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## **'Adolescent leadership: the female voice'**

*Nicole Archard*

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# Adolescent Leadership: The Female Voice

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**Nicole Archard**

## Abstract

This research investigated the female adolescent view of leadership by giving voice to student leaders through focus group discussions. The questions: What is leadership? Where/how was leadership taught?, and How was leadership practised? were explored within the context of girls' schools located in Australia, with one school located in South Africa. The findings of this research indicated that girls not only had an understanding of leadership, they also actively performed it. Students viewed leadership as the active process of working with others in a positive way. Leadership was mostly taught through specific programmes and activities and practised both formally and informally by students. It was also acknowledged that leadership was often learnt through experience. Further exploration of this concept is needed in order to ascertain the ways in which these understandings of leadership can be better utilized in order to develop the leadership potential of girls when they enter adulthood.

## Keywords

adolescence, education, girls, leadership

## Introduction

The need to study the adolescent view of leadership has arisen from the relatively small amount of research in this area (Dempster and Lizzio, 2007) as well as the interest in understanding if adolescent leadership behaviour can be a predictor of adult acquisition and practice of leadership (Schneider et al., 1999). In gaining a comprehensive understanding of adolescent leadership recent studies have recognized that it is particularly important to provide students with an opportunity to express their point of view on this concept (Dempster et al., 2010; Raby, 2010). By gaining this perspective, educators can be more in tuned with the adolescent understanding and practice of leadership. Of particular interest to the research reported in this article is the female student perspective and practice of this concept. One important result of such a finding may be the development of educational practice in order to meet the specific needs of female students. As a consequence, more women may move into leadership positions as a result of their development as leaders in adolescence, thus addressing greater global concerns of gender equity in society.

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The research reported in this article will therefore assess the literature with regard to adolescent leadership as well as the importance of capturing the voice of female students in gaining their understanding of this concept. An investigation into the adolescent female perspective of leadership will then be made, followed by an exploration of how leadership is taught to and practiced by girls in educational settings. Educators can then use these findings in order to better understand female student leaders as well as the feminine adolescent construct of leadership within their school context.

### *Adolescent leadership*

In the study of leadership numerous researchers have noted the absence of the understanding and practice of this concept by adolescents (Dempster and Lizzio, 2007; Neumann et al., 2009; Whitehead, 2009). In conjunction with this, is also the absence of a student voice (Dempster et al., 2010; McGregor, 2007; Rudduck and Flutter, 2000) and in particular the female adolescent voice is virtually non-existent in such studies (Denner et al., 2005; McNae, 2010).

As to why seeking an understanding of adolescent leadership would be important, numerous points of view exist. Some researchers claim that adult leadership acquisition can be predicted by adolescent behaviour and as such the understanding of these correlations could lead to the better development of adolescent and adult leaders (Schneider et al., 1999). Other research has linked student leadership experience with an increase in social, civic and political awareness and engagement in later life (Lizzio et al., 2011; Zimmerman-Oster and Burkhardt, 1999). While an increase in personal (Higham et al., 2010) and moral (Dempster et al., 2010) development had also been noted. Added to this is an association between adolescent leadership development and adult career choice and achievement (McCullough et al., 1994; Singer, 1990; Yeagley et al., 2010). This research highlights not only the importance to the individual with regard to the impact of adolescent leadership development on adult life but also on a more global level, the importance of the contribution that these future leaders will make to society.

Of the recent studies that are available with regard to adolescent leadership, an exploration of leadership behaviour and type is apparent. Higham et al. (2010: 419) have proposed a model of 'responsible leadership' which draws on the concepts of 'distributed and authentic leadership and on a dialogic understanding of responsible action'. This model anticipated that 'good action' would emerge as an ethical response to interactions with a variety of people. This type of leadership education is concerned with students learning how to *be* as opposed to being *taught about*. McNae (2010) has also drawn upon the construct of authentic leadership in a model that invited students as co-constructors or collaborators of leadership learning. Lizzio et al. (2011) also explored the concept of authentic distributed school leadership in the study of students' motivation to engage in formal and informal leadership positions. With regard to leadership behaviour McGregor (2007: 90) concluded from research in this area that adolescent leadership behaviour was 'more a process than a person' and a 'relationship rather than role'.

