

2017

Student perspectives of a leadership program: Benefits and shortcomings

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This article was originally published as:

Hine, G. (2017). Student perspectives of a leadership program: Benefits and shortcomings. *Leading and Managing*, 23 (1), 77-97.

Original article available here:

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This is the author's version of an article published in *Leading and Managing* available online at www.acel.org.au/accel

Hine, G. (2017) Student perspectives of a leadership program: Benefits and shortcomings. *Leading and Managing*, 23(1), 77-97.

Student perspectives of a leadership program: Benefits and shortcomings.

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Abstract

Despite the importance of adolescent leadership development, little research has critically examined how to improve school-based leadership programs. The intention of this research was to explore how one Catholic secondary school developed leadership potential in adolescents, and how such efforts could be improved in the future. Perspectives of elected student leaders from Years 10 - 12 were examined using a longitudinal case study. The primary methods for collecting data included qualitative interviewing, field notes, journalling and document analysis. Based upon the collected data, the researcher inductively conceptualised strengths and shortcomings of the leadership program proffered by the student participants. According to the student leaders, key strengths of the program included having many leadership opportunities available, many elected leaders participating in the program, and working with other student leaders. The most commonly reported shortcomings encompassed certain student leaders abrogating responsibilities, an apparent non-involvement of younger leaders, and the perceived influence of a 'popularity vote' on leadership elections. The findings in this article are a singular presentation of one specific research question within a completed research project. Where previous published work (Hine, 2013) addressed the lived experiences of student leaders, this article examines what student leaders perceived to be the benefits and shortcomings of a school leadership program.

Introduction

Student leadership within secondary schools is a critical issue worth exploring due to its dynamic nature and implications for the future, as well as addressing the paucity of literature associated with this topic (Archard, 2009; Hine, 2013; McNae, 2011). The facilitation and improvement of student leadership programs at secondary school level is important for those involved in the educational process, as leadership experiences contribute positively to student development (Chapman & Aspin, 2001; Myers, 2005), school culture (Freeborn, 2000), and the level of the school's inclusion within a community (Hawkes, 1999). Within the body of literature, authors recommend that school personnel and researchers draw upon student experiences when improving school-based leadership programs (Keeffe & Andrews, 2011; McNae, 2011).

Although many secondary schools have integrated a program of student leadership into their curriculum, an analysis of one functioning program and its participants' perspectives has the potential to provide insight into how schools might refine and optimise such efforts. Thus, the intention of this qualitative case study was to explore how one Catholic secondary school developed leadership potential in adolescents, and to inductively conceptualise how the underlying leadership

program being pursued consciously or implicitly by the school might be improved. This exploration took place by examining (through interviewing, field notes, journaling and document analysis) student leader perspectives concerning their developmental experiences within a leadership program. The researcher expected that elucidating and considering these perspectives would lead to a better understanding of how the school might focus and strengthen its commitment concerning the structured development of its student leaders. The findings in this article address a theme within a completed research project. Previously published work from this project examined what the elected student leaders experienced in terms of leadership opportunities and activities as they participated in the school's leadership program. This article, on the other hand, examines student leaders' perceived benefits and shortcomings of the school's leadership program in practice. While the findings presented in this article can be read in conjunction with the previously published work from this project (Hine, 2013), they represent a *stand-alone* analysis of findings within this domain.

Conceptual Framework

Three theoretical constructs form the conceptual framework underpinning this research, which investigated the need for improvement in a student leadership program at a Catholic secondary school. These theoretical constructs are: student leadership, benefits of student leadership programs, and shortcomings of student leadership programs. First, the literature on student leadership provides insight into how the preparation, promotion and inclusion of student leadership programs positively contribute to school climate and student development. Second, various commentators offer a broad baseline of benefits for students participating in school-based leadership programs. Third, literature specifically focuses on shortcomings associated with the implementation and maintenance of student leadership programs.

Literature Review

Student leadership

Leadership development programs are a vital and inherent aspect of the student experience (Appleton, 2002; Lavery & Neidhart, 2003; McNae, 2011; Wallin, 2003). Fertman and van Linden

(1999) postulated that ‘all middle school and secondary school students have leadership potential’ (p. 11) and the skills critical for effective leadership develop strikingly in adolescence and in young adulthood, including the capacity to understand and interact with others (Gardner, 1987). Consequently, the skills students are able to acquire as a result of opportunities to exercise mentored leadership can be developed in a variety of ways and through a range of situations and experiences (Hine, 2012). For instance, Lavery and Neidhart (2003) advocated a model of inclusive leadership whereby all senior students have a legitimate role in exercising leadership. These authors suggested 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. In a similar sense, Appleton (2002) discussed the outcomes of an action research project that sought to ‘promote leadership with the senior students by working with them to create roles within the school community which give them opportunities to make a positive difference’ (p. 19). After a term, the researcher noted many positive responses from the student leaders. Leaders expressed enjoyment at being selected, remained engaged and interested for the duration of the term, confirmed their positive feelings about being involved in the program, and appreciated having the opportunity to be involved in and being seen to be involved in a worthwhile program for the student community (Appleton, 2002).

Benefits of student leadership programs

School-based leadership development programs are beneficial to students’ personal growth (Komives et al., 2005; Neumann, Dempster & Skinner, 2009; Wallin, 2003), school culture (Hawkes, 1999; Lineburg & Gearheart, 2008; McNae, 2011), and strengthening the connection between school and wider community (Lavery & Hine, 2013; Wallin, 2003). Komives et al. (2005) postulated university student involvement in leadership roles contributed to the development of a leadership identity. After examining student leaders’ testimonies regarding leadership views, self-

development perceptions, and developmental influences, these commentators asserted that particular dimensions of personal development changed after assuming a leadership role. Those dimensions where students experienced growth were conceptualised as a 'deepening self-awareness, building self-confidence, establishing interpersonal efficacy, applying new skills and expanding motivations' (Komives et al., 2005, p. 599). Additionally, the students involved in the study described their shifting leadership identity from a hierarchical and leader-centric view, to one that engaged with leadership as a collaborative, relational process.

