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Student Ministry: Youth 'step up' to lead and serve

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Abstract

This article is about student leadership and service in Catholic secondary schools. Initially the concept of leadership through service is explored with particular reference to the educational setting. The concept of “student ministry” is then considered in the light of this leadership and service. The article subsequently reports on an exploratory research study that focused on the experiences and reflections of principals and selected staff from three Catholic secondary schools involved in student ministry. Their experiences and reflections indicate that student ministry has the capacity to offer all students the chance to develop their leadership potential through acts of service, and accentuate their civic, spiritual, religious and personal formation.

Student Ministry: Youth 'step up' to serve and lead

Introduction

Catholic schools have a reputation for preparing, developing and nurturing their elected student leaders. Fair and impartial elections, leadership camps, reflection days, weekend programs and seminars all form valid and constructive ways to prepare seniors for the challenges, responsibilities and enjoyment of leadership (Lavery, 2002). But two questions do need to be asked. First, what is the approach to leadership that these students are encouraged to exercise? Second, what of the leadership aspirations and promise of students not elected as designated leaders, do they simply miss out? This article seeks to explore the experiences and reflections of Principals and other staff leaders from three Catholic secondary schools involved in promoting leadership through student ministry, a leadership by students for students, for their school, and for the wider community. What becomes obvious from principal and staff experiences and reflections is that student ministry has the capacity to offer all students the chance to develop their leadership potential, and that such potential can be developed through acts of service.

Leadership through Service

Leadership is about influence (Maxwell, 2007). How one exercises influence defines one's approach to leadership. Greenleaf (1977) posited the concept of servant leadership as a contrast to the top-down, hierarchical leadership models prevalent in business management at the time. He argued that servant leadership began with the "natural feeling" (p. 13) that one wants to serve first before leading. Greenleaf stressed that at the heart of such leadership is the wish "to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served" (p. 13). He concluded that the best test of servant leadership was: "Do those being served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (p. 13). Greenleaf also asked what effect one's leadership would have "on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?" (p. 14).

In recent times, the notion of leadership through service has been linked with the manner in which Jesus exercised Gospel leadership. Lencioni (2004), for instance, questioned those qualities one might search for in leaders best able to change the world for the better. Ahead of such traits as courage, intelligence, charisma and creativity, he placed humble service and the ability to suffer. Lencioni posited that Christian leaders need to ask two questions of themselves before setting off on any quest to challenge and improve the world: "Who am I really serving?" and "Am I prepared to suffer?" (p. 72). He argued that Jesus, through his actions and death, provided the ultimate example of humble, selfless leadership. Blanchard and Hodges (2005) presented Jesus as a role model for leadership. They asserted that the world is in desperate need of a different leadership model, one that stands in stark contrast to the prevalent "it's all about me" experience of leadership. They noted that self-centred leadership can easily lead to abandoned values, betrayed trust, exploitation and manipulation by people in power and influence. Such examples abound in the media, exemplified by the 2008 global financial meltdown and the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Blanchard and Hodges argued that servant leadership, as epitomised by Jesus, has two roles: one of vision, setting the course and the destination; and one of implementation, doing things right with a focus on serving (p. 84).

Commentators have also noted the importance of service in educational leadership. Sergiovanni (1991), in considering school principalship, argued that ultimately, the only leadership that counts is the one that taps people's emotions, appeals to their values, and responds to their connections with other people. This leadership is a morally based form of stewardship or service.

