

**Redefining Leadership:
Exploring the Experiences of Black Youth
in Leadership Development Programs**

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ABSTRACT

Student leadership development is typically regarded as the planning of school activities, such as dances and school rallies. However, researchers argue that leadership development can foster empowerment within students, while encouraging them to be agents of social change (Fertman and van Linden, 1999, Goldman, 1998, Bisland, 2004). This study explored the experiences of Black young adults who participated in leadership development programs during their high school careers. Leadership is defined in this study from the perspective of Black young adults. Findings from this exploratory study indicate that Black students desire leadership curricula that reflect their culture and struggles as Black youth in America. Findings also suggest that Black students felt inclined to create social change, as a result of their leadership training, by positively influencing their peers and improving their schools and communities.

Introduction

Developing agency amongst Black youth can emerge in several ways. While there are a number of programs and ideologies that can help Black youth develop agency, this study examines leadership development programs and its influence on Black youth. While some scholars argue that it is possible to incorporate leadership curriculum into core academic courses (Bisland, 2000, Karnes and Stephens, 1999), others believe that a separate curriculum, or program is necessary (Roets, 1988, Wolff 2002). Although learning leadership development is essential at all age levels, it is critical that high school students have the opportunity to discover their leadership potential, and develop and use it while they are in school. Ultimately, learning and practicing leadership while in high school can encourage and enable youth to affect change as students and throughout their adulthood.

Considering the inadequate education that many Black youth receive in this nation, this article examines how existing leadership development programs and curricula have counteracted many of the inadequacies that so many Black youth experience. This study addresses youth leadership from a Black perspective, how leadership development has served as a vehicle for the young adults in this study to produce positive change, and how leadership development should be made relevant to the issues Black students encounter.

All students encounter a wide range of problems in a variety of school settings. Young people are suffering from a crisis in confidence; they need security to help them deal with societal pressures and global events, a security that comes from leaders who display strong character, integrity, morality, competence, courage, and vision (Wolff, 2002). Despite the issues that all youth may be encountering today, scholars have asserted that Black children are especially at risk because structural factors exist in

American society that place limits on the opportunities for Black youth (Phinney and Rotheram, 1987). The structural issues that Black youth encounter, institutional racism, for example, are embedded in the American educational system and in impoverished communities, so that some may project that oppression and self-hatred (Phinney and Rotheram, 1987).

What is Leadership Development? Can it be a Vehicle for Change?

Given the educational issues facing Black students, what then is leadership education and how have students used it to create positive change within their schools and communities. In leadership development, young people acquire leadership information and attitudes, and develop an array of interpersonal skills, such as communication, and decision-making (Fertman and van Linden, 1999).

Fertman and van Linden (1999) further explain that youth leadership includes both transactional and transformational leadership. They define transactional leadership as skills and tasks that are usually associated with leadership, such as speaking in public, delegating authority, leading meetings, and making decisions; “In other words, what leaders do”(p. 12). Transformational leadership on the other hand, focuses on characteristic of what it means to be a leader. Focusing on both transactional and transformational leadership is the most effective way to support and guide adolescent leadership development (Fertman & van Linden, 1999).

Leadership development is essential to provide youth with the skills and concepts necessary to make positive changes across peer groups, school, community, religious affiliations, states, and nations (Karnes & Stephens, 1999). Leadership training across curriculum can help students deal with and create solutions to the adversities encountered from day to day (Karnes & Stephens, 1999).

