SHARING THEIR WOR[L]DS: APPRECIATING STUDENTS' VOICES IN STRENGTH-BASED YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Students have an important contribution to make in helping adults understand what their lives are like and how they learn best. However, within schools in particular, young people are frequently positioned within deficit discourses—as vessels needing to be filled, or broken beings that require fixing, resulting in them more likely to be positioned as passive recipients of policy and practice as opposed to active agents of change (Roberts & Nash, 2009). This article examines the implementation of an alternative approach to enhancing student leadership in five New Zealand high schools and argues for the powerful nature of strength-based learning opportunities, which shifts the focus from "what needs improving" to "what might be possible". This research project engaged appreciative inquiry to transform the focus of a traditional teaching and learning relationship and bring adults and young people together in a learning partnership that focused attention on their desired needs and voices—aligning these with the students' strengths, and positive dimensions of their leadership formation. Critical to this work was the formation of youth-adult partnerships, which created new opportunities and relational spaces for students to share their voices and experience learner agency. The findings from this research provide privileged insights into the wor[l]ds of student leaders.

Introduction

The notion of student voice has become a much-discussed area of educational research as student-centered learning approaches become central to the daily lives of teachers and students (for example, Groundwater-Smith, 2011; Mansfield, Welton, & Halx, 2012; McNae, 2011). A number of researchers argue that the concept of "student voice" is evasive of definition and there is little consensus as to what student voice actually is and how the concept contributes to student learning overall (Bolstad, 2011; Thomson, 2011). The work of Bourke and Loveridge (2015) indicates growing recognition that young people's involvement in student voice initiatives is "philosophically, politically and methodologically more complex than first appears" (p. 126) and in her review of literature and practice in this area, Hipkins (2010) reports that the phrase "student voice" and the knowledge associated with is fraught with differences in conceptual understanding and pedagogical application.

Different typologies of student voice, such as being heard, collaborating with adults and building capacity for youth leadership (Mitra, 2004), can be viewed through multiple lenses and can have significant influence on the organizational, personal, political and pedagogical aspects of education (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). Growing bodies of research indicate that the voices of students can play a key role in improving student learning outcomes and facilitating change in schools (Cook-Sather, 2002; Fielding 2009; Frost & Holden 2008; Mitra 2003; Rudduck & Flutter 2000). However, regardless of which definition one opts to advance, opportunities for student voice are infrequent, and on the few occasions where students get to contribute, these initiatives rarely involve students in pedagogical decision making (Thomson, 2011) or link to curricula areas. Instead, students' contributions are focused on co-curricular areas with little connection to their academic learning or achievement. The work of Nelson (2015) critiqued discourses of authenticity associated with student voice initiatives, where she observed "the evolution of student voice seems to rest on a view that authentic student voice will emerge if we get student positioning 'right' or if we get our methods 'right', freeing the voicing process from restraints to facilitate an unfettered and ideal expression of student experience and perception" (Nelson, 2015, p. 2).

Bolstad and Gilbert (2012) argue "the idea of changing the scripts for learners and teachers is often shorthanded with phrases such as 'student centred pedagogies' or 'student voice' alluding to the need to engage learners (and their interests, experiences and knowledge) in many decisions about their learning" (p. 41). Within the New Zealand context, they present the challenge to educators "to move past seeing learning in terms of being 'student centred' or 'teacher-driven,' and instead to think about how learners and teachers would work together in a knowledge building learning environment" (p. 42).

That said, involving students' voices in curriculum design is complex. Cook-Sather (2015) states, "Student-voice work asks us to accept the importance of bringing together different angles of vision born of different positions that, at their intersection, yield perspective that can catalyze insight and inform action" (p. 6). Manefield, Collins, Moore, Mahar and Warne (2007) acknowledge the value of developing partnerships in education and consider that "involving students as partners in their education strengthens their self-esteem and respect and provides practical agendas for improvement that have student support" (p. 14). By surfacing and paying attention to students' diverse and varied perspectives on school

curriculum in ways that simultaneously acknowledge and build individual capacities as learners, students shift into the roles of being "*actors in* shaping policy", rather than being the "*subject of* policies" (Mansfield, 2014, p. 398). Furthermore, by acknowledging that students' voices do not manifest within a vacuum, it becomes important to create dialogic encounters that are cognizant of the social and cultural dimensions of context in order for voices to meaningfully materialize. This research sought to engage students in a collaborative inquiry process whereby students worked in partnership with adults to co-create a leadership learning program. Students' voices were critical in the design, implementation and review of the program.