Sergiovanni maintained that for school administrators to be truly effective, they must be servant leaders who strive to become “leaders of leaders”. That is, they endeavour to build up the capacity of teachers and others, and in so doing, diminish the need for direct leadership. For example, teachers become less dependent on administration, are better able to manage themselves and hence share the burdens of leadership more fully (pp. 119-126). Similarly, Culver (2009) explored the ideal of servant leadership as it applied to school administration. She indicated that the term ‘servant leader’ is not synonymous with ‘weaking’. Rather, she argued that it requires a certain degree of confidence in one’s leadership skills to realise how to empower others to assume levels of leadership. It takes dedication to place the interest of the school over one’s own. It takes strength of character to seek out and remove barriers to the optimal performance of others. This article explores ways that students can exercise servant leadership in schools. It does so through the perspective of teachers who work closely with students in student ministry programs. Specifically, how can students lead and influence their community through acts of service? Further, what role do teachers have, as servant leaders, in promoting, nurturing and developing a culture of servant leadership in the student body?

Student Ministry

The notion of “student ministry” underpins the approach of student leadership that emphasises leadership through service. Student ministry is an approach that allows students to engage directly with their civic, spiritual, religious and personal formation. As a form of catechesis (Harper, 2001), it opens the opportunity for moments of evangelisation through an apprenticeship process. Students can ‘try on’ or ‘echo’ experiences of the Christian life for themselves. Students can develop qualities of leadership, care, service and discipleship through reflective practice (including prayer) and servant leadership.

Originally, ministry referred to the lowly practice in Ancient Greek society of a person serving others, that is, a servant (Adair, 2001, p. 138). Later, service referred to voluntary, altruistic actions performed by someone whose status may be anything but lowly. Frederick Ozanam (1813-1853), for example, was a university academic from a distinguished middle class family. Though from a privileged background, he spent his life serving the poor and established the Society for Saint Vincent de Paul. Catholic schools today provide a range of experiences such as liturgies, retreats, youth leadership roles and campus ministry as part of a school’s systematic planning for evangelisation (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 50; Holohan, 1998, p. 65). Often, however, the focus of these experiences is on behalf of students rather than *by students*. If students are to make a difference, then it is crucial that students are directly engaged in their own formation (Smith & Denton, 2005). As an agent of the Church, the Catholic school needs to become the “travelling companion” of young people (John Paul II, 1993), to help them meet the challenges of the 21st century. It is the authors’ belief that a renewed form of student leadership based on service is needed in Catholic schools for a new millennium.

Young people face many challenges. Perhaps, the most significant of all, a loss of meaning or purpose in life, a “crisis of values which, in highly developed societies in particular, assumes the form, often exalted by the media, of subjectivism, moral relativism and nihilism” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, para. 1). Among the challenges to be faced are “an uncertain transition to work, the rising cost of higher education, family breakdown and isolation from parents, the implications of cultural influences such as materialism and individualism, and the power of the media and marketing” (Hodder, 2007, p. 180). Many young people feel that to keep up they need to constantly achieve – to ‘be more by having more’ – more friends, more education, more work, more money, more clothes, more social life, more fun. The focus is on the self and immediate relationships, especially friends and family; connections with and responsibilities to a wider community are minimal. As a consequence, this ‘*My-self*’ generation experiences an underlying

spiritual malaise and stronger “spiritual foundations for Australian schooling” need to be developed. (Hodder, 2007, p. 180)

The Melbourne Declaration of the National Goals of Schooling (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008) seems to confirm a need for this spiritual foundation to schooling. The second goal for young Australians lists a number of values such as integrity, commitment to the values of democracy, equity and justice, civic participation and working for the common good; and to become responsible citizens, locally and globally (p. 9). The Declaration emphasises that the way to address this second goal is through community partnerships (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2009):

Partnerships engender support for the development and wellbeing of young people and their families and can provide opportunities for young Australians to connect with their communities, participate in civic life and develop a sense of responsible citizenship. (p. 5)