Implementing Leadership in High Schools

Most educators and scholars would agree that having students learn leadership development skills is important for high school youth (Bisland, 2004, Close and Lechman, 1997, Fertman and van Linden, 1999, Goldman, 1998, Montemayor and Supik, 1995, Wolff, 2002). Despite the problems that young people face today, “leadership remains an often-neglected, abstract concept, with educators themselves receiving little training in leadership skills and concepts” (Karnes and Meriweather, 1988, p.8). Leadership experiences can help motivate young people and assist them in learning (Montemayor & Supik, 1995). However, while leadership is a skill that can be taught, it also is an art that must be practiced (Roets, 1988). Because leadership needs to be practiced and refined, “youth need to have opportunities available within their schools, communities, or religious affiliations in which to participate actively and assume leadership roles and responsibilities” (Roets, p. 39). Leadership training needs to be available to all students in school, the most accessible environment (Karnes & Stephens, 1999).

Student Empowerment and Agency through Leadership Development

There must be ways for youth to become personally empowered so that they can feel inclined to create positive change. Freire (1970) explains that the “banking concept” of education perpetuates the idea that the teacher knows everything and the student knows nothing; the teacher teaches and the students are taught” (p. 57). Similarly, Goldman (1998) explains that students are not normally ever included in the process of their own education; students are essentially the customers of education, but they are rarely considered in the decision-making. Close and Lechman (1997) discuss that as a society we shut young people out, especially urban youth, yet want them to be well adjusted and function in a world that does not treat them fairly. Goldman (1998) asserts that having students trained in leadership development is the key to student empowerment. Similarly, Fertman and van Linden (1999) believe that “the real value of

leadership development lies in the fact that it is action oriented; it gives adolescents a voice in decision making processes that affect their lives” (p. 10).

Methods—Participants

Ten young adults of African descent were recruited for this study. Participants involved experienced leadership development education at some point during their high school careers. Participants attended high school in Oakland, San Francisco, or Los Angeles, California. Five of the participants were men and seven participants came from working class backgrounds; the remaining participants would define their upbringing as working to lower middle class backgrounds. The average age of the participants was 18.5 to 19 years of age.

Three coordinators of leadership programs throughout the Bay Area recruited eight participants. Other participants who had already agreed to be a part of the study referred two participants. During recruitment, the intention was to draw Black students from diverse backgrounds that experienced leadership development in high school. Participants were not required to have entered a higher education program or have a particular career. Participants were involved in three different types of leadership programs and organizations outside of their schools, while two participants attended high schools that created specific leadership programs that were integrated into the structure of the school, through courses or after school programs.

Table 1 Participant Information

Name	Program	Yrs Involved	Age
Frank	Public Magnet School State Wide Program	6 years	20
Will	State-Wide Program	2 years	19
Robert	Public Charter School	4 years	21
Aisha	After School Program	4 years	18
Brandon	State-Wide Program	3 years	18
Nate	Youth Organizing Program	4 years	18
Jontae	After School Program	4 years	18
Debra	State-Wide Program	4 years	26
Winter	State-Wide Program	4 years	19
Yasmine	Youth Organizing Program	4 years	20

Procedures

Each participant went through a semi-structured interview that lasted between one and two hours. The first portion of the interview consisted of questions about the participants' childhood, their relationship with their families, and their home communities. During the second portion of the interview, participants were asked to describe their high school environment, their administrators, teachers, and students at their school. During the third portion of the interview, participants were asked to recount their experiences with leadership while in high school. The fourth portion of the interview consisted of questions regarding the specific learning that took place from the leadership curriculum they learned. Finally, during the last portion of the interview, participants were asked to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their programs, and how they saw leadership development influencing Black youth in the future. Interviews were then transcribed and coded for themes.

Results

All interviews were transcribed and coded for the most common themes brought up by the participants. As the researcher I was looking for similarities in what participants learned from their program. I was also looking for how the participants viewed the strengths and weaknesses of their programs and its potential influence on Black youth. During the interviews, several themes emerged. However, for this particular article, I discuss two of the themes. The first theme I address is how participants expressed the need to have culturally relevant leadership curriculum that pertained to the struggles of Black youth. The second theme I address is how participants felt encouraged to use what they learned to create social change by helping others, by improving their schools and communities while they were still in high school and upon their graduation.

