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## Student leadership in Catholic schools: A matter of service!

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**STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: A MATTER OF SERVICE!**

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## **Student Leadership in Catholic Schools: A Matter of Service!**

### **Introduction**

The promotion of leadership potential in students is not an option for Catholic schools. If Catholic schools profess to develop the whole person academically, religiously, socially and morally, then an important element of that development entails explicit promotion of leadership, not only in positional leaders, but also with the entire student cohort. Moreover, the days when the role of student leaders centred on organising the sausage sizzle, collecting the mission money and tidying up the classroom are long gone. Catholic schools have an obligation to foster a leadership model in young people that draws its inspiration from the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. This paper explores the role of student leadership as one of service. It does so from the perspective of eight Catholic secondary school principals of schools situated in Perth, Western Australia. Key to this research is how these principals see student leadership actively operating in their schools.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Four theoretical constructs form the conceptual framework underpinning this research into the place of servant leadership within student leadership development programs in Catholic schools. These constructs are: Christian leadership in Catholic schools, Student leadership in Catholic schools, Servant leadership, and the Role of the principal in developing student leaders. These theoretical constructs are now considered.

### ***Student leadership in Catholic schools***

Student leadership within Catholic schools is a topic attracting increased attention (Hine, 2011; Lavery, 2002, 2007; McNae, 2011; Willmet, 1997). In a longitudinal study that engaged senior secondary school leaders, Hine (2011) outlined

various beneficial, personal outcomes for students participating in a leadership program. The chief benefit mentioned by staff and students was the acquisition and refinement of distinctive leadership skills. Moreover, during their leadership experience students were given the opportunity to learn and practise these skills during leadership training events, and afterwards further opportunities arose during the school year for these skills to be exercised and further. Similarly, research investigating the perceptions of secondary, female student leaders suggested that students believed leadership experiences were both valuable and necessary preparation for future leadership roles in professional practice and society (McNae).

Several commentators highlight the importance of student leadership in Catholic schools (Lavery, 2002; 2007; Lavery & Neidhart, 2003). Lavery (2002) argued that a worthwhile form of student leadership for a Catholic school, as well as a method to prepare student leaders, is through participation in service learning activities. A study of service-learning co-ordinators in Catholic schools in Western Australia (Lavery, 2007) found that student involvement in service-learning programs could have a range of implications for leadership development. This study indicated that:

service-learning experiences aid in the personal growth of students as future leaders by developing young men and women as leaders who would act with compassion and a strong sense of justice. (Lavery, 2007, p. 9)

Furthermore, the study underscored how participating in such programs promotes social awareness in students, assists with the formation of life skills, encourages the habit of giving, and has a positive effect on character enhancement. Lavery and Neidhart (2003) advocated a model of inclusive leadership whereby all senior students have a legitimate role in exercising leadership. These authors suggest that such an inclusive model would seek to involve all Year 12 students in leadership

training, not merely the elected leaders. Additionally, Lavery and Neidhart described how to actively involve all Year 12 students in leadership activities, and recommended that these school-based experiences are meaningful to the students and of value to the school community.

Willmetts (1997) posed two arguments regarding student leadership development in Catholic schools. First, “if student leadership is to be distinctive in a Catholic school then it will include an understanding of the dignity of each person and a recognition of people’s potential” (p. 27). Second “direct involvement is necessary from the student body so that the leadership model is inclusive and open to all rather than the leadership group of school captains and prefects being hierarchically superior” (p. 28). Additionally he contended that:

consideration needs to be given to the student leadership process so that it does not disempower students at a young age by setting them apart. Support needs to be provided so that student leaders become skilful in engaging, encouraging and facilitating the student body so that the followers do not feel passive. (p. 28)

Willmetts also emphasised the need for a school community to identify and develop the practice of student leadership as ministry. He stressed that:

if service is understood to mean to bring out the potential in another person because of a belief in the dignity of each person, then the particular approach to student leadership...will need to be invitational, cooperative and collaborative. (p. 27)

