The Impact of Positional Leadership on Secondary School Captains

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Abstract
This article examines the impact of positional leadership on secondary School Captains in a group of ‘like schools’ in Queensland, Australia. Through six studies, using document analysis, interviews, observations and focus groups, with School Captains, parents and teachers, a number of perceived areas of impact on the students holding these positions emerged. These impacts involve relationships, roles and responsibilities, personal well-being, learning skills and learning management, self-management and self-confidence. The study suggests that through the status and responsibilities associated with the position and the self-awareness that grows during the school captaincy experience, the young person is likely to experience deepening maturity more quickly than might otherwise be the case.
Introduction

Although leadership amongst principals and teachers in schools has been given persistent attention by researchers over the last two decades (Andrews and Crowther, 2007; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Fullan, 2002a; Grace, 1995; Hargreaves, 1994b; Harris & Townsend, 2007; Leithwood, 1992; MacBeath, Moos, & Riley, 1997; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Riley, 2004; Sergiovanni, 1991, 1999), student leadership in secondary schools has been relatively unexplored. The impact of incumbency on students who hold a recognised leadership position in the school community has been given even less attention.

It goes without saying that students should be at the centre of education systems. Traditionally, their role in school has been to learn from teachers in a classroom setting. However, educational researchers over recent years have given a higher level of attention to schools as learning organisations and social organisations where interaction between all participants influences the potential for students to learn and develop through the early parts of their lives (Bernstein, 1977; Grace, 1995). School life for students involves activities and experiences inside classrooms, within the school, and in the wider community (Nordgren, 2002). Increasingly, students are being seen as a key stakeholder group and, therefore, are being encouraged to be contributors to organisational arrangements, learning procedures and processes and strategic decision-making (Levin, 1998). Creating organisational structures where leadership is built on collaboration is fundamental to facilitating student participation.
Beyond the classroom and within the school community, students in today’s schools assume many roles: helpers, partners and leaders. The expectations of student leaders in contemporary schools make the role now much more than symbolic. Indeed, the position of School Captain is likely to become more demanding over time, as shared leadership becomes the new currency in educational institutions (Gronn, 2007, Spillane, 2007)

This article presents the outcomes of a study aimed at explaining how the position of School Captain affects students. It uses six School Captains in the final year of their secondary education in Queensland, Australia as cases. Before examining the results of the study however, a brief scan of relevant literature on student leadership from tertiary settings is undertaken to substantiate the claim that secondary school leadership is under-researched. This is followed by an explanation of the school captain’s position in secondary schools and a description of the study, including its methods, data management processes and overall findings.

**Student Leadership in Tertiary Settings**

Greater attention has been given to student leadership by researchers in the tertiary sector than in schools. Positional student leadership in tertiary settings is common in many universities, particularly in the United States. The roles performed by these students vary, depending on the organisational structures within the university and the value placed on student leadership by the academic council or board. A number of studies have indicated both positive and negative effects on students who have held positions such as Student President. The findings suggest that when leadership skills from out-of-class activities practised by positional student leaders are applied in the
classroom, real academic benefit is experienced (Christensen, 1969; Downey, Bosco, & Silver, 1984; Kuh, 1994, 1997; Ross-Power, 1980).

Some researchers (Astin, 1984; Logue, Hutchens, & Hector, 2005) claim that student leadership experiences, such as holding a university or college position of responsibility, or active membership in a group, directly influence personal development and the richness of learning experiences. It also appears there might be a number of factors, such as previous experience in leadership (Astin, 1984), training (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001), achievement orientation (Erwin & Marcus-Mendoza, 1988) and gender (Whitt, 1994), that influence the quality and benefits of leadership experiences for the students who assume a recognised role and contribute through out-of-class activities to their college or university.

