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Student leadership in the middle years: A matter of concern

Abstract

Traditionally, student leadership has been seen as the prerogative of senior students. Very little research has been conducted on how schools nurture and develop leadership skills in students in the middle years of schooling. This article provides an overview of student leadership in six secondary schools with a particular focus on student leadership opportunities in the middle years. These schools were drawn from the Government, Catholic and Independent sectors in Western Australia. Specifically, the opinions and experiences of either principals or their delegates were sought in order to develop a sense of the importance placed on student leadership in the middle years and the types of leadership opportunities available to students. Initially, the literature is reviewed on student leadership per se and student leadership in the middle years. This review is followed by an outline of the purpose, research question and significance of the research. The research methodology is then explained, providing a summary of participants, the school contexts and methods of data collection and analysis. The subsequent section on results and discussion highlights three themes: the role of teacher leaders, student leadership structures in middle years and the holistic development of middle year students. The article concludes by providing a number of recommendations, in particular, the need to gain a 'student voice' in any understanding of student leadership at the middle school.

Keywords

Adult mentors, inclusivity, leadership skills, middle years, student leadership, youth mentoring

Introduction

Student leadership matters! Schools have always had a fundamental obligation to develop young men and women who are knowledgeable and active learners. However, in the 21st century, schools must also develop confident and creative young people who are energetic and informed citizens with a strong sense of ethical understanding and personal and social capability (Dawkins, 2008). One practical way of promoting such attributes in young people is through school-based student leadership (Lavery & Hine, 2013). While it

is acknowledged that schools do not have sole responsibility for such development, schools are ideally situated to nurture and support the leadership potential of children during their pre-teen and adolescent years. Dempster and Lizzio (2007) identified the issue of the dearth of candidates, throughout society, to take on leadership roles as well as a general decline in 'general civic participation that may contribute to a declining interest in community leadership' (p. 277). This article explores the opinions and experiences of seven teachers actively involved in the promotion of student leadership in the middle years of schooling. Underpinning this research is a belief that student leadership development in the middle years of schooling forms a critical pathway from primary school-based leadership to models of leadership exercised at senior secondary level and beyond.

Review of the literature

Two key themes in the literature on student leadership underpinned this research into ways student leadership in the middle years is promoted in secondary schools. These two themes are student leadership in general and student leadership in the middle years. The literature on student leadership in general focuses predominantly on student leadership in senior secondary years and to a lesser degree in primary schools. Key areas in this literature include what student leaders do, the ways student leaders are supported, as well as benefits and concerns associated with student leadership. In contrast, the manner in which student leadership operates in the middle years is less well understood. Therefore, student leadership in the middle years should be considered in conjunction with an overall understanding of student leadership in general. The literature on middle school leadership focuses on the manner in which age-appropriate opportunities for leadership contribute to the holistic development of student identity and how these opportunities can occur in a range of both formal and informal settings.

Student leadership

There is a strong sense that student leadership should be centred on ministration, namely, civic service (Dugan & Komives, 2007), or servant leadership (Lavery, 2007) or leadership as ministry (Willmetts, 1997) whereby students develop a belief that their talents are to be used for others and the common good (Ryan, 1997). Such an approach to

leadership is well described in the general body of leadership literature (Culver, 2009; Greenleaf, 1977; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005) where its central dynamic is that of nurturing those within an organisation. Furthermore, service forms a key component of transcendental leadership, a leadership approach based on trust, inclusivity and participation (Okomo-Okello, 2011).

Progressively, there has been an appreciation of the value of leadership training and development for elected student leaders (Buscall, Guerin, Macallister, & Robson, 1994; Chapman & Aspin, 2001; Mardon, 1999). Such training often takes the form of a school camp or leadership in-service day. Various commentators (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Gray, 2002; Hart, 1992) have stressed the place and value of an adult mentor working with elected student leaders. In particular, the school principal can have a significant role in the development of student leadership through actively working with student leaders or by sponsoring a leadership-friendly environment for students (Lavery & Hine, 2012). In conjunction with appropriate training and support, it is important that schools provide positive student leadership opportunities and experiences for all students (Hay & Dempster, 2004).

