Youth Leadership Development from the Grade 8 Perspective: 
A Case Study of a School-Based Program

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Abstract

This study examined the leadership development experiences of adolescents participating in a school-based leadership program. A case study of ten Grade 8 students is described based on qualitative data from student response journals, field notes, and program documentation.

The evidence from the study suggests that adolescents value and benefit from leadership development experiences and opportunities. The major findings were as follows: (1) Leadership development experiences that adolescents find meaningful are those where they are actively engaged in problem-based, real-life, and experiential learning opportunities; (2) Adolescents value learning experiences where they are granted freedom, decision-making power, and increased responsibility; (3) Adolescents prefer to work in educational groups where collaboration and cooperation are essential to the attainment of a shared goal; (4) Adolescents are drawn to novel, exiting, and interesting learning experiences; (5) Having positive and supportive role models from whom to seek inspiration, guidance and validation is an important experience for an adolescent’s leadership development; (6) Long-term participation in leadership education is critical to leadership development; (7) Leadership development allows adolescents to feel like they
can make a positive impact on their world; (8) Leadership development gives adolescents an improved sense of self, including: higher self-esteem, more confidence, and feelings of self-worth, self-efficacy, and self-fulfillment; (9) Leadership skills acquired by students consist of interpersonal and communication skills, problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, and the ability to influence and lead others; (10) Leadership development gives adolescents the opportunity to build relationships with likeminded people who they normally would not interact with – including students younger or older than them; and, (11) The Student Leaders program offers participants both transactional and transformational leadership opportunities.
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate the elements and attributes of youth leadership programming from the perspective of adolescent students. I chose this topic because of my own personal and professional interest in developing leadership qualities in today’s youth. I have been fortunate to have had mentors, teachers, and opportunities that have nurtured and stimulated me as a leader, eliciting the very qualities in me that have pushed me to pursue my goals, to aim high, and to achieve. This thesis attempts to examine how a specific leadership program within a school setting is striving to develop these same qualities in its students, and to discover which aspects of this program resonate with adolescent developing leaders and how their involvement in the program has impacted their lives. This chapter outlines the research context and questions as well at the significance and my personal connections to the study. The plan of the thesis is also shared.

1.2 Research Context

Few would argue the need for quality leadership in our culture. As noted by Bornstein (2004), people recognize that change is urgently needed. Now more than ever, citizens are acutely conscious of environmental destruction, unshakeable poverty, health catastrophes, human rights abuses, and escalating violence. To combat these global needs facing society, leaders are essential. Since the future of world civilization rests in the hands of today’s young people, strong leadership development in youth is critical.

Cox (1988) urged that how to best prepare today’s young people to fulfill their roles as tomorrow’s leaders, is a question we all must face together. If leadership
knowledge, attitudes, skills and aspirations are not successfully developed in youth, argued Cox, the progress of humankind and our ability to survive as a civilization, will be in jeopardy.

Fortunately, leadership can be learned. Contrary to popular belief, people are not born leaders; rather, they become leaders through a process of development that begins early on in life (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Simply put, leadership is a set of skills and attitudes. Through instruction, guidance and practice, these skills, like any other, can be learned and developed by all. Gardner (1987) found that skills essential for effective leadership develop strikingly in adolescent years. According to van Linden and Fertman, “adolescence is a time of opportunity in which to awaken [emphasis added] the leadership potential of individuals (p. 18).” Adolescence is a critical time in which individuals form their identity, defining themselves and their place in the world. Consequently, these are optimal years for “developing future leaders whose decisions and actions will reflect universal human values” (p. 15). The development of leadership abilities in youth, asserts Heath (2005), “should rank high on the agenda of school administrators, teachers, parents, and all who work with and on behalf of young people” (p. 2).

Despite its obvious importance, literature on youth leadership development remains scarce (Cox, 1988; Metzger, 2007; Sacks, 2009). Although there are many opportunities for leadership available, little is known about how to best develop leadership skills in youth, resulting in few approaches to leadership development that are grounded in a solid research base (Bickmore, 2001; Cox, 1988; Karnes & Chauvin, 2005; Heath, 2005; Karnes & Stephens, 1999; Leventhal, 1999; Roach et al., 1999; Metzger,
2007; Rosenberg, McKeon, & Dinero, 1999). Heath (2005) argues that, while few would dispute the idea that leadership can be developed through involvement in existing youth organizations, “there appears to be a lack of research to indicate how such organizations can best direct their efforts to be most effective in their work with students” (p. 2).

Effective or not, a variety of leadership opportunities and organizations exist within the secondary school setting, while, in the intermediate (middle school or elementary) setting, they remain limited. Despite Sacks’ (2009) description of the intermediate years as an opportunity for students to see in themselves the possibility of being a leader who brings about positive change for the community – a period where students can gain their first “real-taste” of leadership – opportunities are scarce. Few schools put forth the effort and resources to provide opportunities to help young students realize their leadership potential. This poses a problem because “leadership skills are most effectively acquired through practice” (Metzger, 2007, p. 7).

Leadership development opportunities for students, intermediate and high school alike, tend to focus on developing skills in public speaking, organization, and written communication (Heath, 2005). While clearly beneficial to student development, van Linden and Fertman (1998) characterize these skills as transactional in nature. A more “complex” and “potent” type of leadership is transformational leadership (Burns, 1978, 2003). Transformational leadership qualities “focus on adolescents valuing how they serve as role models, make good decisions, and influence others in a positive way” (van Linden & Fertman, 1999, p. 12). It is important for students to go beyond the mere acquisition of transactional skills, and be empowered to encourage and support their peers and younger students to develop as moral leaders. By encouraging leadership in
others, students have the potential to lift their peers to higher levels of thinking, living, and motivation (Heath, 2005). In doing so, young people will not only have the experience of doing leadership tasks, but also the practice and confidence in truly being a leader.

For these reasons, it is important to address the issue of youth leadership. Young people have high levels of energy, enthusiasm, and idealism, and are capable of great accomplishments. Karnes and Bean (1995) noted that young people have the desire to be challenged, the courage to accomplish, and creative approaches to problem solving. For example, Craig Kielburger, founder of Free the Children – the world’s largest network of children helping children – began his battle against child slavery at the age of twelve. At age eight, Hannah Taylor founded The Ladybug Foundation Inc., a charity providing food, clothing, and shelter for Canadian homeless, raising millions of dollars, and speaking to hundreds of Canadian schools.

While the former examples may have been exceptional cases of extraordinary leadership, the fact remains: the leadership potential is in every child (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Consensus suggests it is time to bring youth leadership development to the forefront. Why wait until high school or post-secondary education to “awaken” leadership potential? Why not seize the opportunity and begin creating leaders in young adolescents? The opportunity is there. As noted by Martinek, Schilling, and Hellison (2006), fostering the innate need to lead, teach and care for others is fundamental to creating a just and moral society. Today's young people need new leadership skills to see their way into the future: the capacity to collaborate, to live with contradiction, and to imagine new ways of living.
1.3 Research Questions

In this study, I investigated a leadership program that exists within the school setting at the elementary level. The intent of this study was to understand the elements, dimensions, and experiences offered by the program that contributed to leadership development among participants. This study also examines the effects/impact extended participation in the program has had on students. This thesis focuses on the following research questions:

1. What types of leadership learning activities or experiences do Grade 8 student leaders find most meaningful to their leadership development?

2. In what ways do Grade 8 student leaders feel their participation in a leadership program has impacted their lives?

3. What transformational and transactional leadership opportunities does the Student Leaders Program offer to Grade 8 student?

To conduct my research, I employed case study methodology. Data was collected through the use of student response journals, field notes, and program documents.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Understanding leadership development in youth, specifically adolescents, is an important step in the process of improving and developing effective leadership education. Researchers in the fields of child development, child psychology and education have commented that there are many gaps in youth leadership research (Conner & Strobel, 2007; Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Hackman & Wageman, 2007; Sacks, 2009). While there are theories in place, the question remains: What does youth leadership development at the intermediate level look like in a real-life context? This case study is intended to
answer this question by examining an existing youth leadership development program while extending and strengthening what is already known through previous research. It also allows us to hear what youth leaders themselves say about how we help develop their skills, and why it is important that we do so. These findings have implications for public policy, program development, and ultimately, students and society at large.

This research can help to inform youth policy at both the school board and ministry levels. The desire to improve children’s social-emotional development, to create positive contributing citizens through our school systems, is not new. With Finding Common Ground (2008), the Ontario Ministry of Education expressed its commitment to character development in youth (Sacks, 2009). In response, school boards across the province adopted character development programs to be implemented at the school level. Programs such as Character Matters at the York Region District School Board, and the Virtues Program at the Dufferin-Peel Catholic School Board both show an effort to ensure positive character development in all children. This research will give the ministry and school boards a snapshot of a youth leadership program, giving youth a voice, and offering recommendations about what youth leadership can look like, how it can be improved, and why it is important.

This research can also reinforce leadership education. The findings inform teachers and administrators, as well as leaders of any organizations that involve youth, about the kinds of practical leadership experiences that have helped youth to develop as leaders, the kind of activities youth leaders found most beneficial, and the impact it has had on their lives. This information will be of great value to administrators looking to
implement leadership programs in their schools and to educators who are designing leadership programs.

The greatest contribution this study can make is its contribution to future student leaders, and the society in which they will influence. Youth experience numerous benefits from leadership development: increased self-esteem, confidence, personal fulfillment, resiliency, and self-efficacy. Student leaders also give us hope for the future. By improving the quality of education and programming for the next generation of leaders, we all benefit. Students who participate in leadership development and are given the opportunity to learn and practice leadership will enter each phase of their lives better prepared to solve problems, create change, and bring about a vision for a better, kinder, more inspiring world.

1.5 Background of the Researcher

My personal interest in this topic stems from my own experiences and goals as a teacher. As a novice elementary school educator, I would like to discover new ways to help and inspire all students to realize their full leadership potential. There is no greater gift that I can give my students than to teach them to be leaders, and help them to learn and grow independently and creatively.

I remember the teacher who first awakened the leader in me. I was in Grade 7, and I distinctly remember the feelings of excitement and joy, anticipation and desire for a newfound possibility. It was as if a whole new world was unfolding before me – a world in which I not only belonged, but was a principle character. In the years to follow, I actively sought out opportunities - and I have had the fortune of many - in which to
develop and practice leadership skills. Each time, I felt my world expand a little further, leading me to the most valuable truth: anything is possible.

For this reason, I believe in leadership education. In fact, I believe it is our best hope for the future. Each of the world’s greatest accomplishments began with the vision of great leaders: the airplane, the realization of civil rights, and the shuttle to the moon. Thus to teach a student to be a leader is to pass on the confidence to live in the realm of possibility: to be the change, to make a difference, to achieve dreams, or to defy the impossible. This confidence is a byproduct of well-developed and proficient leadership skills. It is the ability to face a problem, and not only have the vision for a positive outcome, but also the means to see it through. This is the gift that was given to me, and it has always been my hope to share it with my students through education.

From the onset of my career as an educator, I recognized a passion for teaching intermediate level students. I was specifically drawn to working with students in Grade 8. Maybe it was the influence of my intermediate teachers that drove me in this direction? Or perhaps I was simply drawn to the task of preparing students for their transition to high school? In any case, I viewed Grade 8 as a pivotal year, one bursting with both challenges and opportunities. Thus, despite being allotted to the junior division for a number of years (as well as a stint in the library), I continued to pursue my work with intermediate students through extra curricular activities, facilitating clubs and coaching sports teams.

What I loved about working with intermediate students, something that I felt was lacking in the junior division, was the critical conversation. With these students, I could reason, debate, push, challenge their perspectives, and open their eyes to something new.
Most had not yet begun to think about life or the bigger picture – these were foreign concepts. In this way, I found intermediate students to be in somewhat of a state of unconsciousness, blind to the world around them, but open to guidance. It was in this state of unconsciousness that I saw my opportunity to awaken leaders. After all, the leadership potential in a person is already there, it is just a matter realization.

Of course, I quickly discovered that awakening the positive leader in an angst-ridden, hormonal teenager is no small task. The challenges were many, and the interested were few. The inspired, do-gooders were greatly outnumbered by the aloof, “too cool to care” students, and student council, in every school I taught, appeared to be nothing more than a popularity contest. The beautiful picture I envisioned with my new-teacher-coloured glasses tarnished before me. There I was in 2007, barely completing my third year of teaching, deflated. This would be more difficult than I imagined.

As it turned out, I was not alone in my position. My colleague expressed a similar frustration when reflecting upon the work we did with student council that year. The students were disorganized and apathetic. Attendance was poor. Communication was non-existent. Worse, there was no common goal. We realized, however, the problem was not necessarily the students or their sour attitudes; rather it was the structures of the program itself that were limiting. First, while students were elected into particular roles, none were clearly defined. Furthermore, the students elected were not necessarily qualified for their position in the first place; the students voted in were generally the ones with the most friends. Regardless of who was elected, student council responsibilities were greatly limited to carrying out teacher/administration generated tasks - little room for student voice, social justice, or authentic opportunities to lead.
In response, we decided to completely revamp student council. Our goal was to create a program that every student would want to be a part of, a program for elite leaders. Thus, the Student Leaders Program was born, and has been evolving ever since. Regardless of successes, there remains a lot of work to be done - just when we think we have figured out one problem, another arises. Despite four teachers advising the Student Leaders, we struggle to find a model that works perfectly, there seems to always be something that is not quite right. It is for this reason that this thesis exists. Leadership education is my passion. It is what I adore about my profession and I want to explore it, learn about it, and make it better. This is my hope.

1.6 Plan of the Thesis

There are five chapters in my thesis organized to describe the study in detail. Chapter One provides an overview of the thesis describing the research questions, background, and the significance of the study.

Chapter Two reviews existing literature in youth leadership. Definitions of leadership are discussed with particular attention to transformational leadership models and leadership in youth. The stages and dimensions of leadership development, as outlined by van Linden and Fertman (1998), are described as a theoretical framework for how adolescents acquire leadership skills. Leadership interactions are explored to further understand how students learn and practice leadership skills/attitudes. Finally, findings of previous case studies will be examined to address current leadership education practices, programming, and impact on students.

Chapter Three describes the methods used to carry out the study. The participants in this study are Grade 8 students of a school-based leadership program. The program is
described in detail. I also discuss data collection and analysis methods and the ethical considerations of the study.

In Chapter Four, I present the case study findings of my participants. I use this case study to illustrate how a school-based leadership program facilitates the development of leadership knowledge, skills, and attitudes and the impact it has had on the lives of the participants. Finally, Chapter Five takes the insight from the case study to answer the research questions posed in Chapter One. I conclude with suggestions for further research.
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

2.1 Leadership Defined

Leadership is a difficult concept to define. As Stogdill (1974) noted “there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept” (p. 259). Since there are “no generally accepted definitions of what leadership is…and little agreement about the best strategies for developing and exercising it “ (Hackman & Wageman, 2007, p. 43), gaining a clear and solid understanding of leadership proves to be rather challenging.

