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2008

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AUSTRALIA

Developing student leadership through service-learning

Shane Lavery

Adolescents possess enormous potential as leaders. They have the capacity to become leaders in the workplace, in their families, in the community, and in government. Increasingly, schools have taken on the important responsibility of the developing leadership in young people. Schools are, what van Linden and Fertman call, "hotbeds of leadership development" (1998, p. 224). For instance, Catholic schools have a commendable reputation for preparing, promoting, developing and nurturing elected student leaders. Fair and just elections, leadership camps, leadership reflection days, mixed school leadership programs, and leadership seminars, all form valid and valuable ways of preparing students for the challenges, responsibilities and joys of leadership (Lavery, 2002). This article examines two issues: first, it presents an understanding of service as a feasible model of leadership. Second, it proposes an experiential learning style, that of service-learning, as an appropriate method of preparing students for leadership.

Leadership as Service

Leadership is a fuzzy topic. Sergiovanni points out that despite the multitude of studies of leaders conducted over many years "we still do not understand what distinguishes leaders from nonleaders, effective leaders from ineffective leaders, and effective organizations from ineffective organizations" (1993, p. 1). He suggests two reasons for this situation: first, leadership is viewed as behaviour rather than action, as something psychological rather than spiritual, as having to do with people rather than ideas. Second, there has been an overemphasis on what he calls the "bureaucratic, psychological and technical-rational authority" (1993, p. 1), while neglecting professional and moral authority. As an antidote to this situation, Serviovanni argues that the moral dimension of leadership must be moved "from the periphery to the centre of inquiry, discussion and practice" (1993, p. 2).

One way of placing the moral dimension of leadership squarely at centre stage is to view leadership as service and the leader as servant. Servant leadership is not a new concept. At first glance the notion of servant leadership can appear problematic. How can one serve while at the same time act as a leader? Greenleaf (1977) attempts to address this apparent contradiction by better conceptualising the idea of servant leadership. He argues that servant leadership begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first, then lead. Greenleaf stresses that at the heart of such leadership is the wish "to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served" (1977, p. 13). He concludes that the best test of servant leadership is: "Do those being served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more

likely themselves to become servants?" (1977, p 13). Greenleaf also asks what effect one's leadership will have "on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?" (1977, p 14). Such an approach to leadership not only challenges an attitude where people "shoulder their way into leadership positions, driven by upward mobility and a thirst for personal success" (Beare, 1998, p. 2) but also suggests an alternative that is "selfless, large -souled, (and) expansively visioned" (Beare, 1998, p. 3). It is a model of leadership which stands in stark opposition to leadership that is self-serving, manipulative and power-oriented.

The notion of servant leadership is well grounded in the Gospel tradition. All four Gospels recount occasions when Jesus clearly challenged the authoritarian understanding of leadership. In Mark's Gospel, for example, following the request by the sons of Zebedee for positions of honour, Jesus states, "anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be slave to all" (Mk 10:43-44). Similarly, Matthew notes that when Jesus criticises the hypocrisy and vanity of the scribes and Pharisees, He tells his disciples: "the greatest among you must be your servant" (Mt 23:11). During the Passover meal Luke records that Jesus admonishes his disciples for arguing over who is the greatest with the words: "the greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, the leader as if he were the one who serves" (Lk 22:26). John's Gospel has Jesus wash the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper and then state: "If I, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet" (Jn 13:14). It is not surprising, therefore, that various commentators (Adair, 2001; Nuzzi, 2000; Edwards, 1989) argue that the most distinctive aspect of Jesus' teaching on leadership is his emphasis that a leader is essentially a servant.

