

## Preadolescent leaders: critical reflections from a well-being perspective

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*Very little information is available on the impact of leadership practices, in South African primary schools, on the development of preadolescent learners. Leadership in primary schools focuses mainly on the roles, tasks, features, identification and development of "leadership". Leadership practices, as currently applied in most primary schools in South Africa, challenge preadolescent development, with serious consequences. Our purpose in this study was to reflect critically on the appropriateness of existing leadership models for the preadolescent from a well-being perspective. A qualitative research method, which follows an inductive, exploratory approach, was selected because this method acknowledges the complexity of the phenomenon. Data were collected by means of focus groups and written assignments. The six components of psychological well-being, namely: self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and autonomy are used in discussion of the findings. The findings confirmed that the current social phenomenon of preadolescent leadership contributes to negative evaluations of the self and personal experiences, early identity foreclosure, disrupted peer group interactions, distorted relationships with adults, and a limited environment for the development of self-determination.*

**Keywords:** development; leadership practices; leadership values; preadolescent; psychological well-being; qualitative investigation

### Introduction

Very little information is available on the development of learners' councils in South African primary schools. Moreover, this practice is also not reported in the developmental psychology literature (Berger, 1994; Hook, Watts & Cockcroft, 2002; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000; Shaffer, 2000; Yamaguchi, 2001).

The significance of leadership in primary schools that have a white Afrikaner tradition should be understood against the socio-political background where, prior to 1994, the Christian-National philosophy of educational institutions was dictated by legislation (De Wilzem, 1988; Follet, 1985; Strydom, 1970; Tierney, 1996; Weber, 1985). The objective was to produce leaders who would ultimately realise and preserve the adultist and ideological view of leadership, which was regarded as a means to hold onto power within a specific political system (Bell & Bromnick, 2003; Bowie, 2000; Tierney, 1996). Based on this view, leadership in primary schools focused on the skills, roles, tasks, features, identification and development of "leadership", not children. The meaning attached to the leadership role was furthermore superficially amplified and inflated by primary school level objectives and values such as

achievement, competition and social comparison (Yamaguchi, 2001), as well as monetary considerations.

In this context, the term *leadership* refers to the inducement and management of change, taking critical decisions, and promoting and maintaining the school's values and integrity (Barker, 1997; Gibbons, 1992; Rost, 1991; 1993). *Management* refers to the maintenance of the status quo and stability (Barker, 1997; Gibbons, 1992; Rost, 1991; 1993). Leadership skills and duties among children in a school context refer to management skills which relate specifically to the maintenance of stability in the institutional system. Child leaders appear to be a vital part of the management function of any school and serve as substitutes for teacher supervision (De Beer, 1992; De Wilzem, 1988). For example, learners are appointed and held responsible for maintaining discipline among fellow learners, performing duties with regard to general order, and acting as messengers for teachers, as substitutes for teachers when they are not present and as traffic officers on school grounds (Buscall, 1994; De Beer, 1992; Follet, 1985; Smith, 1991). Leaders very seldom (and in some instances never) have a say in the way things are done.

Opposed to the adultist and ideological viewpoint are the scarcely researched opinions of the children who are involved on ground level. From this perspective the obvious objective of leadership seems to be different, which will be illustrated in this research. When the special development needs of the preadolescent are taken into consideration, the misalignment between leadership and the developing preadolescent becomes evident.

The Carnegie Council (in Wavering, 1995) defines preadolescence as the age group between 10 and 15 years of age. Other sources refer to the group of children between 10 and 14 years of age, or 11 and 14 years of age (Stafford, 1982; Wiles & Bondi, 2001). The exact age group, however, is not that important. It is far more important to take into consideration the remarkable emotional, social, intellectual and physical changes that occur and needs that arise during this critical developmental phase (Berger, 1994; Hook *et al.*, 2002; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000; Newman & Newman, 1997).

Physical changes represent the most obvious development taking place, and are often followed by other developmental dimensions (Walker, 1995). Preadolescence is characterised by rapid physical growth and sexual awareness. Preadolescents are particularly vulnerable when it comes to the emphasis on the importance of physical appearance, which affects in particular the perceptions of the peer group and the teachers (Berger, 1994; Kaplan, 1998; Newman & Newman, 1997). Preadolescents who develop faster than their peers are more inclined to be selected as leaders in their class, sports teams and other group activities. Those who develop late, or at an average rate, are not nearly as popular (Berger, 1994; Peterson, 1996). Sigelman (1999:280) concludes that "the rate of maturation sometimes leads to events that determine the path of the rest of one's life".