Through the years, leadership experts have defined leadership in many terms: group processes, personality characteristics, interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, influence, particular behaviors, power relations, goal achievement, interactions, motivation, communication patterns, and initiation of structure (Ricketts & Rudd, 2002). Despite a lack of consensus within leadership literature there are a few principal definitions of leadership. For instance, in their book, Leadership Challenge, Kouzes and Posner (1995) assert that leadership is observable and learnable. They propose that there are five fundamental practices that enable leaders to accomplish extraordinary things: leaders must be willing to challenge the process, inspire a shared vision, enable others to act, model the way, and encourage the heart. In other words, leaders must be willing to take risks, be creative in problem solving, and search for new and better ways of doing things. Leaders also must have the ability to create and identify shared goals that enable others to see future possibilities. Most importantly, they must be passionate and enthusiastic about this vision, drawing in and inspiring others through their passion and enthusiasm. It is important that leaders encourage collaboration and empower others.
Additionally, effective leaders must establish standards and values that are respected by others, create plans for reaching important goals, and live and act in ways consistent with their beliefs. (Burns, 1978; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; van Linden & Fertman, 1998).

### 2.1.1 Transactional and Transformational Leadership

Though concepts first used by Downton (1973), the terms transformational and transactional leadership are often accredited to Burns (1978). Burns (1978) defined leadership as “leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations of both leaders and followers” (p. 19). Transactional leadership, according to Burns, is described as a transaction between parties, an exchange of one thing for another (i.e., doing an exemplary job so one might receive praise or a promotion, exchanging promises to secure support).

In contrast to transactional leadership, Burns considered transformational leadership to be far more “potent”. According to Burns, transformational leadership occurs when “one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (p. 20). Such leadership has transforming effects on both the leader and the led, simply by “raising the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both” (p. 21).

Van Linden and Fertman (1998) describe the distinction between the two types of leadership as the difference between doing leadership tasks and being a leader. According to van Linden and Fertman, transactional leadership focuses on “the skills and tasks associated with leadership, such as speaking in public, delegating authority, leading meetings and making decisions” while transformational leadership “focuses on the process of leadership and what it means to be a leader” (p. 9). Similar to Burns, van
Linden and Fertman describe transformational leadership as being concerned with how individuals use their abilities to influence people” (p. 9). Table 1 highlights the characteristics of transactional and transformational leadership as described by van Linden and Fertman.

Table 1 Characteristics of Transactional and Transformational Leadership (p. 18-19)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Transactional Leadership</th>
<th>Characteristics of Transformational Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- values problem and solution identification</td>
<td>- values the participation and contribution of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- makes decisions – even if everyone has not been heard - in order to move forward</td>
<td>- takes all view points and advice before making a decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- uses standards and principals as guides in decision making</td>
<td>- considers individuals within their contexts and situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- develops the self to be a better decision maker for the group</td>
<td>- uses individuals to test decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- gets things done</td>
<td>- develops the self first to be a better contributor to the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- recognizes the importance of the product</td>
<td>- learns from experiences to generalize to “real life”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- takes charge</td>
<td>- recognizes the importance of process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- shares leadership (group power)</td>
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</table>

2.1.2 Leadership as a Developmental Process

All people have leadership potential; a person does not become a leader overnight. Viewing leadership as non-learnable character traits or believing that only certain people can lead dooms society to limited leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Researchers agree that leadership is a personal and developmental process that takes place over time, through involvement with others (Karnes & Chauvin, 2005; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Ricketts & Rudd, 2002; Sacks, 2009; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). For
leadership to happen, leaders have to undergo a journey of self-discovery and personal understanding. True leadership cannot be learned from a textbook; it takes practice and hands-on experience, as well as intense personal exploration and development. However, through a process of knowing, observing, studying, and learning about leadership, people can discover leadership knowledge, skills and abilities that can be applied in the their everyday lives (Daft, 2008). In any case, leadership development is fundamentally self-development; the primary instrument of a leader is oneself (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

2.2 Leadership in Youth

2.2.1 Introduction

To conceptualize leadership in youth, specifically early adolescents, it is important to first review basic facts about the characteristics of adolescents and their development. Van Linden and Fertman (1998) summarize and illustrate current fundamental understandings of adolescence. Thus, for the purpose of this study, I will be extracting key points from their work, which will serve as a framework for understanding the developmental needs and processes of adolescents.

2.2.2 Characteristics of Adolescents

Adolescence is a time of change and transition. During this time, individuals undergo tremendous changes in physical development, levels of maturity, behaviours, and understandings of the world and of themselves. Van Linden and Fertman identify two stages of adolescents: early adolescents (ten to fourteen years old) and late adolescence (fifteen to nineteen years old), differing in needs, characteristics, and tasks. Since the participants of this study included students in Grade 8, van Linden and Fertman’s description of early adolescents will be considered here.
Specific needs of early adolescents, as identified by van Linden and Fertman, are as follows:

- Understanding of physical and emotional changes that take place during puberty
- Self-acceptance
- Acceptance of and by others
- Acceptance, understanding, approval, and love from significant adults
- Knowledge of responsibility to others
- Discovering how to make decisions, assume responsibility, use independent judgment, and recognize and accept consequences of actions
- Figuring out how to deal with feelings
- The beginnings of a personal value system (p. 12)

Van Linden and Fertman argue that these needs reflect the primary tasks of adolescence - a process through which “individuals develop a sense of who they are and how they view the world” (p. 12). Van Linden and Fertman suggest that adolescents’ idealism, quest for independence, and identity formation are critical to this process and to leadership development.

Van Linden and Fertman describe adolescents as idealists. With their abstract reasoning, adolescents are capable of envisioning possible solutions to social problem and conceive notions of ideal social structures. Young adolescents rebel against an imperfect reality and cannot understand why adults do not accept their idealistic solutions - at times becoming frustrated and angry as a result. In response, many adolescents become involved in social, political, or religious causes in which they are given the opportunity to explore their ideals and gain experience in the real world (p. 13).

Adolescents are also on a quest for independence and autonomy. During this phase of their lives, adolescents begin to “seek identities separate from their parents and try to somehow make a difference in a wider social perspective” (p. 14). Young adolescents
spend much energy attempting to gain control over their lives and freedom from authority, yet continue to remain largely dependent on adult figures. This duality often creates internal and external conflict: while they crave and battle for independence, they enjoy the safety and comfort of childhood.

Early adolescence is also a critical time for identity formation. Individuals begin to define themselves and clarify their role in the world. They “look for role models and heroes and try to integrate aspects of those ideals into their own value system” (p. 15). As well, social hierarchy within the school becomes immensely important, as individuals look to peers and teachers to affirm their sense of self and competence.

2.2.3 Adolescents and Leadership

As young adolescents struggle to answer the questions “Who am I?” and “How do I fit in?” few have the inclination to answer, “I am a leader.” Why is this so? The answer is simple: adolescents have a limited understanding of leadership. Through life experiences, observation, and education, youngsters arrive at adolescence having constructed limiting conceptualizations of leadership. First, adolescents tend to constraint their understanding of leadership to leadership tasks: leading meetings, speaking in public, and acting as class president or team captain (p. 16). In the eyes of an adolescent, one either does leadership tasks, or doesn’t. Furthermore, there are certain characteristics that they associate with leadership (i.e., tall, physically fit, popular, attractive, well-behaved, older, extroverted, etc.). These characteristics make for a narrow definition of leadership – one with which few adolescents can identify.

Van Linden and Fertman argue that all people, including adolescents, have the potential to lead. Unfortunately, not every adolescent will be recognized for his or her
leadership skills, or even know that those abilities exist. Some adolescents may even be reluctant to lead altogether. Leadership requires work and effort, and these adolescents may have other needs that rank higher on their list of priorities.

In any case, adolescents need help to tap into their leadership potential. A broader and more accessible definition of leadership will allow adolescents to look at leadership in a new light. Leadership must be viewed as a set of skills and attitudes that can be learned and practiced by all adolescents. This broader definition invites all adolescents to explore their individual potential as a leader. After all, argue van Linden and Fertman, “adolescence as an optimal time of opportunity in which to awaken the leadership potential in individuals; it is a time to help adolescents be the leaders they already are” (p. 18).

2.3 Youth Leadership Defined

While research literature is inundated with theories of adult leadership, there is very little to be found on theories pertaining to youth. In a recent literature search on Scholar’s Portal, Sacks (2009) reported that 95,923 peer-reviewed articles returned hits using the keyword “leadership.” Of these only 55 (0.001%) were related to “youth leadership”. When Sacks’ search was broadened to include other terms such as “student leadership” and “children and leadership,” the list lengthened but not considerably.

When conducting my own literature search using the keywords “youth leadership” and “development,” countless hits on concepts of youth development, service learning, character development, leadership identity, and more, were returned, all of which loosely associated to my area of research focus. The lines between the concepts
blurred, producing a murky landscape for investigation. Similar to adult leadership theories, gaining clarity on concepts of youth leadership would prove to be complex.

Some researchers apply adult theories to the field of youth leadership while others advise that the differences between youth leadership and adult leadership are significant and therefore require a different conceptualization (Conner & Strobel, 2007; Roach et al., 1999). Youth leadership initiatives are expanding rapidly, thus research on youth leadership is particularly important. Despite this expanding youth leadership initiative, the field of youth leadership is not a common focus of educational theory and research; there is little focus on defining leadership within this context (Conner & Strobel, 2007; Ricketts & Rudd, 2002; Roach et al., 1999).

As is the case with adult leadership, little consensus has been made among researchers on how to define the concept of youth leadership. There is agreement, however, that youth leadership involves competencies in communication, intrapersonal, interpersonal skills (Connor & Strobel, 2007; Hindes et al., 2008; van Linden & Fertman, 1998; Zeldin & Camino, 1999). Van Linden and Fertman (1998) present a view of youth leadership that encompasses cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects of leadership. This view describes leaders as individuals who “think for themselves, communicate their thoughts and feelings to others, and help others understand and act on their own beliefs” (p. 17).

Conner and Strobel (2007) acknowledge the concept of youth leadership must be anchored in clear principles, yet stress their belief that leadership in youth presents itself differently in different contexts. Limiting ourselves to a single, perhaps narrow, definition of leadership potentially alienates those youth who do not fall within that definition. They
suggest that a “broader more flexible conceptualization of leadership can play to different youth’s strengths, improving the likelihood that they will become engaged…in their communities in meaningful ways” (p. 294). The authors suggest that leadership is composed of three dimensions: communication and interpersonal skills, analytic and critical reflection, and positive community involvement. Communication and interpersonal skills can be promoted, and analytic and critical reflection can be encouraged through journal exercises and group discussion.

Additionally, Conner and Strobel (2007) emphasize that, while a flexible definition of youth leadership may be necessary, it is important that the conceptualization of leadership is not so broad that it becomes diluted and loses its meaning. Youth leadership may present itself differently in different contexts, but at its core, youth leadership involves connecting with others, making positive contributions to one’s community, and most importantly, allowing others to reach their potential. These core concepts are similar to those of adult leadership, suggesting that perhaps the two conceptualizations of leadership are not all that different. It is important to note that youth leadership theories are similar to adult theories in that they emphasize the belief that leadership can be learned (Staub, 1996; van Linden & Fertman, 1998).

2.4 Youth Leadership Development Models

2.4.1 Introduction

Several youth leadership development models exist, each of which view leadership development as a process occurring in stages. The model proposed by van Linden and Fertman (1998) will serve as a theoretical frame for this thesis, and will be discussed at length. Other prevalent youth leadership models will be explored as well.
2.4.2 Van Linden and Fertman Model

Van Linden and Fertman (1998) argue that all young people can learn about leadership. Unfortunately, many adults are not quite sure how leadership develops in adolescents, and therefore, not all adolescents fulfill their leadership potential. Like adults, young leaders emerge through a developmental process occurring in stages (Komives et al., 2006; Martinek, Schilling, & Hellison, 2006; Ricketts & Rudd, 2002; Sacks, 2009; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Van Linden and Fertman propose three distinct stages of leadership development: awareness, interaction, and mastery. During the awareness stage, youth begin to see themselves as leaders; they become aware of their leadership potential. The interaction stage involves student exploration where young people build and strengthen their leadership skills. Finally, the third stage involves student practice and mastery of leadership skills and concepts. These three stages fit within five dimensions of leadership: leadership information, leadership attitude, communication, decision-making, and stress management. A young person progresses through each of the stages, building on experience and evolving his/her understanding of leadership. The young person progresses from not actively thinking about leadership, to reflecting upon his/her leadership potential, to seeking opportunities to exercise and improve leadership abilities.

Within their model, van Linden and Fertman identify five dimensions of leadership that are found within each leadership development stage:

1. Leadership information
2. Leadership attitude
3. Communication
4. Decision making

5. Stress management

These dimensions, state van Linden and Fertman, encompass cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects of leadership development. “They provide a consistent frame of reference to assess, monitor, and evaluate an adolescent’s leadership development. They also offer adults who interact with teenagers concrete guidelines for understanding and supporting the development of leadership in adolescents” (p. 40).

Leadership Information. Van Linden and Fertman describe leadership information as “what adolescents know about leaders and leadership” (p. 40). Van Linden and Fertman argue that accurate information is critical to leadership development. Leadership information is presented and can be acquired through numerous sources and experiences, information that can be interpreted by adolescents in a variety of ways, and not necessarily correctly. Thus, it is important for adolescents to learn to make sense of all the information available to them, and form accurate conceptualizations of leadership.

Leadership Attitude. The second dimension, leadership attitude, refers to adolescents’ disposition, thoughts, and feelings toward identifying themselves as leaders (p. 41). Adolescent attitudes towards leadership are learned; they do not magically appear over time. Van Linden and Fertman argue, “a teenager’s leadership attitude predisposes him or her to lead” (p. 41). These leadership attitudes are learned – through direct instruction, being influenced by others (i.e., adults or peers who are loved and/or admired), or by adopting a social role (i.e., athlete, student leader, or camp counselor) – and are constantly evolving and being altered according to the adolescent’s experiences. In all cases, the acquiring and modifying of leadership attitudes always takes place within
systems of human relationship. It is a very dynamic process, one in which adolescents are continually confronted with expectations of “appropriate” attitudes, at a time where they are already struggling to exist within their environment and make sense of the world around them.

**Communication Skills.** Communication is the third dimension of the leadership development stages. It is described by van Linden and Fertman as the exchange of thoughts, messages, and information. “It is a process of sharing knowledge, interests, attitudes, opinions, feelings, and ideas with others. It is through communication that one person influences another” (p. 42). Communication is a critical talent for leaders, and thus a fundamental component of leadership. It permits the flow of ideas from one individual to another or to a group, and helps adolescents break down barriers between themselves and others – adults in particular. This includes the ability to share, receive, and interpret both verbal and nonverbal messages. In short, communication skills provide adolescents with “the basic tools they need to make contact with each other and work toward achieving day-to-day goals” (p. 42).

**Decision Making Skills.** The fourth dimension of leadership development is decision making. Van Linden and Fertman argue “decision making is what leadership is all about; it is making choices that influence others in an ethical and socially responsible way” (p. 42). As adolescents grow, and begin making more of their own decisions, they are forced to cope with the demands of parents, school, peers and work. Although adolescents already have considerable knowledge and intuitively approach decision making, they need to be exposed to both transactional and transformational leadership decision making processes. Where as transactional leaders make decisions based on their
own ideas and beliefs (without consulting others), transformational leaders take into account input from everyone involved and then make decisions. Teaching adolescents the basic principles to effective decision making practices may provoke some forethought, which can result in better decisions.

