



A Developmental Framework For Adolescent Leaders For Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Adult leadership has been a research focus for some time and, more recently, some researchers have turned their attention to adult leadership as it relates to sustainability. However, there has been far less research in the field of child and adolescent leadership, with only a few researchers addressing adolescent leadership for sustainability. In addition, while there are a number of development frameworks for adult leaders, there are none in the field of adolescent leadership for sustainability. This paper helps to address the gap in the knowledge base in this field and, in particular, proposes a framework with five different levels of adolescent leadership for sustainability, as well as strategies to help motivate adolescents to progress through these different levels of leadership. This framework will have practical implications for educators and teachers who are developing and conducting education programs with adolescent leaders by providing a number of unique instruments and tools.



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BACKGROUND

This study emerged from our concern that the understandings and theories of leadership (Bass & Bass, 2008; Northouse, 2015) and leadership for sustainability (Taylor, 2010), leadership development programs and developmental frameworks (Department of Education Victoria, 2007; Victorian Public Service Commission, 2015) available for adults may not be relevant to adolescents. A research study in adolescent leadership (Roach et al., 1999) concluded that youth leadership was different from that of adults, and this made us wonder if this may also be true of adolescent leaders of sustainability. The study thus investigated what adolescents really understood by leadership for sustainability, capabilities and attributes of leaders and how other students could be motivated to become leaders.

Several studies of adult leadership stressed the importance of influence and relationships (Northouse, 2015; Sinclair, 2007; Taylor, 2008). Taylor, for example, defined leadership as “a process of influence that occurs within the context of relationships between leaders and their collaborators, and involves establishing direction, aligning resources, generating motivation and providing inspiration to achieve mutual interests” (2008, p. 2), acknowledging that this definition is applicable for both individual leadership and shared leadership, as in teams. Some studies into adolescent leadership have proposed definitions that seem to emphasise individual leadership (Corriero, 2006; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). However, Roach et al (1999) concluded that adolescents are more interested in leading collaboratively in a group, rather than as individuals, i.e. about “doing” leadership instead of “being” a leader.

Human motivation has been researched by psychiatrists and psychologists since the 1940s (Maslow, 1943; McClelland, 1987). In recent times, researchers from other fields have investigated how to motivate people to take actions for the environment. Arnold, Cohen and Warner (2009), for example, found from a study of a small group of young leaders, that these leaders were motivated most by “influential people” and “influential experiences”, but less by negative experiences, books or the media, as had been found in earlier studies with adults (Chawla, 1999). A retrospective study of adult leaders in the United States showed that two of the seven key factors recommended for adolescent leadership development were mentors and “significant life experiences” (Cox, 1988).

Common tools in adult leadership include levels of leadership (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2011) and developmental frameworks (Department of Education Victoria, 2007), while van Linden and Fertman (1998) proposed that adolescent leaders go through three stages of development with five dimensions for each stage.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper reports on part of a larger, 3-4 year longitudinal study, conducted in Melbourne Australia. It investigated adolescents’ understandings of leadership and leadership for sustainability, the qualities and skills of leaders and the factors that impacted on their motivation, emergence and development as young leaders. There were a total of 91 participants in the study. 20 adolescents (aged 15-16 years at the

start of the study) and 10 principals and teachers from five schools were interviewed (using semi-structured interviews) three times as part of the longitudinal study, while we also conducted two focus groups and a number of additional interviews. The study used Grounded Theory methodology, following a social constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2014).

FINDINGS

A major finding of this study was that adolescents in the study viewed leadership for sustainability in a number of different ways. They described it in terms of capabilities, attributes, purposes or relationships or sometimes as a combination of the four ways. Participants' understandings of leadership for sustainability changed as they matured; when younger, they more commonly described it as teaching or changing others, but when older, more commonly described it as a group effort for a sustainable future.

Another key finding was that adolescent leadership for sustainability was not uniform, but occurred on a spectrum, according to the individual's opportunities for leadership and personal circumstances. We propose that there are five levels of adolescent leadership for sustainability, based on increasing levels of responsibility in a school or a community group. We have named these five levels: Eco-citizen, Initiator, Apprentice, Change Agent and Connector. We observed that this was not necessarily a linear or uniform pathway, but differed according each student's opportunities and personal situation.

