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Status and Student Leadership IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

The fact that 96 per cent of the students in one school were considered by their fellows to possess leadership characteristics raises far-reaching implications concerning leadership education in the secondary schools.

IN RECENT YEARS, many secondary schools have introduced programs to develop student leadership. The wide variety of these programs seems to indicate not only a difference in approach but also a serious lack of agreement on the meaning of "student leadership." It was this lack of agreement that interested our committee.

The committee found in current literature three major approaches to the development of student leadership. Each of these seems to be based on somewhat different conceptions of leadership.

• *Developing and improving status leadership.* In this approach, students who hold offices in school-sponsored organizations receive separate, intensive instruction either during or after school hours. The instruction consists of lectures and/or varying amounts of experience in parliamentary procedure, public speaking, the responsibilities of officers, and the like. Several of those who use this approach cite "smoother-running organizations" as evidence for the success of the program.

This approach to the development of student leadership seems to assume that "leadership" is exercised only by the officially-elected officers of a group, and that leadership consists of selling ideas to other people and enlisting their support. It ignores the evidence from research that leadership is a proper function of every member of the group and that leadership is any contribution to group-established goals.

• *Developing and improving a leadership elite.* Under this approach, students with high intelligence, academic success and the social graces are selected and trained for leadership roles. In one school, these students are enrolled in a special course in which a problems approach is used to examine the techniques necessary to successful leadership. In addition to

This article is based upon the report of a study conducted at the Laboratory School of the University of Florida by six students in the College of Education's course in "Educational Leadership." Maurice Ahrens, R. L. Johns and Kimball Wiles made up the faculty staff for this course. This condensation of the report was prepared by Patrick J. Bratton.

the study of parliamentary techniques, some schools include a study of human relations and group psychology in their leadership programs. Indications are that this study is slanted toward more efficient manipulation of groups by these "qualified" leaders.

This approach again assumes that leadership is something that is exercised by a qualified elite over its less qualified brethren. It seems also to assume that people can be trained for leadership outside of the group in which leadership is to be exercised. Research indicates: first, that effective leaders have an intelligence level only slightly above the average of the group; second, that academic success in school does not correlate with leadership ability in out-of-school situations; and third, that education for leadership best takes place in groups of peers.

• *Developing group leadership techniques in a group situation.* Here, all students are considered capable of exerting leadership at some time. In this approach, leadership is seen as functions to be performed rather than as inherent qualities or group manipulation. Leadership training is inseparable from the development of group participation in problem solving. This approach does not segregate individuals or utilize separate leadership courses to develop student leadership. It rests instead upon the use of group problem solving, role playing, self and group evaluation, and cooperative effort in core and other classes of the regular school program. Learning of group leadership skills comes incidentally in a situation which makes them meaningful.

Our committee found the first two approaches to student leadership to be at once the most prevalent and the least defensible in the light of current research in leadership. If the purpose of any approach to student leadership is not merely a better functioning school activities program, but the preparation of all students to exercise leadership in a democracy, then it would seem that the third approach to group leadership is the most consistent with our purposes and with the findings of research.

A Study of Leadership

Because of the constant emphasis on school activities and student-elected officers in the literature on developing student leadership, our committee decided to study the relationship of leadership and status in a high school student body. Research on leadership seemed to us to have some implications for leadership in a group of high school students. We incorporated some of these implications into our study in the form of questions to be answered:

1. Do student officers have a monopoly on the qualities and techniques of leadership in their schools?
2. Are student officers considered as "most popular" by their classmates?
3. Are students aware of different qualifications for different jobs when they select fellow-students for leadership responsibilities?
4. Do student officers have significantly more close friends than non-officers?

Robert B. Myers, in an unpublished dissertation at the University of Florida,[1] set forth eleven characteristics

[1]Robert B. Myers, "The Development and Implications of a Conception of Leadership for Leadership Education." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, College of Education, University of Florida, 1954. 250 p.

which research has found to correlate with leadership: originality, ambition, persistence, emotional stability, judgment, popularity, and communication skills; insight, initiative, cooperation, and knowledge. Myers emphasizes that these skills and characteristics may not be necessary to leadership in all situations, but that different situations require different characteristics to different degrees.