Following their research into the impact of positional leadership on school captains, Neumann, Dempster and Skinner (2009) commented that a newly appointed student leader can 'expect to experience a change in his or her relationships with others as well as an impact on personal well-being' (p. 12). Additionally, in fulfilling the expectations of the position, school captains are likely to gain a better understanding of themselves, a higher level of confidence, and an increased capacity to manage and organise their own lives. They are also likely to develop processes and skills useful in their learning, and develop a deeper sense of maturity (Neumann, Dempster & Skinner, 2009). Wallin (2003) examined the extent to which student leaders felt satisfied with their level of involvement in leadership positions and decision making. In this research, students reported overwhelmingly that involvement in leadership opportunities assisted in the development of social (e.g. goal setting, planning, evaluating), interpersonal and communication skills. Such involvement was perceived to motivate students, as the leadership program encouraged initiative, imagination and creativity. In addition, student testimony highlighted that the collaborative nature of the leadership program was instrumental in their perceived self-development. Collaborative involvement developed 'atmospheres of mutual trust, toleration, and respect as students worked towards common goals' (Wallin, 2003, p. 68), and consequently students shared that self-concepts improved with increased involvement and decision making. At the same time student leaders stated that their sense of independence, responsibility and maturity were heightened when they established and accomplished their own goals.

Lineburg and Gearheart (2008) conjectured that both school climate and trust flourish when students are involved in genuine school leadership tasks. They asserted four central reasons for involving students in the leadership process. First, such involvement creates pride in the school because ‘the students feel they have a genuine stake in it, and the decisions that directly affect them’ (p. 2). Second, involving student leaders provides adults with invaluable insights into the dynamics of the school. Third, when students are given leadership roles, they become positive role models, especially for the younger students. Finally, student leadership creates ‘an atmosphere of students caring about the greater good of the school and the community as a whole’ (p. 2). This final reason was echoed by McNae (2011), who stated that student leaders indicate a disposition to serve others and show leadership for the good of other people. Additionally, students view leadership as ‘fulfilling a bestowed role to serve other people ... it provided the opportunity to serve or give something back to the school’ (p. 42).

Hawkes (1999) underscored the fact that schools need leadership from the students because they ‘have the capacity to influence student values, attitudes and behaviours with an effectiveness that school principals can only dream about’ (p. 21). He argued that effective school leaders will ‘walk the talk,’ and will personify the values they wish to encourage in others. Furthermore, student leaders ‘will not necessarily seek popularity, but they will seek respect, not so much respect for the position ... but rather respect for the person, a respect which is gained through boldness, courage, consistency, empathy, energy and service’ (p. 23). Lavery and Hine (2013) examined the role of eight Catholic secondary school principals regarding student leadership development programs. All principals indicated unanimously that student leadership programs are an integral component of their schools, functioning primarily for students to (i) develop as leaders and as people, and (ii) for students to exercise their leadership in a spirit of service. Other program goals mentioned by the principals included: broadening student leaders’ perspectives of life, emphasising the need for good role models (leaders) within the community, and underscoring the model of servant leadership through service to others. Principals also highlighted that student leadership per se is a vital

component of school identity and culture, and emphasised that leadership programs should be available to all students. Collectively, these authors' comments point to the facilitation of student leadership opportunities contributing positively to the person, school, and wider community.

Shortcomings

Commentators have drawn attention to various shortcomings associated with student leadership programs. These shortcomings include student leader disengagement (Gordon, 1994; Gray, 2002; Hine, 2012; Johnson, 2005) and a lack of support or understanding (Johnson, 2005; Wallin, 2003; Willmet, 1997) from staff. Johnson (2005) asserted that student leader disengagement can arise from voting and election processes that may threaten younger candidates for leadership, perceived popularity contests, or leaders elected predominantly by staff in a manner contradictory to the espoused focus of the leadership program itself. Student leader disengagement may also stem from participation in leadership activities being reduced to little more than manipulation, decoration, or tokenism (Gordon, 1994; Gray, 2002; Hart, 1992). To amplify, Hart (1992) questioned the meaning of student participation, and used a ladder metaphor to propose eight levels of young people's involvement in activities. The first three categories (viz. manipulation, decoration and tokenism) suggest no demonstrable level of student participation – and at the same time, Hart indicated that this is the way students oftentimes engage in leadership activities. Gordon (1994) warned how student leaders can be co-opted patronisingly into a system where they become willing co-operators with decisions others make. Gray (2002) drew the danger of trivialisation whereby having student leadership 'in name only' can lead to student distrust, disrespect, and a subsequent decline in student interest.

A lack of support and understanding from staff can also have a deleterious effect on the success of student leadership programs (Johnson, 2005; Wallin, 2003; Willmet, 1997). This sentiment is echoed by Lavery (2006) who contended that 'if there is one reason student leadership fails, it is due largely to [a] lack of staff backing' (p. 28). For instance, Johnson (2005) found that student participation in the Student Representative Council (SRC) was negatively affected by a lack

of teacher support. To illustrate, she noted that staff had ‘little connection with the SRC other than sending them to weekly meetings [and] several staff complained about the involvement of students during class time because they were “missing out on learning”’ (p. 4). Willmet (1997) asserted that staff commonly misunderstand the duty of student leaders as to perform supervisory roles, including ‘school canteen supervision; observance and reporting of behaviour on public transport; and, supervising groups of students for study or in the school grounds’ (p. 26). In a similar vein, Hawkes (1999) summarised how schools often confuse student leadership with performing ‘menial administrative tasks on behalf of the school’ (p. 241). Lavery (2006) aligns these misunderstandings as schools focusing their efforts on management rather than leadership. Additionally, Wallin (2003) stated that students reported a reluctance to engage in leadership tasks and to ‘learn leadership skills’ (p. 70) when staff members were unwilling to provide direction and opportunity. In particular, students expressed that formalised training in communication skills would be beneficial to their development – as well as to the leadership program overall – in an attempt to deal effectively with the perceived division between teachers and students (Wallin, 2003). To counter staff misunderstandings, Freeborn (2000) stressed the need for all staff members to become directly responsible for student leadership development initiatives, and to remain fully committed to these efforts in the spirit of collaboration with other staff members and parents.