Youth-Adult Partnerships: Creating Partnerships for Learning Leadership

In this research, students' voices were acknowledged as critical components of youth-adult partnerships. These relationships are deliberately constructed in ways that encourage youth and adults to share their voices and work collaboratively to co-create knowledge and take action on issues of interest (Camino, 2000). When exploring the dynamics of these relationships, Mitra (2008) describes such partnerships as "relationships in which both youth and adults have the potential to contribute to visioning and decision-making processes, to learn from one another, and promote change" (p. 222). Within the relationship, across all ages, each person sees himself or herself as a valuable resource offering something unique (Zeldin, Petrokubi & MacNeil, 2007), and once formed, these partnerships can "amplify the expertise of young people while also recognizing the valuable expertise that adults bring to the partnership" (Mitra, 2017, p. 57).

However, these partnerships do not manifest spontaneously and require careful planning and preparation for them to be successful. Establishing a culture of inclusion is essential and "developing contexts where young people feel comfortable to share and critique their personal values is an important part of shifting cultural changes with regard to discourses about youth partnerships" (McNae, 2017, p. 6).

As such, the concept of partnerships that extend between adults and young people lends itself well to the field of positive youth development. The research reported in this article was positioned as a strength-based development approach and founded on the scholarship of student voice and youth-adult partnerships. Cognizant that discourses of power within relationships underpin much of the scholarship in this area, it was not the original purpose of this research; however such elements were taken into consideration throughout the research design and program approaches employed. This work sought to co-construct a youth leadership development program and explore the suitability of appreciative inquiry as an appropriate framework to examine how young people and adults could work together to illuminate students' experiences of leadership and explore ways to enhance their leadership practice in meaningful ways.

Strength-based Leadership Development With Students

Learning leadership through partnership arrangements holds significant potential for developing contextually relevant and authentic learning experiences (McNae, 2014). Many current youth leadership development approaches in secondary schools appear to be predicated on the traditional beliefs that position youth as problems to be fixed or in a stage of transition

to adulthood and that the experience of youth is the same for all youth (Bragg, 2013). There is often an assumption by those planning youth leadership development opportunities, that development occurs at a similar pace for all individuals, that generic content meets the needs and learning styles of all involved and programs will therefore work no matter who the youth are. Klau, Boyd, and Luckow (2006) argue, "at worst, leadership programs are described as an almost negative space into which practitioners project their own beliefs about what youth need" (p. 60). One-size-fits-all program approaches to youth leadership development are perceived as outdated and ineffective and more relevant, progressive and authentic ways to meet the learning needs of young leaders are required (McNae, 2013).

School-based positive youth development is presented as an alternative field to youth development in schools. Pittman and Irby (1996) argue that for youth development approaches to be successful, youth must work in partnership with adults to create these experiences, and that as stakeholders, they have a critical role to play in the formation and implementation of positive youth development programs in schools. Aligning with this discourse challenges schools to think differently about young people (Thomsen, 2004). When schools engage in positive youth development approaches, youth are no longer seen as problems to be solved, risks to be mitigated, or vessels to be filled (Astroth, Brown, Poore & Timm, 2002). Rather, youth are seen as partners in their own personal development with voices that deserve to be heard and suggestions to act upon. Thomsen (2004) argues that:

> Youth are people to be empowered rather than made to be compliant. They are resources to be tapped into rather than liabilities to be managed. They are understood to be in the process of becoming adults, allowed to experiment with their ideas and to resolve any errors that might occur in the process. (p. 80)

With this in mind, developing appropriate means by which to embrace these ideals calls for new ways of conceptualizing what strength-based youth leadership development might look like. It is therefore useful to examine the theoretical framework that supported the research process—appreciative inquiry.