Stress-Management Skills. The fifth dimension leadership development, stress-management, refers to how adolescents react to and deal with the stress in their lives. Though not a concept easily defined, stress is “any physiological response of the body to demands from the external environment (people, situations, elements), internal mental processes (worry, fear, happiness), or physiological processes (drugs, blood sugar, biorhythms)” (p. 45). How adolescents react to stress depends largely on their personality, physical makeup, their perceptions, and context in which the stress occurs. Van Linden and Fertman view stress as a positive element in adolescents’ lives. While too much stress may become counterproductive, healthy amounts of stress challenge adolescents to develop a repertoire of coping strategies. “The ability of adolescents to regulate this stress influences their performance as leaders” (p. 46).

2.4.3 Other Youth Leadership Development Models

Ricketts and Rudd (2002) extend the work of van Linden and Fertman by introducing five dimensions of leadership: leadership knowledge and information, leadership attitude, decision-making, reasoning, and critical thinking, communication, and finally, interpersonal and intrapersonal relations. Students learn about each dimension of leadership within three stages: awareness, interaction, and integration. The awareness stage serves as the orientation to the curriculum. The interaction stage involves student exploration of leadership, and the integration stage involves student practice and
mastery of leadership development activities and concepts. The stages seek to build on the experience and perception of the students in order to enhance cognition and behavior in leadership development.

The relational leadership model introduced by Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (2007) describes leadership development “as a relational and ethical process of people together attempting to accomplish positive change” (p. 74). In this model, relationships are the focal point in the leadership development process. Komives et al. offer a framework connecting five key elements in an approach to leadership – leadership that is purposeful, empowering, ethical, inclusive, and process oriented. The process component of relational leadership means that individuals, leaders and participants alike, acquire and maximize leadership potential through interaction with each other to achieve a common goal.

Another model of youth leadership is the stage-based Leadership Identity Development Model (Komives et al., 2006). This model consists of five categories that influence six stages of leadership identity development. These categories include: broadening views of leadership, developing an awareness of self, group influences, developmental influences, and the changing views of self in relation to others. Movement through the stages of leadership identity formation depends upon an individual’s experiences in the above categories. The six stages of leadership identity development are: awareness of leadership, exploration of interests and engagement with others, leader defined as a position, leadership differentiation and leadership as a process, passion for commitments and care for the welfare of others, and finally, integration. At the end of this final stage, an individual identifies himself/herself as a leader.
Martinek, Schilling, and Hellison (2006) propose yet another transforming, stage-based theory of youth leadership development that attempts to give clarity as to how youth move from being self-serving individuals to caring and compassionate leaders. Grounded in Abraham Maslow’s (1968) theory of self-actualization, and Carol Gilliagn’s (1982) theory of how youth acquire a moral commitment to self and others, the theory presented by Martinek et al. identifies four stages of leadership development in youth: (1) needs-based leadership; (2) focusing on planning and teaching; (3) reflective leadership; and (4) compassionate leadership. In first stage, youth leaders are largely focused on fulfilling their own needs rather than fulfilling their leadership role. The second stage “finds the youth leaders focused on becoming an effective teacher” (p. 149). Once youth leaders become competent and confident in their abilities, they progress to the third stage of development, where they become reflective about their leadership role. The final stage of leadership development reflects compassionate leading, where leaders begin to “internalize and demonstrate an ethical concern for others” (p. 153).

In a recent study of student leaders in elementary and high school, Sacks (2009) identified four phases of leadership identified by children and adolescents: the task-oriented “helper,” the responsibility-oriented “deputy,” the role-oriented “agent” and the identity-oriented “ambassador.” Task-oriented leadership occurs in primary grades where students view adults as leaders, and through helping learn the fundamentals of teamwork and cooperation, basic communication skills, imagination, efficacy and simple problem solving. As responsibility-oriented leaders, students in junior grades begin to develop a more complex understanding of interpersonal leadership, as experiences with their peers reveal characteristics that students identify as leadership. As role-oriented
leaders, intermediate students begin to take part in tasks that demand a higher level of engagement and responsibility than those of previous years. Finally, identity-oriented leaders, found in high schools, are formal and informal leaders able to take on more complex-long term tasks, take initiative, and engage in work that stirs their passion.

2.5 Youth Leadership Experiences

2.5.1 Features of Effective Leadership Experiences

Van Linden and Fertman (1998) point out that adolescents are busy leading in many ways. Whether they are babysitting, working a job, volunteering, playing sports, or participating in clubs, young people are informally acquiring leadership competencies. Kouzes and Posner (1995) claim that opportunities to lead can be categorized in formal (education) and informal ways (through trial and error and people). School provides adolescents with both formal and informal opportunities for leadership development. In fact, Karnes and Stephens (1999) argue that school is the optimal environment for teaching leadership to adolescence. Why the school? School, according to Karnes and Stephens, “has become one of the last relatively safe environments for children” (p. 62). Already, schools offer students numerous extracurricular activities in which to develop and practice their leadership skills: student council, sports teams, clubs, and outreach initiatives. However, in order to maximize on adolescents’ leadership potential, youth activities, programs, and curricula focused in leadership development are necessary. Martinek et al. (2006) argue that while informal leadership opportunities can help kids become leaders, “structured leadership education is perhaps the most important in helping those who have not perceived themselves as leaders or who have not been involved with community and school activities” (p. 143).
Research suggests that there are a variety of factors necessary for the development of leadership abilities. In promoting the development of leadership, some youth development practitioners emphasize the importance of self-reflection, self-knowledge, and identity work (Conner & Strobel, 2007; Sacks, 2009; Saunders, 2002; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Others point to the value of providing youth with opportunities to assert their voices, share their opinions and ideas, and participate in decision-making (DesMaria, Yang, & Farzanehkia, 2007; Metzger, 2007; Heath, 2005). In any case, researchers generally agree on the factors that characterize effective leadership programs. To illustrate, Cox (1988) noted that a variety of well-rounded experiences are necessary for young people to become leaders. Cox urges those who work with adolescents to develop programs that provide adolescents with “collaborative experience, experience to enhance personal characteristic development, mentors and other nurturers, cultural and citizenship experience, communications experience, management control experience, group leadership experience, and significant life experience” (p. 134).

Roach et al. (1999) describe features of effective youth organizations as follows:

- opportunities for creative engagement in a variety of contexts
- adult perceptions of youth as resources for problem solving and project development
- youth given extensive responsibilities and uphold high standards
- multiple occasions to expect the unexpected and to learn to pose as well as solve problems
- engage members in long-term projects that include planning, preparation, performance, and evaluation
• diverse talents and expertise of individuals counted upon for group benefit
• engagement with minimal number of rules created for maximal impact
• individual responsibilities for development embedded within group expectations of excellence
• proficiency with multiple symbol systems and fluency in communication skills
• consistent call for self-assessment and accounting for and critiquing group performance

In a study investigating how at-risk students at an alternative education setting perceived effective leadership programming, Metzger (2007) found that students preferred leadership learning experiences that entailed active, experiential, applied, and novel experiences. Students felt that leadership development required long-term involvement, and appreciated a learning culture that emphasized student empowerment - the opportunity to have voice and power in within a process. In addition, students appeared to value a culture that is positive, motivated, collaborative, and supportive. They expressed the importance learning environments where trust, acceptance, mutual respect, and open-mindedness were practiced, highlighting benefits of equality, mutuality, and diversity within the program. Additionally, students indicated the importance of leadership teachers who promote teacher and student collaboration. Students also expressed a need for the opportunity to imagine new ways of reaching out and connecting with others on both the local and global level.

Van Linden and Fertman (1998) argue that to be meaningful to adolescents, leadership development must consider their idealism, quest for independence, and identity formation. The goal of any leadership learning experience, argue van Linden and
Fertman, is to provide leadership information, encourage adolescents to think of themselves as leaders, and “improve some subset of the participants’ leadership skills” (p. 58). Authors describe high-quality learning experiences as those based on the needs and experiences of the adolescents involved, which differentiate between transformational and transactional leadership, offer students the opportunity to practice their skills, and ensure that all staff members are well trained.

2.5.2 Transformational vs. Transactional Leadership Experiences

Van Linden and Fertman criticize most youth leadership programs as focusing too much on developing transactional leadership skills. Those skills are simpler to teach, implement and measure. However, van Linden and Fertman urge that, to fully develop leadership potential, adolescents must pass through a series of stages, acquiring knowledge of both transactional and transformational leadership. As such, argue van Linden and Fertman, “it is critical that the leadership development model include a balance of transactional and transformational leadership” (p. 18).

DesMaria, Yang, and Farzanehkia (2007) also support the need for transformational youth leadership development experiences. They argue that, while adults envision developing transformational leadership characteristics in youth, their unwillingness to relinquish their own positions of power and decision-making limit young people’s leadership development to transactional activities and responsibilities. They argue that the most powerful approach to youth leadership development is service learning – making a contribution to society – where adolescents become “engaged leaders taking responsibility for solving complex problems and meeting tangible needs” (p. 679). To fully realize young people’s transformational leadership potential, DesMaria et al.
listed the essential elements as: youth/adult partnerships, granting young people decision making power and responsibility for consequences; a broad context for learning and service; and recognition of young people's experience, knowledge and skills. Authors urged adult facilitators to “let go and let be” and allow young people to “be leaders now, today, in their own lives and communities” (p. 680).

Heath (2005) calls for a balance of transactional and transformational leadership experiences. Heath argues that, although management tasks associated with transactional leadership are important and useful skills for leaders, there should be an appropriate level of emphasis on leadership development upon empowering and transforming potential leaders to be positive agents of change. Heath contends that transformational leadership is achieved through experiential learning, mentoring, affording adolescents with decision-making power, and providing them with an environment that supports caring, character building, and inclusiveness.

2.5.3 Educational Groups

Van Linden and Fertman identify educational groups as an extremely effective educational methodology to help facilitate leadership development. Leadership is a social process; it occurs in groups of people. As such, “using educational groups – groups focused on skill acquisition – in leadership development allows teenagers the opportunity to learn and practice skills in a safe yet realistic environment” (p. 127). Furthermore, van Linden and Ferman note that there are few influences on adolescents’ behaviour that are more powerful than the support and approval of their peers. Therefore, using education groups is one of the most constructive ways to ensure that adolescents increase their leadership skills. When adolescents understand the group process – group expectations,
group dynamics, stages of a group, and experiential learning – they can apply what they experience in groups to real-life situations.

2.5.4 Experiential Learning Experiences

Although several theories attempt to identify and describe the necessary features of youth leadership development, perhaps the most critical aspect is providing youngsters with the opportunities to exercise and reflect on their leadership talents, abilities, and identity. Such opportunities allow youth to progress from learning about leadership to learning to be leaders. It is difficult for young people to develop an understanding of leadership and to see themselves as leaders without having an opportunity to practice it (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). As DesMaria et al. (2007) argue, the best approach to develop leadership is in real-life situations, it is learned by doing; thus, it is important to provide youth with many opportunities to “do”.

Van Linden and Fertman (1998) stress experiential learning as critical to the success of any leadership learning activity. Through this process, a person participates in an activity and then reflects at the experience critically, gains useful insight from analyzing it, and puts the resulting knowledge to work in his everyday life (p. 132). The goal of an experiential learning activity is to transfer the responsibility of learning from the facilitator to the participants. This is especially important for adolescents, argue Van Linden and Fertman, because “they need to feel they have power over their lives; taking responsibility for their learning helps give them that power” (p. 133). An experiential learning environment supported by adults allows young people to test out and practice their budding skills.

However, simply doing and practicing leadership is not enough (Sacks, 2009; van
Linden and Fertman, 1998); more attention needs to be paid to developing young leaders’ self-identity by affording them opportunities to reflect on their personal growth and the elements that contribute to their confidence as a leader. Adolescence, particularly intermediate years, is an optimal time to introduce students to adult conceptions of leadership, offering students a framework from which to form their own leadership identity. Sacks (2009) insists, “this is the most significant gap in youth leadership education, particularly for adolescents who have both the sophisticated reflective capacity and inclination to explore elements of their identity and its relationship to their life experiences and goals” (p. 125). Van Linden and Fertman (1998) argue that reflection is a critical component to the experiential learning process. Reflection gives adolescents an understanding of the meaning and impact of their efforts; without it they “do not integrate what they experience” (p. 135).

2.6 Implications of Youth Leadership Education and Opportunities

Youth experience numerous benefits from leadership development such as increased confidence, personal fulfillment, and resiliency (Conner & Strobel, 2007; Hindes et al., 2008; Leventhal, 1999; Sacks, 2009). Other potential outcomes of leadership development include communication skills, project management skills, responsibility, and a student’s ability to take initiative. Youth experience success and satisfaction from leadership development when they realize they are capable and respected for taking a stand, taking the lead, and making a positive difference. Leadership education and opportunities strengthen a variety of skills necessary for the demands of work and life such as problem solving, decision-making, and collaboration (Sacks, 2009). Moreover, leadership education has been shown to contribute to the overall positive
development of youth including increases in self-esteem, self-efficacy, engagement and academic achievement.

To illustrate, Roach et al. (1999) found that students who were immersed in effective youth-based organizations developed the following:

- pro-civic/pro-social values
- strong locus for control
- independence in reading for pleasure, seeking out non-school classes and opportunities
- motivation to seek bases for acquiring and adapting knowledge
- self-images that place themselves as effective learners making use of high education resources
- stable high academic achievement
- strong sense of self-efficacy for future tasks and goals
- trust in the value of high-risk behaviours for learning and performing
- sense of commitment to community service and volunteering
- desire to work and correct economic inequalities (p. 22)

When studying at-risk teens participating in a leadership program, Conner and Strobel (2007) concluded that participation in leadership activities promoted students’ communication and interpersonal skills; analytic and critical reflections; positive involvement at different levels in the community. Likewise, Hindes et al. (2008) saw an improvement in cooperation skills and teamwork, students’ ability to work productively within a group, to be productive members of a team, and to manage emotions in a cooperative way. Leadership programs were found to help students develop self-
awareness, self-regulation, be more open to feedback, more honest with peers, leading to more positive relationships. These programs were also shown to enhance decision-making, social skills, interpersonal strategies, and self-regulation.

Sacks (2009) found students themselves believe that leadership experiences contribute positively to their overall development including areas like self-understanding, contentment, relationships with peers, family and other adults, self-esteem, knowledge of current events and academic achievement. Likewise, Metzger’s (2007) participants experienced self-growth and an increased sense of accomplishment while making internal and external community connections. Ultimately, participants felt they were able to make a positive impact on their world.

In this way, we all benefit from developing leadership in youth. As noted by Martinek et al. (2006), fostering the innate need to lead, teach and care for others is fundamental to creating a just and moral society. Today’s young people need new leadership skills to see their way into the future: the capacity to collaborate, to live with contradiction, and to imagine new ways of living.

2.7 Importance of Youth Voice

Youth have a longing to be heard, and much can be learned from their collective voices (Conner & Strobel, 2007; Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Metzger, 2007; Sacks 2009; Wallin, 2003). Research on student voice suggests that there are a number of benefits to including students as active participants in research as well as curriculum development and reform (Sacks, 2009). To begin, Sacks (2009) reported that engaging students in school improvement efforts has been found to increase students’ empowerment, motivation, commitment to their own achievement and school goals,
which, in turn, allows schools to better understand and respond to the needs of their students.