Evidence suggests various benefits for students involved in school-based leadership. That is, student leadership is not without its rewards (Hawkes, 1999). For instance, there are advantages for student leaders working in collaborative activities such as team projects (Gordon, 1994), student councils (Carey, 1994) and student leadership teams (Appleton, 2002). Researchers have also observed that when students are given opportunities to lead, they can play a significant role in various school decision-making processes (Rafferty, 1997); they can make a genuine and significant contribution to the school community (Lavery 1999), and they are able to effect change (Carey, 1994). Further benefits include the development of confidence and self-esteem (Tucker, n.d.), improved leadership skills (Hine, 2013) as well as the opportunity to serve others (McNae, 2011). There is also, what Hawkes (1999) calls, ‘the privilege of being given the gift of control, of influencing the actions and thoughts of others’ (p. 22).

There are certain concerns related to student leadership. In particular, student leadership can sometimes be little more than manipulation, decoration or tokenism (Gordon, 1994; McNae, 2011; Rafferty, 1997) where teachers use student leaders in a contrived manner to promote their own agendas. One might well wonder what form of student leadership such a dishonest approach would encourage? Hawkes (1999, p. 22) warns that society ‘does not want mere managers, it has no need for the “controllosaurus”’. Rather, the challenge for schools is to develop selfless leaders, ‘shepherds who are prepared to lay down their life for their sheep’ (Hawkes, 1999, p. 22).

Swan (2014) raises the concern that despite the prevalence of student leadership programmes in schools, few provide clear instruction about leadership. Arguing the need for schools to actively promote global awareness and develop effective citizens, Swan asserts that there must be a ‘cognitive element’ (p. 43) in overall student leadership programmes as students need to ‘have a great capacity to think deeply about issues and about their own place in the world’ (p. 43). He contends that student leadership programmes must be broader in their scope and incorporate discussions about issues such as discrimination and women’s rights, value contributions from students with disability and consider leadership perspectives from other countries. As Swan points out,

Students should participate in leadership discussions, analysis, and activities that build their future capacity to either lead or choose responsible and effective leaders in the future. If we, as educators, cannot guide students today to become aware, knowledgeable and skilled in leadership concepts, then who will guide them? They may never get another opportunity. (p. 45)

In a similar vein, Archard (2012) notes that leadership can be both taught and developed. However, it is not just about teaching theory but rather the development of skills for leadership across multiple contexts. Arguing, in particular, for the development of leadership in girls, Archard reiterates the powerful role of education in influencing the future life trajectory of students.

Student leadership in the middle years

The middle years is a term that can be used to describe students from the ages of 10 to 15 years and comprises the transition from childhood to adulthood. During these years, a range of significant physical, emotional, cognitive, social and moral changes occur. Adolescents will be shaped by the various life experiences that they encounter throughout these important years. Bowman (2013) states that

Before one can lead others, one first has to lead oneself. Leadership development for middle school students begins with a quest to discover who you are, what you care about, and why you do what you do at pivotal moments in your life. (p. 59)

The quest for 'self-discovery' that occurs for students during the middle years sees schools uniquely placed to assist students in this critical journey. Schools have an important role to play in providing a variety of opportunities that will enable adolescents to come to know themselves as individuals. The successful transition to adulthood very much depends on it. An important question to emerge, therefore, is what type of school environment can facilitate the passage to a self-actualising adult.

The National Middle School Association (NMSA, 1995) in the United States indicates that in order to support the development of self-actualising adults, educational programmes for students in the middle years need to be developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering and equitable. Hence, the school environment for early adolescents must ensure that decisions pertaining to all aspects of student interaction with the school are grounded in the unique nature of the early adolescent. Student leadership opportunities provide a strong foundation for students to develop in each of the areas prescribed by the NMSA. Thus, it may be expected that middle school student leadership would 'look different' to that evidenced in the senior years of both primary and secondary schooling as the needs of the young adolescent are not the same as for younger children and older adolescents.