Embracing Appreciative Inquiry To Enhance Student Leadership

Appreciative inquiry has the potential to support youth leadership development by employing a model of inquiry which explores what "gives life" to youth leadership as opposed to positioning young people and their leadership endeavors as problems to be solved (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). As indicated by Cooperrider (1998), appreciative inquiry offers an alternative to traditional, deficit-based development approaches as it:

> deliberately seeks to discover people's exceptionality—their unique gifts, strengths, and qualities. It actively searches and recognizes people for their specialties—their essential contributions and achievements. And it is based on principles of equality of voice—everyone is asked to speak about their vision of the true, the good, and the possible. (p. 12)

There is no prescribed format offered for completing an appreciative inquiry, as each inquiry would differ depending on the nature of the context where the inquiry might take place,

and the individuals who would be involved. A well-known model, frequently cited in this area of research is the work of Cooperrider and Whitney (2005). This model sets out four key aspects to the appreciative inquiry approach, and is commonly referred to as the 4D approach. A summarized version is shared below:

1. Discovery (appreciating): this phase seeks to identify instances of peak experiences. To uncover these peak experiences, participants share stories and artefacts associated with their "best" experiences or performances. Within this phase, participants identify *what gives life* to their practice/organization and appreciate the best of what currently is or has been occurring.
2. Dream (envisioning): this phase encourages participants to imagine "best case" scenarios for the future. In this phase people identify *what might be* possible in their area of focus.
3. Design (co-constructing): this phase provides opportunities for in-depth conversations about previous peak experiences from the Discovery phase. Key elements emerge from what is shared and through a form of thematic analysis. Participants work collaboratively to develop strength-based propositions to identify and bring the best elements of previous peak experiences forward.
4. Destiny (sustaining): this final phase explores how each of these statements might be amplified or enacted in future practice and plans for action are generated (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008).

This research drew on the 4D approach above to develop a research framework where adults and students worked in partnership and engaged in reflective dialogue as students drew on past experiences to establish positive actions for the future (Giles & Alderson, 2008). By using a reflective and action-informed process of learning, where students' voices were central and essential to the dialogic process, the research design specifically positioned students as valuable contributors to, and designers of, their own leadership curriculum. This way, individual strengths could be surfaced through the inquiry process and activities designed collaboratively by adults and student could be aligned to the program.

The Research Process: Appreciative Inquiry In Action

The Appreciating Youth Leadership (AYL) program was a 12-month research project funded by the Faculty of Education, University of Waikato. The purpose of the project was to "authentically materialize the notion of voice within youth-adult partnerships…to design a strength-based youth leadership development framework," (McNae & Mackay, 2013, p. 31), and explore what supported students to lead at their best. Appreciative inquiry was the embedded theoretical framework used for developing and carrying out the research.

This qualitative research project involved two phases. The first phase took place in 2014 and involved an open invitation to youth leaders from 48 high schools in the Waikato region. From this invitation 120 high school student leaders met on the University of Waikato campus and were involved in sharing and exploring their beliefs and understandings of leadership. At the completion of this first phase of the project, an invitation was extended to all participants to be involved in further research (reported in this article)—The Appreciating Youth Leadership program. The invitation received 72 expressions of interest from students

indicating their desire to be involved in phase two of the research. From this group, 10 year-13 students (aged 16-17 years of age) from five high schools (two students from each school) in the Hamilton region were randomly selected to work with two researchers. Their participation in the program was not contingent upon their participation in the research. The selection criteria reflected a consideration of gender representation, geographical location, ethnicity and mix of rural and urban locations. The number of students involved in the research was kept small to allow an effective learning community to be created and sustained throughout the research process. Researchers met with the staff and students of each school to share information about the project and gain the necessary ethical consent from the school, the students and their parents for the research and the leadership program simultaneously.

Over eight months the researchers and students co-constructed and participated in a leadership development program that was founded on the key tenets of appreciative inquiry. The overall structure of the program reflected an adapted and contextualized version of the 4D Model previously outlined by Whitney and Cooperrider, (1998). This provided a useful starting point for collaboration. Multiple data sources were embedded in the research design to incorporate a variety of perspectives and form the basis for greater trustworthiness of the data. Curriculum design sessions, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, narrative writing and storytelling were key methods of program creation and data generation over the eight months of the face-to-face workshop sessions. This also allowed for rich descriptive accounts of the students' experiences to be formed. Semi-structured interviews were transcribed and member-checked by the participants. Data analysis took place through thematic analysis whereby constant comparative analysis (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) occurred across the various data forms.