Kuh and Lund (1994) believe “learning and personal development are enhanced when students are more actively engaged in educationally purposeful out-of-class activities” (p. 5). This includes student leadership activities. They suggest that students who are actively involved in student government are more likely to engage in other activities that also contribute to learning and personal development. Moffat (1989) asserts that a majority of what students learn during college is attributed to out-of-class activities. Involvement, according to Astin (1993), leads to greater than average increases in political liberalism, hedonism, artistic interests and a positive impact on occupational choice, humanitarian interests, self-esteem, self-concept, and persistence. Kuh’s and Lund’s (1994) study claims that student government participation yields benefits in the areas of practical and social competence (decision-making ability, organisational
skills such as time management, and budgeting), dealing with systems such as bureaucracies, teamwork, interpersonal relationships skills, leadership, flexibility and communication skills.

Overall, there is substantial evidence from research in tertiary education settings of a range of positive effects on those occupying leadership roles as students. Research into student leadership in secondary settings is not as robust. Although there has some interest in examining leadership development and training for secondary school students, Dempster and Lizzio (2007, p. 282) claim there is “little evidence that leadership is a concept that has been adequately described from the student’s point of view”. In short, to explore and develop a knowledge of what adolescent School Captains see as the impact of their leadership position on them is worthy of further examination.

**Positional Student Leadership in Secondary Schools**

The paucity of student leadership research in secondary schools is matched by the lack of attention paid by Australian school system authorities to defining clearly the role of School Captain. Although there is acknowledgement of student leadership in most state and territory internet Education Department websites, through such programs as Student Voice and Student Councils, no state government web site has policies specifically related to school captaincy. The absence of policy about the position is surprising given that the School Captain is a significant student leadership position common to most secondary schools in Australia. The position is also sometimes called Head Boy/Girl, or Student President. Students who hold this
position have usually taken part in a selection process and upon appointment, have accepted particular roles and responsibilities.

Many schools appoint students to the position through a formal process. These appointments are made according to a multiplicity of school-based criteria depending on the expectations held of the role. It is common for schools to expect much more of their School Captains than of other students.

Student leaders’ roles vary from school to school. These roles are usually recognised formally within the school community. The responsibilities of student leaders might include representing the school at functions and events, organising student-based activities, helping staff with co-curricular activities and assisting in the maintenance of school routines. Some of the responsibilities are similar to those undertaken by positional student leaders in tertiary settings. These involve participating and leading student government groups, committee membership, co-curricular activities and public speaking. Such activities provide an opportunity for these students to acquire and practise leadership and associated skills in real-life situations.

A Study of Secondary School Captains

The study reported here examines some of the stories told by six School Captains, in three ‘like schools’ in Brisbane, Australia. The study followed the students during the final year of their secondary schooling. It aimed to identify the perceived impact of positional leadership on them from their own point of view as well as from the
points of view of parents and significant others within the school setting. Both positive and negative impact was examined.

**Method**

The investigation used a qualitative approach based on the theoretical principles of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). These explain the significance of interaction in shaping human thought and action. In short, individuals act on the basis of the meanings they take from their social situations and circumstances. In this study, interest lay in the meanings School Captains attached to their experiences in the position, particularly their understanding of the impact of the position on them.

The investigation used case studies of six School Captains. It used the perceptions held by these students and “significant others” (teachers and parents) to formulate tentative propositions about the impact of the role on a young person’s life.

Data were collected by reviewing documents and undertaking observations, interviews, and by conducting focus group discussions. Multiple perspectives were used in the analysis and verification process. The grounded theory techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of open and axial coding were used to help derive thematic and propositional meaning from the data.

**Procedure**

The major data collection period was six to eight months into each School Captain’s term of office. However, there was an initial data collection point upon their appointment to the position. Data were sought during the first month of the school year and involved the collection of documentary information about the role and selection processes, an interview with each student and his or her parent, and a focus
group discussion with each student’s English and Mathematics teacher and Year Level Co-ordinator.

Data collection occurred at each school site over a week both at the beginning and towards the end of the study. Interviews, observations and focus group discussions were also conducted at this time. Member checking (verifying ‘scripts’ of recorded data with the data source) occurred immediately following observations and within two weeks of other data collection activity. Participants, through email contact, authenticated these ‘scripts’. Adjustments were made based on informants’ feedback.

**Discussion**

The major findings of the study show that there were six areas in which the impact of the role of school captain are evident. These were: relationships, responsibilities, personal well-being, learning skills, self-management and self-confidence. A discussion of each follows.