Conner and Strobel (2007) urge adults not to underestimate the role youth can play in shaping the very developmental contexts that seek to shape them. Their findings remind us that “just as the youth can benefit from participation in a program, so too can the program benefit from its participants” (p. 296). Conner and Strobel describe youth as powerful agents, not simply passive participants, who can inform and influence leadership development in context.

Similarly, in a study investigating adolescents’ growth experiences in youth activities, Dworkin, Larson, and Hansen (2003) reported that students see themselves as the agents of their own development, having much to say about their ways of learning, if only given the opportunity to be heard. Wallin (2003) suggests “teachers and administrators should be willing to dialogue with students and respect their opinions while recognizing that students have a significant power in shaping schooling” (p. 71).

Youth, being full of energy and enthusiasm, also have the potential to contribute ideas that can drive innovation and improve outcomes (Sacks, 2009). This innovation, suggest Sacks, can extend into the domain of youth leadership development – “examining students’ perspectives yields knowledge not possible through adult perspectives alone” (p. 14). For these reasons, I believe examining the youth perspective deserves further attention. My goal in this research is to offer students an opportunity to share their perspectives in an effort to understand youth leadership development and contribute to innovation in leadership education.
2.8 Summary

Leadership is a complex concept that is difficult to define. Despite the myriad of differing views on the topic, prominent definitions describe leadership as the observable and learnable ability to influence and motivate others to follow a common goal. Youth, specifically adolescence, is considered an optimal time to elicit the leadership potential in an individual. Yet, while extensive research and resources have been applied to develop adult theories of leadership, little attention has been given to understanding leadership in the context of youth. Historically, theorists and practitioners have attempted to apply adult theories of leadership to youth; however, growing research in this field suggests that youth leadership deserves its own conceptualization, despite common themes.

At its core, youth leadership involves connecting with others, making positive contributions to one’s community, and allowing others to reach their potential. Similar to its adult counterpart, youth leadership is developed in stages and can be transformative in nature. Although several theories attempt to identify and describe the necessary features of youth leadership development, perhaps the most critical aspect is providing adolescents with the opportunities to exercise and reflect on their leadership talents, abilities, and identity.

Schools offer adolescents the best opportunities for leadership development. By participating in such activities, adolescents experience many benefits: increased confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-awareness, moral consciousness, resiliency, effective communication skills, academic achievement, and more. Essentially, effective leadership development creates capable individuals who can solve problems and contribute to the betterment of the world around them.
Despite growing interest in the field of youth leadership, much remains to be discovered. To fully grasp youth leadership, one must delve into the minds young people, to gain a perspective that is entirely theirs. Young people have ideas, voices, and innovations that can be powerful and effective in their own right. This thesis attempts to gain insight into the minds of young leaders, and contribute to the advancement of leadership education.
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I explore the leadership journey of ten Grade 8 students who had been participating in a school-based, student leadership program for two consecutive years. This chapter discusses the research context and introduces the participants of the study. The methods of data collection and analysis are described as well as the ethical considerations of the study.

3.2 Research Context

I used a case study approach in this qualitative study. The case study approach was chosen in an attempt to investigate a current phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context (Yin, 2009). Quantitative case study research is exploratory and pays close attention to the smallest variations in detail, context, and meaning. The Student Leaders program researched here is in its infancy and is ever evolving. Though aspects of the program are founded on research findings and literature much is yet to be learned and understood about the student experience. This case study is intended to examine leadership development in a real-life context while extending and strengthening what is already known through previous research.

My research also focuses on student voice. Dempster and Lizzio (2007) criticize the “outside-in” view of leadership research as giving little attention to student voice, leaving “the research terrain from the students’ perspective largely untraveled” (p. 278). Similar to the work of Sacks (2009), my research responds to Dempster and Lizzio’s criticism by focusing on youth leadership from the “inside-out,” allowing student voice
and the students’ perspectives to play the fundamental role in our understanding of leadership development in youth.

### 3.3 The Case Study Unit – School Context

This study focuses on a student leadership program that takes place within a Catholic elementary school located in a Toronto suburb. It is situated within a predominantly affluent community, where few families of low socioeconomic status are represented. The school’s population is just under 400 students and encompasses Kindergarten through Grade 8. Most of the students are Caucasian, from European descent, with a small portion of students of Asian, African, and South American origin.

The staff consists of the principal, secretary, 16 classroom teachers, two resource teachers, one library teacher, one music teacher, and three educational resource workers.

The 2010-11 Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) assessment results show that the majority of students are meeting or exceeding expectations of the province in all components (reading, writing, and numeracy) and well surpass the provincial standard. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the EQAO scores from 2007-2011. Results are shown according to grade and component.

Table 2 EQAO Results 2007-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EQAO Results</th>
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<th>Grade 6</th>
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<td>Writing</td>
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<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>97</td>
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3.4 Participants

This study gives voice to ten Grade 8 student leaders who have been participating in a school-based leadership program. This program consists of fifty-three students in both Grades 7 and 8. A portion of the students in Grade 8, the “returning Student Leaders,” had been participating in the program for two consecutive years. Due to their continued commitment to and involvement in the program, all of the returning Student Leaders were invited to participate in this study. Of these, ten students expressed interest and were therefore included as participants: two male, eight female.

3.5 Leadership Program Context

The Student Leaders program is offered to students in Grades 7 and 8 who have an interest in contributing to their school, local, and global communities. The program was first established in 2007, and consisted of twelve Grade 8 students and two teacher advisors. In 2012, the program had matured to 53 students in both Grades 7 and 8, facilitated by four teacher advisors. The team meets twice a week in the school library.

3.5.1 Program Design

Students who are interested in joining Student Leaders are required to submit an application to teacher advisors at the commencement of each school year. The application consists of a student questionnaire and a teacher referral. The questionnaire challenges students to demonstrate their potential value to the Student Leader team in terms of skills, commitment, and past leadership experiences. In their referral, teachers are asked to evaluate applicants’ leadership potential, rating their skills, attitudes, and personal qualities (i.e. organization, communication, public speaking, responsibility,
approachability, and commitment). Applicants then take part in a series of student-led, co-operative/problem-solving activities as a mode of initiation and acclimation to the Student Leader team. Activities are led by “returning” Student Leaders who had participated in the program during their Grade 7 year.

The Student Leaders team is then organized into working groups of six to eight students. Each working group contains at least two returning leaders who assume the role of “group leaders.” The group leaders are intended to act as mentors and guides for those students new to leadership; their task is to manage, coach and direct their group through activities and projects.

3.5.2 Program Activities

The mandate of the Student Leaders Program is social justice and global awareness. The group is active in the school community, with objectives deeply rooted in social justice, outreach, and community building. The program is affiliated with Free the Children’s (FTC) We Schools in Action program, and has taken part in FTC’s Adopt-a-Village program. Through their four-year commitment, Student Leaders raised approximately $30,000 for a village in Sierra Leone, contributing to the building of a school, the construction of water wells, as well as providing the village with adequate health care supplies and the means necessary to pursue alternative forms of income. Student Leader representatives annually attend FTC’s We Day, a day where thousands of student leaders across North America gather together to celebrate and inspire youth to lead local and global change. We Day is a massive yearly event held at the Air Canada Centre boasting Canada’s top performers as well as the world’s most influential speakers.
Thousands of teens across Canada attend We Day each year, and many more tune into its national television and Internet broadcasts.

Aside from their involvement with FTC, Student Leaders support several other non-profit organizations, both locally and globally, and contribute to the school community in an assortment of ways. Whether writing speeches, delivering announcements, organizing school dances, coordinating fundraisers, or orchestrating assemblies, all leaders are actively engaged.

Each year, changes to the Student Leader program are implemented reflecting the lessons learned from the year prior. The Student Leader team, originally consisting of 12 intermediate students, has grown in size and strength. Over time, it has become less and less teacher-centered and more and more student-led. Teacher advisors now grant students creative and decision-making power, allowing them to authentically take control, and make the program “theirs”. Each working group is thus responsible for managing and planning at least two major projects/events, while the remainder of the Student Leader team assists in carrying out the plan. The four teacher advisors support and supervise all Student Leader activities, and act as liaisons between Student Leaders, the principal, and staff.

3.6 Data Collection

Data collection for this study took place in three of different ways: response journals, field notes, and program documents. The data was collected in May and June of 2012.
3.6.1 Response Journals

Each participant was given a response journal. These journals were intended to give participants a sense of security and anonymity, giving them the opportunity to respond truthfully and comfortably without concern of peer/adult pressure/influence. The journals also gave students the flexibility to respond on their own time, in the comfort of their home, at a time that most suited them. But more than anything, I wanted to hear each of their voices. In a group setting, some participants are bound to take the spotlight in the conversation, while others might shy away. It was important for me to hear from each of them, vocal or otherwise.

Each participant received a student response journal marked with a sticker on the front cover for identification purposes. A set of 3 – 6 questions was pasted inside the journal, and participants were required to give written responses within a two-week time frame. It was important to give students the time and freedom to think and reflect on the questions being asked of them, not only to induce thoughtful responses, but more importantly, to free students from the pressure of extra work on top of an already heavy workload. Once completed, participants submitted their journals, data was transcribed on the computer, a new set of questions was added, and the cycle continued.

There were five rounds of questions in total. The aim of the first round of questions was to gain a broad understanding of young leaders’ conceptions of leadership and their own leadership development. The second round of questions had participants reflecting on qualities, skills, and attitudes of effective leaders, applying their conceptions to their own lives. In the third round of questioning, participants were asked to reflect and elaborate on specific leadership experiences that they viewed as memorable. Rounds
four and five questions prompted participants to reflect on their entire Student Leaders experience and comment on its impact, if any, on their lives.

### 3.6.2 Field Notes

Since I am one for the four Student Leader teacher advisors, it was convenient for me to attend each meeting and take field notes. I also had the unique opportunity to observe students outside of the Student Leader setting as I taught each of them either as their homeroom teacher or as a subject teacher on rotary. Field notes include highlights from Student Leaders meetings including observations of student activity and interactions as well as informal conversations.

### 3.6.3 Program Documents

Occasionally Student Leader meetings were reflective in nature. Working in their groups, students were asked to reflect on their understanding of leadership and positive leaders, and record their thoughts on chart paper to share with the whole group for discussion. Samples of student reflections were transcribed and included for analysis.

### 3.7 Data Analysis

A case study approach was selected for analyzing the data because this study aims to describe the experience as it was lived by the students. The goal of this approach was to gather data from participants about their conscious awareness of lived leadership experiences, and to search through this process for a deep understanding of them. This study demanded self-reflexivity, a willingness to talk about experiences gained in this process, an ongoing conversation about the experience while acknowledging the values of the participants, constructing interpretations of the experience and questioning it.

All journals, field notes and documents were analyzed qualitatively using open
coding (Merriam, 1998) that involved four processes:

- Reading through data and searching, within each participant's material, for evidence and descriptions of leadership development experiences.

- Sorting the data and categorizing them into themes concerning leadership information, attitude, and experiences.

- Choosing main categories through a dialectical process between the data and theory.

- Interpreting the categories and presenting examples and citations for each category.

Validation of the findings involved triangulation of all data sources by means of dialectic between data and theory.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The ethical review process for this thesis was completed in March 2011. Pseudonyms for the teachers, students, and the school are used in this study to ensure confidentiality. Specific details about the location of the school have been omitted.

Participants first verbally agreed to take part in this study and then signed a formal consent letter to confirm their participation. Because participants are considered minors, a formal letter of parental consent was distributed and signed by each participant and their parent. All students who expressed interest in participating in the study were chosen. It was stressed to the participants that they could participate as much as they wanted and could stop at any time. Participants were reminded that pseudonyms would be used and all journals would be confidential. This was ensured by the use of stickers on the journals in lieu of students’ names.

Due to my role within the school and the program, I was very cognizant of the potential ethical concerns regarding a conflict of interest. For this reason, students were at
no time asked to evaluate the program or the teachers in any way. All response questions focused on students’ personal experiences only.
Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I explore the leadership experiences and development of adolescents participating in a school-based leadership program. In examining the case study of the ten Grade 8 Student Leaders, four general themes emerged from the data analysis. They were: leadership information, leadership attitude, leadership experiences, and implications of leadership experiences. The findings for each theme, as well as the categories found within each, will be discussed in this chapter. To support findings, samples of student responses are also included.

4.2 Leadership Information

4.2.1 Defining Leadership

Role Models

Participants generally described a leader as a good “role model,” someone who people “look up to.” A role model, according to participants, can influence others in positive ways – they set an example. Setting a good example for younger students, in particular, was an important element of what participants described as good leaders and role models. As Cassy remarked, “I believe that leader is to be a good role model because you’re influencing other people to follow in your shoes” (Response journal #10, 2012). Acknowledging the impressionable nature of younger students, Claudia further explained that being a leader “is being a role model for children younger than you. These children look up to those leaders and see what they are doing and want to grow up like them” (Response journal #4, 2012).
These role models are loyal, trustworthy, honest, kind, respectful, patient, friendly, giving, helpful, fair, accepting, and understanding. They serve as a guide for others, inspiring and helping others to uncover better versions of themselves. Jacob asserted that leaders “can guide people into the right direction and push them out of the comfort zone” (Response journal #9, 2012). Alexa further explained:

I think to be a leader means to inspire people to do more, to learn more, or to become more. If you cause people to think differently (change what they think, make them more aware) or to act differently (make them think about their actions), then you are a leader. (Response journal #8, 2012)

Being called a leader is also a privilege that is earned. People do not become leaders because they ask for it, or because it is something they desire. It is the recognition of a leader’s exemplary character that grants them this honour. As noted by Lauren:

A leader doesn’t call themselves a leader. People look up to people they think are leaders. So by calling yourself a leader, you are saying you look up to yourself. Other people chose leaders, leaders don’t chose themselves. (Response journal #6, 2012)

The Right Actions

The notion of “right” and “wrong” was a significant aspect of students’ understanding of leadership and being a role model. A leader knows the difference between right and wrong. Leaders cannot be role models if their actions do not match their moral values. Instead, a leader’s moral values should drive his/her actions - they cannot be incongruent. Students recognized how incongruent actions/words are noticeable by others and can send mixed messages about who they are. Bruno contended that leadership is “something you have to be committed to, you can’t be a good example one day and not the next” (Response journal #7, 2012).
Participants also recognized the tension between doing the “right thing” versus doing what was “popular.” Regardless of the circumstance, participants believed a true leader is someone who follows through with what is right, even when it is the unpopular choice. Emily explained:

A leader knows that what is right is not always popular, and what is popular is not always right, and they will make the right choice. You can’t change what you believe is right and wrong based on what your friends are doing, because at the end of the day, you’re your own person. A leader, most importantly, doesn’t just talk the talk, they walk the walk too, and believe in what they say and go through with it…sometimes you’re gonna be the only one who is doing the right thing, and you have to be okay with it. (Response journal #1, 2012)

Madison agreed, further stressing, “Being a leader is also a huge responsibility. You have to live up to what you say” (Response journal #5, 2012).