Research Question

The specific research question that guided the focus of this research was:

What do the elected student leaders perceive to be the benefits or shortcomings of the school’s leadership program in practice?

This question contained several sub-questions that were developed to suit the participant grouping being investigated. These sub-questions were:

- . i) What do the elected student leaders perceive to be the benefits emanating from their participation in the leadership program?
- . ii) What do the elected student leaders perceive to be the shortcomings (if any) of the way the school is currently approaching student leadership development?

- . iii) In what ways (if any) do the elected student leaders believe the school should modify its approaches to student leadership for the benefit both of the participants and the institution?

Previously published work addressed what the elected student leaders experienced in terms of leadership opportunities and activities as they participated in the school's leadership program. This article focuses on the student leaders' perceived benefits and shortcomings of a leadership program, and represents a fresh analysis of a different data set within the same project. The semi-structured interview schedule used by the researcher with the research participants has been included as Appendix A.

Context for Research

This qualitative research project was conducted at a Catholic secondary school in metropolitan Perth, Western Australia. The school is a coeducational institution comprised of approximately 800 students (from Years 8 - 12) and 100 teaching and non-teaching staff. This school was purposively selected as a research site to investigate student leadership development for two chief reasons. First, the school has a well-established student leadership development program in operation. Second, a considerable amount of time and effort is spent perennially in involving all students within this program, and in refining periodically the program itself. Since its inception in 1990, the school has exercised a vertical House system as the main component of the Pastoral Care program. The vertical House system requires all enrolled students to report to a designated Pastoral Care Group every morning for 20 minutes, where administrative items (e.g. attendance, notices) and House matters (upcoming events, relationship-building exercises) are managed. Each Pastoral Care Group is comprised of approximately 20 students (from Years 8 -12). There are six Pastoral Care groups within each of the six Houses; thus, the school is comprised of 36 Pastoral Care Groups. The six Houses themselves are named after a patron or patroness, and each House has a House Coordinator, six House teachers, ten ancillary staff (teaching and non-teaching), and approximately 130 students.

Student Leadership at the School

Each year, all students in Years 8 to 11 are encouraged to self-nominate for election by their peers

to a leadership position in their Houses. From the nominees, each House elect an Arts Leader, a Sports Leader, and a Ministry Leader for each of the years from Year 8 to Year 11, generating a total of 12 elected leaders for each House. Across the six Houses, the elections thus produce a total of 72 elected student leaders for Years 8 to 11 (see Table 1). Those who self-nominated for these Year-level positions are required to prepare and deliver a speech in front of their Year-level peers prior to the election date, at which time these peers vote for their preferred arts, sports, and ministry candidates. Appointment to the positions is essentially by popular vote among their respective Year peers, although all positions are subject ultimately to approval by the House Coordinator and the House teachers. Tenure in all positions is for the year of election only, but students are free to nominate for leadership again in any subsequent year. Neither gender nor prior experience in an elected leadership position has any bearing on a student's eligibility for election to a leadership position in any year.

All Year 12 students in each House are invited to self-nominate for House Leader positions in arts, sports, and ministry, and overall House Captain, generating a total of 24 leadership positions across the six Houses. Those who choose to self-nominate for a position within their House are required to prepare and deliver a speech in front of their entire House before the annual election date, at which point the students of that House vote for their House's preferred arts, sports, and ministry leaders, and their overall House Captain. After these elections, overall School Captains for arts, sports, and ministry are determined by the six newly elected House Leaders in those respective disciplines. The three elected School Captains for arts, sports, and ministry are expected to exercise dual roles as School Captains and House Leaders for their disciplines. Additionally, among the 24 elected Year 12 leaders, staff vote to determine the Head Boy and Head Girl for the year. The Head Boy and Head Girl are thus each expected to represent both their House (in their elected House positions) and the school as a whole. These Year 12 student leadership positions are displayed in Table 2.

TABLE 1: POSITIONS FOR YEARS 8–11 STUDENT LEADERS WITHIN HOUSES

Each House	Arts	Sports	Ministry	Totals
Year 8	Arts Representative	Sports Representative	Ministry Representative	3
Year 9	Arts Representative	Sports Representative	Ministry Representative	3
Year 10	Arts Representative	Sports Representative	Ministry Representative	3
Year 11	Arts Representative	Sports Representative	Ministry Representative	3
Positions (each House)	4	4	4	12
Positions (all Houses)	24	24	24	72

TABLE 2: POSITIONS FOR YEAR 12 STUDENT LEADERS WITHIN THE COLLEGE

	Arts Leader	Sports Leader	Ministry Leader	House Captain	Totals
Each House	1	1	1	1	4
Across all Houses	6	6	6	6	24
College Captains	1	1	1		3

Implications for Longitudinal Research

With some new school leaders being elected in the study cohort's second year (as the group progressed to Year 11), and with the inclusion of an additional leader (the overall House Captain) in Year 12, there was thus an opportunity to consider the impact of the program on (a) any of the original cohort who had left the program after one or two years, and (b) any new student leaders who had been elected to the cohort in Years 11 or 12. It was interesting to observe whether 'experience in the program' appeared to have had any impact on the nature and extent of the students' development of leadership ability and behaviours, or on their self-perceptions of their leadership development. Although a program of student leadership existed at this school, it must be noted that no formal documentation explicitly stating the rationale or structure of this program had

been drafted. However, House Coordinators individually established the criteria required for potential leadership positions, emphasising certain skills, responsibilities, and duties as desired prerequisites.