The committee constructed a questionnaire on the basis of nine of these characteristics in action in various situations. "Ambition" and "emotional stability" were omitted, since it was felt that these personal character traits did not lend themselves to the peer-questionnaire technique. We added two situations to test "friendship."

The following are the seven questions included in the questionnaire. In parentheses following each question are the characteristics and skills which the committee felt a student named for each response could be expected to have in some degree.

1. Assume that you have been confined to the hospital with a broken leg. What two students from your grade would come to see you most frequently? (Close friendship.)

2. A T-V station is planning a panel discussion entitled, "Youth Discusses Teen-Age Problems." Students from all over the state are to participate as members of the panel. Which member of your grade would you nominate to represent students from the Gainesville area? (Knowledge of the problem, communication skills, initiative, originality, cooperativeness, representation of group norms.)

3. In a coming yearbook there will be a selection of the most popular boy and most popular girl in your grade. What two students would you nominate? (Popularity.)

4. You have been invited to a party. What three members of your grade would you especially like to see there? (Friendship in a social situation.)

5. Your grade wants to take a bus trip to New Orleans. The manager of the bus company insists that he talk with three members of your grade so that he can be assured that everyone will be orderly on the trip. What three students do you think can best represent your grade for this purpose? (Communication skills, knowledge, judgment, insight, originality, representation of group norms, acceptability to adults.)

6. The football team's equipment was lost in a fire. A student committee is to be selected to take up a collection in the community to replace this equipment in time for next week's game. Whom would you nominate as chairman of this committee? (Originality, judgment, insight, initiative, persistence, cooperation, communication skills, knowledge.)

7. Suppose that both core sections in your grade are going to cooperate in a six-week study. What three people would you like to have on a committee with you to plan this unit? (Originality, judgment, initiative, cooperation, communication skills, knowledge.)

After the questionnaire was administered, each class was asked to express its opinions as to the qualifications involved in each question. For the most part, the students' interpretations of the questions were in agreement with those of the committee. In Question 3, however, many students at this school suggested that cooperativeness, friendliness and willingness to accept responsibility were some qualities that make a person "most popular."

Population and Procedures

The study was conducted during the spring semester of 1955, at the P. K. Yonge Laboratory School of the University of Florida. Core teachers and students of the four high school grades

agreed to serve as the study group. Each grade is divided into two core classes of approximately 30 students each. From a total population of 238 students, 230 questionnaires were obtained.

Care was taken in the administration of the questionnaire to insure that the responses of the students would be as candid and unbiased as possible. The students were not told the purpose of the study. We avoided focusing attention on "leaders" or "officers" in any way. Instructions to the various classes were standardized, stating merely that "We want to find out how nearly your choices agree when you are not influenced by other people." The students were assured that their answers would be coded so as to protect their anonymity, and that the questionnaires would not be available to any but the members of the committee. We asked that no one discuss the questions until everyone had completed the questionnaire. The two core classes of each grade completed the questionnaires during the same period so that communication between the two groups was avoided. All grades but the eleventh completed the questionnaire on the same day, while the eleventh grade, because of conflicting schedules, completed its forms a day earlier.

Information obtained from the questionnaires was coded and transcribed to our data sheets, and the questionnaires were returned to the students. For each grade, we listed the number of selections received by each student on each question and on the total questionnaire. A ranking was made of each class according to number of selections received on each question by each student.

From the principal's office, we obtained a list of all high-school students currently holding elective positions. This information, after being coded, was entered on the data sheets for each grade in a manner which facilitated comparison of status positions and rank held on each question by each student. As a further aid to interpretation of the data, graphs were prepared to show the relationships between status position and rank on the various questions. The committee found it convenient to divide the population into three groups: first, the *class officers*, who are elected by the class groups to which the questionnaire was administered; second, the *other status leaders*, who are elected either by participants in out-of-class activities or by the entire student body; and third, those who hold no official position, the *non-officers*.

Limitations

The committee recognizes certain limitations to the significance of this study. Some arise from the lack of experience of the first-year graduate students who conducted the study. Others have their source in the inherent limitations of the questionnaire technique. Still others can be traced to the population used.