Neumann et al. (2009) have contributed further to the understanding of adolescent leadership through an investigation of positional school leadership with regard to the school captain role. This study found that secondary school student captains were impacted both positively and negatively in a variety of ways including: relationships with others (staff, adults and peers), through the responsibilities related to the role, their personal well-being, learning skills and management, self-management and self-confidence. Archard (2009) also added to this research through the study of secondary school documents regarding student leadership development. This study found that

servant leadership was the most common type of leadership articulated in Australian and New Zealand secondary girls' schools.

In most of these studies the issue of gender emerged as a salient point, although the findings were somewhat varied. The premise of McNae's (2010) study rested on the importance of including young women in the process of designing and evaluating a leadership programme in a girls' school. In this way the programme met the specific needs of female students through both the development process and through the final programme itself. While this process was deemed highly successful by the researcher, several issues arose in relation to students' participation. First, the girls found it difficult to challenge or question adults and peers in relation to ideas raised. This affected the cohesiveness of the group and design process. In relation to this, another difficulty was the equity between voices, with some students having a more dominant voice than others.

These findings both complimented and contrasted those made by Neumann et al. (2009). Female captains, more so than males, reported a deterioration of close peer relationships as a result of their role, this included issues such as exclusion, a lack of support, and negative comments and behaviour by peers. However, they also reported a greater sense of self-belief and confidence than their male counterparts as a result of dealing with teaching and administrative staff. In a study conducted by Lizzio et al. (2011) it was found that while there was no difference in leadership motivation between male and female student leaders, girls who did not hold a leadership position reported higher levels of leadership motivation than boys. Lizzio et al. have suggested through this finding that the leadership motivation of girls without leadership positions was possibly underutilized in schools.

All of these studies have raised interesting ideas in relation to the development of adolescent leaders. Of interest is the notion that recent studies have identified responsible leadership, authentic leadership, positional leadership and servant leadership as the leadership styles both taught and practiced in schools. Further research into understanding why these styles of leadership in particular are apparent in schools, and if these styles of leadership are congruent with the adult practice of leadership, would be beneficial. While the issue of gender was explored in many of the studies cited, it was also apparent that more research is required in understanding this idea. Thus the study reported in this paper may go some way in gaining an understanding of this concept.

### *The female adolescent construct of leadership and the role of the female voice*

The female adolescent construct of leadership is not widely understood mainly owing to the fact that it has not been extensively researched. While some studies on adolescent leadership have made comparisons based on gender (Lizzio et al., 2011; Mullen and Tuten, 2004; Neumann et al., 2009; Raby, 2010), few have focused primarily on girls in isolation or single-sex girl environments. Of those that have used gender comparisons, some important findings have been made. Mullen and Tuten (2004) have identified that female adolescent leadership emphasized activity based cooperative learning techniques that were supported by social or group roles as 'club leader' or 'classroom leader', whereas male student leadership was more focused on sport, athleticism and power. This dichotomy between female cooperative and male competitive styles of leadership was also noted by Kezar and Moriarty (2000) in a study of college leaders. In a review of adolescent leadership research, Whitehead (2009: 858) concluded, 'if researchers accept the notion that males, for example, are more inclined to competitive landscapes while females are inclined to cooperative landscapes, the ideals of authenticity will be lost on biased leadership development constructs'. By

focusing on one type of leadership over the other, educators are ignoring opportunities for the development of female and male leaders who are both cooperative and competitive in nature.

Therefore, there is a great need to understand the female adolescent construct of leadership so that it can be explored and developed. In exploring the area of adolescent leadership, and in particular female adolescent leadership, the need to capture and hear the voice of students is also essential. In relation to student voice McGregor (2007: 86) has stated, 'existing research suggests that student voice can serve as a catalyst for change in schools'. This change may relate to areas of curriculum, teaching practices and relationships between staff and students. Dempster et al. (2010: 79) have acknowledged that by inviting adolescents to reflect on their 'lived experience' there is greater potential to access their authentic understanding of leadership. However, the authenticity of this voice and whether or not it is heard, remain important elements to explore in relation to continuing research in this area.

With regard to girls, studies have found that adolescence can be a time where there may be a loss or silencing of voice (Denner et al., 2005; Petzel et al., 1990). Gilligan (1993) referred to this loss of voice as the suppression of girls' thoughts and opinions. Harter et al. (1997) claimed that this loss of voice may be due to the impact of adolescence and the transition to 'womanhood'. During this stage girls are in conflict with their inner-selves and the need to adhere to adult gender expectations of politeness and unassertiveness. These authors added that this may be further impacted by peer relationships. In these situations, girls would prefer to preserve peer connectedness rather than speak their minds and express their true voice. Denner and Dunbar (2004) have attributed this outcome to social learning theory, where gender role development is learnt in response to reinforcement and modelling.

