buscall, Guerin, Macallister, & Robson, 1994; Chapman & Aspin, 2001; Mardon, 1999). Further, while the principals appropriately described servant leadership in terms of the Gospel understanding, there was less explicit enunciation of what this leadership might look like. As a concept, servant leadership is empirically not well defined (van Dierendonck, 2010). This fact may well be reflected in the principals' comments. Both the issue of leadership preparation and an explicit clarification of what servant leadership might look like are important areas for further research into primary school student leadership within Catholic schools.

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## **Appendix 1: Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

1. What does student leadership and student leadership development mean to you?
2. What are the necessary elements for student leadership programs to function within Catholic schools?
3. What is the most appropriate form of student leadership that 'fits' within Catholic schools?
4. What do you see as the Principal's role (s) regarding student leadership development?
5. What do you see as your role(s) as Principal concerning student leadership?
6. Are there other issues you would like to discuss pertinent to student leadership?
7. In light of what has been discussed, what do you see as the central role of the School Principal regarding student leadership and student leadership development?

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