

**An Analysis of the Effects of Student Leadership in Schools**

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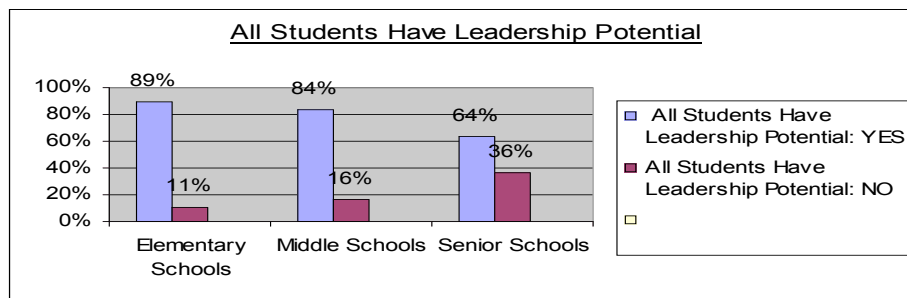
Student leadership has a new face! In the past, young people showed leadership talent as “natural leaders” emerged from a task or activity as team captains or most valuable players or student council presidents. Over time, leadership has changed for adults, as it has for students, with greater participative leadership (Leithwood and Duke, 1999) and distributed leadership (Mitra, 2005), that promotes a sharing and broadening of power and partnerships. Student leadership has shifted, toward group relationships, participation, contributing, sharing and guiding. Today, student leadership implies “meaningful involvement in the educational process, engaging all students as stakeholders, recognizing their unique knowledge, experience and perspective, as they contribute to the direction and development of learning for themselves and for the group.” (Chapman, Toolsie-Worsnup & Dyck, 2006). Through particular instructional methods, class management strategies and delivery of curriculum, an environment can be created to offer opportunities for leadership to all students. In doing so, students develop the necessary skills to improve achievement, utilize many areas of the brain for better retention and understanding, and become integral to the components of a positive school culture.

There are compelling reasons for us to examine the broad context of student leadership today. Literature is scant on student leadership though researchers posit that if students are not given a voice, they may exhibit their control and power needs in negative ways (Offard, Wright, Shain, Dewitt, 2000). As well, if we do not provide opportunity for students to lead, they may never develop leadership skills to their fullest potential. Brain research tells us that autonomy for students is a powerful need. Various functions of the brain may be fully accessed through talk, choice, exploration, “sense-making”, connections between new and known, brain stimulation, and retention (Politano & Paquin, 2000), all of which are elements involved in the act of student leadership within classes today. Though not fully developed or studied, student leadership development linked to academic achievement is now beginning to occur. Our study begins the needed direction for a different way of working with students that will improve school culture through student voice and contribution, empower students to learn more effectively, resulting in a positive respectful relationship between and amongst youth and adults.

This paper is based upon a study completed by the authors. It took place in nine schools (elementary, middle and senior) in the Chilliwack, Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows and Coquitlam School Districts. Surveys, interviews with teachers, and observations were carried out. Some of the research questions were:

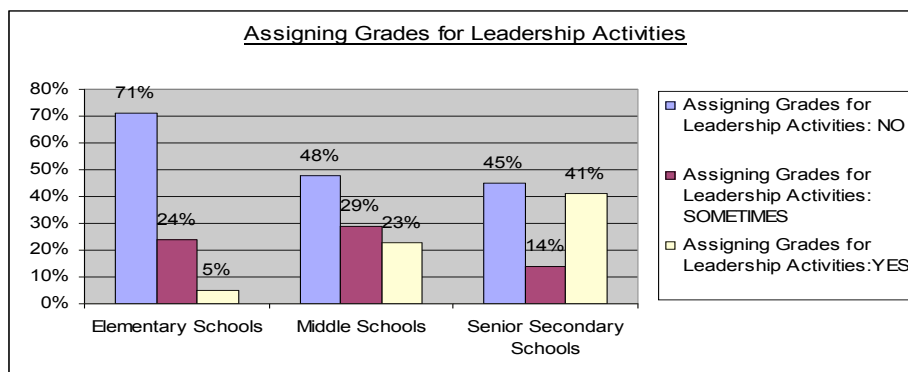
- 1) What conditions are present to help student learning and develop leadership skills from K through grade 12?
- 2) How will student leadership contribute to adolescent development and learning patterns to give us information on brain-based learning?
- 3) How and why does student leadership contribute to school culture?
- 4) How are academic achievement and assessment in leadership development related?

Results of the study showed that if educators did not have a belief in the potential of leadership for all students, conditions were not constructed for leadership to occur. Though most educators provided opportunities for all student populations to practice leadership, by differentiating the tasks and expectations, 11 % to 36 % of teachers felt that not all students could or should lead as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1 Educators Belief That All Students Have Leadership Potential**

As we researchers found in the literature, assessment or assigning grades for leadership varied, as shown in Figure 2, with most grade assignments occurring at senior secondary schools.