In order to contest this issue, girls must be provided with settings where they feel safe to express their views and can form trusting relationships with peers and adults (Denner et al., 2005; McNae, 2010). With regard to leadership development, the outcome of this action, as stated by Denner (2005: 89), should ensure that girls 'get support and not have to choose between maintaining relationships and asserting their opinions'. By understanding girls' perception of leadership and their views towards leadership development, they can perhaps be more adequately developed as leaders and as a consequence better prepared for the challenges of leadership in their adult life. In addition, by understanding the correlation between female adolescent leadership, career choice and adult leadership aspirations, an understanding of ways to overcome the gender barriers that prohibit women from leadership positions may be developed (Yeagley et al., 2010).

The purpose of this study was therefore to explore the concept of female adolescent leadership and to provide female student leaders with a voice in order to express their views and opinions on this concept. Of interest will be the female students' understanding of the following questions in relation to the experience of leadership within their school context.

- What is leadership?
- Where/how was leadership taught?
- How was leadership practised?

The response to these questions will help educators understand the female adolescent construct of leadership. By first hearing what students have to say about this phenomenon, the next process will then involve the evaluation and development of educational practices to help develop female adolescent leaders. The implementation of pedagogic structures that are aimed at developing female student leaders, as have been expressed by students (Lizzio et al., 2011; Starratt, 2007), will therefore ensure that best practice with regard to this development is achieved.

## **Research design and data collection**

In order to provide an opportunity for adolescent girls to engage in discussion about leadership six focus groups were established. Focus groups have been reported as a successful way of engaging adolescents, in particular young women, in conversation (Denner et al., 2005; McNae, 2010). The aim of focus groups has been described by Krueger (1994: 3) as 'not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, not to make statements about the population but to provide insights into how people perceived a situation'. Parker and Tritter (2006: 24) have added to this understanding, 'focus group discussions constitute a type of group interview where, amidst a relatively informal atmosphere, people are encouraged to discuss specific topics in order that underlying issues (norms, beliefs, values), common to the lives of all participants, might be uncovered'.

In order to engage a wide variety of voices, with perhaps a range of leadership experiences, Skype Instant Messaging was used to facilitate each discussion group. The electronic nature of Skype Instant Messaging meant that students could participate in each focus group from separate locations, thus students could engage in discussion with other students with whom they would not have otherwise had the opportunity. This method also enabled students to engage with technology, a medium in which they were both comfortable and familiar with regard to conversing with other adolescents. Harris (2008) has proposed that such technologies are an appropriate way of providing young women with a voice for political action.

One advantage of Skype Instant Messaging was that it provided a transcript of the discussion; therefore errors in transcription were avoided. As only instant messaging was used, students could also retain their anonymity, thus they potentially avoided any intimidation when providing their point of view (Denner et al., 2005; Raby, 2010). However, this method also presented disadvantages. It has been reported that an important component of focus groups is the interaction and dynamics between the members of a group (Morgan, 1996; Parker and Tritter, 2006). As students were participating from a variety of separate locations and were therefore unable to see each other, it was not possible to collect data in relation to this matter. Students often commented at the conclusion of the focus group that they would have liked to have met the other participants with whom they were conversing.

A series of standardized open-ended questions were used for each focus group. These were based on the research questions: What is leadership?, Where/how was leadership taught? and How was leadership practised?

## **Research participants**

The girls that participated in each discussion group were from single-sex schools located in Australia, with one school located in South Africa. All of these schools were members of the Alliance of Girls' Schools Australasia. All students were in their final year of schooling and currently held a leadership position. This purposive sampling method was employed as it was deemed that students in a current position of leadership were more likely to have experiences of leadership from which they could draw examples for discussion.

Each focus group was comprised of schools from the following locations.

Focus Group 1: 1 × New South Wales, 1 × Queensland and 1 × Western Australia (total: 7 students).

Focus Group 2: 1 × Victoria only (total: 4 students).

Focus Group 3: 1 × New South Wales and 1 × Queensland (total: 4 students).

Focus Group 4: 1 × New South Wales and 1 × Queensland (total: 6 students).

Focus Group 5: 1 × Queensland and 1 × Victoria (total: 7 students).

