A case study on student leadership: exploring perspectives and learning from students’ experiences of leadership

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Abstract

This report presents results from an experiential study of student leadership at XXX XXX School, Edinburgh, designed to investigate students’ perspectives on student leadership and the efforts teachers should make to understand their role amid these realities. The study was carried out using a qualitative case study approach, purposively chosen as a school where strong leadership was functioning.

Data suggested that teachers needed to create certain conditions for student leadership to succeed: a trusting and supportive culture; clear structures which supported student leadership; strong leadership, with a teacher typically as the instigator of leadership; and recognition and protection for students. Considering the research synthesis, and upon reflection of the study’s main findings, the paper suggests eight early ideas about how to inextricably link student leadership, teacher leadership and learning for a socially transformative purpose.
1. Introduction

Student leadership is no longer an empty catch phrase used to describe the roles bestowed on students by their teachers; instead, a recent resurgence in the fields of student voice and student engagement has led to a redefinition of student leadership, attributing greater value to the participation of students in their learning (Fielding, 2004; Ruddock and Flutter, 2004). However, by reporting negative features of student leadership, press reports often draw readers’ attention to the corrosive nature of student leadership in relation to the already waning legitimacy of teacher professionalism (see, for example, NASUWT press release and ‘The Mirror’ news articles in Appendix 1). And yet, when submerged voices emerge and are listened to, evidence suggests that student leadership is a positive catalyst for change (Mitra, 2005). Thus student leadership runs deeper than popular accounts suggest.

This report explores students’ perspectives on student leadership in an independent secondary school in Edinburgh. Literature tends to focus on the organisational character of schooling, there is a dearth of research examining the perceptions and personal experiences of student leaders. The study also asks students to consider the efforts teachers should make to understand their role amid these realities.

It is important to define student and teacher leadership. This study draws on Yukl’s (1998) definition of leadership as an influence process that occurs naturally within a social system; student leadership is therefore defined broadly to include all formal and informal roles students adopt consciously or unconsciously. The term student leadership—as opposed to student voice—is used here in order to get away from notions of rights and empowerment or student participation in successful school reform. Further, by employing the term student leadership, the study plays into current understandings of distributed leadership inclusive of students as well as teachers (Harris, 2008). However, students are not all the same and to talk about student leadership is misleading since some students are more willing to lead than others. Whitehead (2009) has underlined two types of adolescent leaders: pro-social and anti-social—this is pertinent to this study since it shows the importance of seeking a differentiated awareness of student leadership from the students’ perspective. Paradoxically, for the purpose of this study, teacher leadership is defined as an influence teachers have on students’ [as opposed to teachers’] leadership (Leithwood and Jantzi, 1999).

A context for the research will be provided followed by an outline of its aims and significance. The relevant literature will be critically reviewed, leading to the development of a suitable conceptual framework. The selected research methodology and data will be explained along with
issues arising as a result of ethical considerations and limitations of the research. Finally, the study will offer early ideas formulated from the results of the research.

2. Context

This research is apposite at a time when student leadership has enjoyed a growing currency in the UK: there is increasing work on student leadership by the National College and a general move by Ofsted to look at it discreetly. The Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003) agenda and increasing interest in personalised learning encourages students to take increasing ownership of their learning experiences and dialogue with teachers. Opportunities for students to lead can be categorised in three ways: trial and error, education and people (Kouzer and Pouzner, 1987). The first implies learning by doing; the introduction of school councils following the Education Act (2002) is an example of this. A structured leadership education represents the second opportunity students have to become a leader; an example here might be the implementation of the citizenship curriculum in 2002. Thirdly, the instrumental role teachers play in fostering leadership skills is patent; they are increasingly accountable and must prove their ‘success’ in measurable ways. In this third context, student leadership is seen solely in terms of proving compliance to the persistent imperatives of the school.

This study aims to convey some understanding of what being a student leader is like within the context of these nascent changes at an independent boarding school providing education for approximately 480 boys, aged 13-18 years. The school has always strived to produce its own atmosphere in which the boys live, and breathe and have their being. According to the Headmaster, it is what lies beyond first appearances, and even beyond the hard facts of facilities, intake and results, it is perhaps most closely aligned to the quality of the relationships [my emphasis] within the school. When awarded the Sunday Times Scottish Independent School of the year award for 2010, the school was praised in particular for its excellent leadership.