The developmental framework grew out of the analysis of the interviews and focus groups. Figure 1 gives an overview of this framework. In summary, adolescent leadership in a school or the community does not occur in isolation, but within the context and structures of each student's home, school and community life and experiences. We propose a framework with several instruments: a developmental matrix (Table 2); a capabilities map, (mapping leadership capabilities against the Australian curriculum, Table 1); and examples of expanded descriptors for capabilities and attributes, Tables 4 and 5. For the developmental matrix, we used a combination of analyses of interview questions and recursive processes (Birks & Mills, 2011) to develop descriptors for each of the five levels of leadership for seven elements – focus, description, examples of actions, practices, understandings, capabilities and attributes. The framework also includes a number of other tools: principles of adolescent leadership for sustainability (Armstrong, 2013, 2013-2014), leadership definition (page 2 of the framework), leadership styles, strategies for motivating adolescent leaders for sustainability (Table 3) and assessment tools that could be used by teachers to assess students, and for students to assess themselves, at various stages in their development. (The leadership styles and assessment tools are not included in the framework that follows, but will be described in future papers. Contact the authors for further details.)

The strategies for motivating adolescent leaders (Table 3) arose from the key groups of factors that motivated leaders identified in the study. These were, in order of importance: influence of people, personal motivation and capitalising on opportunities, school/community influences, and self learning/experiences.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

A key finding of the study was that the participants understood leadership for sustainability as being much the same as leadership in general, but with an emphasis on sustainability. When younger, the participants understood leadership as educating others, but when older, described it more commonly as working together for a sustainable future. This concept of leadership in a group is consistent with the findings of Roach et al (1999).

The finding that two of the key motivating factors for adolescent leaders for sustainability were influential people and influential experiences are consistent with the earlier work of Arnold, Cohen and Warner (2009). However, this study identified extra factors: personal motivation; school and community influences; and self learning/experiences.

The developmental framework is a major contribution to our knowledge of how adolescent leaders for sustainability understand leadership, capabilities and attributes of leaders and how adolescents develop their leadership potential across a spectrum of leadership levels, depending on their age, opportunities for leadership and personal circumstances. It also provides a number of strategies that could be used by teachers or adolescents to motivate adolescents to further develop their leadership through mentoring, training, the curriculum and co-curriculum and their own personal development. This framework has major implications for educators and teachers who work with adolescent leaders, by providing them with a range of practical tools and instruments.

There were some limitations to this study (small population size, narrow age range and limited to five schools in Melbourne, Australia), however the longitudinal research design has resulted in rich data and a comprehensive understanding of how adolescents develop as leaders in sustainability. Future studies could look at how this framework fits with children and younger and older adolescents and how it may differ with gender and culture.

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Patricia Armstrong is a Ph.D. student at RMIT University. She worked in several environmental education roles in Australia and overseas before joining the Gould League, a well known environmental education organisation, in 1989. There, she took up a number of positions, including Deputy CEO, while leading some key projects, such as establishing the world's first Recycling Education Centre, developing and managing Waste Wise Schools and co-developing and managing Sustainable Schools. Pat has also worked as a private consultant in education for sustainability and co-founded Tomorrow's Leaders for Sustainability Inc. She has served in a number of honorary positions for the Waste Management Association of Australia, including convener of the National Waste Educators Division and is a life fellow of Environment Education Victoria.

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ADOLESCENT LEADERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABILITY DEVELOPMENTAL FRAMEWORK

Why we need a framework

Many schools are involved in sustainability education programs across Australia through initiatives such as the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI). Many are doing great work to achieve more sustainable practices and cultures. In addition, a number of schools encourage student leadership by either sending their students to leadership training programs, events or camps or running their own training programs, clubs or committees. However, up till now, there has been no research-based developmental framework, unlike that for teachers (Department of Education, Victoria, 2007), upon which to best guide these adolescent leaders for sustainability.

Who the framework is for

The Framework will be useful for secondary students to map their personal development, and for teachers and leadership training providers to develop leadership for sustainability training programs for adolescents.

The framework in a nutshell

The Framework provides a developmental matrix for five key levels (or categories) of adolescent leadership for sustainability (Eco-citizen, Initiator, Apprentice, Change Agent, Connector) for seven elements (Focus, Description, Examples of actions, Practices, Understandings, Capabilities and Attributes). The capabilities in the Framework are mapped to those in the Australian Curriculum. It also provides additional instruments and tools: (expanded descriptors for capabilities and attributes; principles, definitions of adolescent leaders; and strategies to motivate adolescent leaders in the areas of mentoring and supporting, personal development and curriculum and co-curriculum.