### ***Christian leadership in Catholic schools***

Christian leadership draws its inspiration from the life, teachings, and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Additionally, the leadership approach taught and modelled by Jesus is one of service (Edwards, 1987; Jolley, 1997; Sofield & Kuhn, 1995; Tuohy & Coghlan, 1999). The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education provides insight

into the purpose, significance, and character of Catholic schools where the tenets of Christian leadership can be applied. Additionally, four Church documents speak authoritatively about community, culture, and witness in relation to the task of Catholic education itself, and collectively provide a framework for Christ's model of leadership to operate within (The Declaration on Christian Education, 1965; The Catholic School, 1977; The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School, 1988; The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, 1997). Collectively, the Church documents promote a unilateral message for school communities to train and develop young people within a culture of faith, illumined by the Gospel message. Furthermore, these documents called for all within Catholic school communities to develop a special relationship with Christ, and for those in positions of leadership within such institutions to model their leadership efforts on the servant approach preferred by Jesus.

More specifically, the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia's Mandate Letter (2009) specifically states that those individuals who assume a position of leadership within Catholic school communities have a special role to perform, and that this role is one modelled on service. Moreover, as the Mandate Letter underscored, "for staff, parents and students, they are to reflect the Christ who came to serve rather than to be served" (p. 43). As all school leaders are called to embody the vision, values and outlook of the Catholic school, leadership through providing witness is critical for the effectiveness of the school community. In addition to recommending that a servant leadership style be the chosen model of leadership within Catholic schools, The Western Australian Bishops exhorted those leaders into a spirit of collaboration. Specifically, they note that

the contributions of our Catholic school leaders to the life and mission of the Church are examples of God's presence in our schools. We value their

generosity and willingness to collaborate with us in the fulfillment of our responsibilities regarding Catholic Schools (Mandate Letter, 2009, p. 43).

The servant leadership approach, therefore, is the recommended model of leadership for Catholic schools (McLaughlin, 1997; Neidhart, 1997; Whitehead & Whitehead, 1993) and those staff and students who undertake leadership positions within such institutions.

### *Servant leadership*

Considerable insight and development of the literature on servant leadership is attributed to Greenleaf (1977), who believed that effective leadership emerges from a desire to help others. From this notion, Greenleaf argued that servant leadership begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first before leading. Moreover, at the heart of such leadership is the expressed wish “to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (1977, p. 13). Greenleaf concluded by posing several questions that seek to ascertain the authenticity of servant leadership: “Do those being served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (1977, p. 13). A third question sought to determine the future impact of one’s leadership “on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?” (Greenleaf, p. 14) These questions once again reaffirm the central tenet of servant leadership to demonstrate care for and to nurture those within a group, organisation or society.

Perspectives on servant leadership, as Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2006) stated, “stand in sharp contrast to those theories (such as transactional leadership) that emphasise control or ‘overseeing’ those within the organisation” (p. 16). Furthermore,

servant leadership re-organises the position of the leader within the organisation; the servant leader is positioned at the centre of the organisation rather than occupying a position atop a hierarchy. Marzano, Waters and McNulty noted that this re-positioning implies:

the servant leader is in contact with all aspects of the organisation and the individuals within it as opposed to interacting with a few high-level managers who also occupy positions in the upper strata of the hierarchy. (p. 16)

Certain critical skills of servant leaders include understanding the personal needs of those within the organisation, healing wounds caused by conflict, being a steward of resources, developing the skills of others, and being an effective listener. According to Blanchard and Hodges (2005), there are two main roles of servant leadership.

These include a visionary role and an implementation role; the former requires the leader to set the course and the destination, and the latter is concerned with the leader doing things right with a focus on serving. Lopez (1995) suggested some characteristics of servant leaders: “they express unlimited liability for others, they know self well, are holders of liberating vision, are users of persuasion, are builders of community, and use power ethically” (pp. 155-156). Eleven characteristics of servant leaders have been identified from Greenleaf’s (1977) writing by various commentators. These traits characterise servant leaders as effective listeners, empathetic, healers, aware, persuasive, able to conceptualise well, possessing foresight, stewards, committed to the growth of others, willing to build community (Spears, 1988) and those who answer a calling (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006).