3. Aims

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and perceptions of student leadership. It determines some of the needs of student leaders and gauges views on the purpose of student leadership. It also explores the students’ understanding of the ‘radical collegiality’ between students and teachers (Fielding, 1999). The guiding questions seek to probe the rhetoric and realities of student leadership at the school and are as follows:

- What does student leadership mean to students?
- What do students perceive are the skills, knowledge and attributes student leaders need to be successful?
What do students perceive as the purpose of student leadership?
What are the specific challenges for a student leader?
How do students perceive the narrative of their leadership journeys?
What implications do these findings have for teacher leadership?

The genesis of this study lies in two main research studies. The first is a philosophical enquiry by McMahon et al (2004) into the purpose of student leadership in which they argue, on a philosophical level, for a ‘critical democratic practice’ of student leadership and so this study works towards investigating the practicalities of this exciting vision. The second are studies conducted by Leithwood and Jantzi (1999, 2000) into the effects of principal and teacher leadership on student engagement with school. These studies suggest that the effects of teacher leadership on student engagement are insignificant; it is these counterintuitive findings which have prompted this qualitative investigation.

4. Significance of the study

This research is pertinent to the practice of the school, including both teachers and students. By asking about the attributes and challenges of student leadership, the study has created a very real, albeit small-scale, dialogue about leadership within the school. An important part of this preliminary study was the amount of questions asked which led to discussion about how students lead and the vision they have for their school community; the study facilitated a deeper empowering process of leadership for students and an empathetic engagement.

From the outset the school leadership team has been involved in the design process and while this by no means binds those in power to agree to the study’s early ideas, it has bound them to engage in dialogue with issues that help the school develop as a learning community in a democratic society. Thus, there are two versions of this report for different audiences: first, the academic community; and second, the school where the research was conducted and its stakeholders. The school publication is shorter and was produced in collaboration with the student focus group. Both versions outline the same conclusions drawn from the study and provide suggestions for students and teachers in developing student leadership.

5. Literature Review

Introduction

Recently there has been more attention on student leadership. Nevertheless, the literature tends to focus on the organisational character of schooling: that is, how schools structure groups to create opportunities for student leadership (see for example, Flutter and Ruddock, 2004). Territory that receives much less attention is the students themselves and the concerns that dominate their school leadership experience. Further, even less attention has been paid to the implications this has
for teachers. It seems that if we intend to embrace student leadership it is fundamental not only to look to the school but also to explore how students negotiate and define their leadership journeys and the power imbalance between themselves and adults such as their teachers. Hence, this review looks first at student leadership; and second, at what this might mean for teachers.

**Student leadership development**

Student leadership is no longer an empty catchphrase used to describe the roles bestowed on students; it has received a renaissance in recent years due to a resurgence in the fields of student voice and engagement (Ruddock and Flutter, 2004; Fielding, 2004). Student leadership is now a construct used to describe the plethora of ways in which students can mould the direction of their education. Nonetheless, with little research available on what constitutes an effective student leader, the study turns to other closely related theories of leadership and youth development.

By garnering what comprises an effective student leader according to the literature, the study can investigate whether this matches up to the perceptions and experiences of students. This study does not draw on the wealth of literature about teacher leadership development and conflate it with that of students since this would seem to leave unexplained the complexities of adolescence and take students out of what Vygotsky (1978) termed their Zone of Proximal Development. Rather, we first need to consider student development and how students come to have a high degree of self-esteem and psychological health, thus enabling them to succeed as leaders.