**Figure 2 Assessment For Leadership Activities**

Most interviewees indicated that student leadership contributed positively to school culture however, we did not find a consistent method of assessing leadership. Brain based learning was noted by most respondents who evidenced such things as student empowerment, a way to apply and adapt information, helping to synthesize and increase retention.

### **Findings**

Of the 71 respondents, 75% stated that they addressed students who were not eager to lead. They provided for this by structuring the environment for all students to succeed in leadership activities One respondent referred to “restructuring for inclusivity” and another respondent quipped, “if you build it, they will come” meaning that if the environment were constructed for leadership activities, students would lead. This substantiates the work of Offard et al. (2000), who believe that offering models such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, mediation and classroom management would set the stage for leadership.

Some teachers spoke of directly pushing or nudging students into different roles, encouraging and supporting students in these areas. This is likened to the apprenticeship model Mitra refers to with scaffolding opportunities to help students practice leadership (2005).

When speaking of specific activities of leadership, a teacher from a middle school stated that these activities teach students how to access the entire brain. A secondary school teacher suggested that leadership activities through helping others and listening are ways of developing the brain. Finally, at another middle school, a teacher explains, “Debriefing shows how neurons connect and students are fascinated. The more we teach about the brain, the more leading, learning and reflecting students do.”

These results parallel our literature review findings that indicated leadership training improves adolescent and brain development. Connections to current theorists were evident. Susan Jones indicated a ninety per cent retention rate of what children do and say themselves (Jones, 2001) and William Glasser identifies the development of student autonomy as one of the four basic human needs (Glasser, 1993). Adolescent development is a key factor to consider when leadership activities are implemented, as is shown in the next section.

The development of leadership skills, in students and how that is accomplished in schools and classrooms was very apparent from the survey responses along with the observations and interviews. From the positive responses by the respondents, it is clear that leadership development activities are found across the curriculum and grades. The leadership activities embedded into daily classes and routines reflects the literature of Bisland, who says, “A separate curriculum for leadership education is not necessary, for the students may acquire knowledge and skills through activities complementing the existing curriculum” (Credited to Karnes & Stephens, 1999 by Bisland, 2004).

Although the types of activities that involve youth leadership development vary between the grades, some commonalities were very evident. The group collaborative process helps to develop student's decision making and communicating skills, according to the perceptions of the respondents in this study. As indicated by Wingenback and Kahler (1997), these skills along with practicing resource management, understanding self, and interpersonal relationships, provide the key components to leadership skill development.

### **Our Study's Conclusions**

1. A leadership environment for all students may be created when educators have a philosophical belief that all students can lead.
2. An enriched student leadership environment may influence the brain's growth and learning.
3. Student leadership appears to contribute to positive school culture.
4. There is no prescribed approach or curriculum that supports teaching skills and knowledge in leadership, resulting in inconsistent instruction and learning taking place. Consequently, there is no consistent system of assessment

We conclude that leadership skills for young people are essential for cognitive and social development. Students contribute to the learning with unique talents and insights, improving self-worth and confidence, gaining organizational ability, a responsible attitude and desire to learn. This contributes to the learning of others, the environment and the culture, unmistakably influencing the brain's growth and learning. In choosing, modifying and exploring, students are active and on task, stimulating brain growth. Relationships within an environment of student leadership changes teacher perspectives, reduces tension between teachers and students, and helps students and teachers identify one another as persons and not stereotypes. The process of leadership from awareness to development to mastery of leadership skills, leads to more sophisticated leadership roles. Without this prior instruction and experience, students cannot perform at a sophisticated level. Although respondents clearly had a sense that students achieved far greater through leadership roles, the link from student leadership to academic achievement has not been proven in this study, because there were inconsistent methods for assessing student leadership.

### **Recommendations for Educational Policy and Practice**

Teachers should continue to develop leadership opportunities for students within classrooms, schools and districts. Student voice is a valuable tool in educational reform and daily learning through contributions and relationships.

In light of the current findings on brain based learning, the Ministry of Education in British Columbia needs to inform school districts of cutting edge development leading

to increased student achievement. Leadership development curriculum needs then to be developed collaboratively with districts and educators, using reliable assessment tools for grades K to 12 such as the “Quick Scales” for Social Responsibility. Training would need to follow within the school system as well as at the post-secondary level.

School districts need to allocate funds to schools for student leadership development, with district coordinators to support teachers and students as they develop the process.

Much remains to be learned and understood in the dynamics of student leadership, in students leading the learning for themselves and others. The role of student as learner is more multi-faceted than ever before. The education system needs to recognize, support and be ever vigilant in leading for that changing role.

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