Consistent with the New Testament, servant leadership was the leadership style exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth (Mk 10:42-45; Mt 23:8-12; Lk 22:24-27; Jn 13:12-17).

### ***Role of the principal in developing student leaders***

The involvement of the principal is pivotal to the development of student leadership within schools (Lavery & Hine, 2012). Such involvement can be direct, where the principal is personally engaged in leadership activities and works closely with student leaders. For example, some principals meet with their senior school leaders on a weekly basis (Lavery & Hine). Meeting and working with senior student leaders “allows even the busiest administrator to have a true pulse on the schools” (Lineburg & Gearheart, 2008, p. 4). Other principals may take a more indirect approach, empowering colleagues to engage with student leaders (Leo, 2006), while still taking an active interest in student leadership development. Both methods of involvement have merit. However, whatever the degree of involvement, whether direct or indirect, it is important the principal takes the lead in promoting the philosophical understanding of student leadership at his or her school. Such a philosophical understanding forms part of the responsibility of the principal as a visionary for implementing and sustaining initiatives that promote student development. The principal needs to ensure that the school’s philosophy of student leadership reflects the values of the school. Ideally, the philosophy will embrace an inclusive policy that acknowledges and supports both students elected formally to leadership positions, as well as those students elected to formal leadership positions. In such a way the principal can play a critical role in fostering a culture of leadership within the school (Lavery & Hine).

### **Methodology**

This study into the notion of student leadership as service occurred in two phases. The initial phase involved research that the authors undertook in mid-2012,

the focus of which centred on the role of the Catholic secondary school principal in actively fostering student leadership. The research involved interviewing eight Catholic secondary school principals within the Perth metropolitan region. The second phase involved a follow-up study to interrogate the principals' responses to one of the interview questions: "What do you consider to be the most appropriate approach to student leadership within Catholic schools?" All eight principals had unequivocally answered that the most appropriate form of student leadership in Catholic schools embodied the preferred style of Jesus Christ, that of servant leadership.

***Initial research***

The initial research was interpretative in nature and used two qualitative research methods to collect data: semi-structured interviewing and researcher-generated field notes. The interviews were conducted on-site, and each interview lasted approximately 50-60 minutes. The 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 the school communities. Website information and personal contact with school leaders and teachers formed the basis for participant selection. There was an attempt to maximise the variation of sampling (Patton, 1990). Hence, the principals selected for this research included those from three coeducational schools, two boys' schools, and three girls' schools. Four of the principals were male and four were female. A summary of the participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Summary of the Participants*

School	Male	Female
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Co-educational	1	2
Boys	2	0
Girls	1	2

The eight interviews were digitally recorded with the principals' permission, and the researchers took field notes during each interview. Interview transcription occurred after all interviews had taken place. Subsequently, each participant was offered a transcribed copy of the interview he or she participated in to check and verify that the conversation was accurately captured. Each copy was re-collected for safe storage.

### *Follow-up study*

In the initial study all eight principals had argued that the appropriate model of student leadership in Catholic schools was based on the Gospel understanding of service. The follow-up study aimed to explore those ways the principals perceived student leadership at their schools mirroring that of servant leadership. In late 2012, letters were sent to the eight principals inviting them to participate in a follow-up study involving two further questions (Table 2). To minimise disruption,

Table 2

#### *Interview Questions*

1. How do student leaders at your college exemplify a servant leadership approach? (e.g. actions, characteristics, indicators, statements)
2. Is there anything else you would like to say about servant leadership regarding Catholic school student leadership activities?

and since the principals had already given generously of their time in the initial study, they were offered a choice in the way they might respond to the questions: (a) an on-site interview, (b) a phone interview, or (c) a written response. One principal opted for the on-site interview, two choose the phone interview, and five principals

completed written responses. The on-site interview was taped while notes were taken during the phone interviews. Transcripts were offered for verification. Data from the three interviews and five written responses were analysed and explored for common themes in line with the framework offered by Miles and Huberman (1994): data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions. The findings from the research are presented below.