Current findings indicate that development of the brain during the preadolescent and adolescent period is just as important as that which occurs

during the first two years of a child's development (Minden, 2004). Areas in the brain that control aspects such as self-control; planning and the development of strategy; organising; initiation of focus and attention; ending, starting and shifting attention; emotions; ability to make a judgement; intelligence and identity (i.e. the frontal and temporal lobe and the corpus callosum) continue to develop until the age of 18 to 25 years (American Bar Association, 2003; Gied *et al.*, 1999).

Psychosocial development refers to the preadolescent child's identity and self-awareness with regard to the sexual, moral and psychic growth within a specific socio-cultural context. The context refers to the experience and development of the self within the application of a primary school's leadership policy (Newman & Newman, 1997). The dominant psychosocial development tasks of children aged 6 to 12 are competence, which refers to the unlimited practise of concrete reasoning skills, physical skills and intelligence in the completion of tasks and reliability, which refers to the ability to be committed and loyal to individuals and groups with reference to friendships, self-evaluation and the development of identity (Kaplan, 1998; Newman & Newman, 1997).

The preadolescent continuously experiments spontaneously with social power and abilities and calibrates his/her self against the group to explore his/her unique individuality. The self/identity is defined by means of the group. Social comparison, especially in the school, generates feelings of inferiority (Newman & Newman, 1997; Shaffer, 2000; Sigelman, 1999). The characteristics of early developers correspond with the symptoms of identity foreclosure (Peterson, 1996; Schwartz & Dunham, 2000; Sternberg, 2004).

Preadolescence represents the start of a period of extensive self-analysis and evaluation which later culminates in the development of a comprehensive and integrated identity (Erikson, 1980). Marcia (in Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000; Sternberg, 2004) identifies the concepts of exploration and commitment from the work of Erikson. The process whereby the identity is formed entails the exploration and testing of alternative ideas, beliefs and behaviour. From this follows a process of committing the self to a specific set of goals, values and beliefs which were selected during a process of conscious and purposeful decisions (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000; Sigelman, 1999; Sternberg, 2004). The characteristics of early developers correspond with the symptoms of identity foreclosure (Peterson, 1996; Schwartz & Dunham, 2000; Sternberg, 2004).

An important interface between the school and the child refers to the effect on the moral development of the child. The school is a micro community in which the broader community is represented. In the school environment children learn how things work in real life and they gain the opportunity to define themselves in relation to the world in which they live (Berman, 1997; Wiles & Bondi, 2001). This implies that the preadolescent leader/non-leader must be able to evaluate his/her daily activities within the omnipresent leadership model within a wider context and be aware that behaviour has certain social and political implications. This means that the preadolescent has to

have the ability to act in a way which is consistent with learned behaviour.

The essence of the appointment of primary school leaders is based on values such as popularity, success, achievements, competition (Hendrikz, 1983; Follet, 1985), and a climate that encourages the egocentric hunger for power and status (Berman, 1997; Du Plessis, 1994). These are all aspects that have a normative influence in the lives of Grade 7 learners. An event is normative when it occurs in a similar way for most people in a given group, and when that experience is shared in a similar way by the same group or cohort (Hook *et al.*, 2002). The leadership event in primary schools is normative because it is a planned institutional social occurrence which no Grade 7 learner in hundreds of schools can avoid. Leadership roles are attached to learners in a mutually exclusive way. Learners are either included for being a leader, or are excluded.

Our purpose in this research was to reflect critically on the appropriateness of existing leadership models for the preadolescent from the perspective of the child's well-being, as described by Ryff and Keyes (1995). The dimensions of environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, autonomy, self-acceptance, and positive relations with others will be discussed. These dimensions were derived from the synthesis of theories of lifespan development (e.g. Erikson, Buhler, Jung, Neugarten), clinical accounts of positive functioning (e.g. Allport, Maslow, Rogers), and descriptions of positive mental health (e.g. Jahoda, Birren).

## Method

A qualitative research method that follows an inductive, exploratory approach was selected because this method acknowledges the complexity of the phenomenon of leadership (Creswell, 1998; Parry, 1998). This complexity comprises the multidimensional intra-psychological and behavioural components of preadolescents and the interpersonal and organisational aspects of the leadership phenomenon (Conger, 1998).