Maslow’s (1968) theory of self-actualisation seems important in understanding the personal factors that are so influential to a leader’s—and especially an adolescent leader’s—development (1968). That is, if a student is concerned with issues of safety and social needs then they will be unlikely to develop as a leader. Indeed, such lower-level needs are a prerequisite in achieving more reflective and compassionate forms of leadership. The Centre for Creative Leadership (1998) outlines three stages of development: assessment, challenge and support. The more recent literature on student voice, though, seems to skip over the importance of these initial stages. For example, Fielding rightly calls for teachers and students to ‘see the skills and capacities associated with the practical realities of democracy [...] and in the lived, day-to-day context of real schools as they exist now’ (2001: 104), but such an ambitious aim cannot even be contemplated without the needs, knowledge and skills to empathise and communicate so that students can influence themselves and their community. The Centre for Creative Leadership’s highest developmental phase is based on Maslow’s self-actualisation where a leader ‘fully understands and displays personal standards and values’ (3). Moreover, by having a differentiated definition of student leadership we overcome the trap of only focusing on *existing* and not *potential* student leaders.
With safe and supportive foundations all students can move beyond survival and attention needs. In this regard, educators may be missing opportunities to understand how non-recognised leaders could become more motivated by self-esteem and belonging needs. It is at this point that student leaders can begin to reflect on their skills as a leader and thus strive for Maslow’s self-actualisation (1968). Maslow’s stages, though addressing the needs of youth development, are significant because the power of personal needs—in students and teachers—is always reflected in the way we lead. Only once students have achieved self-actualisation can we begin to focus on student leadership beyond individual self-satisfaction and authentic leadership that concentrates, ‘at least as much on the external factors of one’s influence as it does on the internal factors of being true to oneself’ (Whitehead, 2009: 851). McMahon et al (2004) call this ‘critical democratic practice’.

**The purpose of student leadership**

Recent literature purports that successful leadership is not about a technical task-oriented role, rather, one that is concerned with the motivation of people, having vision and good communication skills (Nightingale 2006: 11). Katyal and Evers (2004) thus argue that leadership ‘is separated from role and status and is primarily concerned with the relationships and connections among the individuals within the school’ (10). McMahon et al (2004) look at a large review of the literature on student engagement and critically discuss the three major conceptions of student engagement: conservative, liberal and critical-democratic. Though only offering an initial philosophical enquiry of student engagement, what is of real value in the paper is the urgency to thoroughly unpick the purpose of student engagement. Given that we have established that the power of personal needs is always reflected in the way we lead, eliding leadership with engagement seems a plausible step. That is, if students are following McMahon et al’s critical-democratic conception of engagement, they will be necessarily leading.

The authors argue that not all forms of student engagement are equally worthwhile; only critical-democratic practice can achieve social transformation and challenge the status quo. McMahon et al ask whether all forms of education are worthwhile; this is a good question to ask but it leaves unexplained the role that conservative and liberal conceptions of student engagement can play in certain contexts. It is necessary to allow for a wider context of engagement, inclusive of the ‘deficiency needs’ that Maslow discusses. This study is based on the premise that students develop their leadership capacity along a continuum, albeit not all student leaders develop in the same way. That is, a conservative or liberal conception of engagement might be necessary before certain students achieve self-actualisation and engage in democratic transformation. McMahon et al admit that it is a challenge and such aims will require ‘teaching against the grain’ and ‘risk-taking’ but this
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will not sit well with all students (2004: 73). McMahon et al focus on the ‘discourses of student engagement’ [my emphasis] not student engagement per se.

Indeed, the need for a differentiated awareness of student leadership has already been highlighted: for many students, student leadership is something a small number of other students do. These students can be marginalised and the comfort of the status quo sometimes suits more students (and teachers) than the challenges of participatory democracy. Moreover, this also raises the question of the degree to which some students can legitimately lead on behalf of others. This study will therefore investigate whether it is first necessary to build capacity through the liberal and conservative conceptions of student engagement before achieving self actualisation and participatory democracy.

This cautionary note about the abstract and universal conception of critical democracy, however, should not lead to tokenism whereby student leadership becomes an empty catchphrase used to describe the roles bestowed on students by teachers; this fails to take student leadership seriously at all (Ruddock and Flutter, 2000). Like McMahon, researchers have shown that those in a position of authority gather information from students to contain and control, thus binding them more securely to the status quo (see, for example, Fielding, 1998). As we have seen, the national context has a role to play here since teachers have to demonstrate and account for their ‘success’ and it is in these circumstances that teacher leadership of student leadership is more about paying lip service than recognising critical democratic practice. This context goes some way to underlining the fact that even teachers must move beyond these survival needs and pressures before connecting the skills and capacities of student leadership with the practical realities of democracy.