The choice of a laboratory school limits the application of our findings. Most of these students, in both core and other classes, have gained a degree of sophistication in human relations which is perhaps not typical of high school students. It is probable that these students are more sensitive to the

abilities of their fellows than would be students in a more traditional school.

No pilot study was conducted to validate the questionnaire. However, we did question the students at the close of the study as to their interpretations of the questions used. As indicated earlier, the committee found no significant difference between the interpretations of the students and those of the committee.

The questions used on the questionnaire required a varying number of responses from the students. Because of this, direct comparison of number of selections received on different questions was impossible.

It was found toward the end of this study that some classes had reached a policy decision to rotate the nominations for office among the class members in order to spread the experience of holding office among as many as possible. This could mean that a non-officer who received many selections from his peers had previously held office. No attempt was made to consider separately students in this category.

Conclusions

At the close of the study, several conclusions were suggested by the pattern of the data. The conclusions are tentatively advanced as valid only for the P. K. Yonge School.

• *Students do not select their officers solely on the basis of popularity.*

Only in the tenth grade at this school did a class officer receive top ranking on the popularity question (Question 3). In the twelfth grade, the two most often-named girls held no offices.

In one grade, no class officer received any choices as "most popular," while almost 40% of all students received some choices on this question. Although elected officers did not rank high on popularity, more than two-thirds of all elected officers received some choices.

• *Elected officers, as a group, tended to rank higher than non-officers as a group.*

The 15 class officers represented only 6.3% of the total population of 238, yet we found that this small group received 13.4% of all the "votes" cast. On no question did they receive less than 9% of the votes cast, while on Question 6, they received 24% of the votes. Class officers made their best showing on Questions 5, 6 and 7—the three most realistic situations—and on Question 4, the party question. They received their smallest percentage of votes on Question 1, close friendship. Other status leaders also ranked higher than non-officers. Since elected officers have more chances to demonstrate their abilities, we question whether this factor alone may not explain to a great extent why they received a disproportionately large share of the choices.

• *Elected officers do not have significantly more or fewer close friends than non-officers.*

All class officers received some choices in both Question 1 and Question 4. At the same time, most other status leaders received some choices on both questions. This finding, however, pales a little when it is seen that, on each question, approximately 80%

of all students received some choices, and many non-officers ranked above elected officers in number of choices received. Furthermore, no class officer received high ranking in his grade on Question 1, indicating that class officers generally were "just students" as far as number of close friends was concerned. Class officers were more often listed as "socially acceptable" in Question 4 than were other groups.

• *Student officers are not considered by their peers to be the only students who can exercise the skills of leadership.*

Nearly 96% of all students were considered by their classmates to possess one or more of the characteristics called for in the total questionnaire. Only 10 students received no choices at all. The lowest number of students named for any question was 71, on Question 2, which represents nearly one-third of the whole population. Many students who did not hold any office ranked as high as or higher than most office-holders in total number of choices received.

• *Students appear to recognize that different situations require different leadership qualifications.*

Students did not select any "all-around leader" who was equally qualified for all situations. In the four questions which sought to set up situations in which group leadership abilities were necessary (Questions 2, 5, 6 and 7), no grade gave all the top rankings to any one individual. No one person, for that matter, received top ranking in all of the remaining three questions. This would tend to support the situational concept of leadership, according to which leadership is exercised in different situations by people who have something unique to contribute to that situation. One is not a leader in all situations, since different situations require different contributions.

Implications

This study found that students consider leadership ability to be spread among many different members of their class, not just among those who hold status positions. If this is true, then it would seem to be the schools' responsibility to create situations in which the leadership potential of *all* students can emerge. Education of an informed status leadership is not enough for a democracy in which all citizens are expected to participate in decision making.

Many schools tend to put the elected student officer on a pedestal labeled "Leader." Employers take this label at face value, and express great interest in the number of elective positions a job applicant can cite in his record. If, however, leadership ability rests not in a few elected leaders but in a large majority of all students, then perhaps our value of status is too high. Our committee believes that the development of student leadership requires more than a program to develop a small minority of students for status positions.

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