**Relationships**

The six School Captains felt that relationships with various groups of people were affected during the period they held the position. These included relationships with staff (including school administrative staff), other adults, peers and younger students. Female School Captains reported significant impact on close peer relationships.

a. **Staff**
Most School Captains believed that their relationships with the staff were stronger as a result of their position in the school, when compared with other students. The contributing factors identified by School Captains for this positive impact included: working co-operatively on school events; working with some staff on student-run events; representing the school at community events with some members of staff; regularly meeting with some staff members, such as the Administration; working on projects within the school; working individually with classroom teachers to catch up on missed lessons; and negotiating with staff about deadlines. These activities created the opportunity for the School Captains to deal with staff in different contexts, leading to deeper personal relationships.

At times these situations created a level of tension for the students, particularly over assessment and missed lesson time. In general, the students felt that the relationships in which they engaged contributed to their personal growth and maturity. In addition, these relationships enabled them to build skills of negotiation, persuasion, advocacy and persistence. The students believed the position helped them feel more assertive and thereby more capable of dealing with issues within the school. They also reported greater sensitivity to the perceptions of others, while their extended relationships helped them enhance their capacity to work in partnership with the staff.

Through extensive involvement with staff in school activities, each School Captain believed he or she had developed a better connection with the school. This was particularly fostered by the requirement to represent the school in the wider community. Family members confirmed this. Examples given by the students included intervening when observing inappropriate student behaviour in the
playground, commenting on school uniform presentation in public areas, encouraging participation, and contribution to school events or competitions.

b. **Adults**

Constant interaction with members of the public was common to each School Captain’s experience. The position required them to represent the school at community events, to interact with government officials and business people at school events, and mix with parents from their own school and others.

As a result, students believed they had developed the capacity to interact casually, communicate and speak informally with unknown people and small unfamiliar groups. They felt that this had helped them build confidence and deal with new situations. Two female School Captains expressed the view that these experiences helped them to gain an understanding of body language in their interactions with others.

c. **Peers**

Generally, the School Captains in the study found a change in relationships with their peers. For two of the three male Captains this was not reported as of concern. However, the females recounted their perception of a deterioration of close peer relationships. These students disclosed their exclusion from some peer group activities both at school and in other social contexts, such as not working together on class work, not reciprocating in sharing notes and assessment preparation, name calling, negative comments, and refusing to assist with some school activities where
the Captain needed student assistance. Each female Captain identified a range of situations, in the second formal interview conducted in the latter part of the study, where they had felt disappointed by the impact the role had on these close relationships.

Some of the students claimed that the deterioration in peer relationships had occurred as a result of being busy with School Captainscy activities during lunch times or after school, when they would normally have time with their friends. This was more common with the males. One male Captain aptly described this as a “lack of playground moments”. Relationships with the general Year 12 student group did not appear to be affected by holding the position of School Captain. Some students said that the position required them to make broader social contact beyond their normal friendship group, as they were required to organise student assistance or participation for some school activities. Three students felt that the position had resulted in them being invited to more social events outside school.

d. Younger Students

All students involved in the study believed that their relationships with younger students were enhanced as a result of their tenure in the position of School Captain. This they said was, in part, because of the activities, roles and responsibilities of the position, but also through informal contact in the school grounds. The activities that required interaction with younger students included orientation programs, buddy programs, lunchtime activities, breakfast clubs, year level assemblies, and leadership activities. These responsibilities involved the Captains in organising and planning activities, public speaking, resolving conflict between students, communicating about
school activities and facilitating social interaction between unknown younger students. Some identified that these responsibilities assisted them to develop listening and interpersonal skills. Interacting with younger students involved working with primary school students through induction ceremonies, primary school leadership days and open days.

e. At Home

Although student and parent comments did not include any apparent negative impact on the home environment, each parent said that holding the position of School Captain required their home life to be more organised and that they had to consider the needs of the school more. The female Captains’ parents commented that their children talked about the tensions in their peer relationships. This suggests an enhanced level of discussion between parent and female students about impact outside the family rather than within it. A further illustration of this phenomenon became evident when family members indicated that they constantly reinforced the importance of the School Captain as a role model at school and in the wider community. This was a point of discussion with both older and younger siblings. When siblings were enrolled at the same school, each parent said that they had noticed a strong sense of pride from the younger child.