Freeborn (2000) links the school's 'thinking curriculum' comprising the development of cognitive skills, critical thinking, reasoning and creative thinking to opportunities for student leadership provided for students. Freeborn contends that linking

the academic curriculum with student leadership programmes is a powerful means of developing student excellence. Bowman (2013) points out that students in the middle years hold strong convictions and beliefs about a range of issues and that leadership, for these students, 'is a lens through which to view the world, not a checklist of things to do' (p. 63). He argues that the essence of 21st-century leadership development for adolescents centres much more on being 'in influence' than being 'in control'. Bowman further contends that middle year students need to develop two types of leadership skills. The first is termed 'executive' leadership skills and pertain to both the capacity and power to make the right decision when required. Sadly, it would appear that the students themselves rarely have the opportunity to exercise this type of leadership in their everyday lives at school. It might be surmised that this type of leadership is exercised more at the senior secondary level (Hine, 2013). The second type of leadership is termed 'legislative leadership' and relies more on persuasion, 'political currency, and shared interests to create the conditions for the right decisions to happen' (Collins, 2005, p. 11). Providing more opportunities for students to make authentic decisions within the classroom would be one way for students to develop legislative leadership skills.

In summary, it might be tentatively concluded that opportunities for students in these middle years to develop their leadership skills would assist schools in developing programmes that reflect the goals stated by NMSA. It is apparent that the concept of student leadership in the middle years of schooling focuses more on the development, rather than execution, of executive leadership skills. This observation is in contrast to evidence from the literature which predominantly focuses on the ways senior secondary students exercise leadership, the motivation behind their leadership and the support that they need to exercise their leadership.

Purpose and research question

The underlying purpose for this study into ways middle school student leadership is promoted in secondary schools stemmed from the perceived absence of research evidence in this field. The purpose was twofold. First, it was to provide a snapshot of middle school student leadership structures in six secondary schools. Second, it was to explore those opportunities middle school students might have to exercise leadership. In

the light of the purpose of the research, there was one primary research question: In what ways is student leadership promoted and developed in the middle schools years?

Significance

The significance of this study lies in the potential to add to the body of knowledge on ways student leadership in the middle years is evidenced in secondary schools. Since the mid-1990s, researchers have increasingly explored the place of student leadership in schools. However, this research has focused primarily on senior secondary students (Carey, 1994; Dugan & Komives, 2007; Hine, 2013; McNae, 2011) or, to a lesser degree, on primary school student leadership (Chappell, 2012; Conn, 2014; Myers, 2005). By comparison, the concept of student leadership in the middle school appears under-researched, particularly in Australia (Truss, 2006).

Theoretical perspective

The theoretical perspective for this study involved an interpretive epistemology incorporating a symbolic interactionist lens. Interpretive social science strives to understand the complex world of lived experience from the viewpoint of those who live it. The focus of interpretive inquiry is, therefore, to discover what is meaningful or relevant to people being studied and attempts to gain a feel for their social reality (Neuman, 2006). Within interpretive social science, there are a number of theoretical perspectives that emphasise different elements of human action. One such theoretical perspective, and the one which underscores the approach within this study, is symbolic interactionism. Essential to the notion of symbolic interactionism is the positioning of the researcher in the setting of those being studied, of considering the situation from the viewpoint of 'the actor'. Methodologically, symbolic interactionism directs one to take, to the best of one's ability, the standpoint of those being studied (Crotty, 1998). Consistent with interpretive inquiry and a symbolic interactionist perspective, this study allowed the researchers to examine the lived experience of student leadership in the middle years of schooling from the standpoint of teachers well versed in working with this age group of students.

Methodology

Participants

Seven teachers volunteered to participate in this research. All held senior leadership positions in their respective schools and all were involved in some capacity with their school's student leadership programme. These participants included the following: Principal, Acting Principal, Deputy Principal (Middle School), Heads of Middle School and Head of Student Engagement and Learning.

Context

The context involved six secondary schools, from a range of socio-economic backgrounds within the Perth metropolitan area. A brief outline of these schools included the following:

- School A: A boys school in the Uniting Church tradition established in 1897 and catering for students from Years 1 to 12;
- School B: A co-educational Independent Public school established in 2001 and catering for students from Years 7 to 12;
- School C: A co-educational Independent Public School established in 1978 catering for students from Years 7 to 10;
- School D: A co-educational Independent Public School established in 1967 catering for students from Years 8 to 12;
- School E: A Catholic co-educational school established in 1983 catering for students from Years 7 to 12;
- School F: A Catholic girls school established in 1938 catering for students from Years 5- to 12.

These schools were deliberately chosen to provide maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990) across a wide range of school types – educational sectors (Independent, Government and Catholic), school types (co-educational, boys, girls) and enrolment practices (K-12, Years 1–12; Years 7–10; Years 7–12 and Years 8–12).

