Exploring the need for improvement in a student leadership program

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Exploring the Need for Improvement in a Student Leadership Program

Gregory Hine

Abstract

Despite the importance of adolescent leadership development, little research has examined how to improve such programs within a school context. The intention of this article is to explore how one Catholic secondary school developed leadership potential in young adolescents, and how such efforts can be refined and improved in the future. The primary methods for collecting data included focus groups interviews, researcher field notes, and researcher reflective journaling. Based upon these data, the author conceptualised the strengths and shortcomings of the program of leadership being pursued consciously or implicitly by the school, by examining the perspectives held by those students who had been elected to a position of leadership in Year Twelve. Specifically, the elected student leaders asserted strengths of the current program including: opportunities to participate in leadership activities, working with staff and fellow student leaders, and learning important skills. Conversely, students raised several shortcomings: the apparent non-involvement of the younger, elected leaders, a perceived ‘popularity’ contest, and determining a balance between leadership duties and studies. The findings of this research will serve to improve and strengthen the functioning student leadership programs, and to assist professionals closely involved with student leadership programs to avoid foreseeable problems regarding the planning and facilitation of future leadership activities. Additionally, this research highlights the importance of conducting research into student leadership programs for the wider education community.

About the author

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Introduction

Student leadership and student leadership development within Catholic secondary schools is an issue worth investigating due to its dynamic nature, implications for the future and the considerable gap of literature associated with this genre. The preparation and establishment of a student leadership program at secondary school level is important for those involved in the educational process, as leadership experiences contribute positively to student development (Chapman & Aspin, 2001; Hine, 2011; Myers, 2005; Neumann, Dempster, & Skinner, 2009), school culture (Freeborn, 2000; Lineburg & Gearheart, 2008; McNae, 2011) and to the level of the school's inclusion in the community (Hawkes, 1999). Most Catholic secondary schools have integrated a program of student leadership and student leadership development into their curriculum. All secondary school students possess leadership potential (Fertman & Van Linden, 1999), and the skills they 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. Despite the multiple benefits available to students through participating in some form of school-based leadership, there are concerns associated with students assuming a leadership role. These concerns include: a lack of support by staff (Johnson, 2005; Karnes & Stephens, 1999; Lavery, 2006) and parents (Freeborn, 2000), student leader disengagement (Johnson), and a misunderstanding of staff regarding student roles (McNae, 2011; Willmett, 1997). One functioning student leadership program and its participants is explored through the medium of qualitative research, and this exploration may provide considerable insight into how to strengthen efforts concerning student leadership.

Purpose of the Research

The intention of this research was to explore how one Catholic secondary school develops leadership potential in young adolescents, and to identify how improvements could be made to the existing student leadership program. From the research, it was expected that a range of strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for modification concerning this leadership program would be elucidated. It was also expected that the elucidation and consideration of these factors would lead to a better understanding of how the College might focus and further strengthen its commitment concerning the structured development of its student leaders.

Research Questions

Overarching question
How can improvements be made to the student leadership program at the College?

Sub-question
What do the elected student leaders perceive to be the benefits or shortcomings of the College’s leadership and leadership development model in practice?

Refined questions
1. What do the elected student leaders perceive to be the benefits emanating from their participation in the leadership program?
2. What do the elected student leaders perceive to be the shortcomings of the way the College is currently approaching student leadership development?
3. In what ways do the elected student leaders believe the College should modify its approaches to student leadership for the benefit both of the participants and the institution?
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Research Context

The College selected for this research is a co-educational, secondary Catholic school located in the Perth metropolitan area. It caters to the educational needs of approximately 800 students, and pastorally adopts the use of a Vertical House System for all students in Years 8 to 12. The student body of the College is distributed amongst six Pastoral Houses; within each of these Houses are one House Coordinator, six House teachers, ten ancillary staff, and approximately 130 students.