Focus Group 6: 1 × Queensland, 1 × Victoria and 1 × South Africa (total: 10 students).

In total, 13 schools and 38 students participated in the study.

The importance of this research study was in understanding female student leadership in the girls' school context as this is an under explored area. Therefore, while there would have been many benefits from comparing female students from single-sex schools to their counterparts in co-educational settings, this comparison was outside the scope of this research project. Therefore, such a comparison would be recommended for further research in this area.

## Findings and discussion

The research questions were explored by each of the focus groups. The findings and a discussion of these findings are outlined separately below. Each section is headed under the questions, What is leadership?, Where/how was leadership taught? and How was leadership practised? A conclusion to all three of these questions then follows.

### *What is leadership?*

Many students who participated in the focus group discussions saw leadership as a positive influence over others, often with the leader leading others by example or inspiring others. This concept is demonstrated through the following student examples:

I look at leadership as not necessarily giving speeches, etc but leading by example. (Student 2, Group 1)

To me, leadership is about taking on responsibilities, being active in a community and aspiring to be a positive influence for those around us. (Student 3, Group 1)

Leadership to me is setting an example, being the leader you think is needed, whether that is being the person up front or encouraging from the back of the pack . . . depends on what you want to achieve. (Student 4, Group 1)

Leadership is being a positive influence, you have to stand to your values and rules-sometimes this can upset people. (Student 1, Group 1)

Leadership to me is being able to inspire a group of people, to build a relationship with them and forge ahead together in some kind of project. (Student 5, Group 1)

Leadership — influencing others, management — ensuring everything runs smoothly. (Student 4, Group 2)

Leadership to me is about inspiring and motivating people to try new things and participate in activities that you share a common interest in. (Student 4, Group 2)

Leadership isn't about controlling people, at [name of school] we have a lot of options for girls to be leaders for certain areas such as dance or sport which allows them to get a feel for how they lead and also for other girls to be inspired because they have students to look up to, not to obey. (Student 2, Group 5)

Leadership is not always being in the spotlight but also doing work behind the scenes that is not always recognised but valuable contribution. (Student 7, Group 1)

Leadership is building future leaders, not the number of followers. (Student 2, Group 4)

Others saw leadership as a process of engagement with other students.

Leadership is the skill to engage people to follow you towards your vision, and help encourage them to achieve their full potential. (Student 6, Group 1)

Leadership involves people! (Student 1, Group 2)

Leadership is actively engaging with people and trying to achieve a win-win situation for everyone. (Student 2, Group 2)

Leadership is about working as part of a team. (Student 1, Group 4)

And being able to work through difficulties and problems and encouraging team members to do their best. (Student 3, Group 4)

It's about taking a personal interest in each person in the community but still working with the community as a whole. (Student 3, Group 4)

Leadership also involved a subset of skills or attributes.

[Leadership is] 90% instinct, for me. You have to know how to read people and how to communicate. (Student 1, Group 2)

I think that leadership is mostly about being confident enough to take responsibility for things. (Student 1, Group 2)

Being a friend to all students and being able to talk to them on everyday basis as well as communicating effectively to the public. (Student 2, Group 3)

It is about listening to peers and the school community. (Student 4, Group 4)

Leadership was also articulated as being a representative of or for a group.

My perspective of leadership is being a representative for the student body in the wider community. (Student 1, Group 3)

Leadership to us is someone who can speak up for the girls and for the girls to look up to us! (Student 2, Group 6)

I think leadership is very important in a school environment and in society in general. It is important that everyone is heard, but it is also necessary that there are students that take the lead and make suggestions and also make sure the general student body's ideas are heard. (Student 3, Group 6)

Leadership was also seen as a service to others.

Being a leader is about holding the 'badge' and having the name. However, showing leadership is about servant leadership and living out your day to day life, in such a way that embodies the values of leadership. (Student 3, Group 3)

Leadership is the act of service and showing initiative for younger grades of the school. (Student 3, Group 5)

Servant Leadership is a principle of leading from behind, by encouraging and gaining the participation of everyone. Everybody is regarded as having the potential to lead. (Student 4, Group 6)

The female adolescent perception of leadership, as demonstrated through the focus group discussions, was varied but also quite cohesive in aspects of understanding. Generally the girls were more likely to describe the attributes or qualities of leadership than the skills required. Leadership was described in terms of leaders who were active, positive, inspiring, engaging, encouraging, influencing, unwavering and had initiative. Whereas students indicated that the skills of leadership involved such things as the ability to communicate and listen as well as being able to manage and work with others. These responses supported McGregor's (2007: 90) study that described student leadership as 'more a process than a person' and a 'relationship rather than role' (p. 90). Phrases such as 'aspiring to be a positive influence', 'actively engaging with people', 'being a friend', 'working as part of a team', 'the act of service' highlighted this altruistic understanding of leadership. These examples also support the finding that adolescent girls tend to understand leadership as a cooperative rather than competitive action (Mullen and Tuten, 2004).