Methodology

Data Collection Methods

The study relied principally on recorded exchanges between the researcher and the participants through focus group discussions. Such exchanges were opportunities for the participants to express their perceptions, opinions, and the ‘lived experience’ of student leadership in their own language. Drawing meaning from this kind of data required methods of qualitative data analysis, and the adoption of a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm (Neuman, 2011) to inform the methodological conduct of the study. Furthermore, and consistent with the theoretical foundations of interpretive social science, symbolic interactionism (Berg, 2007) was chosen as the interpretive “lens” for the study. Pivotal to the notion of symbolic interactionism is the placing of oneself in the setting of the other, and to consider situations from the point of view of those being studied (Crotty, 1998). Then, in turn, the researcher sought to validly interpret and ‘uncover’ the personal meanings conferred upon student leadership experiences by the main participants of the study.

A number of methods for investigating the concept of student leadership development were available to the researcher. A qualitative, longitudinal case study was chosen to answer the specific research questions and acted as the orchestrating perspective of the research. A longitudinal study was the most appropriate selection, as it maximised the opportunity for the researcher to track, report, and compare findings over the three-year period and to gain insight into any developmental changes within the student leaders with regard to their leadership capacity. It was expected that the data gathered in this way would be more convincing than that which might emerge from a one-year “snapshot” (Rose, 1991, p. 194) examination or a cross-section analysis. Additionally, focusing on a single case in this way allowed the researcher – who was a House Coordinator at the school

during the data collection - to investigate the central issue of student leadership at considerable depth (Payne & Payne, 2004), and to gather data that would help to ultimately produce a thickly descriptive account of the issues of concern (Stringer, 2008). Qualitative case studies involve researchers spending considerable amounts of time on site, personally engaging in activities and operations of the case, reflecting, and revising descriptions and meanings of occurrences (Stake, 2007).

Most of the data for this study were collected through qualitative interviews. The researcher made a deliberate effort to maintain self-discipline in the way the research was conducted, and picked the methods of field notes and reflective journaling to serve this effort. Researcher-generated field notes were chosen to supplement the typed transcriptions of the recorded interviews. The researcher employed journaling as an ongoing and reflective method for compiling the study's data and procedures. A document search was conducted of available school records to generate insight and background information regarding the school's student leadership program and its current philosophical underpinnings.

For the study, trustworthiness was established through deliberate, prior field testing of the data collection instruments, the researcher's gaining of experience and expertise in conducting interviews, and the researcher's consistent attention to the four characteristics stressed by Guba (1981); namely, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Specifically, all data collection instruments for this study were field tested and validated prior to their use in formal data collection. The interview questions were administered to a past principal of a Catholic secondary school, a past Head Boy and Head Girl of the school, and the elected Year 10 student leaders within the researcher's House Group. Following the transcription of each interview, all research participants were engaged in the member-checking process by reviewing their interview transcripts and returning them with any corrections, deletions, or amplifications. Additionally, multiple methods were used across the three years of data collection to "corroborate, elaborate, or illuminate the research problem and its outcomes" (Stringer, 2008, p. 49). The researcher collected detailed,

descriptive data that could permit comparison of a given context to other possible contexts in which transferability might be considered (Guba, 1981). To enhance the possibility of transferability, the researcher developed detailed descriptions of the context so that others could make judgments about fittingness with other possible contexts.

Student participants

The researcher interviewed the entire cohort of elected student leaders each year (from 2007 to 2009) with the exception of certain students. This interviewing was conducted flexibly and repeatedly over time to address the purpose of this study and to maintain the longitudinal character of the research. Although 18 students were elected to positions of leadership in Years 10 and 11, there was a perceived power differential between the researcher and three of the student leaders. This power differential existed due to the researcher’s position as a House Coordinator at the school, and data for this study were not collected from the student leaders he coordinated. In 2009, the school leadership cohort expanded from 18 students to 24 students. As noted previously, this expansion was due to an additional position of House Captain being added to each of the six Houses. Acknowledging the potential conflict of interest with participants, the researcher therefore interviewed 20 Year 12 students in 2009.

Each year, the researcher conducted focus group interviews with elected student leaders. Focus groups consisted of three, four, or five participants, and the groupings were arranged according to cohort. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The cohorts of elected leaders are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3: COHORTS OF ELECTED LEADERS 2007 - 2009

Leadership Cohort	Sub-Cohort	Number of Participants
Cohort A 2007	A: Elected Year 10 Leaders assuming formal leadership responsibilities	15

Leadership Cohort	Sub-Cohort	Number of Participants
Cohort B 2008	B1: Elected Year 11 Leaders assuming formal leadership responsibilities	10
	B2: Elected Year 11 Leaders re-elected after previous experience as Year 10 Leaders	5
Cohort C 2009	C1: Elected Year 12 Leaders assuming formal leadership responsibilities	6
	C2: Elected Year 12 Leaders re-elected after leadership experience as Year 10 Leaders only	5
	C3: Elected Year 12 Leaders re-elected after previous experience as Leaders in Year 11 only	6
	C4: Elected Year 12 Leaders re-elected after previous experience as Leaders in Year 10 and Year 11	3

Data Analysis

Data from the various interview transcripts, field notes, and the researcher’s reflective journal were analysed and explored for common themes. When analysing the collected data, this researcher adhered to the framework and guidelines offered by Miles and Huberman (1994). This framework assisted the researcher in inductively conceptualising the strengths and shortcomings of a student leadership program being pursued consciously or implicitly by the school. The framework itself is comprised of three main components: data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions. As data were collected, the researcher employed a continual process of coding, memoing, and developing propositions. Codes, as Miles and Huberman (1994) have explained, “are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled

during a study” (p. 56). These explanations were formalised according to research participant grouping, namely: *2007 Participants*, *2008 Participants*, and *2009 Participants*. For this project, the researcher generated propositions about connected sets of statements regarding student leadership from all participants, reflected on the findings, and drew conclusions about the functioning student leadership program from the study.