In order to gain an insight into the perceptions and thoughts of the students in each school community, it was important that the researchers recognized that they held views and perceptions, which had originated from a different context and different experiences. Researchers are "inescapably part of the social worlds that they are researching" (Bryman, 2001, p. 141), and reflexivity demands that researchers see themselves as integral to, inseparable from and a part of the research process. As such, Pillow (2003) purports that "…reflexivity becomes important to demonstrate one's awareness of the research problematics and is often used to potentially validate and legitimize the research precisely by raising questions about the research process" (p. 179). Mindful that Bragg (2007) had observed a reluctance from researchers working in the area of the student voice field to "engage with the shifting power relations that have accorded students their new authority to speak, or to be critically reflexive about the means used to shape and channel what can be recognized as 'student voice' " (p. 344), critical reflexivity was an essential element of the research process. Researchers were involved in "an ongoing self-awareness during the research process, which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses of our research" (Pillow, 2003, p. 178). Field journals, joint reflection discussions and formative feedback during interview sessions supported the researchers in implementing and maintaining their reflexive practices.

Research Findings

The research findings relate to two key areas—program design (form, function, and co-constructed content) and students' perspectives of being involved in the inquiry and learning

opportunity. The findings illustrated the influence of contextual knowledge on the learning experience and the importance of self-reflection through exploring personal leadership experiences in their multiple guises. These findings also highlighted how working in partnership and using metaphors enhanced students' commitment and connection to the program and allowed students to grapple with complex leadership ideas.

Program Form, Function And Content

It was clear from the onset that the leadership program developed in partnership with students was immensely different from other programs designed by adults. Critical features such as time spent building relationships, the opportunity to learn about and engage in dialogue, "possibilize" and have time for in-depth reflection were critical elements which contributed to the success of this program. The following section describes the appreciative inquiry in action. Examples are used to illustrate some of the students' experiences from each of the four elements of the inquiry process.

Discovery—peering into the water. The discovery phase provided an opportunity for the students and researchers to build a sense of community and establish a foundation for partnership. Initial "getting-to-know-you" activities were co-constructed together as students shared preferred teaching approaches and ideas for activities to build relationships with others. Many of the activities that were designed were extremely simple, yet effective in their approach. One example included group members sharing and speaking about an important Taonga (treasure) with the group. Family photos, a bible, or a piece of sports equipment were examples of meaningful Taonga which students brought from home to talk about. Students also used these artifacts to share stories of moment when they were "leading at their best". The purpose of this phase was to fill conversations about leadership learning with positive possibilities. As students got to know each other and feel more confident in the presence of others, the researchers guided the conversations deeper towards personal leadership.

The dialogic process was guided by questions that were generated by the group. Examples of these questions included:

> Share with us a time when you felt you were leading at your best…and what made [this event] so exciting, meaningful, satisfying? What makes that [artifact] so special? Tell us about the things going on around you at the time when you felt you were leading at your best? What did you notice during that experience?

Some students wrote their responses as stories in their own time and read them aloud to the group. As individuals shared these experiences with the group, other members listened, and wrote down what they perceived was happening during these peak moments of leadership. Sharing these "noticings" back to individuals was an important learning activity. In many cases this was the first time student had experienced getting positive feedback about their leadership in action, for example: "I notice you are a caring person who always puts the needs of others first. You are hopeful and genuinely believe you can make a difference in the world." Some students welled up with tears, overcome with emotion as their peers shared observations of their leadership strengths.

Dreaming—a river runs through us. Students were encouraged to imagine what their best leadership might look like in the future. They engaged in activities that helped them to develop ideals for their best leadership practice as if there were no barriers or impediments with regard to their actions or opportunities. One core aspect of this was envisioning how their leadership would be if it originated from their personal strengths. Students engaged in reflective encounters to think forward into the future. A dialogic process was again guided by questions that were generated by the group to encourage
"blue sky" thinking. Examples of these questions included, "What might your leadership look like if there were no barriers? Imagine the future if you could lead in any way, in any place, in any task…what do you see?" When asked how they would like to record their ideas, some students drew pictures, others shared photographs and pictures. As students shared their vision for their ideal future, others asked questions to help refine the details of what might be possible.