Students need opportunities to work in and for communities. In predisposing students to the values and aspirations enunciated above, many schools have developed programs in community service and service-learning (Lovat, Toomey, Clement, Crotty, & Nielsen, 2009). Likewise Catholic schools have embraced such programs (Lavery, 2008), perhaps even, in a counter-cultural direction. Such direction encourages students to consider a Christian response to global and community issues. Catholic schools provide a distinctive quality of education as part of the Church’s mission of evangelisation (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, para. 3) that seeks the “integral formation of the human person” and includes developing the students’ “sense of responsibility, learn the correct use of freedom, and participate actively in [community] life” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2009, para. 1). Catholic schools have a mandate to promote a Gospel vision of society and to help students integrate faith and culture. (Catholic Bishops of NSW and ACT, 2007, p. 14; Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras 27-28)

Student ministry can contribute towards formation in discipleship (Congregation for the Clergy, 1998, para. 86). This discipleship or Christian leadership is a call of conversion, a two-fold response to Jesus. It is firstly, a response to: “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me.” (Mark 10:21) Secondly, it is a response to “anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant. For the Son of man himself came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:43-45) It is a discipleship characterised by formation in leadership, care, service, faith and prayer (Congregation for the Clergy, 1998):

the maturation of the Christian life requires that it be cultivated in all its dimensions: knowledge of the faith, liturgical life, moral formation, prayer, belonging to community, missionary spirit. When catechesis omits one of these elements, the Christian faith does not attain full development. (para. 87)

Moreover, catechetical experiences such as liturgies, retreats, service-learning, and leadership opportunities can be grouped around the term ‘student ministry’ where an explicit focus on service and leadership by students exists. The intended outcome of student ministry is to produce Christian leaders for the 21st century based upon “an apprenticeship process of formation” that is experiential, behavioural and instructional (Holohan, 1998, p. 23). Such a process allows students to build their spiritual capacity to relate with God, to become resilient citizens and to serve their neighbour.

Student ministry can become a practical way for young people in Catholic schools to take up the challenge of Pope Benedict XVI (2008) when he asked of them: “Are you building your lives on firm foundations? Are you using the gifts you were given? What legacy will you leave to young people yet to come? And, what difference will you make?” If young people are to ‘make a difference’ in the future, to become Christian leaders for the 21st century, then Catholic school communities

have a responsibility to assist young people in addressing the Pope's challenge. Furthermore, in following up World Youth Day, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (2009) "...has emphasised the need for leadership development, spiritual formation and the inclusion of young people in the life of communities." (p. 10) The school is by no means the only place to address these challenges; the home and the parish will always take a leading role in this endeavour (John Paul II, 1979, paras 67-68). However, the role of the Catholic school has become accentuated because of the need for "new evangelisation" where many young people no longer experience an active family or parish faith life (John Paul II, 1990, para. 33). Catholic schools are filled with young people from different backgrounds and outlooks. Many of them have been baptised yet need experiences that re-awaken in them a sense of the sacred and to be inspired to become more Christ-like. Student ministry provides concrete experiences for young people to exercise service and leadership within their school and the wider community.

Exploratory research study

Methodology

A qualitative, interpretive research study was designed to explore how Catholic secondary schools approach the creation and promotion of student ministry through leadership and service. Interpretive inquiry strives to discover what is meaningful or relevant to people being studied and tries to gain a feel for their social reality (Neuman, 1997). In particular, the theoretical perspective underscoring the approach to this research was symbolic interactionism. Pivotal to the notion of symbolic interactionism is the placing of oneself in the setting of the other. Methodologically, symbolic interactionism directs investigators to take, to the best of their ability, the standpoint of those being studied (Crotty, 1998).

As this was an exploratory study, the Principal and two or three key staff leaders supporting student leadership programs were interviewed from three schools in the metropolitan area of Perth, Western Australia. The three schools were purposively selected because of their publicised programs in providing student leadership and service to their school communities. These schools were: a Year 7-12 boys' school of 700 students, a Year 7-12 girls' school of 800 students and a K-12 co-educational school of 1550 students. Consistent with symbolic interactionism, the participants were asked about their perceptions of student ministry and how it was developed and promoted in their school. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and verified by the interviewees. A total of ten interviews were conducted. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted for approximately thirty minutes.