Responsibilities

The second impact area that emerged from the analysis and interpretation of the data was responsibilities. Documents outlining the position descriptions, selection criteria, and processes of appointment were the main sources of data used in defining the responsibilities related to the role of School Captain. Each school document provided
the framework for the kinds of experiences position holders could expect. A summary or the roles and responsibilities distilled from the six schools is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1.

Summary of the Roles and Responsibilities from all Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Role and Responsibilities for School Captains</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Item</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Roles</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Responsibilities</strong></td>
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The selected documents succinctly told the story of who a School Captain was at these schools, what their expected behaviours were to be, and how they were expected to interact with others in and outside the school community.

**Personal Well-being**

The third impact area that the data analysis exposed was *personal well-being*. This included physical, financial and social aspects of the student’s life.

**a. Physical Impact**

The majority of School Captains, and their parents, indicated that the students had experienced illness during the year. Each attributed this, in part, to the demands of extra activity in a year with additional responsibilities. Key comments included terms such as anxiety and imbalance, being run down, and stressed. One parent said that she had already put her son on vitamins, as she could see the signs of lethargy. Time away from school to recover from illness was longer than expected in most cases and
this added to the lost lesson time caused by the extra responsibilities of School Captaincy. Students reported more pressure on meeting assessment deadlines. Each focus group discussion and most classroom teachers in post-student observation discussions, commented on time lost (as a result of official duties) as a point of tension between the School Captain and members of staff.

b. Financial Impact

All except one School Captain claimed that they had made the decision either to reduce their hours of paid employment or to withdraw from part-time employment during their term of office. Some of the Captains made that choice after a couple of months when they believed that the position commitments might have an effect on their academic results. This decreased the financial freedom felt by the students and increased financial dependence on parents.

c. Social Impact

Some of the School Captains said they decided to reduce their involvement in outside community activities as a result of the increased number of school responsibilities. Each of the students talked about reduced contact with friends. Students, at times, made the decision not to participate in outside school social activities with peers because of ever-present study commitments or the perception that the event might produce negative reactions in the wider community. Participation in some family activities was reduced because of school and study. Parents acknowledged that the position required reprioritising school, family and social life during the term of appointment. Captains often needed time at home for study to compensate for the impact of their duties on their academic achievement.
Learning Skills and Management

The fourth impact area identified during the study was *learning skills and management*. School Captains divulged a number of effects of their occupancy of the position on their learning skills, specifically communication within groups, verifying information, listening, and problem solving. In the management of learning they reported effects on their planning, organising, time management, priority and goal setting. These were not always enunciated by students in the interviews, but they were the subject of comment following lesson observations. Class teachers confirmed many of these effects during the post-observation member checking process. Each is now discussed.

a. **Learning Skills**

All students believed that their experience as School Captain had helped improve their oral presentations, particularly in those for assessment. Other learning skills that had developed included written communication, working in groups, verifying information, clarifying with teachers and peers, checking from source materials, problem solving, working under pressure and listening. The most common skills students felt they had developed included working under pressure, listening, verifying, and problem solving.

With the exception of oral presentations, most students did not talk about an application or transference of these skills to their classroom learning environment. Only through probing did disclosure about how this had contributed to the management of their learning emerge. The interviews with classroom teachers and
post-observation discussions, revealed that some teachers believed that there were noticeable changes in student skill development in these skill areas.

b. Learning Management

Students perceived that their learning management had changed while they were School Captains. Learning management skills identified included:

- planning events and activities and assessment schedules;
- organising materials and resources for activities;
- balancing competing demands such as study time with outside school commitments;
- managing time and deadlines to cope with school responsibilities and classroom learning;
- putting in place systems and techniques to catch up on missed lessons and class work;
- assisting other groups to achieve goals;
- coaching peers in the classroom;
- setting project goals and managing resources required to achieve an outcome; and
- setting academic goals and working out ways to achieve these.

