

Enabling students to participate in school improvement through a Students as Researchers programme

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Abstract

This paper explores students' potential to make a difference to their school through a Students as Researchers programme. It begins by discussing the impetus for the current increase in student voice initiatives in schools. It continues the debate around issues of student empowerment and students' identity as change agents through an analysis of the development of a Students as Researchers (SAR) programme designed to support school improvement. The article investigates the possibilities for impact offered by a stepped approach to the student research process, early planning for impact and a strong student/teacher partnership. Issues are illuminated through reference to the authors' work with Students as Researchers groups in several UK schools. The article concludes with an exploration of ways of enhancing the impact of students' work on the development of their schools.

Key words: student researchers, student voice, school improvement, power, impact

Students make up around 95% of a school's population. They are often bright, vibrant young people who have much to offer. Yet we rarely give them the opportunity to take the initiative to improve their school. Instead, they become the passive recipients of policy and practice, rather than active agents of change.

Legislation has, to date, done little to change this practice. Article 12 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child placed in law the rights of young people to be consulted about matters which affect their lives (UN, 1989). The new OFSTED arrangements include the expectation that student consultation forms a regular feature of a school's self-evaluation processes (DfES, 2004a). The Every Child Matters framework (DfES, 2003) and Youth Matters consultation process (DES, 2005) also raised the expectation that young people's views should be taken into account. Yet many still see themselves as increasingly marginalised, with their opinions often ignored, the 'unconsulted majority' talked of in the IPiL project¹ (Frost, Frost, MacBeath and Pedder, 2009).

Recent policy moves towards recognising young people's unique understanding of the learning and teaching process may herald a new reality for student involvement however. Following the 'Working Together' guidance from the DCSF in May 2008, it seems likely that student consultation will become a requirement, reinforced in statute.

Schools will be legally forced to consult pupils on everything from the way they are taught to behaviour and uniform policies under a new law backed by the government this week. The changes will put the trend towards 'pupil voice' firmly on the statute books.

(TES, November 14th 2008)

A note of caution still needs to be struck. Despite their own highly developed sense of entitlement and greater economic power in the world, children's capabilities in school remain wildly underestimated (Rudduck, 2004). Legislation which compels schools simply to listen to students rather than empower them to act continues to ignore young people's potential and is in danger of incorporating their contributions towards essentially conservative ends. In our view, student voice should be about more than asking children their opinion. Instead, using initiatives such as Students as Researchers (SAR) programmes can provide students with a means to contribute to institutional change (Fielding and Bragg, 2003).

This article continues the debate about student empowerment and their identity as change agents through an analysis of our experience of devising a Students as Researchers programme aimed at supporting young people in making a difference to their school (Nash and Roberts, 2009). We have experimented with SAR work in a number of schools in which we provide support as educational consultants. Here we share what we have learned about one way to stimulate children's ability to initiate change. We present a reflective narrative through which we consider the conditions which support the development of a SAR programme and the issues which we confronted. We use the seven steps in our SAR programme to structure this account, discussing issues arising and also raising questions for further exploration.

¹ IPiL project: The Influence and Participation of Children and Young People in their Learning, commissioned by the GTC.

The context of ‘fragile’ schools

The schools in which we developed our *Supporting Students as Researchers: making a difference to your school* programme operate in challenging circumstances. Many are, or have been, a cause for concern to the local education authority and, although working to address these concerns, often remain fragile in terms of their ability to secure long-term stability. The Students as Researchers programme is seen as one strand of a complex web of action and intervention, designed to shore up and sustain progress.

We were interested, then, in developing a programme which enables students to contribute to their school’s improvement. We worked with students from across the age and ability range in a number of Hertfordshire schools. We wanted to evaluate the programme’s impact at individual student and whole-school levels in our project schools. We therefore gathered data from a number of sources. We made field notes during planning meetings with the lead teacher of the Students as Researchers groups and during discussions with senior leaders. We supplemented field notes made during our sessions with the students with data gained through student response sheets and focus group discussions. This data has been used to inform and shape our own developing understanding and, in this article, to reveal the voices of the programme’s participants.