The literature on student leadership shows that moving students forward in their leadership journeys requires recognition, support, cajoling, high expectations, authentic choices, gentle nudging; transforming students beyond their needs to skills and then through ‘different kinds of disposition into something that ceases to be a mere skill and becomes instead a practical expression of an educational relationship and a democratic way of life;’ this points to the role teachers play in student leadership, what Fielding (1999) has coined ‘radical collegiality’ (19). One of the aims of this study will be to capture what ‘radical collegiality’ looks like from students’ perspectives. Much of the literature on student leadership suggests that educators should conflate teacher and student leadership; that it is the relationship which drives the learning community; that there is a fundamental role for teachers in fostering student leadership (see, for example, Van Linden et al., 1998); and yet, Mitra (2005) has noted a dearth of research in this area. The next section of the literature review covers what we do know about teacher leadership in relation to student leadership.
The teachers’ influence on student leadership

As we have seen, leadership can be understood as a process of meaning-making that must be, according to McMahon, ‘critically democratic’ (2004). That is, focused on a social vision and changing the status quo. Complementary to this view is the recent work on transformational and distributed leadership. These conceptions purport that leadership and learning are inextricably linked (Harris, 2008). These adjectival forms of leadership relate to the post-heroic form of leadership and refer to the way leadership is percolated throughout organisations; there is increasing consensus in the literature about the value of adopting participative strategies (Ibid). This study endorses the beliefs of distributed leadership save for the assumption that teacher leadership in schools is between teachers and their colleagues (Leithwood and Jantzi, 1999: 689). Rather, the form of leadership studied here is that which exists between teachers and their students. Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) seem to accept Yukl’s (1998) broad definition of leadership as an influence process and then narrow this definition seeing teacher leadership as a process influencing other teachers. This interpretation of their quantitative data seems to leave unexplained the influence that teachers have over students and the nature of their leadership in school. As Robinson (2001) reminds us, ‘at the heart of education is the relationship between teachers and learners’ (101). Furthermore, if students are to demonstrate critical democratic leadership then teachers patently have a role in giving direction to the lives of students: what academics have coined transformational leadership. That is, teacher leaders must define a vision that sits with students’ key values.

Mitra (2005) has examined the role teachers play in providing support for student leaders whilst simultaneously creating space for them to take on meaningful roles and responsibilities. Mitra (2005) used qualitative analysis methods to study teacher-student partnerships in a High School over a period of three years. Mitra found that small group planning, which at times saw students fail, was slow but the process was as important as the goal; whereas direct, individual instruction did not build capacity or ownership, although progress was quicker. Mitra also highlights the teacher’s role in ‘building bridges and buffering the group from criticism’ (543). Most notably, Mitra emphasises the challenging balance that a teacher leader must strike: ‘constructing the partnerships with students requires that youth has the space to stumble at times while being provided with enough support so that they succeed more often than they fail’ (547). Mitra (2008) also points out that the power imbalance between teachers and students needs to be overcome so that intended student leadership initiatives can be strengthened. Bragg also underscores the balancing act a teacher must perform in fostering student leadership, particularly with regards to language. For instance, Bragg asks the question of how teachers should respond to the language of youth culture and
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inappropriate language—both in terms of semantics and more sinister dispositions (cited in Fielding, 2001). In this way, teacher leaders are caught between fulfilling educational responsibilities whilst also appreciating the true nature of student perceptions of their role in developing students’ leadership.

Using Leithwood and Jantzi’s (1999) study as a lens to look back at other related literature, then, it can be argued that their findings are certainly counterintuitive and perhaps overlook the way student and teacher leadership informs and sustains each other. Further, if students are to practise critical democratic leadership then teachers will have a huge and challenging role to play in moving students beyond low-level needs towards compassionate forms of leadership.

6. Conceptual Framework

There are several different considerations to be made on what is meant by student leadership as outlined in the review but I have made a new model based on what is known. The conceptual framework below shows the different student leadership dispositions rooted in the reviewed literature. While many of the theories drawn on address different aspects of student participation and development (i.e. engagement, needs, participation) they are not independent from one another. Personal needs, for example, are reflected in the way they influence students to give of themselves. Eliding leadership with participation, voice and democratic schooling, engagement and influence, and radical collegiality is not a quagmire of my making but the following conceptual framework endeavours to map my path through it. The framework should not be seen as a hierarchy that implies value but a continuum. The caveat being that the nature of student leadership development is dynamic and fluid, we know that not all student leaders develop in the same way. There is a delicate interplay between the needs and values of students, their awareness of the needs and values of others, and the role of the teacher within this development.
‘Critical democracy’ (McMahon, 2004)

- Teacher leadership
  - maintaining balance
- Student leadership dispositions
  - need/skills based

‘Radical collegiality’ (Fielding, 1999)
7. Design Process, Methodology and Data Collection

**Partnership**
The focus group reflects on widespread opportunities for students to work with staff in all areas of the school. The focus is on moving existing relationships between students and teachers from co-existence to collaboration and on to genuine partnership.