Findings

During each year of data collection (2007 — 2009) the cohort of elected student leaders (A, B, C) identified a range of perceived benefits and shortcomings of the leadership program they had experienced. These key findings for each year of data collection are presented now, together with a longitudinal presentation of findings. The findings in this paper comprise a singular presentation of one specific research question from the research project. While these findings can be read in conjunction with previously published work from this project, they represent a *stand-alone* analysis of findings within the domain of student leaders’ perceived benefits and shortcomings of a school’s leadership program.

Findings from the 2007 interviews - Cohort A

Benefits

Almost half of Leadership Cohort A (7 out of 15) felt that a benefit of the current leadership program was being given the opportunity to work with other student leaders. Such work was usually described as preparing for and participating in House events, and discussing how to perform specific leadership duties. In particular, one student commented on how having multiple leaders in each year level was advantageous to the elected leaders themselves, as the collaboration between students assisted in the planning and completion of set tasks. Another student affirmed this statement, noting that “there's always someone [for you] to rely on, and especially if you need help you've got someone else there for you.” Other students commented on how working with other leaders helped facilitate the sharing of new ideas and opinions amongst individuals, which in turn led to an appreciation of alternative perspectives.

According to some students (5 out of 15), a benefit of being involved in the School's leadership program was the opportunity to work with key staff members. These staff were identified as the Principal, Deputy Principal for Pastoral Care, House Coordinators and House Teachers. One student shared how working so closely with a House Coordinator for a period of time helped to establish a relationship of mutual trust. Specifically, this student spoke openly of how she and her fellow Year 10 leaders could:

Go to the House Coordinator and say, 'Look, there's (sic) these Year 8s who are having problems with bullying at the moment in [our House]; that's what we know and what we've heard...we tell her so she knows about it herself and ask if we can help out.

Similarly, other student leaders conveyed how they found the key staff members to be approachable, easy to relate to, and fun to work with. Instances where student leaders and staff would work together included House and School events, specifically within the areas of Arts, Sports and Ministry.

TABLE 4: FINDINGS FROM THE 2007 INTERVIEWS

Perceived Benefits	Perceived Shortcomings
Working with Other Leaders	Popularity Contest
Working with Staff	Leaders Abrogating Responsibilities
Many Opportunities Available	More Time Needed with Staff
Leaders are Accessible	No Shortcomings

Shortcomings

A majority of students (8 out of 15) noted that the method employed by the School to elect student leaders was a perceived shortcoming. One student criticised the current system as being influenced by a 'popularity vote,' asserting that some student leaders are elected more because of their popularity than their capacity for leadership. A fellow student echoed this claim, stating:

It's really not fair; it's supposed to be a democracy where everybody's meant to get their say, but sometimes that doesn't happen. [For example], the minority groups don't get the people [elected] that they want [as leaders].

A third student also expressed disappointment at the prevalence of this phenomenon, and offered insight as to why it might occur. She shared that being elected on popularity:

Happens more in Year 8 and 9, but when you're older if you don't want to go for it you just don't [nominate yourself]. It happens in Year 8 especially, because the only people who get chosen are those who got voted for in primary school or who are popular.

Those students who offered a similar response all agreed that the 'popularity' vote seemed to occur within the younger year groups (i.e. Years 8 & 9), and that the outcome of such an election was counter-productive towards the School's efforts in student leadership development.

A similar number of Year 10 students (8 out of 15) asserted that student leaders who did not take leadership responsibilities seriously was another perceived shortcoming of the functioning program. For example, one student expressed annoyance at some elected leaders, who, in his opinion did not regularly show up to organised House meetings. This sentiment was echoed by another participant who articulated:

Some people just slide through without doing much at all, or without leaving such an impression that they could. Maybe it's because they're too shy, or lazy, or not committed enough.

This student postulated that although these elected leaders were capable of undertaking responsibilities, such an uncommitted approach frustrated the efforts of fellow student leaders who took their roles seriously. Additionally, all students who commented on this matter agreed that the actions of those who did not take leadership responsibilities seriously reflected badly on their House, and ultimately, the School's efforts at student leadership development.

Findings from the 2008 interviews

Benefits

According to Cohorts B1 and B2, the most beneficial aspect of the School's student leadership program was the provision for many leadership opportunities made available to the student body (7

out of 15). For instance, one student (Cohort B1) explained that because of the program's structure, students from all year levels were able to apply for a leadership position each year. Moreover, this comment received amplification from a student (Cohort B2) who lauded this aspect of the School's program, in that efforts were made to:

Give other kids a chance to have a go. So maybe if they run for Arts [leader] and they get it but they're new to Arts and find it isn't their thing, maybe the next year they go for Sport [leader] and they find out that they like it, so the year after that they can nominate for Sport. You know they'll do a good job because they've had the experience back in the years beforehand.

Another student (Cohort B2) drew attention to the manner in which elected leaders worked with other students, specifically those who had not been formally elected to a leadership position. He explained that student leaders were always working on a project for the House or School, and frequently required assistance from other students to complete such tasks. Aside from the extra assistance from non-elected leaders, this help was seen to be a favourable, introductory experience into everyday life as an elected leader.

A few Year 11 student leaders (4 out of 15) claimed that a benefit of the functioning leadership program was the opportunity for students to learn valuable leadership skills. According to these students, this learning took place formally during Leadership Development Days which appear on the School calendar, and informally from key staff members and fellow students. Some of these events were identified by the students as the Year 10 Leadership Day, Peer Support training, and the Year 12 Leadership Camp. One student leader (Cohort B2) claimed that such opportunities were seen to be beneficial “because they help the students find out what their strengths and shortcomings are, and then [students] can start to build on their weaknesses.” Another student (Cohort B1) described the acquisition of leadership skills as a process that is directly proportional to time, in that:

You can start [learning leadership] when you're in Year 8, and you can develop leadership [skills] over the years, and as you go up you're ready for Year 12 leadership.