The notion of working both for and part of a community was a common element of student responses. In being part of a community the process of listening and being heard was apparent. The notion of listening was also raised in a study conducted by Culp and Kohlhagen (2000). In this study adolescents of mixed gender found that a leader was someone who had the ability to 'listen to others' (Culp and Kohlhagen, 2000: 57). One student stated that 'it is important that everyone is heard', another indicated, 'it is about listening to peers and the school community'. These comments acknowledged the importance of not only working with a broader community in exercising leadership, but making this community part of the leadership process by listening to their needs and opinions or order to act for them.

In summary, leadership was described by adolescent girls as the active process of working with others in a positive way. By this the girls indicated the importance of being a positive influence, leading by example and inspiring others. Students also saw leadership as the process of engagement with other students. The notion of team work and community were seen as an important part of leadership, leadership was not attributed to the individual but rather the action of a group. Students also acknowledged that leadership was a subset of skills or attributes and that leadership could involve being a representative of or for a group. Finally, the notion of leadership as service to others was recognized by students. These understandings of leadership demonstrated that adolescent female students had a strong and comprehensive perception of leadership within their personal educational contexts.

### *Where/how was leadership taught?*

After understanding the adolescent female point of view regarding the definition of leadership, the need to gain insight as to where and how leadership was taught in schools was important. With regard to this, students recognized the formal teaching of leadership as an important component of student leadership development in schools. However, the formal teaching of leadership was still undertaken in a variety of ways.

We get a lot of guest speakers coming; just yesterday a girl from the Australia Youth Coalition on Climate change came in to speak to us and that was very inspiring. (Student 2, Group 2)

We did have a leadership program run last year for all the newly elected school leaders which I think would happen every year as the new leaders are elected. (Student 4, Group 2)

The girls elected as school leaders underwent an orientation program in which we discussed key qualities, who we can ask for advice, etc. but I don't think there is such a program for all students. (Student 2, Group 2)

There is a day called Planning day where all leadership skills needed from year 9 s to year 12 are taught but I guess this is not for the whole school but only for the SRC. (Student 3, Group 2)

We participate in leadership days; workshops, etc where guest speakers just inspire us. We have life skills lessons where we work on teamwork. They give us guidelines when you become a leader but ultimately it's up to you to define the position. (Student 2, Group 3)

We have a leadership seminar at the end of year nine which is our first introduction into the school's main leadership system. We also hold retreats at the end of Year 11 of the prefect body to reflect on leadership and its components. (Student 4, Group 3)

At our school we have different programs right from Year 8 which teach us the importance of leaders and how to be an effective one. (Student 7, Group 6)

Students at our school have leadership days a few times a year where skills such as speaking skills and teamwork are practised. (Student 1, Group 4)

Our retreat and camp programs are a good place to learn these skills. (Student 5, Group 4)

Through performance psychology (a program at our school) we are taught and shown strategies and tips about empowering women. (Student 1, Group 6)

While it was acknowledged that schools offered leadership programmes, some participants recognized that students already had the skills of leadership and therefore did not need to have this formally taught.

We have some workshops, etc. to show us the logistics and to help with some areas, but mostly I think the people who are elected have proven beforehand that they are naturally capable. (Student 1, Group 2)

Because our school hardly needs to 'promote' leadership as girls are already quite motivated themselves, it is hardly ever needed but we still have had leadership programs – for example when our school leaders for this year were elected in we had a whole workshop day dedicated to building leadership skills. (Student 3, Group 2)

Leadership was also taught through teacher co-ordination and role modelling.

[Name of teacher] is the leadership co-ordinator and has come in new this year and the way in which she handles the delegation and responsibility of being in charge of the leaders is very good to see. (Student 4, Group 2)

I think that leadership in the classroom, as a part of teaching, is respected and valued by the students when the teacher has the ability to control a class and also have a bit of fun. I think this demonstrates that leadership is about balance. Teachers demonstrating this in the classroom help I think are a helpful guide. (Student 3, Group 3)

Other students saw leadership as intrinsically taught in all aspects of school life.