How the Framework can be used

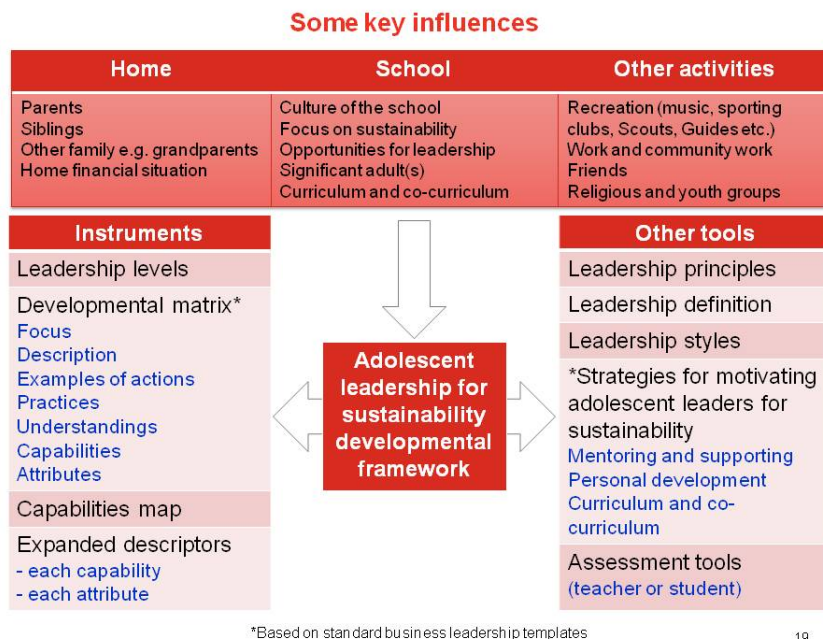
The Framework can be used by teachers and adolescent leadership providers to develop leadership programs and to motivate adolescents to become more effective leaders. It can also be used by adolescents to self-assess their capabilities and attributes and to work with a teacher, parent or adolescent leader to develop a personal leadership development plan.

Principles of adolescent leadership for sustainability

1. Theories, models and styles of adult leadership are not necessarily applicable to adolescents.
2. Adolescents seem to be more interested in developing leadership through involvement in groups, rather than as individuals.
3. Leadership for sustainability is about working towards positive environmental and/or social change.
4. All adolescents have the potential to be leaders for sustainability (if they want to).
5. Many leadership skills can be learnt.
6. Adolescents can be motivated to take environmental actions through positive people and experiences.

7. The essential elements for promoting adolescent leadership are based on empowering them.
8. Adolescent leadership is best developed through challenging and meaningful projects.
9. Encouraging adolescents to undertake environmental and social actions can help them to feel more connected to their school.
10. Training for leadership should start when a person is young and continue throughout life.

Figure 1 Overview of the developmental framework



How this framework was developed

This Framework was developed from research conducted by one of the authors (PA) as part of a PhD research project at RMIT University, which investigated *Adolescent leadership for sustainability: understandings and factors that impact on adolescents’ identity, emergence, development and sustainability as leaders.*

The research was conducted from 2011 to 2018 as a longitudinal study of 20 students in five Melbourne (Victoria, Australia) metropolitan schools.

Definition

Adolescent leadership for sustainability is the ability to work either individually or within a group to create ideas, take initiatives, influence, educate and motivate others and to undertake actions that will bring about change for a more sustainable future.

Levels of leadership

Five levels of leadership were identified from the research. These should not be confused with leadership styles (the way that they lead), which are discussed later. Levels of leadership are simply recognisable categories of adolescent leaders at a point in time. With some adolescents, it may be that they move sequentially through these five levels, but it is not necessarily the case for all adolescents. Some adolescents will never progress beyond the first level of *Eco-citizen*, while others will progress through one or a few of the other levels. Others will move backwards for a while before moving forward. For example, an adolescent may enter at the *Initiator* level for a project, then revert to the *Eco-citizen* level before joining an environment team and advancing to the Apprentice level. An adolescent can be a leader if they want to and they can learn and improve their leadership capabilities. It is also likely that progression through the levels is a matter of maturity, as an adolescent's cognitive and social capacity develops.

Eco-citizen: Moderately committed to sustainability, will take actions to model sustainability at home, youth groups and at school, but may have limited understanding of sustainability and practical opportunities for leadership.

Or Takes actions, has a very good understanding of sustainability and leadership, but for either personal reasons or lack of opportunity is unable to lead at a higher level

Initiator: Highly committed to a particular sustainability issue and shows great tenacity in conducting a particular project about that issue. Is developing capabilities, attributes, understandings and practice through the project.

Apprentice: Interested in sustainability and belonging to a sustainability group, club or committee. Motivated to develop understandings and learn from others.

Change Agent: Growing passion for sustainability and ability to hold leadership positions within a sustainability group, club or committee. Works collaboratively with others. Takes on increasing responsibilities and initiatives.

Or Unable to join or form a sustainability group (for personal reasons or through lack of opportunity) but leads by coaching others.

Connector: Exceptional leader, passionate about sustainability, has had extensive practice in leading sustainability and has a deep understanding about leadership and sustainability. Demonstrates high levels of capabilities and attributes to lead significant sustainability initiatives.