Voice, consultation, participation and research

The terminology used to describe the gathering of students’ perspectives is diverse and potentially misleading. *Student voice* is now an accepted term in schools. It is generally used to mean the provision of opportunities for students to express their views, with the expectation that someone will listen although not necessarily act, a position referred to as *student consultation* by some writers (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). *Student participation* is a development of *voice*, used in the literature (Demetriou and Rudduck, 2004), and in government guidance (DfES, 2004b) to refer to the active involvement of students in decision-making, in evaluating their own learning and in taking on positions of responsibility within the school. *Student research* could be seen as a development of *participation*, where students identify and respond to something which matters to them, rather than simply commenting on concerns brought by others. Where Students as Researchers models highlight the research process rather than potential impact, it is the opportunity for children to engage in in-depth study which is seen to be of value (Kellet, 2005). In a school improvement model, the use of data to illuminate a chosen issue and, with the support of teachers, to bring about change is the student researcher’s fundamental purpose (Fielding and Rudduck, 2002; Demetriou and Rudduck, 2004).

In this paper we use the term *Students as Researchers* to describe the process whereby students identify aspects of schooling to which they want to make a difference. Students are supported in developing their skills in investigating their area of interest, in sharing what they discover with others, in planning to do something to continue to make a difference and in putting their plans into action.

It appears that students are becoming increasingly involved in commenting on their unique experience of schooling. In some schools, students are also given the opportunity to research the nature of that experience, to discover more about learning,

teaching and other aspects of school policy and practice through focused inquiry. Categorising the research which students undertake can be challenging, however. It cannot be regarded as having the same characteristics as practitioner research, nor is it overtly scholarly. It seeks to problematise the experience of schooling, rather than to produce generalisable 'findings'. We found Thomson and Gunter's (2007) description of students' activity as 'standpoint research' to be helpful. We wanted to encourage students to reveal multiple perspectives on learning and teaching and school life. We wanted to support them in taking on the role of expert witnesses (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004) and encourage them to display a 'professionalism' which teachers would acknowledge and which might lead to action (Watts and Youens, 2007). With these aims in mind we developed a Students as Researchers programme designed to:

- provide an opportunity for students to articulate their views about learning and teaching, developing their understanding whilst working in partnership with teachers
- develop students' ability to use this new understanding to influence school policy and practice in a positive manner
- develop students' positive self-image as learners

The students' research process is conceived as a journey of discovery. The journey metaphor proved similarly useful to us in working alongside teachers leading SAR groups (lead teachers) to conceptualise the different stages in the development of an appropriate programme for their school. The first stage in developing such a programme comprises exploratory and preparatory work.

Stage 1 - Getting ready for the journey

Through our early experiences with Students as Researchers groups we learned the importance of considering a particular school's philosophy and practice with regard to student participation, to allow the development of a SAR programme which is contextually appropriate. In the current accountability policy context, it is understandable that teachers may view student researchers as another potential source of criticism (MacBeath, Demetriou, Rudduck and Myers, 2003). Senior leaders in a number of schools reflected this concern.

I wanted teachers to realise that students have something important to say about teaching and learning and it's not just criticism.

(Headteacher, School A)

A culture of trust therefore needs to be developed to allow students the freedom to undertake research which could contribute to school improvement (Rudduck and Flutter, 2003). We provided lead teachers with a selection of tools to help them both to open the debate with colleagues regarding student participation and to continue this dialogue throughout the life of the project. Involving parents through the use of a consent letter and informative updates on what students are discovering (Alderson and Morrow, 2004) provided access to another layer of interest and support.

The composition of the Students as Researchers group is another important consideration at this planning stage. Senior leaders acknowledged the potential imbalance of voices heard in schools.

Although we have a well-developed Student Parliament, the nature of students who volunteer tend to be confident and articulate.

(Headteacher, School B)

We were keen to have a Students as Researchers programme because up until now student voice has been ad hoc and unstructured with the danger of only the keen and interested being listened to.

(Headteacher, School A)

Mindful of the potentially powerful impact of student voice initiatives on student self-perception and identity (Rudduck and Flutter, 2003; Halsey, Murfield, Harland and Lord, 2007), we wanted to ensure that all project school students had the opportunity to become members of the SAR group. We therefore sought to develop a participatory rather than purely representative approach to student involvement (Whitty and Wisby, 2007), believing the involvement of a catholic group of students to be key to authentic and sustainable student involvement in the school improvement process.