A Need for Culturally Relevant Leadership

The first theme that surfaced during my interviews was the need to make common mainstream leadership development ideology and materials more relevant to Black students. Participants involved in the State-Wide program agreed that because white students had a higher population within the organization, the way in which the curriculum was presented did not resonate in the lives of Black students. One participant reflects on his experiences in his program's summer leadership program:

I would say like at least 70% to 80 % of the students were white; there were very few blacks there. I had a problem with it because I didn't see a struggle or a demand for a sense of leadership or for social change. —*Will*

The four participants involved in the State-Wide program mentioned that they felt that their program failed to connect their curriculum to larger issues that they were dealing with as Black students. Frank, another participant of the program, mentioned that although his program had an element about race and class issues, dialogue about issues of race, class, and gender was still not as encouraged as other elements of the program:

I guess it [curriculum dealing with race and class] was lacking in comparison to everything else that was taught. Not enough to deal with the issues that Black students deal with today. —*Frank*

Will found it difficult to become fully engaged in the program, because he was uncomfortable being one of the few Black students involved. Similarly, Winter explains her thoughts on the program's attempt to connect leadership to issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation:

Well, we need to get some new material. It is good to see something that says that racism is still going on and to see that we are still having the same problems. When you get the opportunity to discuss race issues, it's good, but it's not good when you are the only Black person in the group. You feel like the Black spokesperson in the group.

Those participants who were primarily involved with leadership organizations that were predominately white, felt that some of what they learned was beneficial to their lives, and for that reason they encouraged other Black students to participate. However, they would still like to see their organization take leadership a step further by connecting it to major societal issues such as, racism and issues of class privilege. Debra states:

If they are going to have curriculum on race relations ... in the summer, it's too rushed and too superficial. Bring issues that are present today. It needs to be discussed but in real time. They tried to sugar coat things and didn't want to hurt peoples' feelings create a safe environment, but I think there are a lot of issues that needed to be addressed. It's not as effective as it could be.

Debra, the eldest of my participants, was shocked to know that the program's diversity curriculum had not changed since she was in high school. In fact, the programs' failure to connect with the struggles she was having as a Black leader is one of the reasons she discontinued her involvement in the program.

I was getting introduced to a lot more things in my community that I did not like in terms of race relations, and other disparities in high school and in college. I think that's one of the factors [organization's failure to connect with struggles as a Black leader] I didn't push my self to stay involved in the program.

Students from the State-Wide program valued the tools and skills of leadership. Nevertheless, they understood that the demand for leadership was different in Black communities and schools, but felt as though the organization did not provide as much support as they could have.

You really see the difference. The leadership at my school versus somewhere like Troy High School or Beverly Hills High School. For them it was like we have to do this pep rally, like okay, my student government, we just planned a string of student protests against the police. It was like we were trying to make a difference and at those other schools they weren't really trying to make a difference it's really just keeping everybody satisfied.

On the other hand, participants who were involved in the After School program had a different experience. This program discussed leadership from a Black perspective. This program made a conscious effort to teach the Black students about Black history and how institutional racism has permeated the educational system and their lives as students attending urban schools. Jontae, from the After School program states:

The goal is to give us information that we can apply in our everyday lives. To make us more aware of our surroundings and what's going on and why things are the way they are. I was able to decide what I wanted to do to counter certain things in society. Once you have been aware of things...you can't change the situation if you don't know there's a problem.

Participants from the After School program explained how their program was culturally relevant. Both participants expressed how the program was able to address the concerns and issues they had as Black youth.