Design—distilling the current. In the design phase students and researchers collated the information that had been generated in the discovery phase. The information took many different forms—written stories, reflection sheets, posters, photos, post-it notes, and/or pencil sketches. Each individual worked alongside their peers and the researchers to analyze and make sense of this information to gain an understanding of common themes that emerged across encounters of when they were leading at their best. Commonalities and differences were highlighted as the group distilled the main ideas for each individual. The main role of the researchers in this phase was to keep the activities and associated discussions focused on the positive aspects of each students' leadership and to ask questions to refine ideas and develop shared meaning. This information was crafted into statements, which reflected what they believed was the true essence of their leadership. Each student co-constructed three to five "essence statements," which represented their leadership overall. Some examples included: "I am leading at my best when… 'I passionately address areas of injustice and seek fairness with sensitivity and confidence' " (Emma), and " 'I can step back and see what is going on around me. I can then feel confident to make decisions' " (Bianca).

Destiny—searching for the flow of life. The final phase of the appreciative inquiry involved students examining their essence statements and designing an action plan which would amplify opportunities to enact these ideas in the future. One example from Vanessa illustrates how she planned for actions to address her statement, "I break down barriers and enable action, making others aware of who and what they can be." She planned an opportunity to lead a song quest event at her local youth group. She identified key people who could help her to do this (adults and other young people) and created a proposal for how the singing event might take place. This work included considerations for funding and writing a detailed timeline for the project. Students shared their action plans with the group and feedback was given and enacted if thought appropriate. These phases, although presented in a rather linear format above for the sake of academic scholarship, were certainly less linear in practice and often movement between each phase—both forward and backwards—was frequent as students sought to make sense of their experiences.

Students' Perspectives of the Program and Inquiry Process

The following sections highlight themes from the thematic analysis linked to the aspects of working in partnership and the use of appreciative inquiry. The students and researchers worked collaboratively to co-construct the leadership program structure and develop the content for the workshop sessions. It became clear that when students' voices were central to program design, the content and ways in which a leadership program can take place could have rather distinct features. The program was contextually situated and reflected local cultural values.

The students commented that the AYL program was different from traditional leadership programs that they had previously experienced. Although bound by some elements that could not be changed such as school timetables and student/researcher availability, other elements such as program design and session content reflected the importance of relationships. As the program was co-constructed by the students within their schools, it was contextually located and reflected elements of the local context that the students identified and connected with. For example, the Waikato River, which wound its way across the regions connecting the communities of each of the local schools, became an important element of the leadership program. This was represented through the choice of metaphor used initially to frame the program overall. The "life-giving" properties of water mirrored the underlying features of appreciative inquiry as it sought to explore "what gives life" to students' leadership. The whakataukii below from local Maori, which the students connected with, illustrated the importance of leadership within the region, and the links between the Waikato communities.

> Waikato Taniwha rau! He piko, he taniwha, he piko he taniwha!
> Waikato of a hundred chiefs! At every bend a chief, at every bend a chief! (Extracted from Parsonson, 2009).

The researchers presented the metaphor and whakatauki above as a starting point for discussion in the first session. The students sought to embody the essence of these words in further encounters. As discussions about the leadership program purpose evolved, the philosophy of the program that emerged was underpinned by the belief that everyone could contribute and practice some form of leadership. Because of this metaphor, students expressed how they felt more connected to the program. As James stated, "It feels like home, not out of a random box", and Vanessa said, "I see that water [the Waikato River] everyday. The program has joined me to it. I see it and it reminds me of how I lead and what I might do next as the water never stops flowing." Evan stated, "I knew that quote, but I never saw why it was relevant to me. Now, I see myself standing on the riverbank. And I know that I am not standing there alone". Initially shared as an opening quote to generate interest, the whakatauki became an underlying essence of the program itself, capturing the student and adult's imaginations about how leadership manifests itself in multiple ways.