Our school teaches us about leadership through a number of different leadership courses and also in every day life, acting by the rules, stances against bullying and ensuring that you maintain the values of the school. (Student 3, Group 3)

At [name of school] we are encouraged to lead in all areas of school life; we go on leadership camps and are given ample opportunities to lead. Especially as in Year 12, every girl is given the opportunity to lead as they sit on a committee. (Student 6, Group 6)

While it was acknowledged that leadership was taught in all areas of school, it was also linked to some specific subject areas.

It is taught in these areas in our school especially science and maths are encouraged. (Student 5, Group 4)

It is taught in most areas, focused in PD (personal development) lessons. (Student 1, Group 4)

Leadership was taught to the female student leaders studied through a variety of ways, most of these were reported as formal programmes and activities; however, the informal teaching of leadership was also mentioned. Types of formal programmes included workshops, retreats and planning days, while guest speakers were also used as a way of teaching or modelling leadership to students. Some specific types of programmes were mentioned such as personal development (PD) lessons and performance psychology.

However, students also indicated that leadership did not always need to be taught; instead leadership could be learnt through experience or was evident as a result of the qualities of the individual. One student stated, 'our school hardly needs to "promote" leadership as girls are already quite motivated themselves'. Learning leadership as a process of engaging in daily activities was also mentioned, as seen in the example, '[leadership is taught] in every day life, acting by the rules, stances against bullying and ensuring that you maintain the values of the school'. These types of responses are interesting in relation to the findings reported by Higham et al. (2010). These authors found that if adolescent leadership was authentic then good action would emerge as a response to ethical interactions with others. Thus authentic leadership emerged through the process of learning 'to be' rather than being 'taught about'.

The student leaders studied articulated a clear understanding of how and where leadership was taught in their school settings. Starting with the identification of formal programmes and activities, students also recognized that they brought their own understanding of leadership that was developed through personal experience, and thus leadership did not always need to be taught formally. Students also recognized that leadership was taught intrinsically through all aspects of school life, whether this was through peer interaction or through the classroom or other types of school activities. Leadership was therefore taught to students in explicit and implicit ways.

### *How was leadership practised?*

After gaining an understanding of the female adolescent view of leadership and how and where leadership was taught it was also seen as important to understand how leadership was practised in schools from a student point of view. As seen through the following student phrases, leadership was practised in a variety of ways in the schools attended by the participants. One of the main ways

in which leadership practice was acknowledged was through the formal roles and positions held by students.

At [name of school] we have a range of leadership programs including Year 12 prefects, peer support in Year 11, SRC, Big Sister Program (acting as mentors) and we encourage to participate in extra-curricular activities to lead in our communities. (Student 6, Group 1)

At [name of school] we have a large Student Exec of Prefects, House Captains, School Captains and Boarder captains. We also have groups in our school that focus on certain aspects of our community. It's our job to encourage and inspire the younger girls to explore and widen their understanding of what our community is. (Student 3, Group 1)

Our school provides many opportunities for leadership not only in Year 12 but in Year 11 also! An example of this is SRC General Secretary and SRC Treasurer. (Student 3, Group 2)

At [name of school] there are heaps of leadership opportunities, including form captains and social service captains in each form in each year level, and quite a lot of captaincy roles in Year 12. Our Year 9s are at a different campus so they have 4 house captains each semester as well as the form and social service captains. (Student 4, Group 5)

Well at our school, we have a body of 22 prefects which are elected by the year group and the teaching staff. (Student 1, Group 6)

They are different positions which cover different aspects of our school. (Student 1, Group 6)

We have 136 grade twelve leadership positions and 144 for each grade. (Student 7, Group 6)

We have a Student Representative Council which includes 2 leaders from each grade, elected by their peers. In the Matric grade [Year 12] we have a School Leadership Council which includes 10 Committee Chairpersons and a Head Girl and Deputy Head Girl, all democratically elected. (Student 4, Group 6)

We also have a student representative council with 2 girls from each year level, within each homeroom we have class representatives and mission representatives who are elected by their classmates. (Student 1, Group 6)

Examples of how leadership was practised in informal ways were also quite diverse. Leadership was either not acknowledged as a role or involved the informal interaction between students.