A lot of people in there lived in group homes, or had parents who were on drugs, or they were on their own or homeless. And [“After School Program”] was the one place they could come and someone would really love them from their heart. After learning about oppression, I was able to see it everyday in my neighborhood and getting your eyes open to that, it really motivates you not to fall into it [ills of the community].
—Aisha

The two participants from the After School program were very adamant about having leadership programs be made relevant to the needs and struggles that Black students are encountering in their schools and communities. Jontae explains:

You have to make things relevant. The way leadership is now, as far as the application and what it means to Black students, is so generalized. Your issue at your school in the burbs somewhere might be that there’s litter on the ground. My issue is that everyone at my school wants to be on the block. Two different issues. A litter campaign is not going to help my school.

When asked about black youth and leadership development, participants agreed that leadership training is definitely beneficial because of the various communication, organizing and personal development tools they learned. Nonetheless, participants expressed that leadership be discussed in the context of real issues that Black youth are dealing with in their schools and communities.

Creating Social Change: Using Leadership to Help Others

The second theme I will discuss is how leadership development served as an opportunity for the participants to use their leadership to create positive social change. Three of the participants were somewhat motivated prior to their involvement with a leadership program, but their program furthered their willingness to create change. The rest of the participants began seeing themselves as change agents after being introduced to their program. Nate, from the Youth Organizing program, states:

It gave me the drive to start getting involved more and get change in my community. I always wanted to make change, but I never had a backbone, or something to be there with me. It gave me that family feeling. I found people who were thinking about the same things I was thinking. It gave me the support I needed to help with the struggles to help out my community. It made my voice bigger.

All participants made a conscious effort to create positive change while they were in high school. Frank, from the Leadership Magnet and the State-Wide program, explained that “As an African American student I feel that we benefited from it, because we were able to go back to our cities and help others.” Frank had a strong desire to help his community. When asked to describe his community, Frank stated:

Things happen that you wouldn’t expect. Car chases ending in front of your house. Worrying about what color you’re wearing when coming home from school. You know fights happening in front of your house.

Aisha shared with me how the program inspired her to create change in her community. “The program made me want to get involved in my community and it definitely made opportunities that were available to me to other people”. In other words, Aisha explained that because she was learning so much through her program, people in her community automatically learned from her, because she was so eager to share. She also described her experiences and battles with her school administration. She wanted to break away from the school’s plans of leadership, which required planning dances and schools rallies:

I had a lot of battles, it's [leadership] so much more. Leadership is deep. I feel like leaders take care to see that their peers are succeeding. We made sure seniors knew about graduation requirements and we supported people applying to college. I felt empowered when I saw change that I created myself. It was a great feeling.

Nate from the Youth Organizing program reflects on his experiences being active in his high school after becoming involved in the program:

We finally got the youth center. So many students have benefited from it. It makes me proud when I walk through the youth center and I see my fellow peers benefiting from the hard work that I have been through. All of the talking was so worth it.

Yasmine, who was also involved in the "Youth Organizing" program, was able to recognize that the work she was doing was for the enrichment of her peers at school. She states, "When I'm going to meet with the city, I wasn't going there for my self but for the other 800 students [at my school]". Other participants reflected on the influence their program had in their lives. These participants have committed to continue creating change in their college lives and throughout their careers. Will, who now attends a predominately white institution states, "One thing I can do is help more Black people get here [to college]". Robert, who attended the Leadership Charter, made a commitment to help anyone he can. He states, "I want to help people in any way I can. My mission is to find a way to make an impact on each and every person that I meet". Winter, who was involved in the State-Wide program, stated that once she became more involved with the program, she wanted to make sure that Black students became involved, because there were so few already. She states, "If I don't stay or try to get other black students in this organization it's never going to get better. I know how to make the curriculum relate."

Brandon and Debra from the State-Wide program had a strong desire to take the skills and tools they learned in the program and make it relevant to Black youth and to help the Black community at large.