For participants, an integral part of doing the right thing is making a commitment to “be yourself.” These young leaders are well aware of the strength of peer pressure, and the effect it can have on an adolescent’s decision-making. Thus, to stand in the face of peer pressure and stay true to one’s beliefs, is a real sign of strength. This was an attribute highly regarded by participants and one that does not go unnoticed. A noted by Cassy:

A leader is a person who isn’t afraid to be themselves and be who they want to be. They don’t care about what other people think of them and don’t change who they are just because someone else doesn’t like the way they are. (Response journal #10, 2012)

Jasmine agreed that a leader “can’t change what [he] believes is right and wrong based on what [his] friends are doing, because at the end of the day, [he’s his] own person” (Response journal #3, 2012).

_change makers_
Leaders are also change makers – they make a difference. They do so by learning about the state of the world around them, and by putting others before themselves. Cassy explained:

A leader is someone who knows the situations around the world. For instance…where children are abducted and are made soldiers and women sex slaves, or just poverty in general. They want to help those people live a healthy life and make a difference. (Response journal #10, 2012)

Participants stressed the importance of serving others, giving, caring, and making positive changes in this world, particularly for those less fortunate. A leader does not sit idly by while others are suffering. As noted by Claudia, “if you want something to be changed no matter what it is, you can’t just sit around waiting for it to happen, you have to do it yourself” (Response journal #4, 2012). Furthermore, students believed it was the duty of a leader to confront injustice, help those in need. Emily insisted a leader is “someone who wants to make a change and help the world because they know that if you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem” (Response journal #1, 2012). Alexa described a leader as a “dealer of hope. They bring a hope to people who need it” (Response journal #8, 2012).

*Optimism and Determination*

Other significant words used by students to describe leaders were optimistic and determined. A leader does not give up or quit; they stay the course despite challenges. Participants recognized the challenges and responsibilities that leadership demands. Whether completing a task, “being themselves”, or making a difference, it is optimism, determination, and perseverance, that pushes leaders forward. Claudia explained that when “planning an assembly or even a dance there are many things that could go wrong but you must keep going and be determined” (Response journal #4, 2012). Jasmine added
that a leader “never quits and keeps trying to achieve goals or tasks” (Response journal #3, 2012). Likewise, Andrea asserted that a leader “always has a positive attitude…and doesn’t quit when things get tough” (Response journal #2, 2012).

Leaders do not believe in the impossible either; rather, they revel in possibility. Participants viewed leaders as fearless and confident people who rise to every challenge. Cassy suggested that to be a leader means, “you have no limit” (Response journal #10, 2012). While Lauren insisted that a leader can make [her] dreams come true if [she] believe[s] that nothing is impossible” (Response journal #5, 2012).

*Imperfect*

Based on evidence shared here thus far, one might presume that the leader described by participants is a perfect person. Yet, this could not be further from the truth. Participants insisted that, while leaders are superior role models, change makers, and visionaries, they are not perfect people. According to participants, leaders make all kinds of mistakes; perfection is not expected. Students acknowledged imperfection as part of the human story: no one is perfect. As Jasmine noted, leaders “are not perfect. Leaders make mistakes like any other person would” (Response journal #3, 2012).

In general, participants viewed mistakes or “bad choices” as learning opportunities. Participants argued, while everyone is allowed to make mistakes, leaders do not continually repeat them; instead, leaders attempt to learn from mistakes and improve as a result of them. Essentially, leaders strive to be the best people they can be. Emily noted, leaders “aren’t perfect people though, they make mistakes and bad choices, but they’ll learn from them, fix them, and move on” (Response journal #1, 2012).
4.2.2 Forms of Leadership

Different Types of Leaders

These young leaders also recognized that there are many different types of leaders – varying in talents and disposition. As Jasmine stated, leaders “are all different and have different qualities and different opinions” (Response journal #3, 2012). Participants identified a spectrum of leaders and leadership – from quiet to loud leaders, leaders who take control or step back – all of which are valuable and effective in their own ways. As Alexa explained, leadership “isn’t just loud, there are lots of ways to be a quiet leader. I have learned that quiet leaders, even though not right up front, still contribute a lot” (Response journal #8, 2012). Elaborating further, Jacob added:

There are many different types of leaders there are quiet one, loud ones, and listening ones. There are quiet ones who tend to lead through example and actions. The loud ones tend to be very vocal and have lots of ideas and suggestions. The listeners like to hear a lot of ideas and try to get everyone involved. (Response journal #9, 2012)

It was clear that these young leaders valued differences in leaders. Rather than view shyness, quietness, or lack of program participation as leadership deficiencies, participants valued these as simply a different element of leadership – no less effective or important than any other. As Emily noted, just because “people have not joined ‘student leaders’ doesn’t mean they can’t show leadership by themselves” (Response journal #1, 21012). Ultimately, they believed that when it comes to leadership, different leaders offer different strengths/talents, each contributing in their individual ways. As noted by Bruno, leadership is something that should be “unique for each person, some people may excel in a talent leadership such as sporting and music, being a person that is good at something that others can look up to” (Response journal #7, 2012).
leadership is shared

Regardless of the type of leader, all students agreed that leadership is shared. While they recognized the importance of “stepping up” and “taking charge,” these young leaders also recognized the value of “stepping back” and “letting others lead.” In fact, the ability to share leadership, according to participants, is an important aspect of what a leader is. To participants, knowing when and how to step back and allow others to lead is “teaching others to be leaders”. This notion of eliciting the leaders in others is the ultimate sign of leadership. This was exemplified by Emily who noted that, “you can’t always be doing the work if you’re leading, because sometimes the way you lead is to take a step back and let others do the work” (Response journal #1, 2012). Leaders “don’t lead the whole way through,” added Lauren, “Leaders teach others how to be leaders and give them the opportunity to shine” (Response journal #6, 2012).

Sharing leadership also includes teamwork. Teamwork is very important to these leaders. Being able to cooperate and work well with others is an integral component of their understanding of leadership. This includes listening and speaking, keeping an open mind, and “doing your part.” Jasmine explained that to be a leader “means that you have to be open minded to other peoples ideas…if you are in a group let everybody have a chance to say what they need to say” (Response journal #3, 2012). Participants insisted that goals are best achieved when collaborating with others. Working in teams, leaders utilize communication skills to maximize efficiency and ultimately achieve desired goals. As highlighted by Jacob, being a leader means “that you cooperate well with other people” (Response journal #9, 2012). Cassy further explained that, being a leader means
“being able to listen to what others have to say. You need to take a step back when
everyone has an opinion, and to not be so controlling” (Response journal #10, 2012).

4.3 Leadership Attitude

Participants shared a desire to learn about leadership. Each felt compelled to
develop their leadership skills, and hoped Student Leaders would provide them with that
opportunity. More than anything, students expressed a desire join a movement and take
action. Emily explained, “It was important for me to join student leaders because I
wanted to know more about what’s going on in the world that isn’t right, and help be part
of a group that’s trying to change it” (Response journal #1, 2012). Cassy concurred, “I
was inspired by [a teacher] when she quoted ‘it only takes one to make a difference.’ I
wanted to be part of something where I can make a change in the world” (Response
journal #10, 2012).

Participants craved the challenge and the opportunity to let their skills shine for
others to see. As Claudia shared, “I thought it would be a good opportunity to show how I
care about everybody around the world, and to grow into a better person” (Response
journal #4, 2012). Furthermore, participants believed that leadership is something each
person should aspire to and continuously work towards. As Madison supported, being a
leader is “an important thing in life” (Response journal #5, 2012). Urging the need for
leaders to be get involved, Emily exclaimed, “I don’t want to sit back and not help find a
solution, ‘If you’re not part of a solution, you’re part of the problem’” (Response journal
#1, 2012).

Participants also held previous leaders in high esteem and wished to be “just like”
their predecessors. In years prior, Student Leaders contributed much to the school
community: organizing dances, fundraisers, assemblies, announcements, and special events. They were the face of the student body - admired, respected, and “looked up to.” Essentially, they were role models who possessed “power” to influence others in positive ways. These aspects of the leadership program appealed to participants, and ultimately lead them to pursue leadership development. This is evidenced by Cassy’s comments:

It was important for me to join student leaders because as I was growing up my dad always told me to “be a leader, not a follower”, and when I saw the student leader program I thought it was a good way to do that. Also, when I came to the school and saw the other kids standing up there informing us about people in other countries of how they are struggling and need help. I wanted to be just like them, a person who other people look up to and want to be just like them. (Response journal #10, 2012)

Acknowledging positive changes in previous leaders, Bruno added, “…in previous years I have seen what they can do, spirit days, assemblies, announcements, and from seeing them change so much I knew I wanted to be part of it” (Response journal #7, 2012).

Madison concurred reporting feeling amazed by past leaders:

I personally looked up to student leaders in previous years, like when I was in grade 4, and the student leaders did the Brick by Brick project, I looked up to the leaders, because I was amazed that students, just like me, were building a school in a different country! (Response journal #5, 2012)

“Anyone can be a leader, you just have to learn” (Field note, May 4th, 2012). This was the resounding message from Student Leaders. For these adolescents, leadership is not an elusive goal available only to a select few; leadership is a reality, accessible to all. According to participants, leaders learn about leadership through a process - through experiences. They even recognized the process of their own leadership development. As shared by Andrea, “When I started Student Leaders, I didn’t know how things worked or how to do anything. This year, I’m project manager and can teach others” (Response journal #2, 2012).
These students had the opportunity to develop their own skills and watch their peers do the same. From their perspective, all who want to learn about leadership are capable of doing so. Why? Because they feel like leaders themselves. Participants expressed feelings of competence and power. They experienced success when completing leadership tasks, and felt capable of impacting the lives others. Consequently, they viewed themselves as effective and experienced leaders. Bruno explained, “…it shows that students can be leaders without being told what to do…almost everything that we attempt to do it ends up working out. I feel like a huge leader” (Response journal #7, 2012).

Despite feelings of competence, participants unanimously agreed: leadership is challenging. Students acknowledged how demanding leadership is of their time, energy, commitment, and integrity. As evidenced in Jasmine’s comment, participants believed that leadership is hard work. “I learned that things don’t come easy,” expressed Jasmine, “if you want something, you must put your heart to it and try for it” (Response journal #3, 2012). They discovered that managing projects requires effort and organization, managing people requires patience and skill, and managing responsibility requires planning and integrity. Claudia explained, “…it can be very stressful people constantly coming up to you asking you different questions and even sometimes the same it’s hard to keep your cool and stay calm” (Response journal #4, 2012). Jacob further noted that it is challenging because of “all the hurdles you have to over come. People aren’t going to always agree with what you believe and say” (Response journal #9, 2012).

While some students found cooperation taxing, others expressed difficulty in juggling commitments. Bruno shared that it is “difficult to manage office helpers and
Student Leaders. Also it is difficult to be involved with such a big group of student leaders” (Response journal #7, 2012).

As leaders of their working groups, participants felt the strains of increased responsibility. In many cases, the success of their team’s project rested heavily on their shoulders. Consequently, participants expressed experiencing feelings of stress, frustration, strain, confusion, and conflict. As reported by Lauren, “It is difficult because I’m organizing projects” (Response journal #6, 2012). Claudia contended that, to be a leader “is sometimes hard because we face so many difficulties so many bumps in the road” (Response journal #4, 2012).

Especially challenging for participants was “walking the walk.” Peer pressure for adolescents cannot be underestimated. Even the most dedicated student leaders struggled daily to make decisions consistent with their beliefs and expectations. When asked to share the most difficult aspect of being a student leader, one student responded, “It’s just hard when all your friends are doing something. Like I know what I should do, but it’s just hard. Sometimes I just want to have fun with my friends” (Field notes, May 8, 2012). Claudia explained that, sometimes “standing up and making a difference is not the easiest thing to do because sometimes more then one voice needs to be heard or because it’s not seen as ‘cool’” (Response journal #4, 2012). This was especially true during recesses, where students were largely unsupervised. Naturally some students struggled more than others. Still, the “cool” and “popular” choices almost always trumped the “right” choice. Behaviours such as persistent gum chewing, disrespect towards teachers, and bullying, were few examples. In any case, participants recognized the struggle within, and the stress it caused in their lives. Emily shared, “I’ve learned that sometimes you’re gonna be
the only one who is doing the right thing, and you have to be okay with it” (Response journal #1, 2012).

As challenging as it is, participants agreed that leadership development is a valuable experience. Students were grateful for the opportunity to develop their leadership skills and put them to use. They felt they benefitted a great deal by taking part in Student Leaders, and cherished the experience. This was evidenced when Madison’s stated, “I have truly enjoyed my years in leaders and I think that everyone has benefited greatly from it” (Response journal #5, 2012). Andrea added. “If I could sum up my experience in student leaders in one word it would be valuable because it has taught me valuable lessons” (Response journal #2, 2012).

Participants also expressed a desire to see the leadership development program continue, affording others the opportunity to enjoy the same positive experience as theirs. Lauren explained, “…my experience in Student Leaders was great. It was really inspiring. You should continue to do student leaders and help inspire people. But my experience was great and I really enjoyed it” (Response journal #6, 2012). Jacob concurred:

It was a really great experience and I hope other kids get the same one as me. I would like to see this program continue. I think it is a great program and can help teens and students of our age. (Response journal #9, 2012)

Participants valued the long lasting impression that leadership development would leave on their lives. As Claudia shared, “It was an unforgettable learning experience. I will take what I have learned and use it forever” (Response journal #4, 2012).
4.4 Leadership Experiences

Participants deeply valued leadership experiences in which they were given increased freedom and responsibility. Students welcomed challenges and longed for opportunities to “be in charge.” As group leaders, participants were given many such opportunities, regularly assuming the role of project manager or lead. Within this role, participants were responsible for all aspects of a given project: generating ideas, planning, organizing, distributing tasks, communication between group members, reporting to teachers, and execution. It is quite a bit of responsibility for a 14 year-old. Still, participants appreciated the responsibility that was entrusted to them. They were proud to have earned the confidence of teachers to undertake such a hefty challenge.

Emily shared:

I also liked having things put on our plate and the responsibilities because it forced me with a challenge that I had to complete because we all had our part to do. It could be stressful, but it was always fun. (Response journal #1, 2012)

Participants surprised themselves with their ability to manage their responsibilities and successfully complete demanding tasks. Jacob recounted:

I felt most like a leader when I got to turn one of my ideas into actions. I got to organize a football tournament. I had to make sure everything was done and give people ideas and make sure everything got done. It was a great example and helped me realize that you have to take other peoples ideas. It made me feel like a leader because I had to listen to everyone. I was happy when it happened and felt like wow I put this whole thing together. (Response journal #9, 2012)

Participants especially prized the freedom to be creative and implement their own vision for a problem/project with little input from adults. Jacob relayed:

The part that made me proud is that this is 100% done by the students with nearly no help from teachers. We come up with our own ideas and put them to action. I am also proud seeing our ideas work out perfectly and just as we planned. (Response journal #9, 2012)
Virtually no boundaries were placed on their creativity and ideas. Consequently, they felt their ideas and opinions were both respected and critical to success of the project. At these times, participants felt like true, effective leaders. As shared by Andrea, “I liked the freedom we had from our ideas and creativity and the working process. We got to mesh with each other and cooperate and there was really no limits” (Response journal #2, 2012).