Service is a key facet of the vision of leadership within Catholic schools. The Western Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops (2001) emphasises this point in the Mandate Letter to the Catholic Education Commission: "All who hold leadership positions in Catholic schools, especially principals, need to remember that theirs are roles of Christian service as befits Church leaders" (#. 72). Similarly, Jolley identifies a "theology of leadership" (1997, p. 137) exemplified in the gospel text which sees Jesus wash the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper (Jn 13:1-15). Such leadership, he argues, is based on service, empowerment and inclusiveness. It presents a model where leaders in Catholic schools are invited "to enter into a relationship with Jesus, and others, that is motivated by love and grounded in compassion and a desire to serve," (Jolley, 1997, p. 137). McLaughlin points out that "humility, suffering and service were the integral dynamic of Christ's leadership" (1997, p. 22). As such he argues that service forms the basis of genuine and authentic leadership in Catholic schools. He stresses, moreover, "anything less might well be a charade and reflect a distortion of the vision that lends legitimacy to Catholic education" (1997, p. 22). McLaughlin warns, however, that such a perspective does not deliver "a rationale

for subservience, indecision or perennial surrender" (1997, p. 22). In addition, Grace, when investigating the responses of Catholic "headteachers" to the changing culture of English schooling, found that "many of the participants saw a social ethic of 'serving others' as central to the mission of the Catholic school" (1996, p. 74).

Student Leadership

The concept of service features prominently in the literature on student leadership, in particular, civic service (Chapman & Aspin, 2001; Moen, 1997), servant leadership (East, 1994) or leadership as ministry (Willmett, 1997) Chapman and Aspin (2001) argue that programs which develop student leadership need to promote social responsibility, community leadership, active citizenship and service leadership. East, in noting five principles of student leadership, suggests: "the blessing and burden of leadership can be chosen by people who feel ready to become servant to the community" (1994, p. 147). Willmett underlines the need for a school community to "identify and develop the practice of student leadership as ministry" (1997, p 27). In addition, he argues: "if service is understood to mean to bring out the potential of another person because of a belief in the dignity of each person, then the particular approach to student leadership ... will need to be invitational, cooperative and collaborative" (1997, p. 27). Moen comments on the merit of service as a component of student leadership noting "students not only learn the value of giving something back to society, but can readily practise skills while participating in a service project" (1997, p. 1).

Various commentators have looked at what is involved in being a student leader. Wilding argues that student leadership requires integrity and good values. He notes that such leadership has its cost in time, energy and emotion, and is essentially "service for others" (2001, p. 1). Wright stresses that the right kind of leadership is "fundamentally about nurturing a better quality of humanity" (1999, p. 26):

> leadership is about seeking to clarify what is most good, most true and most worthwhile and why it is such and then of seeking to create that environment of discipline, order, ritual, tradition and trust which will best enable noble action to follow noble thought or ideal (1999, p. 26).

Such requirements, Wright (1999) contends, are not beyond the capabilities of schools. In the same way, Hawkes points out that the task of school leadership is "to bring about within the school community a desire to know the good, desire the good, and do the good" (1999, p. 24). He raises the need for school leaders to exercise a "servant heart" (1999, p. 23) and suggests frequent checks to ensure this is the case. What this means for student leaders, Hawkes observes, is that they "are required to animate their communities, to excite their school to do the things that are worthy of them" (1999, p. 23). Hawkes notes that student

leaders are also required to anticipate, be pro-active, inspire confidence, believe in themselves and believe in others.

What, however, does it mean to desire, bring about and do "the good"? Firstly, leadership is not about heroics. One does not need to be a Xena Warrior Princess, a Lara Croft, a John Rambo or a Spiderman. Students do not have to be members of the senior cricket, softball, netball, or football teams to exercise leadership. Rather, as Hawkes points out, most leadership is covert and unassuming. It is seen "in the gentle word of encouragement, in the helping of another, the steering of a conversation, a suggestion, or some small service" (1999, p. 21). Second, leadership is about meeting the needs of others. It can be found through those actions of service which place the needs of others before one's own needs.

Service-Learning

A practical, yet an often under-utilised means of preparing students for leadership is through participation in service-learning programs. Schools frequently use leadership camps, leadership days and leadership seminars to prepare students as leaders. Such preparation, however, is usually only available to the elected few Service-learning programs also have an important role to play in preparing students for leadership, in that service-learning can be used to enhance and complement current school leadership programs. In particular, participation in service-learning programs is available to all and strongly endorses the idea of leadership as service.