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected primarily through six audio-recorded semi-structured interviews between the researchers and a key staff member involved in the middle school at the respective schools. In the case of one school, two staff members contributed to the interview. An interview guide (Appendix 1) was used to frame the discussion. The key focus areas inherent in the guide included the perception of student leadership in general, student leadership structures in the school, the form of student leadership in the middle years and the role of adult teacher leaders (mentors). The interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes. Such exchanges were opportunities for the participants to express their perceptions, insights and opinions of middle year student leadership (Years 7–9 or Years 8–9) in their own language. Field notes were also used to record any salient data as they emerged during the course of the interviews.

Drawing meaning from these kinds of data requires methods of qualitative data analysis and the adoption of a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm (Neuman, 2006) to inform the methodological conduct of the study. This approach places high importance on interpreting and understanding meaningful social interactions (Weber, 1947) and the empathetic understanding of everyday lived experiences, or ‘Verstehen’ (Neuman), from the perspective of those who live those experiences. Content analysis was the particular methodology used to explore the participants’ understandings and experiences of student leadership in the middle years. Content analysis allows the researcher to understand the perspectives of research participants through unwrapping the meaning of the text or their words (Berg, 2007). The researcher thus examines the text for common themes, patterns, symbols, topics and shared mindsets as described by the participants.

The specific format for analysing the data followed that described by Miles and Huberman (1994), that is, data collection, data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. First, the researchers read the interview transcripts. Second, the data were reduced through identifying emerging themes where each researcher selected specific segments of language that emphasised particular themes. Finally, these segments were visually displayed under each theme heading whereby both researchers viewed the

lists and collectively selected appropriate exemplars of each theme. Field notes were referred to where applicable.

Results and discussion

Three key themes emerged from the interviews. These included the role of the teacher leaders (e.g. principal, head of middle school and classroom teachers), student leadership structures (formal and informal) and a focus on the holistic development of middle year students.

Role of teacher leaders

It was evident from participants' comments that staff provided significant support for student leaders in the middle school. Such staff could include homeroom teachers, heads-of-year, teachers responsible for portfolio areas and middle school coordinators. There was an indication in one school that Year 12 student leaders were encouraged to work with middle school student leaders. The importance of adult support for student leadership cannot be overestimated, especially at middle school. Older peers may also have a role to play in supporting middle school student leaders.

The participants were asked to comment on the role of the principal in developing student leadership in the middle years. A number of elements were described. Importantly, each interviewee described the crucial nature of the principal in 'overseeing' structures to support the development of leadership capabilities in middle year students. An ethos of student leadership in the middle years, in particular, could only develop with the backing of the principal. With respect to the need for a whole school approach to student leadership, one participant commented that

I don't see student leadership in the middle school as being formalised. It is formalised in that you have your student council but if you want to do it really well you have to have a whole school culture that looks for and supports and celebrates the strengths the students have.

Having a whole school approach to the development and support of student leadership relied heavily on the imprimatur of the principal. Another participant commented,

If you look at the wider picture of building confident students then you have to do it across different year levels so it is going to look different from year 7 to 12. At year 12 we are preparing them to move onto further study or work and see themselves as an adult and take that responsibility on. In year 7 you are only introducing that as an idea to them.

A concomitant aspect of the principal's role was that of modelling good leadership qualities. Indeed, one participant commented that the principal needs to realise that 'he is the greatest role model on the campus across the school'. Mitra (2005) points out that 'the leadership style of those holding the most power can affect the implementation and success of group activities' (p. 547), so it is unsurprising that participants would refer directly to the key role of the principal in promoting student leadership in the middle years.

Having direct contact with the middle school student leaders was important as this contact provided an avenue for principals to acknowledge student work. Such conversations provided an opportunity for principals to share how they lead from the 'front, middle and behind'. Frequently, student leaders in the primary school years have ongoing and frequent interaction with the senior leadership team (Hine & Lavery, 2015). That students entered secondary school having had leadership opportunities in the primary school presented an opportunity to build on these previously developed skills. One participant commented that 'when kids come into year 7 they have run assemblies, maybe not on the same scale, but they know what is required and we ignore that for years'. In a similar vein, another participant commented that 'we often get feedback (from primary schools) that they send students to us and those kids were doing so many things in primary school and they come into year 7 and we treat them like little kids and we don't see their potential'. There was general recognition that the students in the middle years needed the opportunities to build on leadership qualities that had been developed in primary school in order to 'step up' to the leadership requirements in the senior years.