## Research context

The primary school studied is situated in an affluent city environment. It is in a transitional process regarding leadership models, and the school's governing body had requested assistance in assessing two leadership models, namely, a traditional model and a new proposed leadership model. The traditional model comprises the allocation of permanent leadership roles — the so-called prefects — to a group (15 boys and 15 girls) of senior primary school learners for the duration of a year. The learners are chosen by means of a democratic selection process, in which the senior grade learners (Grades 5–7) and the teachers vote for candidates, who are identified by the teachers and the principal of the school. The prefects function as a small, select subgroup in the school context, and their purpose is to serve the school.

The new leadership model comprises eight committees (buildings and grounds, culture, events, sports, tidiness, scholar patrol, contingency, and

media) including all the children in Grade 7, on a rotating system. The committees represent the main task or fields where the school has traditionally needed the help of learners to make school organisation easier. Every committee chooses a boy and girl chairperson who serve on an executive committee. The executive committee chooses from their members a boy and girl chairperson.

### Data collection

Written information was obtained from learners in the traditional model through the following question:

Your Grade 7 year is nearly a thing of the past. During your Grade 7 year some children were selected to be leaders and some were not. This has been a custom at the school for many years. Write a letter to someone you feel confident about talking to and tell this person about your experience of being selected as a leader, or not being selected as a leader. Tell this person everything you think and feel about this experience.

Altogether 30 learners were selected as leaders, and 29 protocols (96.5 %) were returned. Furthermore, 87 children had not been selected as leaders and 82 protocols (94.25%) were returned.

Data were also collected, during the next year, from learners who participated in the new proposed leadership model by means of 12 focus groups, as well as one focus group consisting of the school's management team. The 12 focus groups comprised 85 learners from the entire Grade 7 group of 140 learners (61% participation). Seven individual interviews were conducted in the middle of the year and five at the end of the year, just before the school closed.

Consent was obtained from the Department of Education, the school's management team, the parents of the learners, and the learners themselves. Learners were assured that information would be treated confidentially at all times and any learner who wanted to withdraw from the research process, at any stage, could do so.

### Reliability

The reliability of this study was ensured by the following processes: literature triangulation; detection of detailed and complete electronic audit trace, by means of Atlas.ti 5 work table; the mechanisation of data (Neuman, 2000); providing complete descriptions by participants (Creswell, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1994); and constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Silverman, 1993) of analysis of data collection, data analysis and conceptualisation (Parry, 1998).

### Data analysis

The qualitative analysis was done by means of computer-aided analysis software. The Atlas.ti 5 is essentially a code-and-retrieve programme (Conger, 1998). This allows the researcher to work through the text, break it up into

subcategories by attaching codes to each category, and then re-organise the codes in groups. General features suggested by various authors (Berg, 1998; Charmaz, 2002; Conger, 1998; Creswell, 1998; Neuman, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were used as a guideline for the content analysis of the data.

Data analysis in qualitative research entails searching for patterns or themes in the data (Neuman, 2000; Seale, 2002). The course of the data analysis process can briefly be described as follows.

Step 1: The data are fragmented through a process of open coding and divided into as many meaningful subcategories as possible.

Step 2: During the process of axial coding, the broad categories, which were created during open coding, are grouped according to themes to illustrate a central idea.

Step 3: During selective coding the categories are integrated, refined and illustrated with quotations.

## **Results**

The discussion of the data is supported by relevant quotes from all the participants.

## **Discussion**

In the discussion of the age appropriateness of leadership models in the pre-adolescent life phase, the model of Ryff and Keyes (1995) is conceptualised by the creation of a context (environmental mastery) that informs personal growth, purpose in life, autonomy, self-acceptance and positive relations with others. The reciprocal interaction between the individual and the environment co-creates environmental mastery, or the lack thereof, which again contributes or limits the other dimensions. It is proposed that all the other dimensions are embedded in the context of the environment.

An environment in which preadolescents have a sense of mastery and competence in managing themselves, their relationships and the contexts is characterised by an accessible, interactive, negotiated space. In this space they should have opportunities to exercise control over their environment, and learn to draw on available resources (human relationships as well as physical resources in the environment) to make optimal use of opportunities and to develop their cognitive, emotional, social and moral potential. This type of environment should be accessible to the preadolescent so that learning opportunities can facilitate growth in learners, thereby enabling them to choose contexts suitable to their developing needs and values (Follet, 1985).