## **Findings**

The intention of this research was to explore the concept of service within student leadership programs at eight (8) secondary, Catholic schools. Specifically, through the use of two research questions the researchers sought to (a) identify what the principals considered to be manifestations of a servant leader approach by student leaders at their respective colleges, and (b) investigate the notion of servant leadership within Catholic, secondary schools. An analysis of the collected data generated four (4) key themes stemming from the research questions. These themes are: Demonstrating school values, contributing to school culture and identity, involvement in school activities, and fulfilling student leadership responsibilities. These themes are now reviewed below.

### ***Demonstration of school values***

All principals interpreted the exemplification of servant leadership by student leaders as a demonstration of key school values. Specifically, principals spoke of the centrality of Jesus to the life of their respective schools, as well as core Gospel values lived out within the school community. Coupled with an understanding of Jesus'

preferred leadership style (i.e. servant leadership), these Gospel values acted as 'objectives' for student leaders to enliven. To amplify, one Principal stated:

Service is a core value for our College (Mercy, Compassion, Excellence, Service, and Justice are our five (5) values. Each year we focus on one of these values and our model of Jesus and Catherine McAuley as servant leaders receives constant exposure.

In a similar vein, another principal commented:

Within our College community there are six (6) House groups. Each House has a patron – a strong member of the Catholic faith who provided support and guidance for others following Christ's example of service. These patrons, together with our College patron, afford our students a wonderful example of how to live Christ's message of love for all.

One principal provided an example of how student leaders are able to enact roles of service through servant leadership. She affirmed the prominent place of St. Vincent de Paul within the school community, and described how between the House system, Vinnies, and Mini-Vinnies, there are many opportunities for students to serve others.

Moreover, this principal offered:

Each House has a mission, and every student within the House has the opportunity to do service work at a nominated organisation (e.g. agency, hospice, centre). For example, the Nairobi Mission is a whole College mission where students do hands-on experience working in orphanages in Africa. Our younger students do some amazing things for the Mission, like doing little jobs in their neighbourhood for money and then donating this money to the Mission.

Each principal had a similar comment to make regarding how students were given the opportunity to engage in servant leadership, both through deepening their understanding at a theoretical level (i.e. learning about the College's values, situated within a framework of Christianity) and operationalising this understanding through acts of service.

### *Contributing to school culture and identity*

All principals understood the exemplification of servant leadership to be fundamental in contributing to school culture and identity. Specifically, one principal shared how the student leaders at her school promoted servant leadership within the school. She stated:

In our College's Christian Service Learning program, the senior ministry leaders have taken up the challenge of helping not only those within our community, but also within the wider community. They work with other students to promote positive action in service of others, and this means having to walk with the poor and needy (e.g. the local soup kitchen, participating in Relay for Life, helping locals with gardening).

This principal also shared that students were introduced to the concept of servant during student leadership training sessions. She contended that “the Gospels form a significant part of the training process”, and training sessions required students to reflect on the Gospel message as an inspiration to serve others. Together, the training sessions and opportunities to serve others – both grounded in a philosophy of service – had become part of this school's culture and identity within the community.

Another principal spoke of how his student leaders demonstrated a service approach towards leadership with the younger students. For instance, many activities on the Year 7 camp (including the student leadership training) were planned, conducted and evaluated by Year 12 students. Additionally, those relationships cultivated on camp were continued in Pastoral Care Group (PCG) once a week for the rest of the year. This principal also reported a real ‘presence’ of Year 12 students in the locker areas of younger students, and described this as “supervision by stealth, as well as an opportunity for them to build a relationship with the younger students”. Grounded in a spirit of service, these actions significantly contributed to the identity and culture of the school.