All students at the College are encouraged to nominate themselves for a leadership position during their high school years, regardless of experience in such a role. In each House there are three students from Years 8 to 11 who undertake a position of leadership in either ministry, the arts, or sports for the duration of one academic year. Students who are interested in nominating themselves for such a position must prepare and deliver a speech in front of their year level peers prior to an election date. Students who assume such positions have been voted in by these peers, and have been subsequently approved by the House Coordinator and House teachers. It should be noted that the issue of gender has no bearing on a student’s election to a leadership cohort.

The Year 12 students of each House are offered four leadership positions. These positions are: House Captain for Arts, House Captain for Sports, House Captain for Ministry and overall House Captain. Students who are interested in nominating themselves for such a position must prepare and deliver a speech in front of the entire House prior to an election date. In effect, there are 24 leadership positions offered to the Year 12 students; 6 Ministry Leaders, 6 Arts Leaders, 6 Sports Leaders, and 6 House Captains.

The overall College Captains for the Arts, Sports and Ministry are determined by the newly elected leaders and key staff within those respective disciplines. Additionally, out of the 24 Year 12 student leaders, votes are cast by the staff and students to determine the Head Boy and Head Girl for the subsequent year. The Head Boy and Head Girl are each expected to represent both their House and College in a dual role. The participants in this research project were the four elected Year 12 House Captains from each House, comprising a total of 24 student leaders.

Review of Literature

Student Leadership

The preparation, promotion and inclusion of a student leadership program positively contributes to school culture and student development (Lavery & Neidhart, 2003; Lineburg & Gearheart, 2008; Myers, 2005; Neumann, Dempster & Skinner, 2009). Student leadership programs may be implemented in primary and secondary schools, and vary according to stages of implementation, size of institution and religious affiliation of the institution (Burgess, 2005; Fertman & Van Linden, 1999; Karnes & Stephens, 1999). Such programs offer students the opportunity to experience an administrative role, develop their potential as a leader and make a meaningful contribution to the school community (Archard, 2009; Chapman & Aspin, 2001; Hawkes, 1999; Hine, 2011; McNae, 2011).

Many authors contend that the provision of leadership opportunities is vital to the promotion of student leadership (Appleton, 2002; Hawkes, 1999; Lavery, 2006; Lavery & Neidhart, 2003; McNae, 2011; Lineburg & Gearheart, 2008). Lavery and Neidhart advocated a model of inclusive leadership whereby all senior students have a legitimate role in exercising leadership. These authors suggest that such an inclusive model would seek to involve all Year 12 students in leadership training, not merely the elected leaders. Additionally, Lavery and Neidhart described how to actively involve all Year 12 students in leadership activities, and recommended that these school-based experiences are meaningful to the students and of value to the school community. In a similar sense, Appleton discusses 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. They 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.

Lineburg and Gearheart (2008) conjectured that both school climate and trust flourish when students are involved in genuine school leadership tasks. They argue that there are 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” (Lineburg & Gearheart, 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 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,’ will personify the values they wish to encourage in others. They 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. (Hawkes, p. 23)

These authors’ comments point to the facilitation of student leadership opportunities contributing positively to the person, school, and wider community.

Benefits of student leadership programs

Multiple commentators have affirmed the perceived benefits of student leadership programs (Chapman & Aspin, 2001; Hawkes, 1999; Hine, 2011; Myers, 2005). Chapman and Aspin argued that developing student leadership through specific programs is crucial for promoting social responsibility, community leadership, active citizenship and service leadership. Hawkes underscored the connection between student leadership and school community by stating, “leaders in schools are required to animate their communities, to excite their school and to do the things that are worthy of them” (p. 23). Hine shared how the acquisition and development of certain leadership skills was a key personal outcome for students involved in leadership programs. These skills included: “public speaking, decision-making, organisation, time management, interpersonal communication, collaboration, and conflict resolution strategies” (p. 233). The benefits of students becoming involved with leadership positions in schools are reiterated by Myers, who claimed that such opportunities provide students with “extra skills and confidence that will help them in their later lives … extra opportunities in organisation, facilitation, speaking in public, and working collaboratively with younger students” (p. 29). Additionally, there is the privilege of being given the gift of control, of influencing the actions and thoughts of others (Hawkes, p. 22).