This comment drew support from another student (Cohort B1) who believed that:

If you just train in Year 12 to be a leader, you're not going to know how to do it as [well as] if you've learnt throughout the years. Mostly, the leaders are leaders throughout, and if they're not a leader they just learn from the other leaders.

Some of the skills learnt during planned leadership events were listed by the participants as: public speaking, managing a group of peers, communicating well with others, and learning how to interact with younger students.

TABLE 5: FINDINGS FROM THE 2008 INTERVIEWS

Perceived Benefits	Perceived Shortcomings
Many Opportunities Available	Younger Leaders Not Involved
Leadership is Learnt	Leaders Not Sharing Responsibilities
Working with Other Student Leaders	Leaders Abrogating Responsibilities
Leaders Voted in Carefully	Popularity Contest

Shortcomings

Students in Cohort B elucidated several shortcomings of the existing student leadership program (see Table 5). Most notably, the area for improvement focused upon the apparent non-involvement of the younger elected leaders in leadership activities and events. A majority of Year 11 students (9 out of 15) felt that the Year 8 and Year 9 student leaders did not have sufficient opportunities to exercise their leadership roles properly. A participant (Cohort B2) of the study compared the current cohort of lower school leaders to her experience several years earlier:

I remember when I was a leader in Year 8 and 9; I didn't really have a chance to lead anything or run anything, so I really just had a badge. I hardly did anything at all.

This statement was supported by another student (Cohort B2), who shared some insight from a conversation he had with an elected Year 8 leader. When asked if leadership was coveted for the subsequent year, the younger leader declined, explaining that “you just don't do anything.” In addition to voicing concerns about this aspect of the program, students offered some suggestions as

to how the present situation could be ameliorated. To varying degrees, all of those suggestions indicated that giving the younger leaders increased responsibility at the School.

Findings from the 2009 interviews

Benefits

A number of Year 12 leaders (6 out of 20) felt that having many elected student leaders at the School was a benefit of the program. For instance, a student (Cohort C1) shared how the structure of the School's program allowed for many leaders to be elected, and then compared this arrangement to another educational context. Specifically, she stated:

A girl I work with was telling me that her school only has School leaders, or [who the School would call] the Executive, which is five positions, and I explained [our program] to her how we have ours [arranged].

After making the assertion, this student concluded that involving more student leaders at a House level was of greater benefit to the individual and the School. Other students held a similar view, and shared some of the benefits as giving more individuals the opportunity to become involved, develop leadership skills, and contribute to their House in a meaningful way.

In a similar vein to Cohorts A and B, a few elected Year 12 leaders in 2009 (4 out of 20) felt that a benefit of the program was being afforded the opportunity to work with other student leaders. One student (Cohort C2) shared how working with fellow Year 12 student leaders at both a House and School level was a gratifying experience, due to the collaborative efforts of those involved. Another student (Cohort C3) agreed with this sentiment, and postulated that working with leaders within one House helped foster a similar sense of personal satisfaction. Both of these Year 12 leaders also stated that working with other student leaders was a positive experience. In turn, this experience was largely due to the collective efforts of the leaders directed towards the improvement of life at the School.

TABLE 6: FINDINGS FROM THE 2009 INTERVIEWS

Perceived Benefits

Perceived Shortcomings

Many Elected Leaders	Poor Understanding of Responsibilities
Working with Other Student Leaders	Younger Leaders Not Involved
Many Opportunities Available	Leaders Not Sharing Responsibilities
Peer Support Leaders	Leaders Abrogating Responsibilities

Shortcomings

The students believed that leaders who lacked a sound understanding of the roles and responsibilities of Year 12 leaders comprised a shortcoming in the School's leadership program.

One participant (Cohort C4) suggested that students elected into a position of Upper School leadership without prior experience in such a role may find fulfilling leadership duties difficult.

This comment received support from another student (Cohort C4) who admitted that “with the initial step into Year 12 leadership [the added responsibilities] seem massive compared to Year 11.”

He continued to state:

There is so much more responsibility that you gain in Year 12, and there are so many more things that you're expected to do. When you're in Year 11 you find that the Year 12s just do the jobs for you, or you have someone else to rely on.

A third student (Cohort C2) affirmed the previous statement, and added that those who accepted an Executive leadership position in Year 12 further increased their commitment and leadership responsibilities overall. To alleviate the apparent surprise experienced by students new to Upper School leadership, one student (Cohort C4) suggested that Lower School leadership experience become a formalised criterion for the future selection of Year 12 student leaders.

Several Year 12 students (4 out of 20) proposed that younger leaders were not actively involved in the School's program of student leadership. This concern was raised over the apparent disengagement of some of the Year 8 and 9 student leaders on both a House and School level. For example, one student (Cohort C3) admitted that compared to their Upper School contemporaries,

Lower School leaders were not involved in as many leadership tasks, including: attending meetings, speaking at House or School Assemblies, and planning activities and events. A second student (Cohort C2) concurred, and volunteered a suggestion to more fully engage the junior leaders:

You want to keep them going, interested, focused; give them something to do, something to be responsible for, so that they want to continue and come back for leadership next year...it's very important to have Year 8s and Year 9s involved, and if we emphasise that it would make a huge difference.

The students who offered some insight into this phenomenon all agreed that the current program should be revised with respect to how the Year 8 and 9 leaders are involved in specific leadership roles. Moreover, it was unanimously understood that the promotion of leadership at this age level was a vital component of securing the commitment of students at that age level.

Longitudinal findings, 2007-2009

A longitudinal review of the data collected over three years revealed a variety of findings overall, and a degree of consistency in some propositions put forth by the respondents. The benefits of the School's student leadership program receiving frequent mention across the three years of data collection included having both many leadership opportunities available and lots of leaders participating, and being afforded the opportunity to work with other student leaders. Conversely, the shortcomings cited regularly comprised: student leaders not sharing responsibilities, leaders abrogating responsibilities, the apparent non-involvement of the younger leaders, and the perceived influence of a 'popularity vote' on student elections. These data are displayed in Table 7.