### *Involvement in school activities*

All principals highlighted that student leaders were able to demonstrate a servant leadership by becoming involved in a myriad of school activities. To illustrate, one principal explained that student leaders are allocated portfolios (campus ministry, academic, music, sport) and, under the guidance of key staff in each of these areas, the students are then tasked with a number of service responsibilities. These responsibilities would typically include tasks such as: “tutoring students after school, coordinating Campus Ministry activities, taking roles in liturgies and retreats, conducting junior sports activity, serving in the canteen”. In addition to this targeted service, all students at this school are encouraged to demonstrate leadership, and the provision of service is commonly understood to be a critical component of this leadership.

Another principal underscored how service learning projects engaged students in servant leadership activities. Specifically, she explained that service learning projects operate at each year level within the school, and the focus of each project was determined by the students in each respective year level. For instance, a group of students had worked for a year on the development of a reflective prayer garden for the school. According to this principal, the students chose “what service they thought the school needed, who had to be contacted (e.g. maintenance staff), and how their work could be communicated to the school community (a PowerPoint presentation at a whole school assembly).” In summary, this opportunity engaged leaders and non-leaders in an activity of service towards the school community.

### *Fulfilling student leadership responsibilities*

All principals stated that students demonstrated servant leadership by fulfilling their leadership responsibilities. One principal asserted that students provided “an example of service for others to follow, and being prepared to do the most mundane jobs (be seen to get their hands dirty)”. These students were expected to attend meetings held in their own time, and to “always consider new and different ways of addressing and helping those in need”. A second principal drew attention to the pledge taken by all senior leaders at the School’s Award Night, in the year preceding their official appointment. This pledge commences with the words “We pledge that we will serve our community...”. This statement is repeated by the same leaders at the Opening Mass. In addition to fulfilling the pledged words, this principal commented that it was a community expectation for these leaders to model the school’s core values of compassion, courage, and respect through their service.

Four of the principals discussed how the use of student leadership portfolios assisted students in fulfilling their leadership responsibilities. Drawing upon an earlier comment regarding portfolios, the same principal highlighted the importance of leadership selection criteria to be based on demonstrable service to the school community. To elaborate, he stated that a senior student leader must have demonstrated a past history, and future commitment to, two categories of service. These categories are Core Service and Non-Core Service. Core service entails service conducted outside of home and school and meets one of the following categories: work with recognised charitable or service organisations, work with marginalised groups, and work within church or parish. Non-Core service requires students to volunteer for service activity at school, home, sports clubs, and other groups. Similar

sentiments regarding the development of a student 'track record' of servant leadership were expressed by other principals, who underscored the notion that Catholic leaders are called to serve, help others, and make a difference in the lives of others.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this research project was to explore in what ways eight principals of Catholic secondary schools in the Perth metropolitan region saw student leaders in their schools exemplifying servant leadership. The data from the interviews categorised the principals' perceptions under four main themes. These were: Demonstration of school values; Contributing to school culture; Involvement in school activities, and; Fulfilling student leadership responsibilities. In their comments, the principals mainly considered their Year 12 student leaders.

Within the theme, Demonstration of school values, the principals stressed the centrality of Jesus to the life of their schools, indicated that Jesus' preferred leadership style was one of servant leadership and highlighted that student leaders engaged in servant leadership through acts of service. Specifically, the principals offered such examples as participation in the St Vincent de Paul Society, active involvement in the school House system, and outreach mission to the wider community. Such an approach clearly links with the understanding of Christian leadership as outlined by such authors as Edwards, (1987), Jolley (1997) and Tuohy and Coghlan (1999). Moreover, placing Jesus at the centre of the Catholic school aligns the principals closely with Catholic Church documentation (The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, 1997) as well as the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia's Mandate Letter (2009).