Multiple authors highlight the importance for student leadership development initiatives to exist or be sustained (Freeborn, 2000; Karnes & Stephens, 1999; Neumann, Dempster & Skinner, 2009). Freeborn (2000) posited that such initiatives are integral for a principal’s realisation of a vision for the school. However this vision is articulated, he states, it must be connected to the improvement of student learning outcomes. Additionally, and alongside the academic curriculum, student leadership programs:

provide a powerful connection to positive self-esteem, connection with the school’s history, future role models, and representation of a school’s core business of student growth, from childhood to young adulthood. (Freeborn, p. 18)
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Karnes and Stephens contended that the personal rewards for developing student leadership potential may strongly and positively affect individual achievement in school and life. By drawing attention to the diverse and evolving needs of the future workplace, these writers insist that students need to be exemplary problem solvers, decision-makers and communicators. To address these needs:

The infusion of leadership skills and concepts into the school curriculum at both the elementary and secondary levels will help nurture the development of tomorrow’s future leaders. (Karnes & Stephens, 1999, p. 65)

Following their research into the impact of positional leadership on school captains, Neumann, Dempster and Skinner commented that students newly appointed to such positions 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.

Shortcomings
Several shortcomings are associated with the successful promotion, implementation, and maintenance of student leadership initiatives. Commentators have shared insight into how a lack of support by teachers (Johnson, 2005; Karnes & Stephens, 1999; Lavery, 2006) and parents (Freeborn, 2000), student leader disengagement (Johnson), and misunderstanding of staff regarding student roles (Johnson, 2005; Willmett, 1997) can be counter-productive to student leadership development. To counter these concerns, strategies for improvement are also suggested by these authors.

Johnson (2005) asserts that a lack of teacher support negatively affected the involvement of student participation within roles. In referring to the way staff speak with members of the Student Representative Council (SRC), she noted that staff:

had little connection with the SRC other than sending their class representatives to weekly meetings … several staff complained about the involvement of students during class time because they were ‘missing out on learning’. (2005, p. 4)

Lavery (2006) supports this argument with the contention that “if there is one reason student leadership fails, it is due largely to [a] lack of staff backing” (p. 28). From an instructional viewpoint, Karnes and Stephens (1999) emphasises that the paucity of teacher training for providing instruction in leadership skills to students is also an area of growing concern. They summarised the findings of research thus:

teachers of the gifted, who should be addressing the development of leadership skills within their classrooms, seldom receive training in addressing leadership skills during teacher preparation. (1999, p. 63)

To alleviate the concern related to teacher training, these commentators suggest that teachers can analyse their own instructional styles, and become more sensitive to their own attitudes and values towards leadership. Speaking of the broader school community, Freeborn (2000) stressed the need for student leadership, parent-community leadership and principal leadership to form a strong partnership. He acknowledged the role of parental support as a key component of successful school leadership, and affirmed that:

A positive parent-principal partnership will detect early signs of leadership issues interfacing with academic pursuits, allowing the school captains and principal to monitor roles and responsibilities amongst the leadership team. (2000, p. 19)

These statements reiterate the asserted claim for all staff members to become directly responsible for student leadership development initiatives, and remain fully committed to these efforts in the spirit of collaboration with other staff members and parents.
Other counter-productive efforts focused upon the apparent disengagement of the student leaders themselves. Johnson (2005) indicates that some contributing factors include voting processes that may threaten younger candidates for leadership, perceived popularity contests, or a leadership cohort nominated predominantly by staff as contradictory to the espoused focus on student development. Specifically, she warns, “the process for selecting these students determined the candidates” (p. 4). For those students elected into positions of leadership, a common understanding of staff is that such students are to fulfill a supervisory role (Willmett, 1997) or exert little or no influence in decision-making structures (Johnson). For the former, this understanding can be observed as:

an extension of duties usually allocated to staff members: for example, school canteen supervision; observance and reporting of behaviour on public transport; and, supervising groups of students for study or in the school grounds. (Willmett, p. 26)