The most common concerns raised about learning management were planning, organising, and balancing priorities between school and individual learning responsibilities. Students said these were essential components of their strategies to deal with the stress of the additional captaincy responsibilities.
Self-Management

The fifth area of impact identified by School Captains was self-management. This included developing a better understanding of self and others and the capacity to prioritise competing demands.

a. Understanding Self and Others

School Captains at one of the study schools which had a program emphasis on student leadership said that the experience enabled them to develop a more critical understanding of themselves, especially in relation to their own strengths and weaknesses. This occurred through project management, application of leadership knowledge, interaction with a range of people in a variety of situations, and personal reflection. It was claimed that a strong self-concept developed through these experiences. Identification of others’ strengths to achieve tasks and the capacity to make better choices in decision-making processes were identified by some of the School Captains as adding to their self understanding.

All female School Captains said that they had become more aware of other students’ negative behaviours – particularly with their peers. Their personal skills and coping strategies to deal with interpersonal conflict developed during the leadership experience. A higher level of sensitivity to issues faced by staff was evident with all School Captains, especially concerning the often tense issues of missing classes, work in class and assessment. With their deeper understanding of others, the students felt that they could make better decisions when undertaking their school duties and when negotiating class activities with their teachers.
b. Prioritising Competing Demands

Each School Captain indicated that the position required them to be more organised and better planned than they had found necessary in previous years. Both males and females believed that this was necessary in order to cope with the additional responsibilities and stress points during the year. Organisational strategies included keeping a diary, planning ahead, keeping an assessment schedule, having regular meetings with the administrative staff to plan events and maintaining study buddies.

Some parents commented that their children had become better planned in their personal lives outside school. This suggests that captains may have learned and applied an holistic approach to organising key activities in their lives – school, family and community. Some students also reported that the process of negotiating flexibility in participation and assessment with their teachers assisted them in managing the competing demands of the position.

Self-Confidence

Self-confidence was the final area that the data showed was affected by school captaincy. Students identified public speaking, improvising when confronted with unexpected situations, dealing with unknown people, and developing interpersonal skills as important indicators of enhanced self-confidence. Findings related to each of these are now discussed.

a. Public Speaking

The position of School Captain requires students to be involved in public speaking in the school and in the wider community. Activities where this occurred included
assemblies and school events such as opening new buildings, ANZAC Day, Open Day, first term welcome to parents and the introduction of guest speakers. Each of these public events required students to communicate with large groups of people, both known and unknown.

As a result of these experiences, all students felt more confident and that they had improved in their capacity to perform well in oral presentations in the classroom setting. Students described this in various ways, such as, “(I) could speak now with only notes compared to a full page of words”, “speaking to a class group is not as scary as a hall full of people” and “giving speeches is what we do all the time – it’s much easier now”. All School Captains commented that the regular practice of speaking and conducting assemblies had been a major contributing factor to their developing confidence.

b. Improvisation – Unpredictable Situations

Most School Captains spoke about dealing with unexpected situations as a part of their role. This happened with assembly changes or malfunctions, giving an unanticipated vote of thanks, welcoming outside people, or having to perform a duty suddenly at a school event. These unknown, unpredictable situations created a high level of anxiety and required the students to improvise and, at times, problem solve rapidly. Students did not say that having to cope with these events was easier, but that they became used to dealing with unpredictable situations. This they said, helped them to feel more confident in public situations.
Problem solving and improvising were also seen as a part of managing and organising projects in the school community. When people did not follow through with their responsibilities or an unpredicted problem arose, the School Captains were required to work out other ways to achieve task outcomes. As a result, the students felt more confident in their ability to achieve goals.

c. Interpersonal Skills

Meeting new people and dealing with adults in school and community contexts was identified as a contributor to building better communication skills, developing confidence and maturity, according to most of the Captains. Being able to handle a conversation with unfamiliar people was a common role for each of them. At times, when the people were perceived as “important community leaders”, Captains felt that a higher level of confidence was called into play. Female School Captains indicated that dealing with the teaching and administrative staff in school activities and events fostered self-belief and confidence in their abilities.