Three aspects became the focus of the study. Firstly, how did the school promote leadership and service with students? Secondly, what role did the Principal and other key leaders take in the programs? Thirdly, how did students respond to these leadership opportunities? The findings were categorised under three broad headings: leadership focus, mentoring, and response to leadership through service opportunities.

Leadership focus

All interviewees expressed a belief that it was important to have a culture of service in their school. They considered such a culture to be a core part of the school's ethos underpinned by the values their school patron stood for and promoted. They believed that students should participate in service programs, preferably outside of school hours. As one interviewee commented it was "about giving in your own time" that characterised a true sense of service. Two of the schools had specific time requirements to complete service to the school community as part of their leadership structure. To become designated leaders (such as school captains or student councillors) in these

schools, students had to complete a significant number of hours of service from the time when they began secondary schooling in Year 7.

There was a strong belief by all interviewees that designated leaders emerged from a potential pool of students as leaders (“leadership applies to everybody”). Interviewees recognised that leadership was developed by serving others. They were convinced that the opportunities the school provided for service helped students to “step up” and develop their confidence in leading. The leadership focus was developmental, that is, as students progressed from Year 7 to 12, they were required to participate in specific service programs. In lower secondary, the service centred on responding to family and school needs. In upper secondary, it centred on responsibilities towards community and societal concerns. Interviewees believed that for students to value their service experiences, they needed to develop skills of reflective practice, that is, the ability to reflect on what they were doing and why they were doing it. Such reflections also led students to consider the impact their actions can have on the world around them and about who they were as a person. One interviewee also noted these reflections may not become significant to students immediately. As he noted, the “penny drops for them” only later in their senior secondary years about the significance of their earlier service experiences. Finally, interviewees commented that the confidence students gained enabled them to share their service experiences with their peers. As one interviewee remarked, it was matter of a “young person speaking to young person”. For example, senior secondary students would speak at school meetings or in classrooms about their service experiences or offer prayers in liturgies using their own words. They shared their stories or prayers and encouraged other students to become involved. They also spoke directly to the student body about what actions could be taken. Interviewees believed that youth speaking to youth had far more impact than what adults such as staff could accomplish.

Mentoring

All interviewees highlighted the importance of mentoring for any successful student ministry program. The style of mentoring advocated was one that entailed “adults backing them (students) up if they need support” and to empower students by “trying to work with their gifts”. Principals saw themselves as the fundamental mentors in promoting leadership through service to the school community. Specifically, they provided a vision of leadership and service within a Catholic context and promoted this vision to staff, parents and students. Principals were able to articulate this vision as representing a core focus of the school. They delegated responsibilities for student ministry to key members of staff and supported these staff with time and resources. Furthermore, the interviewees believed that developing leadership through service involved the whole community’s support and involvement. Communication and documentation to parents (eg weekly newsletters) highlighted the importance of student ministry. Principals and other staff leaders explained that they would meet and discuss with parents and students about the significance of student ministry if there was some concern about the program.

In two of the schools, the staff took the opportunity to show their school communities how important an ethic of service was by participating in a professional learning program to reflect on service learning and undertake an act of service in the community. At the third school, school leaders actively support the students on a regular basis by attending ‘soup patrols’ on weekends. Above all else, interviewees emphasised that students needed the active support and goodwill of all staff rather than just staff delegated specific responsibilities. Further, students were given appropriate recognition for their efforts. This recognition could range from awarding students a certificate of appreciation or honour badge to providing pizza at a lunchtime meeting after students completed an act of service. In all cases, the interviewees believed that student leadership should not be “tokenistic”, confined to specific tasks performed by designated student leaders for the school administration. Nor should the leadership program be based on ‘popularity’ or ‘privilege’.

Rather, student leadership was the opportunity for all students to fulfil responsibilities to the community and become designated leaders in a transparent way based on service.