**Leading and learning**
The focus group is all about leading and learning. Students are leaders of their learning and their role is to actively enquire into when and how leadership is most powerful. At the same time, we hope to create opportunities for teachers to learn through collaboration with students and from research.

**Knowledge sources**
The focus group draws its knowledge about leadership from within school and from external research. Students will work with staff to create new knowledge about how to improve leadership by testing ideas through practical projects.

The focus group is bringing together three fields of knowledge:¹

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Research Methods

Since this study aimed to gather an array of data on students’ experiences, one of the convictions of this study was that it would be intimately conflated with students’ everyday lives. As Kennedy (1997) argues, this includes ‘the things that matter to young people, the things that can help them to understand their reality and give them a stake in the future that rightly belongs to them’ (Kennedy, 1997: 3). Nevertheless, too often research with young people draws on traditional interview methods. Thus Kirby (2001) urges more researchers to rely more on qualitative and participatory research methods in order that students can express their experiences using familiar means of communication (Kirby, 2001: 75). With the student focus group we therefore endeavoured to move away from formal methods of talking and drew on more kinaesthetic techniques which were more engaging and fun.

Internal insights

1. The focus group received emails from 67 students in answer to the question, ‘What does student leadership mean to you?’

The research found that ‘student leadership’ was not a term generally used by students. For most students who identified themselves as leaders in the study, leadership was not a word they necessarily associated with their own activities, albeit many of them were leading other students across the school. However, ‘student leadership’ was a meaningful concept to students when it was introduced as a way of describing engagement with the school for a specific purpose, for example, raising money for charity, captaining a sports team, directing a school play. In many cases it seems that the question of student leadership itself triggered thought about the issue and an acknowledgement that students were in shared leadership roles within their year group and sports teams, clubs and the school at large, even though this was not termed ‘student leadership’.

The research found that there were five dimensions of ‘student leadership.’

1. The first was leading by example and earning respect where students understood student leadership as being a role model for other students across all aspects of school life.
2. The second was authenticity: both in terms of being an individual, not following the crowd; and consistency once labelled as a leader, a form of humility.
3. The third was a form of influence over other students for the prime purpose of securing certain outcomes often linked to performance of a sports team, often with the leadership of other staff members.
4. The fourth suggested that student leadership meant high personal standards, a desire to be the best, ambition and strict working aims.
5. The fifth, which suggested that there is a perceived purpose to student leadership, was activism where students engaged with issues individually, collegially and with staff on behalf of the school in order to directly make improvements.
2. Respondents were asked to put characteristics of first, a leader; and second, a student leader, in order of importance as a way of generating an idea about student leadership development. The responses showed similar patterns between leaders and student leaders, but also some interesting differences.

**Priority for student leaders more than leaders**
- Friendship and belonging
- Safety, protection and security

**Priority for leaders more than student leaders**
- Knowledge
- Vision
- Moral purpose

**Priority for both student leaders and leaders**
Communication skills and respect of others—were seen as the most important for student leaders as well as leaders more generally.
3. **Respondents identified three main common challenges and pressures for student leaders:**

1. The first of these is the **expectations** that teachers, parents and peers placed on student leaders. Some students also felt that they were lacking in confidence when showing initiative or experience when managing these expectations. Parenthetically, student leadership is inhibited by general student apathy and a lack of willingness to take on responsibility which adds further pressure on student leaders because of raised teacher expectations and negative peer pressure. The year-group House system also appeared to create challenges in the way that it created what one student called, ‘a shoaling mentality’ whereby the year group splits and goes off in groups. The suggestion was that it was much harder to be an individual in this system. Another student reflected that in this system, ‘it was very easy to be pigeon-holed and labelled; once you’re seen as a certain type of person, it’s very hard to change perceptions.’