Furthermore, some authors warn school leaders need to avoid reducing student leadership to little more than manipulation, decoration or tokenism (Lavery, 2006; McNae, 2011). According to Lavery, such a mindset characterises a school’s leadership focus as placing importance on management rather than leadership. Willmett concedes that although leadership and management are not mutually exclusive, leadership is more concerned with a vision and the motivation of individuals towards reaching goals while management “deals with the specifics, while organising the resources to achieve the goal” (Willmett, p. 26). Regarding the latter, Johnson contends that limiting the input of student representatives restricts the capacity for “students to be innovative and to raise issues that were of importance to them” (p. 4). In direct opposition to this limiting practice, Willmett insists that student leaders not remain passive in their roles, and exhorts staff responsible for student leadership to “engage in the leadership process by insisting on direct involvement with the leaders” (p. 28). Both of these authors advocate the promotion of an inclusive, leadership-focused, student-centred approach to leadership.

Methodology

This study was interpretive in nature, and used multiple qualitative research methods to collect data about a single school and its leadership program. These methods included semi-structured interviewing, focus groups, the use of researcher field notes, and researcher reflective journaling. For the purposes of the study, it was hoped that the entire cohort of 24 Year 12 student leaders would be research participants. However, four students declined the offer to participate. Additionally, a perceived power differential existed between the researcher and four students. Because of this potential risk of power differential, a pilot survey was administered to these participants in one focus group before any other interviews took place. The results from this interview were not included in the findings of the study. In effect, the perspectives of 16 out of a possible 24 Year 12 student leaders were included in the study. These students were involved in four focus groups comprised of four students each. The interrogatives used by the researcher were derived from the refined questions (see Research Questions section). The four interviews were tape-recorded, and field notes were taken by the researcher during each interview. Interview transcription occurred after all interviews had taken place. Subsequently, each participant was offered a transcribed copy of the interview they participated in to check and verify that the conversation was accurately captured. Each copy has since been re-collected for safe storage.

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 project adhered to the framework and guidelines offered by Miles and Huberman (1994). This framework attempts to identify relationships among social phenomena, based on the similarities and differences that link these phenomena. The approach itself is comprised of three main components, including: data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions. These components themselves involve three main operations: coding, memoing, and developing propositions. First, the
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researcher engaged in data reduction, which refers to “the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or transcriptions” (Miles & Huberman, p. 10). In the process of reduction, the researcher summarised information from interview transcripts, field notes, and the reflective journal in meaningful ways such that final conclusions could be drawn or verified. Second, displaying the data involved the researcher extracting these common themes and grouping them according to their similarity or dissimilarity. The final component consisted of analysing these data, drawing conclusions from developed analyses, and verifying the conclusions with the original data set.

Within each of these components, the researcher employed a continual process of coding, memoing and developing propositions. Codes, as Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 56) explain, “are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study.” These codes were attached to the data gathered through interviews, field notes and journal reflections, and were selected from those data based on their meaning. The researcher then used memoing to synthesise coded data together so that they formed a recognisable cluster grounded within one general concept. The memoing process also captured the ongoing thoughts of the researcher as the process of coding took place. Lastly, as a study proceeds, there is a greater need to “formalize and systematize the researcher’s thinking into a coherent set of explanations” (Miles & Huberman, p. 75). For this project, the researcher generated propositions about connected sets of statements, reflected on the findings, and drew conclusions from the study.