Personal leadership exploration: knowing self before knowing others. The importance of personal connection was evident in the program design where students wanted to explore their own ideas about leadership and how they led, before reflecting on the leadership of others. Rather than replicating what happens in many traditional leadership programs whereby students are required to draw on external and often contextually removed

examples for leadership (for example, reflecting on the leadership of past presidents, professional sports people), and identifying the leadership traits and skills they exhibited in their roles, the strength-based and co-constructed program began with exploring the students' own leadership beliefs and understandings first. Students described this as their *leadership whakapapa.* When negotiating content for the program, one student commented how important this was, saying, "If I don't know who I am and how I lead, how can I make sense of anyone else's' leadership?" Consequent activities provided opportunities for students to learn about others they led *with*, for example Tama stated, "I mean, we have grown up together and known each other since we were at primary school. But I did not know this side of [Kate] and to now see it, is really special." Vanessa stated, "I think I can lead better because now I know about us as a team. I know our strengths and we are a collection of leaders, not just me… I also know people better and why they react the way they do." Sharing their ideas about leadership provided opportunities to develop greater understanding about their personal leadership experiences and also drew attention to the language used to describe the leadership program. It was decided by the group that the word *development* did not necessarily reflect the inclusive nature of the program where previous experiences were acknowledged as powerful contributions to future leadership. As such, the work development was replaced with the word *formation* where leadership was seen as being in a constant state of change that embraced existing strengths and experiences and aligned these with new ideals.

The program embraced leadership in its multiple forms. Content in the program was designed collaboratively to recognize leadership in its many different forms. This required adults and students to engage in a dialogic process, which provided opportunities to share and critically reflect upon their ideas about leadership. Some activities helped students to identify traditional leadership discourses that frequently excluded and marginalized students and their leadership. Discussions illuminated aspects that they had not previously considered (for example, gender stereotyping in leadership roles, rituals and rites of passage which exclude others, the influence of traditional prefect structures on students' leadership beliefs and opportunities). Other activities supported students to critique personal experiences and traditional models of leadership and provide insights into broader concepts of social justice and inclusion. In one example, Kate reflected that even though she held a position of senior leadership in her school, she was continually overlooked by the male principal as a leader and most responsibilities were given to her male counterpart. Her frustrations became evident, and in tears she questioned, "What am I? Chopped liver?"

Being able to identify and make sense of instances like this in the broader discourses of leadership was an important part of students learning about their own leadership identities and developing greater agency in their leadership overall.

The program provided students with the opportunity to highlight other contexts where they noticed or practiced leadership. This led to the validation of various activities that they were involved in as leadership, and challenged students and adults like to expand their ideas about what leadership might look like and to think about leadership existing beyond the school walls. The expansion of students' leadership understandings provided them with further insights into where their leadership could make a difference. It also gave them knowledge and confidence to critique current leadership initiatives and opportunities. Some students reflected upon their leadership opportunities within the school context and acknowledged the trivialized and contrived nature of many of these encounters. One student reflected in her interview:

> I mean, will that really make a difference? No one cares about the athletics day menu? What about the important stuff like real learning? I'd like to put in ideas for teachers about what makes teaching great? What makes learning rock, what helps students to connect with big ideas…you know…big issues…real issues which actually make a difference for us.

In one example Vanessa noticed, "I waited so long to get here to be a leader. I did not realize I had been one all along, but just did not have the label to be accepted in the right way."

Exploring leadership in a holistic and expansive way supported the students to see and articulate leadership practices in multiple forms. Viewing leadership beyond traditional school leadership roles validated existing leadership practices and actions, not previously viewed by the students as leadership. Students came to see the online social movements they were involved in (for example, initiating donation pages for social justice causes, the banners of community non-violence initiatives they represented) were also forms of leadership existing outside of the margins of traditional school leadership prefect systems. When commenting about his volunteer work in the community, Tama stated:

> I didn't realize…I just did it because it felt right. I needed to stand up and say something. Violence is not OK. Now that I've done it [been in the anti-violence campaign], I can see the difference; I'm helping breaking the cycle. I didn't think it was [leadership]. To me, this matters more. It's more important than the other school leadership stuff, like running the basketball tournament.