Response to leadership through service opportunities

A notable reaction by all interviewees was their own amazement at the way many students responded to the opportunity to lead through service. The interviewees recounted with candour and fervour stories of students who had experienced a potentially “defining moment” in their lives and a counter to “life is [only] about me”. Students could discover their potential as future leaders through service. Interviewees believed student ministry had the potential for students to experience a life-changing opportunity. Two examples served to illustrate this point. One story recalled by an interviewee was of a senior secondary boy who had been on soup patrol in the city near a major retail department store:

It was a week or so before Christmas... one of the stops was near the railway station.... I remember a boy serving soup. He was struck by the fact that he was serving soup yet across the road he could see people walking out of [the store] with bags and bags of Christmas shopping. ...He wasn't having a go at the Christmas shopping, it was the image he couldn't get out of his head about this contrast....There was a defining moment for that boy...that made him really think. ...I remember him saying and saying again, to his mates... “Have you thought about the fact [of the contrast]?” ...They were affected by something that they've not normally seen.

A second story recounted was the experience of a group of senior secondary girls on a social justice retreat who came to know a homeless boy in the local area:

This little boy was basically living on the streets; [at] eleven o'clock [the girls found] him in 'Mackers' . He had no food because he was just sheltering there and the girls bought him a meal. ...And a lot of them said at the end that it had really impacted on them just to see what someone else's life is like. And I think sometimes that's difficult for young people to do.

The next day the school was “abuzz” with the story of the boy and what the girls had done. The interviewee observed that students and staff alike were affected by the situation. There was a determination to do something for the boy. The impact of the Christmas contrast experienced by the boys and the plight of the little boy by the girls helps students to re-evaluate their world-view, to make a difference in some small way and develop a sense of hope by “naming their own circle of influence.” Student ministry was “more than doing good ... it was a way of doing good.”

Interviewees were convinced that a leadership through service program “put young people into the centre of their lives and make decisions about the world in which they live.” Further, interviewees were of the opinion that students became empowered by these service opportunities and encouraged students to share their experiences with other class groups or at school assemblies.

Interviewees felt that it was important to encourage students to take their own initiative in serving others, especially the senior students. The perception was that if students were given the opportunity to serve in a variety of ways over their secondary school years, then they would be more likely to appreciate the “value of service for life for them”. By the time the students reached Year 12, many had become “stand out” leaders characterised by a quality of humility as students who were “quietly getting on with it”.

Discussion and Recommendations

This article has attempted to explore the experiences and reflections of Principals and key members of staff from three Catholic secondary schools involved in the development and promotion

of student leadership through service, what the authors call “student ministry.” Five findings that are relevant for educators in Catholic Schools arise from the study. First, nurturing a culture of service within the school adds appreciably to the development of student leadership. Second, service opportunities can encourage students to exercise selfless leadership focused on the needs of others. Third, the religious formation of students can be positively enhanced through suitable reflection on service experiences. Fourth, a comprehensive student ministry program gives all students the opportunity to partake in genuine leadership activities. Finally, the importance of concerned adult mentors cannot be overstated.

All interviewees highlighted the importance of a culture of service within the student body. To this end, interviewees commented that students were given a variety of opportunities to serve throughout their time at the school. They argued that students developed an understanding of leadership by serving others. That is, service opportunities gave all students a valid way to exercise their leadership both within the school and in the wider community. In addition, responses indicated the importance of adult mentors working with young people, a consideration well documented in literature on student leadership (Gray, 2008; Hart, 1992; Lavery, 2006). What was perhaps new is the belief, expressed by the Principals that their mentor role was to actively support staff working in leadership ministry with students. Support took the form of providing staff with sufficient time, appropriate resources and a public affirmation that student ministry was a core focus of the school. Interviewees also remarked on how often they were surprised and impressed with the mature way students responded to the opportunity to lead through service.