We tried to avoid the temptation to work only with those students whose voices we wanted to hear (Black-Hawkins, 2005), who we knew would be co-operative (Monahan, 1999), who would be articulate (Hadfield and Hawe, 2001) and could produce a polished final report that we could all be proud of. In some schools we sought proactively to include the more challenging students within the Students as Researchers group. Our previous work with such students had demonstrated to us their potential to reveal insights into learning and teaching from the perspective of non-conformity (Russell, 2007). Comments from this cohort on their initial feelings about being part of a SAR group are therefore interesting.

I think I'm lucky that I got in it. I feel I'm good at these things. Most lessons I don't like so I don't do it. It's like having views on things and it makes you feel more important.

(Student A, School B)

It makes me feel important because it's the first one.

(Student B, School B)

The opportunity to succeed in a new context has had a clear and positive impact on the self-image of these students at this early stage of the programme, challenging their perception of themselves as 'stuck' in a negative learner role (Rudduck and Flutter, 2003). We return to this cohort of students as we continue to consider the personal impact of involvement in the SAR programme later in this article.

Considering the locus of power

Students in our early SAR groups struggled both with some of the practicalities of research work and with securing the impact they had planned for. We recognised that we needed to put in place arrangements which involved teachers, yet ensured that students retained the role of project leaders (Fielding, 2004). Students suggested an insightful solution.

I think we would have more chance of things changing if teachers worked alongside us because it would be someone you know and could talk to.

(Student C, School A)

We therefore introduced the concept of co-researchers. Co-researchers are drawn from the teaching and support staff. In an inversion of many co-researcher models (Fielding, 2004), the research agenda remains student-led. Adults work alongside students, offering them conceptual support in imagining the structure of their research project and practical support in, for example, the collection and interpretation of data. Concerned that teachers in particular would find the change of role from leader to supporter challenging, we addressed this directly in the guidance material produced for co-researchers.

*One of the most challenging aspects of being a co-researcher can be developing a clear understanding of leadership roles with your student partner. Our student-teacher partnership is **student-led**, with the teacher acting in a supportive role. It is **their** journey, we are just here to help them on their way!*

(Nash and Roberts, 2009:18)

In practice, the location of power in the student-teacher partnerships appeared unproblematic to the participants. Roles became more fluid, fostering creative ways of working (Somekh *et al.*, 2006). Adults supported students in collecting their data and in making meaning of it through student-led dialogue, rare in the context of many schools (Fielding, 1999).

She (the student researcher) was in control of her project and I just listened and made the odd suggestion. I was also there for her to copy questionnaires, distribute them etc.

(Co-researcher A, School C)

My co-researcher helped me a lot and understood everything I wanted to change.

(Student A, School C)

This challenge to traditional power relations was key in establishing the authenticity of the students' research work.

Stage 2 - Making the journey

The preparatory work over, students are ready to begin their research. In the *Supporting Students as Researchers: making a difference to your school* programme the students' research is conceived as a journey of seven steps, expressed as a series of questions.

- Step 1: What do I want to make a difference to?
- Step 2: What information do I need to find out?
- Step 3: How will I find this out?
- Step 4: How will I organise what I find out?
- Step 5: How will I make sense of what I've learned?
- Step 6: How will I tell other people about what I've learned?
- Step 7: How can I continue to make a difference to my school?

Students use their answers to these questions to design and undertake a research project. Symbols are used to illuminate aspects of the students' research journey. We hoped that this iconic representation of new learning (Bruner, 1966) associated with the research process would help students to build their understanding at a conceptual level. A picture of a stone being dropped into water, for example, is used in the programme to illustrate the possibilities for impact. A student's initial project may be narrow in scope but the ripples from it may be far-reaching within the school. Students are encouraged to use these symbols, and any others which are known and understood in their particular school context, to help them to make meaning of their research work and its contribution to school improvement.

Our aim was to develop a programme which was self-supporting once we had left the school. In consultation with the lead teachers, we therefore devised resources to support students at each step through:

- providing information
- stimulating student reflection and supporting decision-making
- providing models for writing activities
- supporting student researchers in partnership working
- checking for understanding

A series of teachers' notes, giving guidance on how the resources might be used, was also developed. This support material has now been produced in the form of a teacher handbook (Nash and Roberts, 2009).