Extending leadership actions into the wider community setting provided scope for some students to demonstrate leadership in diverse ways not previously recognized within their schools. This did, however, provide some challenges for the students as they attempted to align the benefits of these expansive learning experiences with those that were presented to them in their school settings, which were often less visionary and narrower in focus.

Working in partnership enhanced commitment and connection to the program. As the students had played a key role in the partnership that designed the program, they were committed to seeing it be successful. They took on extra responsibilities to complete tasks and activities over the months that the program ran. They involved themselves in designing activities and reflecting upon the success of the activities with regard to impact, usefulness, and links to leadership learning overall. For example, Tyson stated after one session, "the sticks are good because they make you think. I'll get better pens for next time, and I think we need longer to talk about the words we put on each." Students began taking responsibility for the success of the activities, critically reflecting upon the value and enjoyment associated with the activities they participated in. Kate described how it felt to be part of the appreciative inquiry, sharing, "We [the students] actually meant something and were part of the learning… It felt real awesome to be part of a group where we were all important, where everything we said got heard by everyone and...yeah, like we were not shut down or mocked by you or the others. Because of this, it made me want to come and do my best."

Providing students with the opportunity to co-construct and plan their learning activities supported the development of activities that students found meaningful, useful and

engaging. Students' individual learning needs were able to be addressed and as new teaching and learning strategies were developed, students played an active role in evaluating and critically reflecting upon content and teaching approaches.

The powerful role of metaphor in uncovering complex ideas. The students conceptualized complex leadership ideals and notions in their learning. The metaphor of the river provided an enduring theme and thread that linked the session together and ensured the inclusive philosophy of leadership permeated through each activity that was created. As the program concluded, students shared their final reflections. The overall themes, which students generated and linked to this aspect of the program, are synthesized and represented through the metaphor of the river in the following sentences:

> In the Discovery phase, they noticed: "Stepping forward to look into the water takes courage. There is a need to gauge depth, understand where the water has come from, and where it is going. Looking through ripples and learning to identify meaningful shapes from shadows cast from above or below are important skills for those negotiating new waters."
> In the Dreaming phase, they noticed: "To move skillfully down the river requires coordinating skills, such as balance, paddling techniques, and navigation ability. Bringing all the required elements together can help ensure safe passage, along with efficient use of resources and energy."
> In the Design Phase, they noticed: "As the sides of the riverbank narrow, the current intensifies and the need to concentrate on what is important heightens. Understanding what it is that makes this journey pleasurable requires thoughtful reflection and analysis of many journeys over time."
> In the Destiny phase, they noticed: "Understanding the importance and value of water through asking what specific actions must be taken to harness its energy, its power, its life-giving properties so that it can always be present in the form that is most desired."

Locating their emerging and sometimes sophisticated ideas about leadership within the metaphor supported them to confidently theorize and come to see new ways of conceptualizing leadership overall.

Rupturing The Research Relationship

Over the course of the research many students sought mentoring, friendship, and support. Due to the nature of the partnership, some students found this setting a safe place to disclose their fears, frustrations, anger and sadness about their leadership experiences often disclosing personal challenges and grievances related to their school and home lives. It became clear that over the course of the research, all individuals had significant emotional and academic investment in the project. Tyson stated, "We are so much closer now. Like, I understand why she [a peer] does things the way she does, and even this helps me to work better with others, because I try to see their story in what they are saying." Another student commented, "This was a place for me to be myself, to trust and be trusted. I wouldn't say half those things out loud. You all listened and did not judge me. Even when I fell apart. Like the

time when I felt like chopped liver [overlooked for leadership opportunities] and bawled my eyes out."

Understandably, questions of how to ethically and appropriately exit the research relationship began to emerge. Initiating the research had required the careful consideration of establishing these trusting and respectful partnerships, but had not predicted the intensity of the relationships that were formed. The rupturing of the research relationship was something that had not been fully considered until reaching the end of the research. Strategies to support this process were eventually established. Some of these included: maintaining contact with students after the research and slowly reducing the contact over time and agreeing to provide academic references through face-to-face contact initially, then moving this to email communication. Possibly the most powerful factor was reshaping the partnership so that students relied more heavily on each other.