I think that there are different forms of leaders and some may not be officially recognised. (Student 6, Group 1)

Often someone shows initiative and can lend a helping hand when they see someone in need. (Student 1, Group 5)

I prefer leadership in a casual manner rather than the formal aspect. I like to talk to people and get to know them first before leading them. I rely on humour a lot as well. (Student 2, Group 3)

Leadership also involved acting as a voice for others.

I think the school allows the school leaders to present their view on the changes or improvements needed in the school and also gives us the freedom to voice them in front of the whole school which what makes us able to take action. (Student 3, Group 2)

I endeavour to give everyone a voice and make sure my decisions suit the majority although I've learnt that not everyone can be pleased. (Student 1, Group 3)

I would hope that I promote a style of leadership that shows that I respect, listen to and respond to the needs of the students. I also hope that my leadership allows for people to become motivated and excited about activities, especially concerning social justice in our school. (Student 3, Group 3)

Leadership was also practised through the influence of others.

It is definitely influencing the whole school as it is something that is looked up to from the beginning of Year 9. (Student 3, Group 2)

At our school, we combine influencing others and motivating them toward a common goal which is usually about service to others or social justice issues. (Student 3, Group 3)

Even if you are not a "leader" as such you still influence the people around you and I think that's a part of leadership. (Student 6, Group 1)

The practice of servant leadership was also recognized by students.

Our school places an emphasis on service to others, and teaches that from that, we can influence and motivate. (Student 4, Group 3)

At a school level, leadership is predominantly about service. My experiences of leadership at my school have been centred around doing service to the school and to the students. (Student 4, Group 3)

I would like to think I am what our school calls a servant leader, but whether I achieve that or not is difficult for me to evaluate personally. (Student 4, Group 3)

At [name of school], we believe in Servant Leadership as opposed to a system of prefects. (Student 4, Group 6)

Leadership was also practised through active participation in school- and community-based activities.

I see leadership at [name of school] as the opportunity for the students to play an active role in schooling life and acting as a role model for younger students in the school. I think it is shown at [name of school] through a number of different positions for different aspects of schooling life, wherein the leaders are involved in developing activities, organising events to benefit and motivate other students. (Student 3, Group 3)

Leadership is practised in almost every aspect of our school where every girl in the senior school is seen as a leader and role model to the younger grades. (Student 1, Group 5)

Leadership is practised and awarded to students at our school who are willing to put in the initiative and effort to organise and direct other students so a group or organisation can be successful within the school. It is a wide spread belief at our school that someone shouldn't take control of a situation because of their own ego, but for the betterment of the majority of students. (Student 5, Group 5)

At [name of school], leadership positions relate to teamwork, service, and how much a person can contribute to the College community. As a senior leader at [name of school], I practise leadership by upholding College values and liaising with staff to improve College life. We look upon leadership

as a chance to give back to the school community. Leadership at [name of school] means being an active member of the senior cohort and, more importantly, the larger school community. (Student 6, Group 5)

It is shown through our school through a wide range of leadership opportunities available to everyone even starting from Year 9. (Student 4, Group 2)

Leadership was also practised by working with others to achieve objectives.

Within our school it is evident within all aspects of the school. As a leader, it isn't about the position but being part of the team and showing the way. (Student 3, Group 5)

Leadership is definitely not a one man show! It requires cooperation and teamwork and working together with others to reach a goal. Yes, as a leader you do need to 'lead' others but you can't be an effective leader unless you work closely with whom you represent. (Student 4, Group 5)

I strongly believe in the power of teamwork. Working with people is an effective way to develop an idea. (Student 6, Group 5)

Leadership is about delegating jobs to others but as captains our job is to oversee it. (Student 7, Group 5)

With regard to how leadership was practised in the participant's schools, the responses were divided into two main categories; leadership roles and leadership behaviour. Examples of leadership roles included such things as peer support leaders, prefects, head girl positions, house and committee captains and being a member of the student representative council (SRC). It was often noted that leadership positions were available across year groups in schools. In these roles students organized and directed school activities and events. However, it was also noted that not all leadership roles were officially recognized, supporting the notion that leadership was a behaviour, not only a position (McGregor, 2007). Leadership programmes were also mentioned such as 'peer support' and a 'big sister program', these activities gave students the opportunity to implement their leadership skills. The extensiveness of leadership roles and opportunities was encapsulated by one student who stated: 'leadership is practised in almost every aspect of our school'.