Findings

The intention of this research was to explore how one Catholic secondary school developed leadership potential in young adolescents, and to identify how improvements could be made to the existing student leadership program. From the research, it was expected that a range of strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for modification concerning this leadership program would be elucidated. It was also expected that the elucidation and consideration of these factors would lead to a better understanding of how the school might focus and further strengthen its commitment concerning the structured development of its student leaders. An analysis of the gathered data revealed a range of strengths, shortcomings, and recommendations for improvement regarding the extant student leadership program. These shortcomings and recommendations acted as the foundation for the action component of the research. The findings of this study are presented below.

Benefits

A number of benefits were mentioned by the elected Year 12 student leaders. These benefits included: being afforded the opportunities to work with other student leaders, assuming a role of involving students in College activities, being provided authority and responsibility, working with College staff, and learning important leadership skills. All participants in the sample were able to identify at least two strengths of the leadership program.

A majority of student leaders (10 of 16) who participated in focus group interviews believed that being given opportunities to work with other students and assuming the role of involving students in College activities were two key benefits of the current leadership program. Concerning the former benefit, one student stated that a strength of the program was “Being able to get the other students involved, especially if they’re Year 8 students or new students.” Another student echoed this claim, adding “Getting people involved … just involving everybody of different age groups, everyone is involved in curriculum and outside activities.” With reference to the latter benefit, one student acknowledged that “Working together with the teachers and students, working well together, and learning how to cooperate.” This statement received amplification from a fellow leader, who offered:

When I was at another school, we had leaders, but I actually went there for a year and I didn’t know any of the leaders’ names. Here at our school, there’s a lot of intimacy, even between, you know, the Head Boy and a Year 8, and they’ll try to touch base all the time. I like the interaction here.
Three other benefits were mentioned at least once by a number of leaders (7 of 16); these included being given authority and responsibility, being given the opportunity to work with staff members, and learning important leadership skills.

The descriptive field notes and reflective journal entries revealed a level of consistency in all focus group interviews. Collectively, the written notes illustrated the variety and depth of perceived strengths of the leadership program. In one journal entry the researcher wrote that “[The respondents] had plenty to offer in the way of strengths in the existing program. What has been evident is the students interviewed thus far are able to speak freely about leadership.” In another instance it was noted that, “The respondents worked well as a team during the interview, asking each other about events, times and people, and checking amongst themselves for accuracy.”

**Shortcomings**

An analysis of data revealed that students indicated several perceived shortcomings associated with the current leadership program. These shortcomings comprised: non-involvement of younger students in leadership opportunities, determining a balance between leadership responsibilities and scholarly requirements, and a perceived ‘popularity contest’ during the elections of younger students into leadership positions. Four participants were unable to identify any shortcomings or areas of the current leadership program requiring improvement.

The shortcoming expressed most frequently by the student leaders (5 of 16) was the apparent non-involvement of the younger leaders in leadership opportunities at the College. This lack of involvement, however, stemmed not from a lack of opportunities, but rather from a perceived lack of willingness or motivation on behalf of the students. One student stated:

> It’s so much worse than what people think, though. I had this leader last year in Year 9 Ministry, and I told him, ‘Come to Patron Day, and read this prayer of the faithful.’ Not only didn’t he write it, but he didn’t even come. This happens so many times, and you really just get sick of it.

This comment received support from another student, who stated “Lots of younger kids don’t understand the commitment that’s involved, like the responsibility you hold if you get [a leadership position].” Other significant shortcomings asserted by participants (4 of 16) included undertaking a considerable leadership workload in addition to Tertiary Entrance Examination (T.E.E.) studies, and witnessing a ‘popularity contest’ during the election of younger students into leadership positions. The term ‘popularity contest’ was used by students to amplify the claim that some leaders become elected more readily because of their popularity amongst peers than their capacity to lead.