Planning for impact

Students are encouraged to consider the impact they wish to secure at an early stage of their journey. They begin by focusing on what they want to make a difference to. We are clear that this choice of agenda is entirely theirs. In some cases, this challenges their experience of other student voice initiatives, for example, school councils (Hadfield and Hawe, 2001; Raymond, 2001). Students appreciate this freedom to choose which they see as contrasting with their experience in some other aspects of school life.

We don't have view on things in normal lessons. We do work and that's it. We don't have a choice. The teachers set it.

(Student D, School B)

There appears to be renewed interest in the impact of student leadership initiatives on learning (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Students are encouraged to plan for impact throughout the *Supporting Students as Researchers: making a difference to your school* programme. Although difficult to evidence, we wished to attempt to evaluate the impact of the students' research projects. Students we worked with had clear, and variable, views on the possibility that their work would change anything. Their thoughts are discussed in our evaluation of impact later in this article.

Stage 3 - Next steps in making a difference

The *Supporting Students as Researchers: making a difference to your school* programme seeks, then, to overturn the common construction of students as passive respondents to teacher-led initiatives. Instead, it aims to empower students to reconstruct themselves as creators of knowledge (Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Bragg and Fielding, 2005). Students have, by now, created such knowledge on the seven steps of their research journey. They have made plans for action based on what they have learned. They now need to focus on using these plans to continue to make a difference to their school. The lead teacher takes a key role in providing students with an opportunity to report to other students, teachers and senior leaders on what they have learned and what they now plan to do.

The response which adults make to what students share is a vital component in difference-making (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Children interpret the 'right' teacher response as validating what they have discovered and, by extension, their own position as bona fide knowledge creators. Students' suggestions tend to be acceptable to teachers when they ask them to extend their existing practices or offer sensible, practical and purposeful ideas (McIntyre, Pedder and Rudduck, 2005). The students we worked with seemed well aware of the importance of teachers being able to recognise and access their suggestions. This was often expressed as teachers 'liking' what was being proposed.

I think the teacher will take up the learning style if she likes it.

(Student B, School A)

I don't know if anything will change. I think it could because Mr. Jones (Deputy Headteacher) had views on it and liked the ideas.

(Student E, School B)

The opposite position was equally recognised.

Some of the teachers might listen but they think they are doing everything right already. I don't think they will change what they are doing.

(Student F, School B)

It has been argued that SAR programmes can be used to deconstruct the myth of the teacher always being right (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). Our experience with this particular programme suggests that the myth is not so easily exploded.

Some teachers shared with us their concerns over the perceived decision-making power given to children through Students as Researchers programmes, a recognised reaction to student participation initiatives (Stoll and Fink, 1996). However, in our experience, children are generally well aware that they will not have the final say (Roche, 1999 cited in Flutter and Rudduck, 2004), understanding the difference between partnership working and decision-making (Monahan, 1999).

It would be the teachers who would get to decide.

(Student G, School B)

Instead, they appreciate the opportunity for a dialogue with adults which might lead to a balanced viewpoint.

I am hoping to present this to the senior staff and it will be them who make the decision whether it will go ahead.

(Student B, School C)

There is an intrinsic problem with this stance however. Accepting that the decision-making responsibility rests with adults simultaneously removes from students any responsibility to take action.

Teachers will think about our research and probably put it into action because they will want to know what will help students to learn better.

(Student C, School B)

Encouraging teachers and students to view leadership as a relational process of influence rather than as hierarchical gives more opportunities for recognising students as leaders (McGregor, 2007). However, if students are to act as partners in the school improvement process, they need to accept the attendant responsibilities as well as the rights which this position brings. We therefore began, in our later work with SAR groups, to put more emphasis on students' responsibility to act themselves to effect change. This had partial success.

This is more like the way adults work. We have more responsibility.

(Student A, School D)

It is their (students') school and it is their right to a better system, but only if they take the bull by the horns and do something.

(Student D, School C)

These students responded positively to our strategies to strengthen their ability to make their own judgements and to take action. However, many students, whilst acknowledging that something needed to be done, still saw themselves as advisors rather than actors (Mitra, 2001).