Concluding Thoughts: Leadership Formation Through Appreciative Voice-centric Pedagogies

This research has illustrated the powerful role students' voices can play in reshaping leadership learning in high schools so that it is more connected to their lives and the contexts in which they lead. More so, this research has highlighted the diverse and complex nature of student voice work and the many different shapes voices might take within student voice initiatives. Moving beyond "voice" in its literal sense to locate and situate the notion of student voice within relationships and inquiry approaches that are structured as dialogic encounters, encourages those working in the field to expand what might be considered student voice initiatives.

Furthermore, this research has illustrated how students, when working in partnership with adults, can embark on deep and meaningful inquiries that effectively surface personal and organizational strengths. Involving young people in designing strength-based leadership curriculum can provide numerous benefits and challenges, for students and adults alike. This research illustrated how appreciative inquiry can be embedded in youth-adult partnerships to enhance leadership learning and creating what Yballe and O'Connor (2000) describe as an appreciative pedagogy. This appreciative inquiry was founded on the notion of student voice and encouraged students to become aware of and focus on the positive elements of their leadership learning and practice within their current context. Sharing their voices within youth-adult partnerships allowed for diverse learning opportunities that met individual needs. By examining and identifying what worked in the past for the students as leaders in their school, families and communities, the students were able to draw parallels to other contexts and explore actions to amplify these and incorporate these elements into their current learning contexts. They were also exposed to new approaches to leadership through interacting with others and this supported them in their leadership formation overall.

However, this research highlighted that sharing "voice" is not enough. Engaging students in actions that reflect their shared ideas, desires and expressions for future learning is essential if authenticity of new ideas is to prevail. Appreciative inquiry provided new ways for validating these voices through acknowledging existing ways of *being* and *doing,* and bringing these forward in new conversations. It required new metaphoric spaces for students to reflect and imagine new ways of working as they experienced freedom from traditional leadership discourses and pressed out against perceived boundaries to explore the concept and practice of

leadership in known and unknown contexts. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) maintain that an appreciative inquiry process creates six freedoms: the freedom to be known in a relationship, to be heard, to dream in community, to choose to participate, to act with support and finally, the freedom to be positive. However, as the students identified, many of these freedoms struggle for presence in the current discourses of education.

Youth-adult partnerships played a role in uncovering these freedoms as this relational arrangement carved out spaces for students to share their voices. The engagement of appreciative inquiry held an emancipatory focus with[in] self and others ensuring that humility remained intact, yet fulfilled the requirements for deep curiosity and opportunities to reflect and share new ideas. The significance of this process was that it engaged students and adults in conversations about something that was deeply important. It was through this very process that relationships drew a sense of "wonder" at what was happening amongst the group, in the school and in the wider community. The process honoured *each individual's* creativity and capacity to reflect through emphasizing and acknowledging moments of brilliance, best practice and anticipated outcome. Finally, the process was transformational because it focused on and actualised what can and will be. As Vanessa stated, "You showed us we know stuff. It's really cool how you…really listened and got to see us at our best, like, fully being our best in our own worlds."

Appreciative inquiry highlighted the value of shifting the emphasis from "what requires fixing" to "what might be possible." Educating through the use of metaphor and positive language and "story-ing" exposed students to this language and opened spaces where they could use it with confidence, where changes could be enacted and sustained so this practice became the norm. However, it is acknowledged that when working at the level of the individual, it is difficult to change the systems that students re-enter into after development encounters. Working in partnership can provide significant opportunities for change to take place at the systemic level as adults and students work collaboratively to develop critical insights into their leadership contexts and actions/inaction, to evaluate and challenge existing structures. This experience also highlights the need for researchers to consider reshaping how they initiate research and work with students, and also how they exit the research relationship once they become "in" the research relationship.

Overall, this research illustrated when opportunities are created for students to share their voices, and collaborate with others within respectful and constructive partnerships, the very essence of their wor[l]ds may become apparent to those within the relationship. This in turn may provide further scope for engaging in strength-based learning opportunities, developing foundations upon which meaningful learning and agency can be generated.

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