The claims that working with other student leaders and being afforded many leadership opportunities as benefits of the functioning program were sustained over all three years of data collection, i.e. from 2007-2009. Another observation mentioned repeatedly by students across time (2007-2008) was that having many elected leaders in any given year was indeed beneficial. Conversely, the notion that certain leaders abrogated leadership responsibilities received was frequently mentioned by students in all cohorts. Other shortcomings to be suggested in more than one year of data collection included certain leaders not sharing responsibilities (2008-2009), a

perceived 'popularity vote' during leadership elections (2007-2008), and the non-involvement of the younger student leaders (2007-2008).

TABLE 7: LONGITUDINAL FINDINGS 2007-2009

Year	Perceived Benefits	Perceived Shortcomings
2007	Working with Other Leaders	Popularity Contest
	Working with Staff	Leaders Abrogating Responsibilities
	Many Opportunities Available	More Time Needed with Staff
	Leaders are Accessible	No shortcomings
2008	Many Opportunities Available	Younger Leaders Not Involved
	Working with Other Student Leaders	Leaders Abrogating Responsibilities
	Many Elected Leaders	Responsibilities Not Taken Seriously
	Leaders Voted in Carefully	Popularity Contest
2009	Many Elected Leaders	Better Understanding of Roles
	Working with Other Student Leaders	Younger Leaders Not Involved
	Many Opportunities Available	Leaders not Sharing Responsibilities
	Peer Support Leaders	Leaders Abrogating Responsibilities

Discussion

Students identified a range of perceived benefits and shortcomings associated with the functioning leadership program at the School. Two benefits receiving frequent mention included working with other student leaders, and having many leadership opportunities available to the student body.

During the data collection process, students elucidated three shortcomings of the functioning leadership program, namely: some elected students abrogating leadership roles and responsibilities, the alleged non-involvement of younger elected leaders within the program, and the influence of a

perceived popularity vote on leadership elections. These benefits and shortcomings are now considered together with the current literature.

Benefits

During the data collection period, students across all cohorts consistently commented that working with other student leaders was a benefit of participating in the School's leadership program. In particular, the tasks undertaken by leaders incorporated attending scheduled leadership meetings, preparing for House events, and participating in House events. Testimony from students included claims that working with other students leaders helped facilitate the sharing of new ideas and opinions amongst individuals, which in turn led to an appreciation of alternative perspectives. Several students in Year 10 (Cohort A) discussed how working co-operatively with peers helped foster a sense of inter-dependence within a House leadership cohort. Other students drew attention to the task-related discussions held with other leaders, and commented how these discussions helped them think about and perform leadership duties. More specifically, some students in Year 11 (Cohort B) shared that working with other leaders helped them to 'learn' leadership skills. To illustrate, one student (Cohort B2) communicated that these opportunities were beneficial because they "help the students find out what their strengths and weaknesses are, and then [students] can start to build on their weaknesses." A number of students in Year 12 (Cohort C) expressed how working with peers was a gratifying experience. In particular, this sense of satisfaction was felt largely due to the collaborative and committed efforts of student leaders working collectively towards a common goal. The perceived benefit of working with fellow leaders has strong links to existing literature concerning advantages of student leadership. To summarise these student perspectives of the leadership program at the School, co-operative work with other leaders facilitates the discovery of leadership qualities within students (Komives et al., 2005; Neumann, Dempster & Skinner, 2009), and engenders a sense of personal pride (Lineburg & Gearheart, 2008), empowerment, responsibility, and mutual respect (Lavery, 2007). These student perspectives

suggest that assuming a leadership role at the School is an enjoyable and personally fulfilling experience.

According to the interview records, students repeatedly indicated that a perceived benefit of the School's leadership program was the provision of a range of leadership opportunities for the student body. For instance, testimony from leaders revealed how the program's structure enabled students from all years to apply for a position of leadership each year, with Arts, Sports, and Ministry positions available across every year level within each House. Students also consistently mentioned other leadership roles offered at the School, including: House Captain (Year 12), Peer Support (Year 11) and Student Executive (Year 12). Several students listed advantages they believed were the result of the School's effort to offer such a broad range of leadership positions. These advantages included: giving more students the opportunity to become involved and 'experience' leadership, to acquire and develop leadership skills, and to contribute to the House and School in a meaningful way. Researcher field notes and reflective journaling recorded that House Coordinators created additional leadership roles (e.g. House Secretary, House Photographer, House Spirit Leader) for students expressing a desire to participate in leadership and contribute to the House. All staff and a majority of students claimed that the School deliberately encouraged all students to exercise leadership; these claims were supported expressly with the motto "You Don't Need a Badge to Be a Leader". The efforts of the School to provide multiple and diverse leadership opportunities for its student body are consistent with extant literature on student leadership programs. Specifically, all students are given the opportunity to become involved in leadership (Fertman & Van Linden, 1999; Karnes & Stephens, 1999; Lavery & Neidhart, 2003), acquire leadership skills (Wallin, 2003; Myers, 2005), and to contribute to the School community (Lineburg & Gearheart, 2008; Lavery & Author, 2013). Such opportunities promote the development of student leadership potential (Wallin, 2003; Gordon, 1994; Neumann, Dempster & Skinner, 2009) within the School.

Shortcomings

Students consistently reported that a shortcoming of the leadership program was the perceived disengagement of some elected leaders. Data revealed that students predominantly described such disengagement as some leaders not undertaking roles and responsibilities seriously. Specifically, students criticised the efforts of disengaged peers who made few or no contributions to House activities, did not attend scheduled House meetings, and acted as a poor role model for other students. For instance, one student (Cohort A) expressed frustration at those few, uncommitted leaders who were capable of undertaking leadership responsibilities, and stated their approach was counterproductive to the collective, positive efforts of fellow students leaders. Furthermore, all students who commented on this issue (2007-2009) agreed unanimously that the actions of those few students who abrogated roles and responsibilities reflected badly on their House, and negatively impacted upon the efforts of leaders demonstrating a committed approach. Researcher field notes supported those comments, and several reflective journal entries suggested that students who demonstrated an uncommitted approach towards leadership undermined the School's efforts at facilitating leadership development.