2. The second barrier, and this links to the first, relates to students’ **ability to undertake ‘extra work’**. The lack of time for students to engage in yet more activities outside of class work, prep, sport and activities seems to be an important inhibitor to student leadership, as it is to any school initiatives. When we sought further clarification from one student about his lack of time, he explained that he seldom got a lunch break, dashing from lessons to choir and then to meetings with the library or student council, sometimes he did not even get chance to eat.

3. Finally, **the role of teachers** can, in rare instances, be seen as a barrier particularly where teachers are not willing to relinquish control, where leadership from the individual teacher is seen as weak, or where teachers are poor communicators. We found one example where student leadership had not flourished because of poor communication and a passive approach to student leadership on the part of a teacher. While professing support for student leadership, the teacher did not take any active steps, but waited for students to come forward and take initiatives. This was an unsuccessful approach in this instance that left students confused. Active approaches, whereby the teachers formally recognise students and give them roles seem essential, at least initially.

4. **The final task asked respondents to draw a line**
The research found a wide variety of formal and informal groupings characterised as ‘student leadership’. 87% of students’ key leadership experiences were seen as formal and in 83% of cases they had been invited to take on the role. A large proportion of the key experiences were sport-based, albeit most of the defining moments were not. It is clear that the prefects in the school—positions bestowed on final-year students—provided a real legitimacy for student leadership and collaboration at the top end of the school. This was the most common defining moment for final year students. These formal positions which were teacher-driven had prompted groupings amongst student leaders at the top end of the school. These groupings were predominantly year-group/House based with a mandate to lead certain year groups. There was specific training received before becoming a prefect which students seemed to value and appreciate. However, there was no evidence of any other formal leadership training across the school.

There were other examples, however, which were not teacher driven. It consisted of more personal defining moments such as an interview to become a prefect or a particularly memorable sports fixture. There was also evidence of informal groupings between students for particular purposes. One example saw a student leading a team of others—crucially, including teachers—to direct next year’s school play. Other examples included members of the same sports team meeting up to improve set plays and team coherence.

Student leaders agreed that formal recognition and teacher support had enhanced students’ leadership skills, though explaining how was more difficult. In contrast, those student leaders without direct teacher support found it more difficult to find a legitimate time to meet and felt that their collaborative efforts were constrained because of this factor. An example here was a band whose members struggled to make sufficient time to meet and ‘jam’ together.
8. Early ideas and going forward

These ideas bring together and summarise all that the student focus group has been inspired and challenged by. They represent the early thinking of the group. There are still many unanswered questions and more to be understood in all areas. The ideas come from all three fields of knowledge: what is known; what we know; and new knowledge we create (NCSL model for networked learning website). A simple framework organises the 8 ideas into two domains: students and teachers. A third area—collegiality—acknowledges that making a difference to the way leadership and learning takes place means addressing issues through the way in which students and teachers work together in the learning process.

**Student leaders**

Students lead successfully when:

1. Students explore and understand their own needs and values;
2. Students are encouraged and supported to take responsibility for, and have ownership and control of, their own learning and achievements;
3. Students take on formal roles that involve responsibility for the learning and success of others.

**Teacher Leaders**

The role of the professional in schools needs to develop to ensure that:

4. Teachers trust students, there is a ‘no blame’ culture and communication is clear;
5. Teachers build bridges, reward and buffer students from difficulties;
6. Teachers demonstrate that they are leaders and learners too.

**Collegiality**

Changing the way students and teachers work together involves:

7. Learning partnerships between students and teachers that inspire, motivate and take risks;
8. A collaborative vision which is socially transformative.
What next? Plans and challenges ahead

The challenge for the next phase is to grapple with and develop further the ideas that have been set out in this interim paper. Even in the writing of this paper a number of questions have been raised and these will bring focus and momentum to the focus group’s future activity.

The focus group will continue to test, trial and research new approaches that specifically set out to apply particular ideas. We will be seeking out models of practice that have implemented these ideas in interesting and effective ways. Looking outward to other schools that are further down the line in making these ideas a reality will be a critical source of new intelligence.