In general, students took ownership of their projects; after all, each was a product of their creativity. They took pride in successful outcomes, and worked through problems as they arose. Emily explained:

I felt really excited when we had to decorate for all the dances, because we got to blow up balloons and it was up to us how well it went. We could do it anyway we wanted and there were no guidelines, so we could be as creative as we wanted, and it always looked really good. (Response journal #1, 2012)

It was difficult to resist the urge to step in and rescue students when things got messy. But somehow, it always seemed to work out in the end. Ultimately, participants understood that the success or failure of a project rested greatly on their shoulders.

Of all Student Leaders activities, participants were most passionate when helping others. Students were in awe of their ability to make a contribution to a person in need. Cassy reported:

The best part of being part of student leaders was actually being able to say that I was part of helping out people in third world countries and I helped saved lives. Also being part of something so helpful was the best part of it all. (Response journal #10, 2012)

Whether volunteering at the local food bank or raising funds for a global initiative, the young leaders whole-heartedly engaged in service activities and treasured the opportunity. Cassy recited, “I felt like I was actually making a difference seeing the
emotions on the kids’ faces. It was as if everything I helped with was so helpful to the people. Even though I only helped a little” (Response journal #10, 2012). When recounting these experiences, students expressed feelings of pride, excitement, happiness, and fulfillment. This was evident in Madison’s comments:

I was so proud when we found out we filled over one hundred shoe boxes full of toys for children as Christmas gifts and when we built a water filtration outside of our school in Sierra Leone. That had to be the best feeling ever, accomplishing so much, not just for me, but for other people to make their lives so much better. A time when I felt very excited to be a leader was when we were packing shoeboxes to send to 3rd world countries. Our goal was 100 shoeboxes and filled SO much more then we hoped for. I was so excited, and happy that our school made such a huge accomplishment. (Response journal #5, 2012)

Participants viewed themselves as agents of change and contributors to society, a realization that was both surprising and inspiring. Each success and contribution inspired students to do, contribute, and help more. Emily described:

I felt I grew as a person because I finally understood that it is possible when I saw and listened to kids that have made a difference. This helped me grow as a person by opening my mind, and realize how much these children benefit from our help. (Response journal #1, 2012)

Claudia added, “The leaders, all of us make a difference. It’s an amazing feeling. It’s that feeling when you can’t stop smiling, that inside it’s all warm and sunny. It’s truly amazing” (Response journal #4, 2012).

Helping others also allowed participants to feel better about themselves. By helping others, students felt like “good” people, people who cared about and put others before themselves. Claudia noted:

…another feeling that I experienced would be the feeling of doing something good and kind for someone else. Even if it’s for someone far or someone close the feeling of self pride, is something that really boosted my confidence about myself. (Response journal #4, 2012)
Andrea added, “…helping people in other countries makes me feel like a good person. (Response journal #2, 2012)

Regardless of the nature of the task, all participants preferred to work in teams. They acknowledged the benefits of capitalizing on the talents of others, recognizing that there is strength in numbers. Acknowledging the talents of others, Claudia noted that other leaders “have unique ideas and help out a lot when an event is getting organized. So it’s like having 5 or 6 brains helping you organize an event” (Response journal #4, 2012).

Thus, participants valued the opportunity to rally with their peers towards a common goal. They compared the experience to that of a sports team: everyone doing their part to achieve. While one student wrote announcements, another was creating posters, and yet another was preparing a visual presentation while his/her friends developed a script for the assembly. Everyone had a task to complete, and together they accomplished their goal. Lauren expressed:

I love planning the assembly with our team. Everyone else had to do just as much work and we were all always busy working on it and rehearsing for the big assembly. I really felt like a leader because we were all working hard on something we cared about, and we were all independently working, then coming together as one. (Response journal #6, 2012)

Students also acknowledged teamwork as an opportunity to apply and develop communication and management skills. Jacob insisted that the groups “help to get a better understanding of people and help to develop trust between the leaders. Most [leadership] skills are acquired when we are working in our groups” (Response journal #9, 2012). These were aspects of teamwork that students found arduous: having to depend on, include, manage, teach, speak and listen to their peers. These experiences forced participants to cope with their feelings of stress and frustration. Participants
identified these as valuable lessons despite challenges that would arise. As Emily described, “I’ve learned to compromise and cooperate a lot more because of the number of students and ideas there is. Things can’t always be done my way, so I learned to blend ideas and narrow things down” (Response journal #1, 2012).

More than anything, team experiences were “fun” for participants. These experiences presented students with the opportunity to work with their friends and socialize. They were exposed to people they normally would not have an opportunity to work with, often resulting in new friendships. Madison expressed:

> What I loved most about being a part of Student Leaders was being around the same people and working as a group. I loved getting closer with the grade sevens and the grade nines last year. It felt as if we became good friends and can rely on each other. I loved always having something to do and being a part of a group. Working as a group for assemblies is so fun. I love being able to see how others view things and working with my friends. (Response journal #5, 2012)

All participants shared a love for speaking in public. These were moments where students had the opportunity to shine for all to see. As shared by Lauren. “I felt really excited when we would put on big assemblies (plant a seed assembly) and rehearse for them because it was a chance to speak in front of the school” (Response journal #6, 2012). Alexa added. “[Being an MC] made me excited because I wanted to show people what we can” (Response journal #8, 2012).

These were challenging moments, too. Public speaking did not come easy to participants; this is true for most students their age. Consequently, students found this aspect of leadership both difficult and rewarding, especially when delivered successfully. Alexa recounted:

> I also felt most like a leader when I was standing up and speaking in front of people; whether in a classroom or at an assembly. I felt like a leader then because, since speaking in front of a lot of people is hard for me, I feel like I’m becoming a
better leader by speaking out and making people more aware. At one of the first assemblies I did I had to speak in front of everybody and when it was over I was like, “Did I really just do that??” And I felt like I could do anything that I wanted. (Response journal #8, 2012)

Participants also viewed public speaking as their opportunity to spread an important message. The task of teaching or informing others about leadership or world issues was considered an important aspect of their role. This was reflected in Cassy’s recount:

I felt most like a leader when I stand up in front of the school informing people about new projects and info on the less fortunate. I felt like a leader because I was able to inform people about problems out there and help people make a change. (Response journal #10, 2012)

Lauren further explained that, sometimes “words speak louder and have more of an impact. Words can move people” (Response journal #6, 2012).

Participants were creative about their message and shared it in any manner they pleased. As a result, their message was a true reflection of them and their ability to influence people. It was here that participants felt like role models for the school.

I felt really excited during the plant a seed campaign because [a student] and [a student] and I got to say whatever we wanted and not be scripted. We remixed an Eminem song to introduce a PowerPoint, and everyone loved it. (Response journal #1, 2012)

When describing leadership experiences that had impacted their lives, participants acknowledged We Day, guest speakers, and teachers as most significant. We Day, a day-long concert/motivational presentation hosted by Free the Children and Me to We, was identified by students as the most exciting, inspiring, and memorable experience offered through Student Leaders. Highlighting the novelty of the experience, Andrea explained:

The whole idea of traveling downtown for an event as big as We Day made me excited, because it’s very rare to get opportunities such as that. Also the fact that
all my best friends were there was so awesome. In grade 6 when we heard about We Day we all couldn’t wait to go. (Response journal #2, 2012)

The performances were a highlight for many. “The thing that made me excited about We Day was that it was very lively,” shared Jacob, “Musicians performed there were lots of guest speakers and the energy level was very high” (Response journal #7, 2012).

Participants acknowledged their attendance to We Day as an enormous privilege. To have the opportunity to hear famous figures speak messages of hope, calling all youth to join a movement for a better world, was extraordinary. Hearing stories of despair, injustice, and hope participants left moved and inspired. Claudia recounted:

It amazed me how many people were wanting to help free the children. Also it was amazing to hear what others were doing to help and also other’s stories like the one about the child soldier. Learning about that happened to him, and how he had to kill his friend. That now he is helping free the children because of what happened to him. It was sad but yet amazing and that’s why we day stood out. I thought that experience was very inspirational and fun. The guest speakers that spoke at We Day made me realize how lucky we are compared to other people who are suffering all around the world. It made me want to help free the Children even more. (Response journal #4, 2012)

For most, We Day left a lasting impression. As Jacob explained:

When we went to We Day it helped me see the big picture and the part I was doing. This experience stood out because of the impact it had on my life. At We Day it showed me what I had done and what I can do. (Response journal #9, 2012)

Guest speakers had a similar effect on students. Over the span of four years, several keynote speakers from Free the Children were sent to speak to the student body acknowledging the efforts of the school and appealing students for further assistance. Participants reported feeling inspired by guest speakers, who shared stories of overcoming personal obstacles and making a contribution to society. Students were
grateful for their guests who left them both moved and motivated. Madison shared, “I felt most like a leader when we had an assembly with Scott Hammel. He came to our school to inspire us, and talk to us, and I felt very inspired afterward” (Response journal #5, 2012).

Claudia further explained why this experienced left such an impact:

I was inspired when Spencer West came to talk to our school. He came when I was in grade 6. So I wasn’t in Student Leaders yet (but he was one of the things that inspired me to join). His story was sad but also thrillingly inspiring about how his legs got amputated when he was so young but that didn’t stop him one bit. He still did things like regular people with legs do. He drives!! And he also helped free the children with their projects. I remember him showing a video of him helping in Africa with free the children, helping build a school and right then and there I was astonished. Going through my mind was “wow this person is incredible helping others while missing his legs, and doing more then most people would do.” He truly inspired me to help with what I can even though it may be hard because the people we are helping are doing something even harder, trying to survive on nothing. (Response journal #4, 2012)

Students also reported learning from and feeling inspired by teacher facilitators.

As teachers shared stories, both personal and world histories, participants gained knowledge about leadership and the world. Emily described the knowledge she gained from a teacher facilitator:

Another time I felt inspired was when [a teacher] came back from her Kenya trip and told us how grateful everyone there was for our help, and how simple things mean the world to other people. They’re thankful for clean water where I take it as an automatic thing that I get and don’t value it. It’s helped me change my opinion on things that I value. (Response journal #1, 2012)

She continued:

I also grew as a person when [a teacher] explained to us how slavery started, because I didn’t know how. It woke me up and informed me of the importance of black history month. It made me realize how bad our world’s past was and made me determined to never let something like that go by me unnoticed. (Response journal #1, 2012)
Participants expressed gratitude to teachers for their commitment youth leadership training, and for the impact they made on students’ lives. As Claudia’s stated, “I cherish very much what the leader teachers have done for all of us leaders” (Response journal #4, 2012).

Participants identified feedback and validation as integral components of their leadership development. When teachers, peers, or guests complimented their work, students felt like effective leaders.

But one moment [where I felt like a leader] that stuck out for me would be when after the Vow of Silence assembly (which I mostly organized) teachers came up to me, even other leaders came and acknowledged me saying that it was great, really smooth it went. (Response journal #4, 2012)

Compliments were a sign of being on the right track; if others believed they were doing a good job, so did they. As noted by Emily, “…it made me feel like I was doing a good job to have little kids telling me they were excited or couldn’t wait for specific events” (Response journal #1, 2012). Comments of support and validation carried students through questionable times, kept them motivated, and inspired them to continue growing. This was reflected in Claudia’s remarks:

…when younger students come up to me and ask me questions about our school project or when they tell me how their class is progressing in there share. I love that feeling of being noticed as a leader as a changer, as a role model. (Response journal #4, 2012)

The power of positive reinforcement cannot be underestimated. At the conclusion of each event, Student Leaders would reflect on the event and honour the team responsible with compliments and applause. These moments of reinforcement were visibly special for those leaders, filling them with pride and satisfaction. Cassy explained, “Everyone complimented us on how good the assembly went. Even the teachers. I felt so
proud! It was such a huge projected and it turned out good” (Response journal #10, 2012).

Unfortunately, things did not always turn out as expected. When participants encountered bumps in the road, they turned to teachers and friends for support and guidance. They appreciated teacher facilitators’ advice, and sought approval when making decisions. The support offered by teachers, agreed participants, allowed them to take risks, aim high, and learn from mistakes. As noted by Emily, “Leaders teachers helped us” (Response journal #1, 2012). Claudia added, “I want to thank all the leaders teachers for helping me through the last two years” (Response journal #4, 2012).

4.5 Implications of Learning Experiences

All participants reported feeling better about themselves as a direct result of leadership participation. By helping others, students felt like people who cared about others and made a difference in the world. Generally, participants viewed themselves as kinder, more thoughtful, giving, generous, and helpful individuals – improving their overall sense of self-worth. This was reflected when Jasmine’s shared that, “Student Leaders made me a better person and made me care for everybody around me especially the people who are unfortunate and living in horrible situations” (Response journal #3, 2012). Claudia added, “[Helping others] has helped me become a kinder more thoughtful person” (Response journal #4, 2012).

Participants also viewed themselves as “do gooders” who refused to sit idly by while others were suffering. Cassy explained:

Being part of Student Leaders has made me a better person. It has made me a better person because I don’t sit by and watch bad things happen. I am able now to speak up and state my opinion without feeling like I have to sit there and not being able to say how I feel. (Response journal #10, 2012)
These contributions, as well as other successes, left students feeling confident. Participants agreed that an increased sense of confidence was the greatest by product of their participation in Student Leaders. Lauren noted:

I have learned how to have self-confidence through various assemblies we had and many quotes we have heard. I know having too much self-confidence makes you come off as cocky, but you need some to be proud of yourself and excited for the future. (Response journal #6, 2012)

In general, students reported an increased self-esteem, feeling happier, more positive, and sure about themselves and their abilities as leaders and role models for the school. This is reflected when Andrea’s shared, “Being part of leaders has impacted the way I see myself because I think I see myself more positively and I think I am capable of more things” (Response journal #2, 2012). This confidence allowed students to feel like they could be themselves and not alter their beliefs or behaviours due to outside pressures. As stated by Claudia, “I have learned to stay true to myself, and basically how to be a leader in my everyday life, which has helped me through hard decisions and conflicts” (Response journal #4, 2012).

All participants expressed feelings of self-efficacy as a result of their leadership training. Students reported feeling capable of accomplishing goals they set for themselves. As Cassy explained:

Being in Student Leaders has improved my life because it has opened my life to more possibilities. I believe that if I put my mind to something and I work hard to do it as long as I do my best it’s all good. (Response journal #10, 2012)

Emphasizing the importance of goal-setting, Madison added, “I never really used to set goals for myself or aim very high, but to be a leader you have to accomplish something in your life” (Response journal #5, 2012). They also described feeling powerful and able to
achieve and create change regardless of their age or current circumstances, as revealed by Lauren’s stating, “It taught me that one person can make a difference, even if they’re just a kid, and that you always need to believe in yourself” (Response journal #6, 2012).

Finally, participants expressed having more faith in themselves, in their abilities, and visions for the future. They believe they could accomplish anything so long as they believe. Emily explained:

Student leaders has changed the way I view myself by showing me that I can make a difference even if I’m a kid. “One voice can make a song. One person can change the world.” I also believe in myself more and have more confidence in what I say and do. I carry myself higher and expect higher of myself because I believe more that I can do it. (Response journal #1, 2012)

Bruno added, “I learned that me alone can make a big change” (Response journal #7, 2012).