The field notes and reflective journaling pertaining to the second research question continued to display a degree of consistency commensurate to that of the first question. Specifically, the field notes from each focus group interview conveyed not only the variety of improvements offered by respondents, but also the perceived authenticity of these claims. In a similar manner, the field notes corroborate the previous assertion of several respondents’ inability to identify any shortcomings or areas of the leadership program requiring improvement. Concerning the second question specifically, the researcher’s journal reveals that in one interview, “The students did deliver some good answers overall, substantiated with examples from their own experience.” Another journal entry recalls one respondent offering a possible area of improvement to the existing model of leadership. In this instance, this student

> Spoke about the clash between [academic studies] and leadership. The [other respondents in the focus group] seemed to listen to what he had to say, and more or less acknowledged his comments in a positive manner.

**Student recommendations for improvement**

Despite four of the participants suggesting that there were no weaknesses in the existing program of leadership, all 16 respondents offered at least one suggestion to improve the leadership program. The most commonly offered suggestion for improvement (6 of 16) was to provide more opportunities for younger student leaders to exercise responsibility and leadership. One student leader recalled:
I found when I was doing leadership from Year 8 to Year 10 I didn’t do anywhere near as much as I do now; it’s kind of like, you’re the Sports leader, and you make sure people are in their event. You get to Year 12, and you have to organise everything, like writing down names for events, and we should get Year 8s, 9s and 10s to help us more.

Another participant recommended that for the College’s leadership to provide additional leadership opportunities, perhaps there could be:

A more gradual transition between the younger Year 8s, 9s and 10s, and the seniors, because the Year 11s and 12s’ workload and responsibility is huge. So with the 8s, 9s, and 10s, they don’t really have much; it’s just mainly the senior students. So, maybe a more gradual responsibility increase over the years.

Other ideas proposed by student leaders (4 of 16) included receiving more encouragement and recognition from teachers and students alike, for teachers and students to have a better understanding of student leaders’ roles and responsibilities, and for the program to be modified to better suit Year 12 leaders. For instance, consideration could be given by teachers and students to the frequency of extra duties and responsibilities undertaken by leaders. With regard to modifying the current program, some interviewees intimated that concessions could be made for student leadership responsibilities at certain times of the year, e.g., during examination periods. One student offered a suggestion to modify the program such that senior leaders would assume their positions during Term three of Year 11 and pass on this responsibility at the end of Term Three of Year 12.

The researcher’s field notes once again communicated the variety and perceived authenticity of the respondents’ answers. Also, these notes reflected how respondents offered solutions and suggestions for the weaknesses they outlined in the previous question, and added plausibility to the notion that the responses generated overall were thoughtful and accurate. With reference to reflective journaling, the researcher once again drew attention to the participant who communicated perceived weaknesses concerning the area of leadership and academic commitments. Specifically, “It was pleasing to see that [the respondent] also offered suggestions as to how the College might approach the problem concerning leadership duties and academic responsibilities.”

Discussion

Two key benefits were mentioned by a majority of student leaders (10 of 16) who participated in focus group interviews: being provided opportunities to work with other students, and assuming the role of involving students in school activities. These two benefits illustrate the common belief among interviewed students that being afforded opportunities to work cooperatively with other students and student leaders is favorable to their own personal development. Furthermore, in their capacity as student leaders, a majority of those interviewed perceived that attempting to involve other students in school activities is—for the most part—rewarding to both the individual, the House and College. These perceived benefits of the College’s leadership program receive amplification from Hawkes (1999) who argues that leaders can effectively influence the behaviours, values and attitudes of others in the school community. To amplify, this influence can include the need for leaders to serve others, and to promote a culture of ‘giving back’ to the school (Lineburg & Gearheart, 2008; McNae, 2011). These perceived benefits are also echoed by several writers who maintain that there are manifold personal advantages of students becoming involved with leadership positions in schools (Hine, 2011; Myers, 2005; Neumann, Dempster & Skinner, 2009). Overall, the findings suggest that there are multiple benefits for students assuming positions of leadership at the College. In light of the literature examined, it is also evident that the College’s efforts in producing such outcomes are consistent with researchers and practitioners of this educational genre.