All principals emphasised that operating out of a servant leadership model was essential in the development of school culture and identity. They believed that student leaders significantly contributed to school culture and identity through their leadership in Christian service-learning programs and the way they supported younger students. Service-learning is a well documented pedagogy for developing leadership characteristics in students (Youniss & Yates, 1997; Kaye, 2004; Lavery, 2007). Participating in service-learning can help students to develop as leaders who take initiative, solve problems, work in teams, and demonstrate their abilities while and by helping people (Kaye). Moreover, service-learning is a preferred methodology for Catholic schools (Lavery, 2007).

Under the theme, Involvement in school activities, all principals indicated that student leaders demonstrated servant leadership through their participation in innumerable school activities. One of the keys to such student involvement was the allocation of leadership portfolios. These portfolios highlighted leadership in campus ministry, academic, as well as cultural and sporting pursuits. Students were able to exercise their leadership skills through either running the portfolio or participating in the portfolio. In this way student leaders were able to exercise a significant role in the core business of the school – the education of children. Such an approach, moreover, is indicative of an inclusive model of student leadership highlighted by Fertman and Van Linden (1999) who argued that all middle school and high school students have the capacity to lead.

Finally, principals believed that student leaders displayed servant leadership through fulfilling their leadership responsibilities. In many cases this involved students being prepared to “get their hands dirty” by undertaking some of the mundane leadership activities such as attending meeting in their own time. Having student leaders prepared to undertake the ‘ordinary’ leadership responsibilities provides a fine role-model, especially for younger students. Such an approach, moreover, has strong links with the literature on servant leadership (Blanchard & Hughes, 2005; Lopez, 1995). In particular, this focus on working for others is a key element inherent in a servant leadership approach.

The principals articulated two further issues pertaining to the four themes outlined above. Firstly, they noted the central place of servant leadership in the development and training of student leaders. That is, the notion of servant leadership based on service was explicitly presented to students as *the* way to exercise leadership.

Secondly, a predisposition to service was an important criterion in any appointment of a student leader. As one principal noted, to be eligible for a senior student leadership role, students must have clearly demonstrated service to the school community, and the wider community, over a number of years. The manner in which the principals articulated these two issues indicated their belief in them as critical to any student leadership development (and appointment). Clearly the principals were ensuring that their respective school’s philosophy of student leadership reflected the values of the school (Lavery & Hine, 2012).

## **Recommendations and Conclusion**

From the findings and discussion, it is evident that the eight principals surveyed believe servant leadership holds a prominent place within the student leadership programs at their respective secondary, Catholic schools. On the basis of these findings the authors make three (3) recommendations regarding servant leadership and student leadership within secondary Catholic schools. First, it is recommended that secondary Catholic education authorities actively promote and sustain the notion of servant leadership within student leadership programs. Such promotion may take the form of providing professional development modules for teachers and school leaders in establishing and facilitating student leadership initiatives within Catholic schools. This research has indicated the prominence of servant leadership within student leadership programs, and such programs hold many benefits for students and school communities. Second, the authors recommend to those responsible for student leadership within secondary Catholic schools to explore the potential for service-learning programs to promote leadership activity and develop leadership skills among students. In addition to the confidence, skills, and experiences leadership opportunities afford youth, the Catholic view of leadership encourages participants to ‘look beyond’ themselves and minister to the needs of others through service. Third, it is recommended that principals in secondary Catholic schools examine the focus of the leadership programs in their schools to ascertain what extent the program’s goals align with the charism, mission, or objects of the school. Secondary Catholic schools are in a strong position to foster a servant leadership approach within student leadership programs through the promotion of leadership activities based on serving others in the school community, and to the wider community.

Developing the leadership potential in students is an important responsibility of secondary schools. What form that leadership takes and those ways it is developed are issues worthy of consideration. For Catholic secondary schools, the model of student leadership needs to be based on service and exemplify the notion of servant leadership so clearly articulated and demonstrated by Jesus. Certainly this position was the one advocated by all eight of the Catholic school principals involved in the study. These school leaders plainly saw the importance of their respective schools producing young women and men prepared to lead through serving the school community, and the wider community, in the spirit of Jesus.

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