Participants also commented on the important responsibility of the principal to select the ‘right’ staff to head up the various leadership positions in the middle school. The appointee needed to be someone who could relate to middle year students and identify opportunities to develop leadership qualities across the cohort. Selection of the right person for the position was an example of how the principal sets the standards for all. In summary then, the principal was considered crucial to student leadership in the middle years. One participant noted that their current principal was a strong supporter and that ‘when you haven’t got it you probably don’t notice it but when you have someone who is very influential [in encouraging student leadership in the middle school] you do notice how significant it is’.

Participants believed that expectations in the role of middle school leaders were, in many ways, similar to those of the principal when it came to the development and support of middle school student leadership. One participant was quite specific in noting she needed to ‘have leadership as her goal in conversations with her middle school team and other heads of year’. She saw herself as a mentor to the middle year students and someone with whom the students could discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Similar to the principal, having a presence at school events and other occasions was important as it showed the student leaders that their efforts were valued. Supporting colleagues who had ideas about the provision of leadership opportunities was an important feature of middle school leaders. Furthermore, identifying students with leadership potential and working with teachers to support the development of leadership qualities within these students were mentioned as a particularly important element of a middle school leader’s role.

From the above, it is apparent that the principal and other teacher leaders have a critical role in both encouraging and supporting student leadership in general and, more specifically, student leadership in the middle years. Such findings support literature on student leadership, which highlights the premier role of key adult mentors in the development of leadership dispositions in students (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Gray, 2002; Hart, 1992), especially the principal (Lavery & Hine, 2012).

Student leadership structures (formal and informal)

All seven participants highlighted the value of student leadership within secondary schools. There was a strong sense that while formal leadership positions such as student councils were important, participants believed that student leadership entailed more than simply the elected leaders. Student leadership was considered multifaceted where participants pointed to the significance of informal leadership in the student body. That is, those ‘without the badge’ should also be given opportunities for ‘their voice to be heard’. As one participant noted, student leadership was not simply ‘about anointment or appointment’ of students ‘who show leadership because it comes naturally’. These comments support the notion of Keefe and Andrews (2011) who noted that student leadership is ‘no longer a linear construct that filters down from the school administration to a privileged few’ (p. 21). Rather contemporary notions of student leadership have more democratic overtones with opportunities being made available for students to exhibit leadership qualities in a range of different circumstances.

Each of the schools in the study operated a designated student leadership programme involving students elected to formal leadership positions. In all cases, there was a head boy or girl, or both. It was evident from participants’ comments that Year 12 student leadership was the more visible and overt form of student leadership in each of the schools. When asked to describe their school’s structure of student leadership, participants talked about senior school captains, head boy and head girl, house captains in Year 12, Year 12 prefects and Year 12 ‘portfolios’. The subsequent Year 7–12 student councils or portfolios tended to be senior student driven. The general focus of student leadership tended to be one of to serve, serving others, service or stewardship.

Participants in co-educational schools also commented on the issue of gender balance or gender differences, with concerns raised over the participation of boys. As one participant noted, ‘we do our best to keep the gender balance but it doesn’t always work out that way’. This situation appears to be of particular concern in the middle school. A second participant remarked, ‘there have been real issues getting boys for the middle school positions – sometimes no boys nominate’. This participant went on to question: ‘are we feminizing the (leadership) activities?’ He commented further, ‘boys don’t want

to be seen to be a part of organising something they perceive more attractive to girls'. A third participant proffered, 'Girls tend to be better organised and can appear to be better leaders'. As she pointed out, 'boys tend to have a great idea and then drift. Boys are easily pulled away; it's more fun to kick a footy'.

The structure of middle school leadership varied considerably within the six schools. One school replicated the Year 12 student leadership structure in Year 9 with two middle school captains and a middle school leadership team, all of whom had portfolio positions. These portfolios included sport, liturgy, service, academics, music, media, performing arts and visual arts. A second school rejected this approach. The respective participant stated, 'We have senior school captains and house captains, but we will not go down that path in middle school leadership'. As he explained, 'we have a structured program to give every student the opportunity of being a leader'. Specifically, he noted that leaders are appointed 'in a whole range of roles, but rotate through a semester basis'.