Student leaders recognise that the focus group faces a number of challenges as it moves into the next phase of activity:

1. **Challenge 1**
   Getting a greater number of teachers and students actively involved in focus group activity

2. **Challenge 2**
   Finding ways to involve the most disengaged students and most sceptical teachers

3. **Challenge 3**
   Because of the transient nature of the student body, the group will need to recruit its members and re-establish its norms regularly

4. **Challenge 4**
   Keeping the focus on enquiry and not moving to implementation too early

5. **Challenge 5**
   Maintaining dialogue with the Headmaster and his staff to ensure the recommendations have their active support

6. **Challenge 6**
   Paying sufficient attention to the systematic changes that may need to be made in order for the school to be able to deliver recommendations
9. Limitations and further academic research

If this were a large-scale study seeking to make generalisations, further limitations would be the very small sample and the sole use of qualitative data collection tools. However, rather than generalising, the intention of a single case study can be ‘to understand the case in its complexity and entirety, as well as in its context’ (Punch, 2005: 146). The research techniques used opened up dialogue to an extent, but certainly, a more open mode of discussion about the issues would ideally capture student voices and experiences as directed by their eclectic interests.

While a good deal of initial work is underway on student leadership, more work is required to explore the roles students should assume in helping schools improve not only themselves but their communities, ultimately achieving democratic transformation. Moreover, even the most pioneering and competent student and teacher leaders founder, hence the importance of systems and organisational culture. This paper has only very briefly considered the way the school system and organisational culture enshrines the value of student leadership. Furthermore, as Ruddock and Flutter (2000) emphasised even earlier, it is those students who are reluctant leaders ‘who are most likely to be able to explore aspects of the system that constrain commitment and progress; these are the voices least likely to be heard and yet most important to be heard’ (Ruddock et al., 1996). This research corroborates Whitehead’s argument that there is too much focus on developing existing not potential leaders (Whitehead, 2009: 863). It would be interesting to see the ways in which non-recognised leaders could become more motivated by increased self-esteem and belonging and then move beyond individual self-satisfaction towards authentic leadership dispositions. Next steps would therefore involve a more open mode of discussion and would look to more challenging and reticent students in particular.
10. References


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**Websites**


11. Appendices

**Appendix 1 - Pupil interview grillings revealed, 3/04/2010**

A teacher failed to get a job after being labelled as "Humpty Dumpty" by a pupil allowed to sit on his interview panel, a report has revealed.

Another teacher was told to sing their favourite song while another was asked by students on an interview panel how they would impress the judges of Britain's Got Talent.

The anecdotes are part of a 200-case dossier compiled by the NASUWT teaching union, which says a government scheme to allow students a greater say in their education is being abused. The union also heard students could "inform" on their teachers and would manipulate questionnaires so they could unfairly criticise staff.

The NASUWT asked its members to comment on the Student Voice idea, most recently updated in 2008, ahead of its conference. In one case, a pupil did not choose a prospective teacher at interview because he looked like "Humpty Dumpty". The teacher who was eventually awarded the job wrote: "I was 'interviewed' by a panel of five students. During my first year here I taught three of them.

"These pupils turned out to be poor behavers and low achievers who were being given these positions of responsibility as a motivational and self-esteem boost. One of them actually said to me, 'If I'd known I wasn't going to like you in the interview I would have chosen one of the other teachers, but one of them looked like Humpty Dumpty so I didn't pick him.'" In another case, a teacher said they were "humiliated" after being asked by pupils to sing their favourite song at interview. They declined and didn't get the job.

The NASUWT said it warned the idea could be abused by students when it was introduced in schools up and down the country. On Saturday, the union's members will debate whether they should resort to industrial action to stop pupils abusing their new powers. The motion added: "Conference rejects the inappropriate use of Student Voice. Conference asserts that the involvement of pupils in classroom observations, selection, interview and assessment of teachers is inappropriate and erodes teacher professionalism."

Chris Keates, general secretary of the union, said the dossier of teachers' experiences made for "distressing and disturbing reading". It was "littered with examples of demeaning, embarrassing and humiliating practice", she added.

Ms Keates said: "Many of the practices described are grossly unprofessional on every level. They are stripping teachers of their professional dignity. To be effective in their role, teachers need to feel confident and empowered to act with the authority. It is clear that too many schools are engaging not in Student Voice but in the manipulation of children and young people to serve the interests of school management and its perspective. This is a distortion of the true purpose of Student Voice and constitutes an abuse of children and young people.

A spokesman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families said the idea was devised to give students a say about how lessons could be made engaging and interesting. Pupils were not meant meant to have an input on the performance management of teachers, the spokesman added in a statement.