Interviewees were convinced that their students were influenced personally, sometimes quite dramatically, through their service opportunities. Students were ‘moved’ emotionally by the plight of others and were determined to make a difference in some way. Student ministry in the schools studied can make a significant contribution to the civic, social and personal spiritual formation of students (Furco & Root, 2010). Students become more socially aware and responsive, more confident in relating with others and were prepared to take greater initiative. Students can become advocates for the poor and those marginalised in society and actively seek to influence others around them. They ‘step up’ or transcend a worldview focussed on self (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003). They are able to build “spiritual capital [which] can be a source of empowerment because it provides a transcendent impulse which can guide judgement and action in the mundane world.” (Grace, 2002, p. 236) Students become leaders because of student ministry (Larsen, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006). Where student ministry is a systematic and integrated part of the curriculum of the school as indicated in this study, there are many positive benefits for the school community. One interviewee described the school’s program as embracing “an outlook, developmental approach and a language.” Further, the school extolled a focus on student leadership based on the person of Christ, the program was appropriate to the age and maturity of the students; and, lastly, a vocabulary was spoken that related to young people about who they are and what they can achieve. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” (ThinkExist, 1999) Students are more likely to participate in community and seek to serve others for the good of the community if they have a worldview or language that helps them understand and interpret what needs to be done.

Student ministry can contribute to religious formation of students provided appropriate theological reflection is put into place (Dekker, 2007). Students can begin to “look at the world through Christian eyes.” (One interviewee’s words) A good starting point in this study was the use of service journals and opportunities for students to share their real life experiences with their peers as well as offering prayers for the people the students met. Students need the time and space not only to discuss and reflect but also to pray and ritually celebrate their experiences (Lavery & Hackett, 2008). Students became ‘wiser’ about the world around them, and perhaps more humble about their sense of importance of their place in that world. In terms of ‘new evangelisation’, the students may be more prepared to ask religious questions about their experiences.

Schools are in a unique position to make a major contribution to the way young people understand and practise leadership. Student ministry has the potential to develop a leadership in school students that is other-centred and incorporates a vision based on service. Where students themselves raise the question, “Who needs help?” and become more “community conscious.” (One interviewee’s words) It is, in effect, a servant model of leadership that emphasises the natural wish to serve first, and then to lead. It is a model that prioritises the needs of other people. It is a model that ensures those being served can grow as persons and also become servant leaders themselves. Above all, it is a model that has its focus on the needs of the least privileged in society (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 13). Such an approach goes beyond the rhetoric of active citizenship. One criticism of student leadership in schools is that involvement can often be little more than manipulation, decoration or tokenism (Hart, 1992). That is, students have little or no real level of participation as leaders. Student ministry, as evidenced in this research study, guarantees that students have a genuine and authentic leadership role through service to the school and to the community. Moreover, service opportunities ensure that all students, not only the elected few, have the opportunity to contribute as leaders. Aristotle once remarked:

People become virtuous by performing virtuous acts, they become kind by doing kind acts, they become brave by doing brave acts. (cited in Hawkes, 1999, p. 24)

For young people to be leaders, they need the opportunity to perform real leadership acts based on service. They need guidance from concerned adults. They need a leadership model that embraces civic, spiritual, religious and personal responsibilities that challenge an overly exaggerated focus on self. They need a way to become Christian leaders for tomorrow. A systematic student ministry program has the potential to provide all four needs!

Three recommendations emerge from this exploratory research. First, there is need to investigate whether the experiences of the interviewees are representative of key staff leaders in other Catholic schools involved in student ministry. Second, it is important to examine the experiences of senior secondary students partaking in student ministry programs. That is, how do student experiences compare with the perceptions of key staff leaders? Third, it would be illuminating to explore whether, as a result of student ministry experiences, young people ‘step up’ to serve and lead in society after leaving school. The authors believe that the results of such research projects could highlight appreciably the value of student ministry programs in schools and provide important guidelines for best practice.

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