The responsibility for getting it known is the person who came up with the idea. The responsibility of getting it to the next level ... after a while I can't do anything more.

(Student E, School C)

I think ultimately the people higher up the school need to make and persevere with changes, but those changes should take the voice of the students into account more than anything else. It is also up to the students to make sure the people higher up the school change the right things.

(Student F, School C)

There remains a clear need to support students in converting talk into action. School leaders, recognising this difficulty, are experimenting with ways to further empower students.

Next year the SAR projects will be given a budget so that students take responsibility for what they plan to do as a result of their research.

(Headteacher, School A)

It will be interesting to evaluate both the symbolic and practical impact of such actions. At the time of writing we are trialling an alternative strategy with our SAR groups. Teachers and senior leaders are using a 'Response to student researchers' feedback form' to document the discussion they had with students when they presented their research work. They note action points for teachers and for the student researchers themselves. Students are thus reminded that the responsibility for action is a shared one. We want to see the effect of this process on student action, whilst recognising that this remains an area for development in our programme.

Evaluating the impact of the programme

Comparatively little research has been undertaken into the impact of using children's ideas to develop both individual teachers' practice and whole-school policy (Pedder and McIntyre, 2006). The majority of studies have concentrated on student decision-making in areas such as fundraising, homework and the school canteen (Ekholm, 2004), rather than on analysing the contribution which students can make to the ongoing development of their school. Although impact is rarely evaluated systematically (Halsey, Murfield, Harland and Lord, 2007), we wished to attempt to learn more about the impact of the current version of the *Supporting Students as Researchers: making a difference to your school* programme to inform future developments.

Within the programme, both students and teachers are asked to undertake evaluation activities. Students are asked to consider the impact of the SAR programme as a whole, in addition to considering the impact of their own research work. Latterly, teachers have been asked to consider ways in which the SAR project may have impacted on students, teachers and the wider school using Frost and Durrant's (2003) 'impact framework'. To date, student evaluation data has been more readily available to us than data from teachers. Some themes arising from the data are explored below.

Personal impact on student researchers

Students generally enjoyed undertaking a research project as part of a SAR group. They recognise that they acquired new skills which are useful elsewhere in the curriculum.

It has helped me to develop my skills when working in teams.

(Student A, School E)

We learned how to write a questionnaire.

(Student C, School E)

They also have a positive view of the influence of becoming a student researcher on their disposition and their view of themselves as learners.

I have found out what I can do when I concentrate.

(Student B, School E)

The work makes us feel more mature. We know we are being trusted to do something.

(Student B, School D)

In some schools, we had sought to include the more challenging students in the SAR group. Many of these students worked productively, and sometimes independently, as group members. They explained their positive disposition.

I felt, I am the one. It made me feel proud.

(Student C, School B)

This is real learning. Not like what we do in lessons...You don't have views on things in normal lessons. We do work and that's it. We don't have a choice. The teacher decides.

(Student A, School B)

For these student researchers, the positive impact of a sense of agency on learning disposition is clear. An agenda for the further involvement of students in curriculum planning is also raised. However, other challenging students remained unconvinced by the offer of a route to get their voice heard and influence the way their school worked.

We've done this stuff all before. It doesn't work. Nothing changed.

(Student G, School C)

These students tended to drop out of the programme. Finding a way to engage the hard to reach students who feel disenfranchised by current student voice initiatives (Silva, 2001) remains a challenge for us. Challenging students who do experience a sense of achievement through their SAR work also comment on its effect on their confidence

and self-esteem although this process is not yet well-understood (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007).

It makes you think when people say you are no good, I did that (the SAR project) so that can't be true.

(Student C, School B)

I wanted to know how the students feel when they are at school and what effects it has and what their main reasons are for coming in. I feel that by starting at the beginning you can work to the top and hopefully this is just the beginning!

(Student J, School C)

These students felt their SAR work posed a challenge both to their own negative self-perception and to the way in which others viewed them. Other students reported similar experiences.

We're getting more confident.

(Student B, School D)

I have gained more confidence in myself because I would never have been able to stand up in front of lots of people and give a speech.

(Student A, School A)

My confidence is growing with every meeting.