The preadolescent leaders and non-leaders in this study perceived both the traditional and the new leadership models as very limiting in that there was a lack of control to change or improve their interpersonal and contextual environments. Due to the specific developmental phase of preadolescent children, they are still in a learning process and need to be given opportunities to learn different skills, such as competence in mastering interpersonal skills. They also need to develop their intrapsychic abilities and to explore different

contexts (Sternberg, 2004). In both leadership models the development of these tasks was distorted and limited.

The context is limited by the underlying assumptions on which these leadership models are based, developed and implemented such as competition, achievement, status and rewards (Follet, 1985). These assumptions co-create a context in which unfairness flourishes. Such a context is characterised by competition and comparison, exclusion and deprivation of the natural environment in which preadolescent children naturally experiment with leadership roles, as illustrated by the following quotes:

*All of the children have leadership potential .... Yes, [but] not everyone has the potential like high profile leaders. I suppose not everyone can become the prime minister.*

*It is simply not possible for everyone to be the winner.*

*Children will also be excluded later on in life (Member of the Management team).*

The obvious criteria for preadolescent leaders include that they should be willing and have the ability to perform the required duties, be an example to others and be hard-working. The reality, however, is that the democratic selection process is based on popularity that is achieved by sport achievements, intellectual abilities and physical appearance. This finding is also supported by Buscall (1994) and Newman and Newman (1997).

*If you are not popular, you will not become a chairman. Your academic performance does not matter and it does not matter whether or not the teachers like you. If you are popular, you will be selected as a leader.*

*Being an example to others, performance, hard work and having intellectual ability will help you to be selected.*

An unnatural environment of a forced division is created whereby children's natural social processes are disrupted by a superficial allocation of roles and responsibilities based on an adultist model of leadership. The best defence mechanism for the preadolescent against inclusion in, and exclusion from, the group, due to the appointment of leaders, is the positive relationships with friends. With the appointment of leaders a small select subgroup is formed and the group norms and social values of the spontaneous friendship groups are transformed by a new set of norms that are fostered by individual attention, training camps and special meetings. Previous existing group formations are split by the process. One participant expressed it as follows:

*I am unhappy because sometimes the prefects form a group and spend time on their own. Unfortunately all of my friends became prefects. As a result I feel on my own without any friends. For instance, when I wanted to visit N\*\*s on Friday, they had a prefect meeting. The next Friday he had to get ready for a party. The next morning I heard that all of the prefects had learned to dance — with girls! — completely like a group of insane matric boys.*

The power of friendships is extremely significant for the developing preadolescent (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000; Newman & Newman, 1997; Sigelman, 1999; Thompson, Grace & Cohen, 2001; Sullivan, 1969). This context that has been

created by the leadership models does not allow for any natural way of dealing with interpersonal loss and personal validation (Adler & Adler, 1998; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000). Friendships have to be specially nurtured in preadolescents because preadolescence represents a so-called sensitive period or "teachable moment" in the development of the child (Havinghurst in Newman & Newman, 1997).

The preadolescent life phase is the time during which children are most ready to acquire new skills (Newman & Newman, 1997; Sigelman, 1999). Skills related to personal growth are reflected in the preadolescents' evaluation of the leadership models. Children described what they felt to be a limiting environment because they felt bored by the reality of the demands of leadership tasks. In time they became uninterested in pursuing the leadership responsibilities since these responsibilities invaded their school life, free time and friendships.

*The way I see it, leaders are a waste of time. If you are selected as a leader, your responsibility would for instance be to stand at the toilets and tell children that they are not allowed to go in after break. How on earth could this develop your leadership qualities?*

*After a while it did not bother me any more because leaders have many responsibilities and their duties are certainly not pleasant.*

In addition, the developing preadolescent does not have the ability to apply the power associated with their leadership positions responsibly:

*Because they pick on and make fun of the children they do not like.*

*They tell the children exactly what to do, e.g. 'I need to stand in front of you, because I am a leader', 'Carry my school-bag', etc.*

*Sometimes they are rude and they pull and tug and push and shove as they wish.*

*They are so arrogant, it 'sucks'. I lost two friends because they are leaders and they regard themselves as superior.*

A positive feature is that children experience personal growth in the assignment of the leadership title since it contributes to their self-confidence, perceived status and acknowledgement by the community, parents and teachers.