Participants were grateful to learn more about the world around them. Their leadership experiences “opened their eyes” to the rest of the world for the first time (for many). They expressed feeling more globally aware as a consequence, gaining a new perspective on life and people in general. This is reflected in Lauren’s comment:

If I hadn’t joined student leaders I wouldn’t be as aware of things. I think more of people in need and try and get others to do the same. Student leaders changed the way I see the world. It changed my life. (Response journal #6, 2012)

The young leaders believed they acquired a better understanding of how the world is - unfair and unjust – and feel they have grown as people as a result. Madison shared:

It’s made me look at life differently as well. We learn that some people aren’t as fortunate as us so I haven’t been mad about what I have, I’ve learned to use only as much as I need. Student Leaders has impacted me in a positive way. (Response journal #5, 2012)

They valued having their “blind eyes” opened, and agreed their lives have benefited from it; they see how lucky they are, and learned not to take things for granted.
Being a part of student leaders has benefited my life. This is because during my two years in student leaders I have seen and heard people’s stories that have really impacted my life. They showed me that I shouldn’t take life for granted and always be grateful for what you have and don’t always think about yourself. (Response journal #5, 2012)

Participants stressed the importance of learning about the world and sharing their knowledge with others. Emily explained:

I’ve learned how important awareness is and not always getting money is the best thing. Some people really don’t know what’s going on in the world, and they need to know… it was shocking to know how bad other people have it, and how much us in Canada take for granted. (Response journal #1, 2012)

Highlighting the need for social action, Cassy noted, “Ever since I joined student leaders I think that I have learned that there is more in the world that meets the eye, and that there needs to be something to change that”. (Response journal #10, 2012)

Friendship was another byproduct of participants’ involvement in Student Leaders. They cherished the friendships formed over the course of two years. They especially valued relationships with people they would not have otherwise befriended if not for their interactions within Student Leaders. Jacob revealed that, the best part of student leaders “was the friendship. I learned a lot about friendship and added a few more. I gained a lot of friendships with people I never thought I would be” (Response journal #9, 2012). They enjoyed being exposed to many different people, and formed friendships with students both younger and older than them, while strengthening relationships within their peer group. This is evident in Emily’s comment:

I loved getting closer with the grade sevens and the grade nines last year. It felt as if we became good friends and can rely on each other. I loved always having something to do and being a part of a group. Working as a group for assemblies is so fun. I love being able to see how others view things and working with my friends. (Response journal #5, 2012)
Student leaders let me be around people who believe in the same things as I do. (Response journal #1, 2012)

Participants also described Student Leaders as a place in which they belonged and felt accepted. Participants viewed Student Leaders as a “family” and treasured the time they spent together. Andrea shared, “I have felt involved and part of a group. Since I don’t play sports, I didn’t have the “team” experience and bonds like most people at school, but student leaders gave me that experience” (Response journal #2, 2012). The notion of “family” is further emphasized in Madison’s comment:

We have always been told that student leaders are a family, so we all felt accepted as a group. I felt happier since student leaders, it brought the intermediates closer as a family, we can rely on each other, and know that even the grade 9 leaders for last year will be there for us. (Response journal #5, 2012)

Participants agreed that they are better prepared for the future due to their leadership training. Through experiences in Student Leaders, students acquired skills and abilities that would, in their mind, better equip them for the road ahead – particularly with high school looming. Participants identified organization and time management skills as applicable tools necessary for future learning. Emily explained:

Student leaders had helped me prepare for high school in many ways. It’s given me many tools individually and in a group…it helped me realize the importance of organization, because when you plan events you have to keep track of everything and be on top of things. That’ll help me next year, especially during exams, because I’ll know how to manage my time with studying. (Response journal #1, 2012)

Participants also acknowledged the advantage they gained by improving their interpersonal skills - communication, collaboration, and the ability to work effectively in groups – in a predominantly collaborative world. As such, these were regarded as the most critical additions to their repertoire. This is reflected in Andrea’s comment:
I have gained group skills like cooperation and compromising. Since there were so many of us, not everyone gets what they want, so I’ve learned to meet people halfway. That will help me in high school on group projects. (Response journal #2, 2012)

Alexa added, “Having to work with many different people has helped me with cooperation, problem-solving (problems often arise and we try to overcome them) and persuasion (persuade people that they should try an idea)” (Response journal #8, 2012).

Students believed they gained both the tools and mindset to succeed. Some felt the lessons learned in Student Leaders steered them in the “right” direction and will continue to help them along the “right path,” as revealed in Claudia’s comment:

It prepared me for the transition to high school because it will help me on the right path. I say this because since learning right from wrong and growing confidence I will surround myself with people and friends that will help bring the best of me not he worst. (Response journal #4, 2012)

Others expected to apply leadership skills to future life and learning experiences, as evidenced by Emily’s comment:

Student leaders also gave me a taste of what it is like to be in the real world, with no one babying you and it is all your responsibility. It is your accomplishments or consequences if you succeed or fail. (Response journal #1, 2012)

In all cases, participants expressed a desire to continue to pursue leadership in their own ways. Generally, participants hoped to continue formal leadership development at the high school level, as evidenced by Jasmine, “I do plan on continuing my journey towards leadership. I am planning to do that by joining groups in high school that involve leadership” (Response journal #3, 2012). Participants shared intentions of continuing to be leaders in their everyday lives, particularly among their friends. This is reflected by Emily’s who said, “I’ll continue to take charge and lead my friends in only one direction, the positive one, no matter what’s popular” (Response journal #1, 2012). Claudia added,
“I plan on continuing my journey towards leadership because I am a leader” (Response journal #5, 2012).

4.6 Summary

This case study shows us how leadership learning experiences can positively impact the lives and growth of adolescents. Youth are capable of acquiring leadership and can learn to be leaders in their own lives. Though a difficult and complicated developmental process, students believe that leadership training is valuable and important. Their experience in Student Leaders awarded students with friendships, higher levels of confidence, a greater awareness of the world around them, and tools to effectively confront an uncertain future. But more than anything, participants left Student Leaders feeling like better people - people who care and contribute to the world around them.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I revisit the research questions posed in Chapter One and explore how the case study answers those questions. Next, I discuss the major findings from the study and link them to the current literature. Finally, I suggest areas for further research.

5.2 Research Questions

My thesis focused on the research questions posed in Chapter One. Those questions were:

1. What types of leadership learning activities or experiences do Grade 8 student leaders find most meaningful to their leadership development?
2. In what ways do Grade 8 students feel their participation in a leadership program has impacted their lives?
3. What transformational and transactional leadership opportunities does the Student Leaders Program offer to students?

5.3 Discussion of Each Research Question

5.3.1 What types of leadership learning activities or experiences do Grade 8 student leaders find most meaningful to their leadership development?

This case study shows that the most meaningful leadership learning experiences for participants consist of active, experiential, and real-life opportunities; freedom, power, and responsibility; teamwork; novel, exciting, and challenging activities; positive and supportive role models; and long term involvement.

5.3.1.1 Active, Experiential, and Real-life Opportunities

Participants appear to flourish when participating in leadership learning experiences that are active, hands-on, real-life, and project-based. Student Leaders
activities are entirely project-based, keeping students actively engaged at all times. As returning leaders, participants take on lead roles, resulting in even higher levels of engagement. Students have countless opportunities to write, speak, manage, communicate, connect with members of the community, volunteer, etc. Metzger (2007) noted, “students value these experiences because they offer the opportunity to be actively engaged with real world people, places, and situations; providing them with a three-dimensional learning experience” (p. 147). Theorists argue that adolescent leaders need real-life issues to work on in order to realize their leadership potential (DesMaria et al., 2000; Martinek & Schilling, 2003; Metzger, 2007).

Service-learning experiences are especially meaningful to students. As participants take active roles in helping others, raising funds, collecting food, packing shoeboxes full of toys, and donating their time, they become engaged leaders taking responsibility for solving complex problems and meeting the needs of real people in real places. These findings support those by DesMaria et al. (2000) who propose service learning as the most effective approach to leadership development. DesMaria et al. argue that the most powerful aspect of service-learning is the opportunity it provides for students to be “leaders now, today, and in their own lives and communities” (p. 680).

The experiential learning cycle, as described by van Linden and Fertman (1998), is an important element of participants’ learning experience. Students are given the chance to take responsibility for their own learning, reflect on the experience, and apply resulting knowledge to their everyday lives. As such, participants have ample opportunities to practice their skills and put their abilities to action. Theorists agree that
leadership is most effectively acquired through practice (Metzger, 2007; Sacks, 2009; van Linden & Fertman, 1998).

Reflection is a critical aspect of the experiential learning cycle (Sacks, 2009; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Participants benefit from post “performance” discussions where they are able to connect to and make sense of their learning experiences. Through these discussions, students are able to identify their contributions and strengths, as well as areas for improvement. The information acquired through these conversations is vital to development as it allows students to improve their skills for future application.

5.3.1.2 Freedom, Power, and Responsibility

Participants value learning experiences where they are granted freedom, decision-making power, and increased responsibility. Assigned lead project management roles, participants are responsible for the creation, completion and success of an entire project with little to no adult intervention. In essence, the young leaders have complete creative freedom and decision-making power. Freedom and control over decisions are new concepts to students who feel teachers and adults tend to “tell them what to do.” By granting students this freedom, they exercise their creativity and problem-solving skills and are left feeling powerful by the success of their efforts. Theorists agree that, young people need the power of decision-making to carry out leadership roles (Des Marias et al., 2000; Heath, 2005; Metzger, 2007; Roach et al., 1999), particularly as they seek to become more and more autonomous (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Direct student voice, involvement, and leadership are crucial for a successful and long-lasting experience (DesMaria et al., 2000; Metzger, 2007). For these reasons students need to be directing projects as opposed to adults. Furthermore, adults must resist assuming power to execute
student-led plans, even when failure looms, as exercising power over developing leaders can shut down the development process (Whitehead, 2009)

Participants also welcome responsibility. Given increased responsibilities, students feel respected and trusted by their teacher counterparts. Despite the stress or frustration often accompanied by increased responsibility, students feel most capable and effective when working through and “surviving” these experiences. In doing so, they take ownership over their work and are very proud of their accomplishments. Roach et. al. (1999) argue that students who are given extensive responsibilities tend to uphold high standards for themselves and others directly involved in their work. Likewise, as participants acknowledge that the success or failure of their task rests entirely on their shoulders, they set high expectations for themselves and most frequently rise to the occasion.

5.3.1.3 Teamwork

Participants value team-based learning experiences where collaboration and cooperation are essential. Teams or groups allow participants the opportunity to learn and practice their skills in a safe yet realistic setting (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). In fact, there is consensus within the literature suggesting that adolescents greatly benefit from collaborative and cooperative learning experiences (Cox, 1988; Metzger, 2007, Roach et al., 1999; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Van Linden and Fertman (1998) describe leadership as a social process involving interactions with other people. Friendships and peer relationships are important aspects of an adolescent’s life; therefore, “the approval of a group of peers is a powerful source of motivation and support for adolescents who are learning new skills” (p. 127).
Participants enjoy collaborating with their friends. They respect the strengths and talents of their peers and learn from each other in the process. As problems or conflicts arise, participants learn to communicate, compromise, and accept differing personalities and points of view. Karnes and Chauvin (2005) insist that future leaders will need to foster and encourage the participation of all kinds of people. As such, adolescents must learn to respect and positively interact with diverse populations. Through group participation, youth can learn how to encourage others, create group spirit, and resolve conflict. In addition, youth can attain an understanding and appreciation for diverse attitudes, skills and talents as well as how to work towards a common goal.

5.3.1.4 Novel and Interesting Experiences

Participants in this study view novel and interesting learning experiences as most impactful and memorable. We Day – a full-day concert showcasing Canada’s best performers and the world’s most influential people – is the best example of a novel and exiting experience. Some participants had been anxiously anticipating We Day for years, watching it on television or hearing about it from former Student Leaders. To most, attending We Day was an experience of a lifetime. Consequently, the leadership messages heard at We Day had lasting effects on participants.

It appears that any experience that is new or different can leave an impression on students: guest speakers, conferences, new initiatives, approaches, activities, or games, etc. Any activity that is outside a typical classroom experience is appreciated and valued by participants. These findings support the work of Metzger (2007), who found that students benefit from learning experiences that are unique, new, or appeal to student interests. Consensus in the literature urges leadership educators to offer students
leadership experiences that are both varied and well rounded (Metzger, 2007; Roach et al., 1999; van Linden & Fertman, 1998).

5.3.1.5 Positive and Supportive Role Models

Having positive and supportive role models from whom to seek inspiration, guidance and validation is an important experience for participants’ leadership development. Role models – teachers, parents, family members, famous people – can greatly impact the lives of participants (Cox, 1988; Metzger, 2007; Sacks, 2009). Participants learn and are influenced by role models through observation: watching their role models’ actions and absorbing their words. Thus, leadership educators are significant role models for participants; they provide students with information about leadership and the world. Famous change makers such as Craig Kielburger and Terry Fox act as role models for participants as they teach students how to overcome adversity and that one person can make a difference.

Researchers concur; observing and following role models are viable means of learning about leadership (Metzger, 2007; Sacks, 2009; van Linden & Fertman, 1998) and are essential elements for leadership programming. Not only do they provide a good example for student behaviour and values, these role models can also provide participants with a great deal of support and validation. Adolescents benefit from praise and positive reinforcement, particularly when given to them by an adult whom they respect and admire (Conner & Strobel, 2007)

5.3.1.6 Long-term Involvement

Participants in this study believe long-term participation in leadership education is critical to leadership development. After two years of leadership training, participants
acknowledge leadership as a developmental process and recognize aspects of their own growth over the two-year period. They recall feelings of inexperience and hesitation as novice leaders in their first year, to feelings of confidence and self-efficacy in their second. Participants express a desire to continue on a path towards leadership, as they view leadership development as a life-long process. These findings highlight the importance of allowing youth time to cultivate and demonstrate their leadership capacities. As noted by Conner and Strobel (2007), it may take youth as many as three years before they develop the courage, the eloquence, or the capacity for critical judgment. Because leadership is a personal and developmental process that takes place over time, throughout a lifetime, long-term involvement in leadership education is necessary (Metzger, 2007; van Linden & Fertman, 1998).

5.3.2 In what ways do Grade 8 students feel their participation in a leadership program has impacted their lives?

This case study shows that adolescents benefit from leadership education. Participants identify several learning outcomes that have added to, impacted, or benefited their lives: awareness of their ability to make a positive change; increased sense of self; acquisition of fundamental skills; and, peer relationships.

5.3.2.1 Awareness of their Ability to Make an Impact

Having had ample opportunities to serve and impact the lives of others, participants view themselves as able to make a contribution to society. Leadership development provides youth with the necessary skills and knowledge to affect positive change on an interpersonal, school, community, and national level (Karnes & Stephens, 1999). Furthermore, leadership development, and the application of these skills to
meaningful roles in the community, provides youth with the opportunity for addressing social issues and for becoming competent community members and responsible citizens.

Metzger (2007) discussed the importance of service learning opportunities and allowing students to make an impact. When students become actively engaged in addressing important community needs, they realize that they can make a difference in the world. Thus, engaging youth in leadership with service in mind promotes the message that youth can be important resources in their community (Des Marais et al., 2000; Metzger, 2007; Sacks, 2009). Service learning is beneficial to adolescents as it leaves them with a sense of purpose, the ability to empathize, and sense of civic and social responsibility (Billig, 2000; Kraft 1996; Meyer, 1999, as cited by Metzger, 2007).