I feel I am needed back in my community and if I don't do it then no one else will and I have to be the one to start it. It's at least that one feeling that we got here on the shoulders of somebody else and how is anybody else going to cross like we did unless we become the shoulders for them too.
—*Brandon*

I just wanted to be more involved with helping my people. I am able to get along with all types of people I have always had to do that, I am able to relate to a diverse group, but I know that I have to help African American people first.
—*Debra*

Participants gained similar and differing skills and ideals from their respective programs. Participants involved in the State-Wide program found facilitation, communication, visioning, and strategizing skills to be valuable for them when creating change. The two participants involved in the Youth Organizing program appreciated the techniques they learned in mobilizing and organizing small and large groups of people for a cause. Participants from the After School program valued the opportunity they had to learn about theories of leadership, but in the context of the real life struggles they encountered daily as Black youth living in an urban community.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Black young adults who participated in leadership development programs while in high school. While there are many different programs that seek to help Black youth develop agency, such as political groups, ethnic specific programs, or community service enrichment programs, dialogue is lacking on the impact of leadership development education for Black high school youth. During my analysis of the literature, I discovered that a large portion of

leadership curriculum has been written from the perspective of people in positions of power. The skills that are commonly associated with leadership have been skills that have allowed people to move up the societal ladder and capitalize on opportunities for themselves. Despite each programs' different methods of teaching leadership development, they all wanted youth to use leadership for positive change through self-improvement and using leadership as a service to other people.

The After School and Youth Organizing program, provided students with a solid understanding of how institutional racism plays out in their lives. These organizations helped students understand how the residue of racism has permeated urban schools and communities. Once the students were aware of their surroundings, these organizations set up curricula, activities, and brought in speakers to then empower students to believe that as an individual and as a collective body, they could be agents of social change within their schools and communities. As the findings suggest, making leadership culturally relevant is important to the participants in this study. Having culturally relevant leadership curriculum can allow Black students to identify the root causes of the problems plaguing their schools and communities, and then recognize the areas in need of change.

All participants were able to positively influence their schools in some way while they were in high school. Participants used the skills they learned and have made a commitment to their communities by helping fellow Black youth realize their potential for making change. Encouraging Black students to create positive social change is critical. Although many of my participants did many wonderful things on their campuses while in high school, I found it interesting that participants stated how important it was for them to go back into their communities after graduating from high school to help other Black people.

Providing Black youth with the opportunity to discover and practice their leadership can have a long lasting affect on the Black community. It will allow youth to understand the demand for leadership in the Black community. The Black community will be greatly influenced if Black youth can understand the demand for leadership within the Black community and in larger society at an early age. If leadership is learned and practiced while in high school, students will be equipped with particular tools and skills of leadership that will make it easier for them to organize around larger issues facing the Black community in their adulthood.

If students have the opportunity to develop their leadership potential, they can become engaged in their own education and use their skills and talents to make their experiences more worthwhile. And, for Black high school students, who live in inadequate housing, who continually see negative images of themselves, and who may have internalized stereotypes and racism, leadership development is essential. By accessing their voice and using tools of leadership to create positive change within their school environment, Black students can inspire and motivate each other to make a difference, socially, academically, and politically in their schools and communities.

This research study has a small sample size and should be used as an exploratory study. Directors and coordinators of various leadership programs recruited the participants. The reasons underlying the directors/coordinators selection of participants may have resulted in a biased sample thereby skewing my findings. Despite my effort to recruit a diverse set of participants, many of the directors and coordinators recruited students that were in college, which may have also influenced my findings.

Educators must understand that leadership development should be viewed with the same importance as all other core academic subjects in secondary education. Leadership development is something that all educators should desire for all of their students. Although leadership skills may be universal for all students, leadership must be delivered to students in ways that connect with their needs. Therefore, leadership programs with involvement from Black students need to ensure that they are delivering curriculum in ways that are relevant to the needs and struggles of Black youth. The reality is that Black youth are in need of outlets and a variety of programs including, but not limited to leadership development, in order to cope with educational and societal ills. These programs should not only be inspirational and motivational, but they also need to provide skills and frameworks to help youth mobilize for change in their schools and communities.

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