Having described some of the specific findings of the study, the task of crystallising them as major messages from the research remains. This is now done in the final part of the article which presents conclusions about the impact of School Captaincy in two interconnected themes: role and status and self-awareness.

Role and Status and Self-awareness

By grouping common elements of the specific areas of impact explained above, two overarching themes emerged. These were the role and status that accompanies the
position and the *self-awareness* that develops by fulfilling the responsibilities of the office.

Giddens (2001) argues that status is the difference between two social groups; it is attributed by others and is reflected in symbolic ways. In the case of School Captains, it is reflected in the way they stand out from other students in formal assemblies where their profiles are high, abroad in the school community where they meet and interact with civic dignitaries, and in the time they spend with members of staff, the school Principal and members of the administrative team in planning and decision-making activities. The role played by School Captains is recognised and valued by students, teachers, parents and the local school community thus adding to its status. This high regard has ramifications for each Captain’s ready relationship with staff, peers, younger students, and members of the public.

The second key impact theme, *self-awareness*, captures an amalgam of effects associated with the position, namely the enhancement of significant personal capacities able to be applied in school and at home.

**Conclusion**

To conclude the article, a model capturing the anticipated impact of school captaincy on students is presented and explained (see Figure 1). This is done to provide a framework for discussing with young people what they might expect when they are appointed to these positions. An added purpose of Figure 1 is to provide a depiction of the study’s analytical outcomes and their interplay in the production of a central theoretical proposition – that the position of School Captain is likely to lead to a deepening sense of maturity.
Figure 1 A model of the possible impact of positional leadership on secondary School Captains’
Central to Figure 1 is the idea of ‘deepening maturation’ to which the role and status of School Captains and their developing self-awareness contribute. These twin concepts in turn reflect growing skills in learning and learning management, general self-management, enhanced self-confidence, expanding relationships, coping with demanding responsibilities and handling personal well-being concerns.

The model presented in Figure 1 is consistent the work of Tilton-Weaver, Vitunski and Galambos (2001), who suggest that maturity is a multifaceted concept that involves physical, social, psychological, emotional, and behavioural elements. They claim that adolescents themselves, commonly acknowledge that maturity comes from responsibility, power and status, balance and privileges, and that maturity is demonstrated through “competence at individual, interpersonal and societal levels” (p. 154). The model illustrates the claim that the status and self-awareness that come with the position of School Captain impact on adolescent lives to deepen their maturity.

Overall, the study suggests that when a student is appointed to a leadership position such as School Captain, he or she can expect to experience a change in his or her relationships with others as well as an impact on personal well-being. In fulfilling the expectations of the position, School Captains are likely to gain a better understanding of themselves, a higher level of confidence, and an increased capacity to manage and organise their own lives. They are also likely to develop processes and skills useful in their learning. These real-life experiences as School Captains, more likely than not, will result in a deepening sense of their own maturity. The thrust of the findings of this study should prove helpful to teachers acting as mentors for School Captains, for
parents whose children are appointed to these positions but more importantly, for the students themselves who are selected to carry out this important leadership role.
REFERENCES

Andrews D. & Crowther, F.


Gronn (2007)


Spillane (2007)


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1. 'Like schools groupings used by Education Queensland are determined on the basis of the schools' Index of Relative Socio-economic disadvantage, their proportion of students of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background and the size of the school, influenced by complexity.'
NOT INCLUDED:

Literature suggests that empowering students within democratic learning structures (as participants and student leaders) will help schools to cope with the rapid pace of change (Louis, 2003; Mitra, 2005; Smyth, 2007; Thomson, 2007; Wallin, 2003). Cook-Sather (2007) believes that empowerment comes principally as Principals and teachers design school structures, curricula and pedagogical approaches that are more relevant, accessible, more engaging and less exclusionary. Therefore, student involvement in managing aspects of their learning and pedagogy in the classrooms, and through participating in broader school structures, particularly in acknowledged roles and positions, will enable them to be true partners in their learning and the education process.