Due to their leadership involvement, participants feel they have gained a better understanding of the world around them. They have been introduced to new perspectives and ways of living around the globe. Thus, participants feel they finally see the way the world works, injustices an all. This information is the fuel that drives participants to want to make positive changes.

5.3.2.2 Increased Sense of Self

Participants have a greater sense of self as a result of their leadership training. In general, participants feel empowered, wiser, kinder, and more confident, caring, and capable. They have an overall improved self-image, viewing themselves as people of integrity who uphold a moral standard. Engaging in leadership activities, particularly service-centered activities, gives adolescents cause to experience feelings of pride, contentment, and accomplishment. Consensus in the literature suggests that leadership education contributes to the overall positive development of youth. Self-esteem,
confidence, personal fulfillment, and resilience increase when adolescents engage in leadership development and in meaningful, positive contributions to their community (Hindes et al., 2008; Leventhal, 1999; MacGregor, 2006, Metzger, 2007; Sacks, 2009).

Of particular value is participants increased sense of self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) describes self-efficacy, the belief in one’s capabilities, as the determining force of human action. Perceived self-efficacy is critical in determining what challenges people take on, how much effort is expended, the extent of perseverance, and their interpretation of failure. As such, the ability to act depends largely on a person’s belief about whether they can actually achieve the expected results. Since participants believe they are capable of attaining goals, they are more likely to act towards achieving them. In this vein, Roach et al. (1999) also discovered that students immersed in leadership development developed a strong sense of self-efficacy for future tasks and goals.

5.3.2.3 Fundamental Skills

Participants believe that leadership development has equipped them with essential skills necessary future success. Leadership skills acquired by students consist of interpersonal and communication skills and the ability to influence and lead others. These findings are similar to that of Hindes et al., (2008) who discovered that participants experienced an improvement in cooperation skills and teamwork, students’ ability to work productively within a group, to be productive members of a team, and to manage emotions in a cooperative way. Participants said they learned to speak and how to listen. They learned when to take charge, and when to take a step back and allow others the opportunity to lead. In the meantime, participants also developed and practiced problem solving, decision-making, and stress management skills.
The ability to lead and influence others is another important aspect of participants' learning outcomes. Leading working groups through projects afforded participants opportunities to develop their ability to lead and manage others. Participants feel capable of taking control over a task or situation, and recognize the importance of sharing leadership and teaching others to be leaders in their own lives.

Participants are aware of their potential to influence others. They have come to understand the power of the spoken and written word, and how they too can be positive role models for other people. Martinek et al. (2006) noted that fostering the innate need to lead, teach and care for others is fundamental to creating a just and moral society.

Clearly, leadership education and opportunities strengthen a variety of skills – collaboration, problem solving, decision-making, and task management – that are necessary for the demands of work and life in general (Sacks, 2009). Today's young people need new leadership skills to see their way into the future: the capacity to collaborate, to live with contradiction, and to imagine new ways of living.

**5.3.2.4 Peer Relationships**

A learning outcome treasured by participants is the acquisition of new friends. Leadership development gives adolescents the opportunity to interact with likeminded people who they normally would not interact with – including students younger or older than them. These interactions lead to friendships and a sense of belonging to a community or family. This supports findings of Sacks (2009) and Metzger (2007) who found students participating in leadership development programs foster meaningful relationships with peers, adults, and members of the community.
5.3.3 What transactional and transformational leadership opportunities does the Student Leaders Program offer Grade 8 students?

Evidence from this case study suggests that the Student Leaders program provides students with both transactional and transformational leadership opportunities. Van Linden and Fertman (1998) compare transactional and transformational leadership as difference between “doing” leadership and “being” a leader. Findings show that participants had many chances to do leadership, as well as significant opportunities to be a leader.

To begin, I draw on van Linden and Fertman’s list of characteristics of a transactional leader. According to van Linden and Fertman, transactional leaders take charge, get things done, and recognize the importance of the product. These describe participants’ behaviour when carrying out a task or helping with a project. Examples of transactional leadership include participants: creating decorations for a dance, writing announcements, or creating a PowerPoint presentation. Transformational leadership involves all of the administrative or managerial tasks necessary to accomplish a goal (Heath, 2005; van Linden & Fertman, 1998), including project management, which was a large component of participants’ role.

Transactional leaders also value problem and solution identification, and will make decisions with little or no input from others. This characteristic was evident in participants who felt that “taking charge,” meant, “doing things on your own.” Depending on the circumstance, some participants feel that it is their responsibility, as older leaders, to find solutions to problems. For whatever reason, participants feel an
enormous pressure to be able to figure things out on their own. This is a reflection of their leadership capabilities, and the students take pride in their ability to overcome obstacles.

Most participants, however, recognize the importance of sharing leadership, which is a characteristic of transformational leadership. As the findings show, these individuals value the participation and contribution of others, and consider all viewpoints and advice before making a decision. Consequently, these participants recognize the importance of process, one that is inclusive and supportive of each team member.

A transformational leader also learns from experiences to generalize to “real life.” This is also evident among participants. When afforded the opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences, participants can make connections between leadership information and how to apply these to real life situations. For instance, participants were able to apply leadership lessons to decision-making out on the schoolyard or after school with friends. Furthermore, participants connected and identified leadership characteristics to current events and societal issues.

DesMaria et al. (2000) state that some of the elements of transformational leadership experiences are: youth/adult partnerships, granting young people decision making power and responsibility for consequences; a broad context for learning and service; and recognition of young people's experience, knowledge and skills. These too were evident in the findings of this case study. Adult supervisors facilitate student learning, working in partnership with Student Leaders. Students are granted decision-making power with little or no adult intervention. They are also provided with a broad context for learning: guest speakers, conferences, project management, We Day, group education, and whole group conversation and reflection.
Finally, in describing transformational leadership, Heath (2005) emphasizes its power to transform leaders to be positive agents of change. As previously stated, one of the major findings in this study is participants’ awareness of their ability to be positive agents of change. Heath also contends that transformational leadership is achieved through experiential learning, mentoring, affording adolescents with decision-making power, and providing them with an environment that supports caring, character building, and inclusiveness. These aspects of transformational leadership are all evident in the findings of this case study.

It is important to note that the leadership experiences of each participant are highly individual. While some expressed leadership experiences largely transactional in nature, others demonstrated a far more transformational experience. This is a testament to the diverse characters, qualities, and talents of the ten participants.

5.4 Summary of Major Findings

This thesis examined the case study of ten Grade 8 students participating in a school-based leadership program. The study showed that students valued their leadership development experience and benefited from several positive learning outcomes as a result of their participation.

The major findings of this case study can be summarized as follows:

1. Leadership development experiences that adolescents find meaningful are those where they are actively engaged in problem-based, real-life, and experiential learning opportunities.

2. Adolescents value learning experiences where they are granted freedom, decision-making power, and increased responsibility.
3. Adolescents prefer to work in educational groups where collaboration and cooperation are essential to the attainment of a shared goal.

4. Adolescents are drawn to novel, exiting, and interesting learning experiences.

5. Positive and supportive role models from whom to seek inspiration, guidance and validation is an important experience for an adolescent’s leadership development.

6. Long-term participation in leadership education is critical to leadership development.

7. Leadership development allows adolescents to feel like they can make a positive impact on their world.

8. Leadership development gives adolescents an improved sense of self, including: higher self-esteem, more confidence, and feelings of self-worth, self-efficacy, and self-fulfillment.

9. Leadership skills acquired by students consist of interpersonal and communication skills, problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, and the ability to influence and lead others.

10. Leadership development gives adolescents the opportunity to build relationships with likeminded people who they normally would not interact with – including students younger or older than them.

11. The Student Leaders program provides students with a balance of transformational and transactional leadership opportunities.

5.5 Implications for Future Research

This study examines the leadership development experience of ten Grade 8 students. These students clearly value their leadership training, having enjoyed many
opportunities to lead projects, make important decisions, collaborate with friends, and be inspired to make a difference. In the end, they developed foundational skills necessary for the demands of their next level of education, as well as work and life in general. While few pieces of the youth leadership puzzle have been uncovered here, much is yet to be learned and further research can shed light on some of the missing pieces.

First, this case study examines one specific program in one specific school. Although eliciting useful findings, it is just one case. Many schools offer leadership development programming within the school setting and are worth investigating. A future study involving more school-based leadership programs, and completing a cross-case analysis of findings would provide a stronger model of how adolescents learn about leadership.

This case also limits understanding of leadership development programming to those found in an extra-curricular setting. Karnes and Stephens (2005) and Martinek et al. (2006) insist that formal leadership education should not be limited to extra-curricular activity, but can be embedded throughout the curriculum. While leadership courses are commonplace within the secondary school setting, few are offered to students in elementary or middle schools. It would be interesting to investigate how the development of leadership skills is addressed within classrooms that receive regular curricular programming.

Finally, while participants reported preparation for future learning as a desirable learning outcome of leadership education, I would be interested in seeing what long-term benefits, if any, result from students’ participation in Student Leaders. Specifically, I would like to know if in fact their leadership training has made a difference in their
transition to and success in high school. A longitudinal study investigating students—those participating in leadership development compared to those who are not—through Grades 7 to 12 (or onward) may shed some light on this subject, and perhaps confirm the importance of leadership education for youth.
References


Appendix A

Informed Letter of Consent

Dear Student Leader,

Since you have taken part in the Student Leader program for the past two years, I am inviting you to take part in a study I am conducting for my Master’s degree at the University of Toronto. Through this study, I hope to learn more about students’ perspectives on how youth learn leadership skills and attitudes. By participating, you may discover a lot about yourself as a developing leader, and help improve the Student Leader Program at the school. Plus, with your help, this study may benefit teachers, principals, and school boards in developing high-quality leadership programs.

If you agree to participate, your name will be entered into a draw along with other Grade 8 student leaders who are interested as well. If your name is pulled from the draw, you will be given a journal and a list of questions. You will be asked to write your answers to the questions in the journal. You can bring the journal home with you and complete the questions at your leisure. I will ask you to hand in the journal from time to time so that I can record your answers and possibly ask some follow up questions. Don’t worry; all information that you share in this study will remain strictly confidential, and you will remain completely anonymous.

If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you do not want to participate. If you do decided to participate, you are not stuck; you can withdraw at any time should you change your mind later and want to stop. All students who participate in the study will receive a token of appreciation upon completion.

If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you do not want to participate. If you do decided to participate, you are not stuck; you can withdraw at any time should you change your mind later and want to stop. All students who participate in the study will receive a token of appreciation upon completion.

Please feel free to ask questions regarding this study. You and/or your parents may contact me at anytime if you have any additional questions. You can also contact my research supervisor, Dr. Doug McDougall, at doug.mcdougall@utoronto.ca. Any questions about your rights may be directed to the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416)946-3273. You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

Signing your name at the bottom means that you agree to be in this study and clearly understand what this research entails. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form after you have signed it.

__________________________________  ____________________________________
Signature of Participant                 Date

__________________________________  ____________________________________
Signature of Parent or Guardian          Date

__________________________________  ____________________________________
Signature of Investigator                Date
Appendix B

Parental Letter of Consent

Dear Parent(s) and/or Guardian(s),

Your child has participated in the Student Leaders programs for the last two years. As such, he/she is invited to take part in a study I am conducting for my Master’s degree at the University of Toronto. With the help of your child, I hope to gain a better understanding of how youth learn and acquire leadership skills and attitudes. It is hoped that findings from this study will help improve the Student Leader program, as well as help teachers/principals create high-quality leadership programs for their students.

As a participant, your child will be given a journal and a list of questions. He/she will be asked to use the journal to respond to the questions. Your child may bring the journal home and complete the questions at his/her leisure. I will ask your child to hand in the journal from time to time so that I can record answers and possibly ask some follow up questions. Rest assured, all information that is obtained throughout the study and that can be identified with your child will remain strictly confidential and will not be disclosed. Your child’s privacy is of utmost importance; thus, I ensure that your child will remain anonymous.

Your child’s involvement in this study is strictly voluntary, and in no way should he/she feel pressured to participate. As well, should your child choose to participate, he/she has the right to withdrawal from the study at any time without question or consequence. All potential participants require parental consent in order to take part in the study. All students who participate in the study will receive a token of appreciation upon completion.

Please feel free to ask questions regarding this study. You may contact me at anytime if you have any questions. You can also contact my research supervisor, Dr. Doug McDougall, at doug.mcdougall@utoronto.ca. Any questions about your child’s rights may be directed to the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416)946-3273. Thank you for your support and cooperation.

Sincerely,

Laura De Simone OCT

By completing and signing this portion below, you are giving your child permission to participate in this study and clearly understand what this research entails. A copy of this form will be given to you to keep.

________________________________________
Name of student

________________________________________
Signature of Parent or Guardian

________________________________________
Date

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Appendix C

Response Journal Question Guide

Students were asked to answer the following questions in their Response Journals.

**First Round Questions**
1) What does it mean to be a leader? (ie. What does a leader look like, or act like?)
2) Why was it important for you to join Student Leaders?
3) What do you think you have learned about being a leader since you’ve joined?
4) When, throughout the program, have you felt most like a leader?

**Second Round Questions**
1) In your opinion, what types of qualities, skills, and attitudes does an effective leader have? List as many as you can possibly think of.
2) Of the qualities, skills, and attitudes you just listed,
   a) Which do you think you already had, prior to joining Student Leaders?
   b) Which (if any) do you think you acquired through your participation in Student Leader?
   c) Which do you think you have yet to learn/acquire?
3) Describe any/all Student Leader activities that helped you acquire leadership qualities, skills, and/or attitudes.

**Third Round Questions**
1) Tell me about a time when you felt really excited and/or proud to be part of leadership.
2) What made this experience stand out?
3) What was your part in the experience?
4) What about the experience made you excited?
5) What about the experience made you proud to be a part of it?

**Fourth Round Questions**
Thinking back on your two years of Student Leader involvement….
1) Compare your experience in Student Leaders this year to your experience last year? (Was one experience better than the other? Easier? More difficult? More fun? Learn more? Do more? Etc.)
2) Describe (explain in detail) any/all moments/activities where you felt inspired, and how did that make you feel?
3) Describe (explain in detail) any/all moments/activities where you felt like you had grown as a person, and how did that make you feel?
4) Describe (explain in detail) any others ways that you can think of in which being part of Student Leaders has added to, impacted, improved, or benefited your life.
5) Describe (explain in detail) any ways that you can think of in which being part of Student Leaders has impacted, improved, changed, or influenced the way you view, think, or feel about yourself.

*Please explain your reasons why for each.
Fifth Round Questions
Now that your two years of Student Leader involvement is almost up….
1) What have you liked best about being part of Student Leaders?
2) What were some of the best FEELINGS you experienced due to your involvement in Student Leaders?
3) If you could sum up your experience in Student Leaders in one word, what would that word be, and why?
4) How do you think your experience with Student Leaders might have helped you prepare for your transition to high school?
5) Do you plan on continuing your journey towards leadership? And if so, how, or in what ways, do you plan on doing that?
6) Is there anything else that you want me to know about your experience in Student Leaders or leadership in general?