With regard to leadership behaviour the responses were closely associated with those provided in the earlier question, What is leadership? Leadership was practised in schools through acts of motivation, influence, inspiration, encouragement, teamwork and cooperation. Leadership practice for girls was articulated as an act of doing and working with others. An example of this was seen through the student comment, 'within our school [leadership] is evident within all aspects of the school. As a leader, it isn't about the position but being part of the team and showing the way.' Leadership practice was recognized as impacting on both the individual and the community in a positive way. The practice of servant leadership was also raised by students. This practice of leadership supported the finding indicated in the literature review that servant leadership is often articulated by girls' schools as the most common type of leadership practiced (Archard, 2009). This type of leadership behaviour in schools also supported the concept of leadership as moral development as raised earlier by Dempster et al. (2010).

Student voice was acknowledged as an important component with regard to the practice of leadership. This was shown through the student statement: 'I think the school allows the school leaders to present their view on the changes or improvements needed in the school and also gives us the freedom to voice them in front of the whole school which what makes us able to take action'. The

potential for student voice to impact on the pedagogic structures of the school, thereby influencing staff and student relationships as well as teaching and learning practices, was raised by Lizzio (2011). The student focus on this aspect of leadership gives rise to the possibility of such action in schools.

The way in which leadership was practised in the girls' schools studied, as articulated by student leaders, was therefore varied and complex. Leadership was practised both formally, through roles and positions, and informally, through peer interaction and by such things as the utilization of student voice as a tool for action. Leadership was also practised through the influence of others and conveyed through the notion of servant leadership, ultimately resulting in a positive outcome for all involved. Students practised leadership through the participation in school and community activities and by working with others in order to achieve common objectives.

## Conclusion

The importance of studying adolescent leadership and understanding how student leadership behaviour might in turn impact on the adult practice and acquisition of this concept formed the rationale behind this study. This was seen as particularly important for girls with regard to understanding if educational practice and schooling experience could be used as a tool for addressing the current imbalance of women leaders in society. The answer to this question lies outside of the scope of this study; however, what this research has presented is a beginning to understanding this phenomenon. By first coming to terms with the adolescent female construct of leadership, educators and researchers alike can use this information to inform practice for developing female leaders. Female students can be taught leadership in a way that both develops and expands their current understanding. This can then ensure that the practice of leadership by girls in schools is comprehensive and aimed towards the development of women leaders for the future.

The importance of giving voice to students, particularly female students, was also raised by this study. By giving students voice pedagogical practice can be better informed by those who will be immediately impacted by its implementation. A recent shift in the research of leadership has not only recognized the importance of adolescent leadership but also in gaining the opinion of adolescents. The fact that girls often experience a silencing of voice in adolescence adds importance to collecting their understanding. This research practice may then teach girls to use their voice and give importance to what they have to say.

With regard to the findings of this study, even though the female student leaders were from quite diverse locations, their perceptions of leadership have enabled a cohesive understanding of the concept to be found. This study found that girls had a very clear understanding of the meaning of leadership and that they viewed this concept as the active process of working with others in a positive way. This involved influencing and inspiring others towards a common goal or representing others and their point of view. The participants also acknowledged that leadership was mostly taught through specific programmes and activities; however, leadership was also intrinsic in nature and did not always need to be taught formally, instead it could be learnt through experience. Students indicated that they were exposed to many leadership opportunities at their school and leadership was practised in a variety of both formal and informal ways. The notion of serving and meeting the needs of others became apparent in the student practice of leadership.

The opportunity for female students to have a voice regarding their understanding of leadership will allow educators to in turn understand the adolescent construction of leadership. It may then be possible to expose others to this understanding and thus make them more accepting of the practice

of female adolescent leadership and thus more in tune to their needs. This reciprocal process will then help facilitate the evaluation and improvement of educational practices that are aimed at developing not only female adolescent leaders but also future women leaders. Further exploration is needed in order to ascertain the ways in which this understanding can be better utilized in order to develop both the desire for leadership and the leadership potential of girls when they enter adulthood. Perhaps educators would be benefited by the provision of a framework that presents first the adolescent girls' understanding of leadership within their current context, and then identifies specific areas for development with the purpose of ensuring that girls are prepared for future leadership roles. It will be these active measures, in conjunction with a societal acceptance of female leadership, which will help address the current lack of women in prominent leadership positions in the workforce.

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### Author biography

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