A 39-year-old teacher from Buckinghamshire, who did not want to be named, said she withdrew from a job interview after being told she would have to sit in front of a student panel. She said: "I feel so strongly about it. It's not on. I feel people who are properly qualified for the job should interview me, not students. How many qualifications have they got?"
Calling all student leaders

Would you like to join a focus group on leadership for an informal evening of fun activities and discussion?

Then email jtimms@merchiston.co.uk outlining ‘what student leadership means to you’ in 50 words or less.

Deadline: 4 March 2012
Appendix 6 – Evidence of data collection
Dear Student leader,

Thank you for taking the time to work with our research team to discuss your experiences as a student leader. It is an exciting chance to begin to understand more about the opportunities and challenges of leading your school. We are very interested in your perspectives on your own leadership and how being a student leader influences you. In the long run, our collective learning may contribute to future school policy. The school and Headmaster are very interested in our work.

YOUR PARTICIPATION

Your participation in our evening is voluntary and will remain confidential. All information shared will remain confidential and your name will not be used during any stage of our work. While we may use quotations from correspondence and discussions, they will never be attributed to you. You may withdraw or retract any comments at any point. Only the research team will have access to the raw data. We will analyse our shared findings and disseminate them to all participants.

CONTACT

Your key contact is Mr. Timms
jtimms@merchiston.co.uk

KEEPING YOU INFORMED

☐ Please keep me informed of findings by email.

I agree to participate in this student leader evening. I am aware that my participation and contributions are voluntary and I may withdraw at any time.

Signature:

Date:
Appendix 8 – The characteristics a leader needs (Maslow 1968, McMahon 2004, Nightingale, 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling safe, protected and secure</th>
<th>Having moral purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A feeling of friendship and belonging</td>
<td>Having people skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having the respect of others</td>
<td>Being organised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having communication skills</td>
<td>Being self-aware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having vision</td>
<td>Having knowledge of leadership and information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 9 – Card Sort: characteristics of a leader and then of a student leader

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Level of importance</th>
<th>Student leader</th>
<th>Level of importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>10 9 10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10 9 10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship and belonging</td>
<td>2 1 2</td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td>8 8 6</td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>6 2 3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5 1 2</td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral purpose</td>
<td>4 6 6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2 5 3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>9 4 4</td>
<td><strong>4=</strong></td>
<td>6 6 5</td>
<td><strong>4=</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People skills</td>
<td>8 7 5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7 3 7</td>
<td><strong>4=</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect of others</td>
<td>7 10 8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9 10 8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety, protection &amp; security</td>
<td>1 8 1</td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td>1 7 1</td>
<td><strong>8=</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>3 5 9</td>
<td><strong>4=</strong></td>
<td>4 4 9</td>
<td><strong>4=</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision</td>
<td>5 3 7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3 2 4</td>
<td><strong>8=</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 10 – Mind-mapping: challenges and pressures faced as student leaders and the ways teachers could ease these pressures or help students overcome them
Trajectory example and key

14, I, F
Captain of rugby team

15, Tr*
Member of school council

I – invited to take the role
X – key experience
Tr – if leadership training received

* - defining moment
F – if a formal role
### Appendix 13 – Trajectories: the narrative of students’ journeys of leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key leadership experiences</th>
<th>Formal role</th>
<th>Invited to take on role</th>
<th>Training received</th>
<th>Defining moment and age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2 (0.3)</td>
<td>3 (0.5)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Student forum, 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3 (0.6)</td>
<td>2 (0.4)</td>
<td>Prefect training</td>
<td>School prefect, 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 (1)</td>
<td>3 (1)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Sports scholar, 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
<td>3 (0.75)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Sports captain, 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 (1)</td>
<td>3 (1)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>7 (0.9)</td>
<td>7 (0.9)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>15, student leadership research group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5 (1)</td>
<td>5 (1)</td>
<td>Prefect training</td>
<td>School prefect, 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>School council, 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Memorable sports fixture, 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>6 (0.9)</td>
<td>5 (0.7)</td>
<td>Prefect training</td>
<td>Interview for prefect, 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Sports captain, 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3 (0.75)</td>
<td>3 (0.75)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4.6</strong></td>
<td><strong>87% of experiences were formal</strong></td>
<td><strong>83% of experiences were roles offered to students</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>