*I learned how to work as a team; to trust others; not to allow others to walk all over me; what it meant to be obedient and patient with less important duties such as watching the toilets; to be independent and stand on my own feet; to take decisions; to have perseverance; to be responsible.*

*Teachers, school children, parents and the community regard leaders as children with high status. Being a leader is quite an achievement. You feel and are important when you are a leader. Leaders are more important than those who are not leaders.*

However, very little involvement of teachers in the facilitation of constructive learning opportunities has been observed. Fixed roles are applied by the teachers to the children, without any negotiation with the children. Teachers are perceived as absent and it was felt that the teachers in fact contribute to the unfair practices.

*At some of the meetings, in fact most of them, the teachers are not even*



*present. Then you can not control the children at all. You stand in front and no one listens to you, you just waste your time.*

*No, and then we don't do it properly and they scold us because we did it wrong. But the teachers never told us how it is supposed to be done.*

In the preadolescent life phase children should be guided. Processes should be facilitated to nurture their development to allow for the development of personal skills. Participants perceived that leadership positions contributed to their purpose in life. For instance, a person who is not a leader in primary school will have less chance to be a leader in high school. They also perceive that leadership will help a person to obtain a job in future. One of the participants verbalised it as follows:

*Then it creates a good impression with the children when they go to high school, because perhaps later in life again they will have the opportunity to become a leader. It might perhaps help you to get a job and you/ she could even one day become the boss.*

The whole process of leadership assignment (to be or not to be a leader) is interpreted by preadolescents in relation to their identity. This illustrates the sensitivity of this developmental phase. Preadolescents do not have the cognitive ability to understand that the assigned identity is only one interpretation of the power relationship between the school and the child, or to distinguish between the assigned role and the self (Mottier, 2000; Burr, 1995). These intrapsychic and interpersonal processes contribute to early leadership and personal identity foreclosure, with little space for the development of exploration and commitment (Schwartz & Dunham, 2000; Sternberg, 2004).

*When you are a leader, it means that you have to be a role model for other children. This gives others somebody to look up to. Leaders are selected by the children; they know who can take the lead and accept it. Leaders are superior to other children and those who are not leaders can look up to the leaders.*

The preadolescent who has not been selected as a leader has more opportunities to develop autonomy, since the rigid procedures as well as the narrowly defined tasks and responsibilities of the leadership role do not have the power to limit the child's developing self. Emotions that typically arise from the impaired level of self-acceptance were expressed by both leaders and non-leaders, indicating impaired levels of self-acceptance.

*But [I] am sad about the fact that ... if you do not perform well in something, you are nothing.*

*It took me a lot of courage to say what I am about to tell you. When I was selected as a leader I was delighted, but when I saw the other children crying I felt really bad and thought that it was unreasonable and unfair.*

Very few participants dissociated themselves from the process in a manner that would indicate their ability to resist social pressures and to regulate themselves according to their personal standards (Ruini & Fava, 2004).

*Now I don't understand why the children selected the leaders, because when it comes to recognising leadership qualities, they do not have a clue. They merely selected the children they liked the most. I really do not care, because I enjoy my life the way it is.*

## Recommendations

Both of the leadership models did not contribute to the well-being of preadolescent development. The following recommendations are made to promote the well-being of preadolescents. The Department of Education should take responsibility for the co-creation of enabling school environments by facilitating learning opportunities, such as workshops that include both teachers and children to share alternative approaches that would assist them to optimise this critical learning phase of preadolescent development. Management of schools should use the existing opportunities in which preadolescents can participate and involve all the children in activities that will facilitate the development of their cognitive, emotional, social and moral potential. For example when children are expected to assist with the organisation of social, cultural or sports events, children can take turns in assisting with the planning and executing of various tasks. It is however of critical importance that adults guide the children, e.g. to identify available resources; to model appropriate behaviour in terms of utilising the resources; to determine what specific tasks need to be attended to; to determine priorities and to ensure that all the responsibilities have been met. By applying an inclusive approach everybody gets an opportunity to exercise skills and by allowing children to take control of certain aspects of their lives, guided by adult-facilitators, the natural social processes of preadolescent development would be optimally supported. This approach would also endorse principles of inclusion and fairness that contribute to the well-being of school communities in general.

## Conclusion

The study showed that preadolescent leadership does not promote well-being on an individual, interpersonal, or contextual level. On the contrary, it contributes to negative evaluations of the self, disrupted peer group interactions; distorted relationships with adults; and limited environments for self development. From a well-being perspective the educational system should be revised to create more opportunities for developing creativity, empathy, optimism, and hope.

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