Some schools incorporated their middle school leadership within the overall student leadership structure, where, as one participant observed, 'older students do dominate and this might explain the lack of interest by the younger students'. Other comments included the following: 'leadership is not really obvious in the middle years', 'I see student leadership in the middle school as some- thing that is lacking' and 'we don't want student leadership in the middle years to be seen as a bunch of jobs'. The last comment alludes to the conception of student leadership in the middle years being more than formalised leadership structures. Instead, it could be as simple as 'differentiating the curriculum within the classroom to make an opportunity for someone to succeed instead of being the person who fails all of the time'. These sentiments are in accord with the view of Bowman (2013) who states that

Life in contemporary middle school classrooms and hallways constitutes an unrelenting stream of interpersonal interactions and relationships. Before- and after-school text messages and Facebook posts serve to reinforce students' sense that every moment matters relationally. These ubiquitous social interactions also

serve to reveal both the promise and power of creating vibrant leadership connections in the smallest of everyday, ordinary moments. (p. 60)

The participants in the study commented on the frequency with which leadership opportunities were presented informally in the classroom. Bowman (2013) also points to the 'dialogue in the contemporary classroom' (p. 61) as being a perfect vehicle for students to share the things that matter most to them and to learn from others. Such conversations provide a unique opportunity for students to develop the important leadership skill of 'listen(ing) to others intently, frame others' core concerns, and advance the other person's interests through dialogue' (Bowman, 2013, p. 61). One participant noted that student leadership was about giving 'every kid a chance to lead in some way', so the informal opportunities extant in the middle school classroom for students to develop their leadership skills are important.

The above discussion reinforces the observation that student leadership structures in the middle years operate both formally and informally. Those formal, more overt, structures tend to operate on a hierarchical basis with senior students taking the lead. The informal structures, being more covert, tend to arise organically and provide an opportunity for students who may not necessarily opt to exercise leadership in the formal structure.

Holistic development of middle year students

Participants remarked on the importance of 'growing leaders', both those in leadership positions and within the wider student body. One participant commented that 'the earlier you grow a person the better they will be'. Moreover, it was pointed out that all students should be provided with opportunities 'to be involved as opposed to being a bystander'. Groundwater-Smith (2011) points to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in arguing for student voice to be heard on all matters that affect them. However, the power differential that favours adults to the detriment of students (Mitra, 2005) influences the degree of authenticity imbued in the student voice. Shier (2001) indicates student participation may occur at one of five levels, including (1) children are listened to, (2) children are supported in expressing their views, (3)

children's views are taken into account, (4) children are involved in the decision-making process and (5) children share power and responsibility for decision-making. Shier further contends that at each of these levels, there are three stages of commitment: 'openings', 'opportunities' and 'obligations'. An opening is described as occurring when there is a sense of readiness to participate, but it is only considered an opening because the opportunity for it to happen may not be available. An opportunity occurs when the needs are met (resources, skills and knowledge) for the young person to participate at that level. An obligation exists when the organisation has a specific policy or mode of operation that supports the young person to participate at the level. In line with this premise, it needs to be pointed out that in the current research only school leaders were interviewed. There is a considerable need for the student voice to be considered in discussions about student leadership (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007), and it is the intent of the authors to include student voice in future research on the topic of student leadership in the middle years.

A strong theme to emerge from the discussion with the participants about their role as middle school leaders, and has been alluded to previously, was the notion of student leadership contributing to the growth of the students. One participant commented that student leadership was perhaps more important in the middle years than in other areas of the school. To this end, student leadership was important, but perhaps not as valued in the middle years as much as it needed to be. A number of participants commented on the degree to which they sought the opinions of the student leaders about a range of different issues. One participant remarked that student leadership needed to be 'inclusive rather than exclusive where you just pick the leaders'. As she pointed out,

There's got to be a chance for everybody to shine because what can happen is the same leaders go through from year 7 to year 12. Nobody else gets a chance so they give up. There's got to be lots of opportunity for people to show their leadership in lots of different ways and there's got to be acknowledgement of that.

The following comment from this same participant perhaps best encapsulates the sentiments of the participants with respect to the important role of student leadership in the holistic development of the middle year student:

Leadership in year 7 is about turning them into good citizens, respectful, to have empathy, to be people who have a positive outlook on life . . . Once they start treating people well and are then treated well – that’s what a good leader does – they are someone who looks after people well.