Definitions of service-learning vary considerably among those who embrace it. One such definition, which reflects the most commonly enunciated principles of service-learning, comes from the Centre for Service and Leadership:

> Service-learning is a teaching method, which combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. Service-learning programs involve students in organised community service that addresses local needs, while developing their academic skills, sense of civic responsibility and commitment to the community (n.d., p. 1).

As a method of teaching and learning, service-learning aims to enhance the lives of students by engaging them in meaningful, hands-on service to address real-life needs in the community, while also gaining a deeper understanding of themselves, their community and society (Kaye, 2004).

Service-learning programs are usually tailored to meet specific learning goals and community needs. Nonetheless, while programs tend to be unique, commentators highlight a series of components critical for success. Schoenfeld (2006, pp 1-2) highlights seven commonly held components: connecting service

with learning, reflection, civic engagement, working as a team, experiential learning, journaling, and celebration. These components are briefly explained below. Connecting service with learning occurs when students are actively engaged in meaningful service that has a positive impact on the community and also fulfils a stated academic aim. Reflection is essential in developing critical thinking in students. Civic engagement places students in situations that will expand their civic awareness, compassion for others and desire to be civicly engaged By working as a team, students learn to strive for a common goal and by doing so acquire a variety of skills such as learning to communicate, being accountable, listening, and leading. Experiential learning encourages students to take initiative, assume responsibility, and develop effective problem-solving skills through direct experience and hands-on learning. Journaling is a fundamental element of service-learning as it enhances the reflection process and improves thinking and writing skills. Celebration makes the culmination of the project meaningful wherein students have the opportunity to highlight their achievements and be congratulated on the work they have done for the community.

Service-Learning and Student Leadership

Commentators readily point out links between service-learning and student leadership. For example, Cooper (n.d.) highlights the need, when planning community service projects, to ensure that the project offers opportunities for student leadership. Kaye (2004) notes that by participating in service-learning programs students develop into leaders who take initiative, solve problems, work as a team and demonstrate their abilities while and through helping others. Rue argues that institutions with well-developed service-learning programs pay particular attention to student leadership development. She notes that such institutions not only take advantage of existing leadership programs, but also create "specific programs for service-learning student leaders" (1998, p. 257). A case in point is an intensive pre-orientation service-learning program for new students, where experienced student leaders introduce incoming students to service-learning in the context of the institution and its community (Rue, 1996). Youniss and Yates (1997) draw attention to the positive longer-term effects of service involvement on the leadership development of young people.

A study of eleven service-learning coordinators in Catholic schools in Western Australia (Lavery, 2007) found that involvement in service-learning programs could have a range of constructive implications for leadership development in students. Typically, student participation in such programs began in Year Eight and concluded in either Year Eleven or Year Twelve. The study indicated that service-learning experiences aid in the personal growth of students as future leaders by developing young men and women as leaders who would act with compassion and a strong sense of justice. Specifically, the study highlighted the impact of service-learning on the formation of life skills, it encouraged the habit of giving, the exercise of gifts and talents for others, and its positive effect on character

enhancement. There was a strong sense that participating in service-learning programs promoted social awareness in students. Students were not only empowered to serve those in need, but also to examine the causation of poverty, suffering and powerlessness in society. Furthermore, all eleven service-learning coordinators were able to provide various examples of where they believed service -learning enhanced student leadership development. Examples ranged from the general to specific cases such as quiet, conservative, studious young ladies whose confidence was increased by a passion for social justice. One from their number became head girl at her school in 2007.

Conclusion

One of the most effective ways of destroying student leadership in schools is for it to be little more than a token, shallow experience. A model of leadership that has at its core a desire to serve is neither tokenistic nor shallow. It is a model firmly rooted in the spirit of Gospel leadership as exhibited in the words and actions of Jesus. A very practical way of developing this style of leadership in adolescents is by involving them in service-learning activities. Not only does participation in service-learning allow students to contribute to society in a meaningful way while gaining valuable leadership skills, such programs are open to all students, and not simply the elected few. Catholic schools have the added dimension that the service undertaken is done so in the light of Jesus' words as recorded in Matthew's Gospel: "In so far as you did this to one of the least of these bothers (and sisters) of mine, you did it to me" (25:40)

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