The concern expressed most frequently by the student leaders (5 of 16) was the non-involvement of some younger leaders in leadership opportunities at the College. According to the collected data, those few ‘younger’ leaders were described as those elected student leaders in Years 8, 9 and 10. More specifically, those students interviewed conceded that although the College did attempt to engage students across all year levels in the leadership process, this apparent non-involvement possibly stemmed from a lack of willingness or motivation on behalf of the student
leaders themselves. Another concern receiving significant mention from the student leaders (4 of 16) revealed an apparent ‘popularity contest’ regarding the election of younger students into leadership positions. Such a contest was deemed counterproductive to the leadership process overall, as its occurrence can invariably see less motivated or able students elected instead of those more suited to a position of leadership (Johnson, 2005; Willmett, 1997).

The findings from this research highlight an area of concern regarding the student leaders in Years 8, 9 and 10. From these findings, an obvious recommendation would be to involve younger, elected leaders more frequently in College activities, or to provide more opportunities for leadership in such years to be exercised. Fertman and Van Linden (1999) insist 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). However, the inference drawn from this finding must be made cautiously, as multiple opportunities already exist for elected student leaders of all year levels. Although the College’s efforts in encouraging student leaders in Years 8, 9 and 10 to be active participants in the leadership program should continue and perhaps even improve, the focus could be directed at refining the nomination and election process. Such refinement may see the frequency of the ‘popularity’ vote diminish, and at the same time, increase the possibility of electing students with sufficient motivation and inclination towards leadership (Lavery, 2006; McNae, 2011).

As a corollary to the prominent program weakness, the most commonly offered suggestion for improvement (6 of 16) was to provide more opportunities for younger student leaders to exercise responsibility and leadership. Freeborn (2000) underscores the critical importance of involving students in leadership programs by asserting multiple benefits for the participants. These benefits include providing a powerful connection to positive self-esteem, a strong connection with the school’s history and the preparation of future student role models (Neumann, Dempster & Skinner, 2009). The data collected revealed that although the College actively engaged students from Years 8, 9 and 10 in the leadership program, further considerations can be made to increase student participation. Several interviewed Year 12 leaders noted that the structure of the current leadership program could be modified for increased student participation to eventuate. Moreover, those interviewed recommended that the roles of student leaders be more sharply defined, and reflect a gradual increase in responsibility with respect to age level.

Conclusion

From the overall findings of this study, it is apparent that a range of strengths, weaknesses and subsequent suggestions for improvement are associated with the existing student leadership program at the chosen College. These findings are consistent with themes and concepts found in current literature regarding leadership itself and leadership within educational settings. It is hoped that the significance of this research strengthens the existing gap in literature concerning student leadership in Catholic schools. Specifically, the findings of this research 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 suggestions geared towards improving the model.

This research has personal significance for the researcher, and adds considerable insight into the teaching profession. As a House Coordinator at the College, the researcher is an active participant in the student leadership model and has a legitimate and tangible working relationship with student leaders from Years 8 through 12. The insights gleaned from this project include affirmation for the benefits of being a student leader at the College, and acknowledgement of some areas of the existing model that require improvement. Additionally, for the shortcomings elucidated during the research process a variety of constructive solutions were offered by students to improve current problems. The researcher has gained valuable knowledge into the College’s student leadership program through the perspectives of Year 12 leaders, and is placed at an advantage when planning for future leadership activities and events. At a school level, it is hoped that this research will serve to improve and strengthen the functioning student leadership program at the College, and to help the Pastoral Care team avoid foreseeable problems regarding the planning and facilitation of future leadership activities.
EXPLORING THE NEED FOR IMPROVEMENT
IN A STUDENT LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

References