Conclusion and recommendations

The purpose of the research was to gain an insight into the nature of student leadership in the middle years. The participants in the study provided wonderful insights into their own perspectives of student leadership, in the broadest sense, and, more specifically, the type of opportunities that were necessary for students in the middle years. It is clear that student leadership in the middle years is different to that in the senior years, and this is rightly so. While it might be tentatively concluded that leadership in the senior years is quite similar in structure, student leadership in the middle years can vary significantly between schools. In some instances, the contrast is quite stark. For example, in the senior years, leadership opportunities tend to be limited to the senior elected student leaders, whereas, as exemplified in one school in the study, all of the students in the middle years were expected to take on a leadership role. In other schools, there were very limited opportunities for middle year students to exercise formal leadership roles, and where these opportunities existed, the students tended to defer to their senior school counterparts. The question therefore remains: If middle year students are expected to take on substantial leadership positions in their senior years of schooling, then what experiences are required in the middle years? The authors’ first recommendation is that further research be undertaken as to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of middle school student leadership.

The authors also believe that there is need for schools to provide a ‘continuum of opportunities’, commencing in primary school and progressing through the middle years, in order to prepare students for leadership in their final years of schooling and beyond.

These opportunities should be age-appropriate and scaffolded in order that students continually build on their leadership skills. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach to student leadership neglects the unique needs of the students at different age levels. The authors' second recommendation is that further research be conducted to identify important opportunities that students require to develop their leadership skills as they progress through their formal primary, middle school and senior secondary schooling.

A further finding from the research is the important role that key adult school mentors, particularly the principal, play in fostering leadership opportunities for students in the middle years. Unless there is such adult support, these leadership opportunities will not eventuate. Moreover, what is apparent from the research is the informal nature of many of the opportunities that occur for middle year students. Often, they are unplanned, arising inadvertently in the general class-room environment. Aligned to the informal nature of student leadership in the middle years is the sense that such leadership contributes to the overall growth of the individual. The authors' third recommendation is that teachers in the middle years be mindful of the many informal occasions that might arise in which students can exercise leadership. Student leadership in these years is seen as being focused on holistic student development and being inclusive of all students. Hence, adult mentors play a critical role in the development of leadership skills in middle year students. The influence of adults is threefold: adults are role models, mentors and facilitators who provide opportunities for students. The authors' fourth recommendation is that principals ensure appropriate teachers have, as part of their role description, the responsibility for mentoring students in leadership.

This research sought the perspectives of principals and middle school leaders with respect to student leadership in the middle years. Their insights have been valuable in forming a sense of how student leadership in these years is similar to, and different from, that in other phases of schooling. As with other research in the area of student leadership, the voice of students is often lacking. While the participants were fulsome in their accounts, they provided an adult conception of leadership. The authors' fifth and final recommendation is that further research be conducted to explore student conceptions of

leadership in the middle years, especially the type of leadership opportunities that students desire.

Student leadership is important. Moreover, the research has reinforced the critical need to remember students in the middle years. Student leadership in the middle years can occur in a variety of different ways and settings. As one participant commented

You might think of leaders as those who represent the school but what about the kid who turns up every day to (help out with) the school performance, even though they are not very talented. They show absolute resilience in turning up every day and taking on a role and perhaps they are encouraging everybody else . . . They need to know that everything they do is important so that in later life they still need to make a contribution because (life) is all about contributing.

If students are to enter the senior years of schooling, and indeed, adult life beyond school, it is critical that they receive multiple opportunities to develop leadership skills. Such leadership opportunities can equip students with the requisite skills to positively contribute to society.

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Appendix 1

Semi-structured interview questions

1. What does student leadership and student leadership development mean to you?
2. Could you please describe the student leadership structure in your school?
3. What does student leadership look like in the middle years?
4. How does student leadership in the middle years fit within the overall student leadership structure at your school?
5. What are the specific opportunities for the development of leadership skills in your middle year students?
6. What do you see as your role(s) regarding student leadership development in the middle years? (If principal delegate
7. What do you see as your role(s) as principal concerning student leadership in the middle years?
8. How important do you perceive student leadership in the middle years to be within a secondary school?
9. 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 in the middle years?
10. Are there other issues you would like to discuss pertinent to student leadership in the middle years?