An analysis of student interview records indicated that a second perceived shortcoming of the leadership program is the apparent non-involvement of younger leaders. To amplify, many students in Cohorts B and C shared how the elected leaders in Years 8 and 9 did not have sufficient opportunities to exercise their leadership roles properly. To illustrate, one student (Cohort B2) recalled where she was elected to a leadership position in Years 8 and 9 and did not have any legitimate leadership opportunities. This sentiment was echoed by many other students in Cohort B. In particular, one student shared insight from a conversation he had with an elected Year 8 leader. When asked if he would apply for leadership in the subsequent year, the younger leader declined, offering "you just don't do anything." In a similar vein, testimony from several students in Cohort C revealed that compared to their Upper School peers, Lower School leaders were not involved in as many leadership tasks including: attending meetings, speaking at House or School assemblies,

and planning activities and events. Those students who provided insight into this perceived shortcoming unanimously agreed that the current program be revised to increase the involvement of Year 8 and 9 leaders in leadership tasks. Moreover, these students expressed that the promotion of leadership during Lower School was vital in securing the interest and commitment of students at that age level. Relevant literature suggests that leadership roles should not restrict students' capacity to be innovative, or to raise issues that are of concern to them (Willmetts, 1997), nor be reduced to decoration or tokenism (Lavery, 2006). Instead, staff responsible for leadership programs are encouraged to create roles that require students to exert influence (Lavery & Author, 2013), and to allocate responsibilities that far exceed those of supervision and passivity (Hawkes, 1999; Willmetts).

A third concern raised by the students involved the election process at the School. Students in Year 10 and Year 11 described the current process as being influenced by a perceived 'popularity contest'; that is, the claim that some leaders become elected more readily because of their popularity amongst peers than their capacity to lead. All students in Cohorts A and B who raised concern over the voting process agreed that the 'popularity contest' tended to occur within Lower School, and that the outcome of such elections was counter-productive towards the School's efforts in leadership development. These views resonate strongly with the extant literature, which warn that popularity contests, leadership cohorts nominated by staff, and certain voting processes may threaten younger candidates for leadership (Johnson, 2005). Interestingly, whilst a number of Cohort B students felt that the voting process was influenced by a popularity vote, an equal number of students within this cohort claimed that leaders are voted in carefully.

Summary of benefits and shortcomings

Students were able to identify a number of perceived benefits and shortcomings associated with the functioning leadership program at the School. Two strengths frequently mentioned included working with other student leaders, and having many leadership opportunities available to the student body. A longitudinal review of excerpts taken from the researcher's reflective journal

suggests that students within all cohorts expressed enjoyment and excitement at the prospect of working collaboratively with other leaders. Additionally, the journal excerpts noted that Year 10 students commented exclusively on the role collaborative work amongst leaders played in the completion of work. However, those students in Year 12 often remarked that engaging in tasks with other leaders was an experience that engendered a sense of community within a House or leadership cohort. Students mentioned three shortcomings of the functioning leadership program, namely: some elected students abrogating leadership roles and responsibilities, the apparent non-involvement of younger elected leaders within the program, and the influence of a perceived popularity vote on leadership elections. A longitudinal perspective illustrated that students in Years 10 and 11 spoke vociferously about the perceived ‘popularity contest’ during leadership elections. Although the opinions offered were concerned predominantly with Lower School leadership elections, each cohort reported that popularity could still influence Upper School elections, albeit to a much lesser degree. Conversations recorded in focus group interviews and field notes with several Year 12 student leaders illuminated this phenomenon further. The Year 12 leaders offered that by the time students reach Upper School, the application process precluded the chance of ‘popular’ students being elected by virtue of their popularity alone. Thus, the rigour of the application process for Year 12 leadership would inevitably dissuade any popularity vote from taking place — particularly with someone who could not assume the role appropriately.

Conclusion

From the overall findings, elected student leaders have identified a variety of benefits, shortcomings and suggestions intended to improve a school-based leadership program. These findings are consistent with themes and concepts found in current literature regarding leadership itself and school-based leadership programs. At the same time this research strengthens the existing gap in literature concerning student leadership development within secondary schools. Specifically, the findings illuminate the pressing need for practitioners to evaluate the successes and shortcomings of a functioning school leadership program, and for these individuals to honestly acknowledge

participant-generated suggestions focused on program improvement. At a school level, it is expected that this research will serve to strengthen the functioning student leadership program at the School, and to help the Pastoral Care team avoid foreseeable problems regarding the planning and facilitation of future leadership activities. More broadly, it is hoped that the methodological approach exercised to investigate the improvement of a student leadership program will be replicated by practitioners responsible for school-based leadership programs. This study may be replicated and developed further by other researchers interested in student leadership development. As this research took place within a Catholic, secondary institution, it would be worthwhile to design a replication study to examine the efforts of other Catholic secondary schools who are similar – demographically speaking – to the School. Much could also be learnt from studies focused on exploring student leadership within secondary schools that are dissimilar to the School’s demography. Based on the key findings of this research, a follow-up study could be designed to determine the effectiveness of actions taken to strengthen the School’s leadership program.

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Appendix - Interview Questions

1. How many years and in what capacity have you been in a leadership position at the School?
2. Why did you nominate yourself to be a leader at the School?
3. What do you think are some of the benefits of being a leader at the School?
4. What are some of the things that the School does well in their approach to student leadership?
5. How could the School improve their approach to student leadership, and what would any changes do to the program?
6. What are some of the things the School does not do well in their approach to student leadership?