(Student H, School B)

The repetition of the word 'confidence' is marked here. For these students, the journey had become one of personal development – through their research work they were making a difference to themselves as well as to their school. Students were clearly developing an understanding of themselves as agents of change (Bandura, 1989; Frost, 2006).

Impact on student/teacher relationships

We were interested to learn more about the impact of the SAR programme on student/teacher relationships and mutual understanding (Mitra, 2001). From our evaluation of students' work with co-researchers it was clear that students and teachers had developed a viable working partnership within the boundaries of the SAR project. Students' experience as researchers seemed also to impact on their relationship with other teachers in the school, however.

I have learned that teachers and other staff are not so scary and that I can go and talk to them.

Student F, School A

I have seen students grow in self-confidence and they are all really pleased with what they achieved personally. They have presented to the "scary teachers" (their words, not mine) in school and answered questions with great confidence.

The blurring of roles of the educators and the educated evidenced here offers great potential for the further development of mutual learning (Raymond, 2001).

Impact on school improvement

Although impact on school improvement is identified as one of the main arguments for student voice (Whitty and Wisby, 2007; MacBeath, 1999), research which has investigated opportunities for students to contribute meaningfully to school life has found limited scope (Wyse, 2001, cited in Bragg and Fielding, 2005). Possible causes of this lack of influence are suggested as overambitious projects, coupled with insecure planning and staff changes (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). We are interested in developing a programme which enables students to contribute to the development of their school. We therefore sought views on the impact of their work at this level. Students both understood the SAR programme as an opportunity to exert influence at whole-school level and recognised their capacity to take up this opportunity.

It's good to be part of something like this. It's fun and we are helping ourselves and our friends.

(Student E, School D)

I've learned that I can and should make things happen.

(Student E, School C)

It has been the doorway into me being more involved in my school.

(Student F, School C)

These comments highlight students' understanding of their ability to participate fully in shaping their own learning experience. Developing further opportunities for staff/student dialogue about learning and teaching is seen by some lead teachers as the first step forward in realising this broader aim.

We have started to break down the barrier between staff and students and initiated conversations between them about learning and teaching that just didn't happen before.

(Lead Teacher, School C)

There is also a recognition that building pedagogic cultures in which students and teachers collaborate in the learning enterprise is a long term goal.

The effect on school practice has been slower than I anticipated. I realise now that my expectations were ambitious and that something as big as this will take time to really work.

(Lead Teacher, School C)

Students and teachers need to develop a shared understanding of their school's priorities if they are to be empowered to fully engage with the improvement agenda (Leith and

Mitchell, 2007). Despite slow progress, the impetus for change is seen to have been achieved however, with student leadership now being on schools' agendas and students and teachers being encouraged to begin to determine the future of the school together (Ranson, 2000).

Students as Researchers are actively looking to communicate and find things out and as such they play a major part in the leadership of the school ... When there is a joint conversation about what students value and what they believe could be improved and developed, then the school has moved forward.

(Headteacher, School A)

We have to use learners more successfully to help us to develop our understanding of learning and teaching. There's a recognition that we (students and teachers) need to work together on this.

(Headteacher, School B)

Headteachers appear, then, to be seeking ways to support students and teachers in working collaboratively to bring about school improvement.

Our own 'next steps' – an agenda for the further development of SAR work

We are interested in developing a number of aspects of our Students as Researchers work. We want to contribute to work in schools where teachers and students build knowledge together, as part of a learning community (Watkins, 2005). We are similarly concerned to enhance the inclusiveness of Students as Researchers groups and to support students in taking action to change their school rather than simply to describe it.

Supporting the development of students as decision-makers, exercising student leadership in its fullest sense through an understanding of their ability to influence themselves and others (Frost, 2006), remains an aspiration, reflected in Mitchell and Sackney's view of learning communities.

..in a learning community, individuals feel a deep sense of empowerment and autonomy and a deep personal commitment to the work of the school. This implies that people in the school form not just a community of learners but also a community of leaders.

(Mitchell and Sackney, 2000:93)

We are currently looking to pilot a series of joint working groups, where students and teachers who share similar concerns about an aspect of practice work together to develop a way forward. We are interested in how this might facilitate students' active contribution to the forward movement of their school, whilst moving a step nearer to a learning community in which student leadership can flourish.

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