

## Student/Youth Leadership Development in Contemporary Societies: A Review Attempt

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**ABSTRACT** Student and Youth Leadership are ubiquitous in every society. However, the concept is yet to receive significant academic references. Inspired by the paucity of academic writings, this paper attempts a review of existing literature within the domain of Student and Youth Leadership with the aim of drawing vital argument regarding the necessity of the notion on the contemporary societies. As such, the review focuses on the advantages of Student and Youth Leadership in our societies. The paper reckons that there is the demand to focus on the development of students and youths in our communities particularly, for the future. It is suggested that leadership education and skills should be imparted into students and youths at an early stage. Furthermore, students and youths need to be encouraged to assume leadership positions with proper guidance and support. How and why Student and Youth Leadership are essential in the contemporary societies remains the thrust of this paper.

### INTRODUCTION

Karagianni and Montgomery (2017) argue that there is a gap in the literature with regard to the experience of leadership among school children and young adults. Developing leadership attributes early in the lives of young adults' results in a more effective cultivation of ethical mindsets and values (Elmuti et al. 2005; Reichard et al. 2011). Studies on leadership development abound. However, the aspect of Student and Youth Leadership has been faced with scarcity of academic literature. It is also not a contest that currently, reflections on leadership and its variants have gained enormous popularity. It is therefore crucial not to only study leadership as an academic discipline, but also identify and describe how the field of leadership translates into our modern societies. Unquestionably, the importance of education is not just in its acquisition but application.

This paper dwells on Student and Youth Leadership, henceforth (SYL), as a context for observing the essence of leadership in the common society. The paper's intention to fuse students and youths together in one paper is hinged on the observed relationship between the two. It can be arguably said that the two entities are closely related. Hence, the authors' recourse to students encapsulates students in general and not only in higher institution. In the same vein, reference to youths also includes young people that may not have the opportunity to have studied at all. Ekpoh et al. (2013: 82) notes that "the need for building youth leadership is becoming more critical now since the present-day society continues to grow and change with challenging demands for the future."

Objectively, we deviate from observing leadership solely from academic perspective but also from a societal perspective. The review paper focuses mainly on studies that have observed leadership from the perspective of their potential impacts on the society. To further clarify, adequate attention is given to studies mainly focused on SYL. It is the intention of this paper, through earlier studies, to demonstrate that SYL development has become a phenomenon that may not be neglected in today's academic environments. The advantages of SYL cannot be

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overemphasized in our society and as such, it is now a domain that needs to be constantly explored. The development of SYL skills should therefore be at the foremost priority both at educational institutions and the common society. The foregoing paper discusses the term “leadership” as well as reviews related literature on SYL.

### **What is Leadership?**

There are several theories on leadership where there are definitions and scholars. In fact, the term “leadership” is broad and thus divided into different styles and types. To simplify the amenable notion of leadership, scholars have resorted into defining leadership from their own different academic perspectives and research interests. It is however beyond the attraction of the topical paper to discuss the several theories and definitions of leadership including the types or styles; the concern of this paper is on SYL which is of course just one of the many tenets of leadership.

Put extensively, leadership is a process by which a person influences others to accomplish an objective and directs the organization in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent (Sharma and Jain 2013: 310). Similarly, Inyang (2013: 78) observes it as a process of influencing people to work towards the attainment of organizational goals. In the same vein, Ayub et al. (2014: 503) perceive leadership as the position, function and ability to lead other people to a greater success. In an akin definition, Ololube (2013) opines that leadership involves a type of responsibility aimed at achieving particular ends by applying the available resources (human and material) and ensuring a cohesive and coherent organization in the process. De Simone (2012) perceives leadership as the observable and learnable ability to influence and motivate others to follow a common goal.

Northhouse’s (2007) definition seems to capture the overt and covert idea of leadership as a behavior, style, skill, process, responsibility, experience, and function of management, a position of authority, an influencing relationship, characteristic, and ability. Particularly, Northhouse’s attempt to include “skill” and “process” in his definition stands out for this paper. Ideally, this implies that leadership requires competent techniques systematically acquired in pro-

gression that is, over a period. In addition, considering his inclusion of “experience”, it is therefore invulnerable to assert that for effective leadership skills, participation and understanding of the conception of leadership is integral. In an attempt to achieve this understanding, an intimacy with the practical aspect of leadership is of great importance. Hence, our intention for advocating for the development of SYL in our societies.

Al-Jammal (2015) states that student leadership is about focusing on communication, teamwork, planning, decision making, problem solving and other skills. As such, he argues that children are not only kids; they are in fact, the future leaders. The qualities, values and skills invested in them now will determine their life’s success and the society’s future success (Johnson 2013). On the other hand, youth leadership involves connecting with others, making positive contributions to one’s community, and allowing others to reach their potential. Further, youth leadership is developed in stages and can be transformative in nature. Going by these tendencies on SYL, it is established as an interrelated concept, hence, the attempt to fuse the two. The connection between the two amounts to the fact that students are found amongst youths and vice versa. In the discussion section of this paper, the researchers present a detailed result on the context of this work.

### **METHODOLOGY**

As this paper does not dwell on any data, a qualitative methodology is adopted where a desk approach is favored. Information were collected only from already available sources such as papers already published and books. This paper only attempts a review of these works in an attempt to reveal a gap for future studies.

### **OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION**

A leader is not simply grown in one day; each experience shapes an individual (Moguel 2015). To Karagianni and Montgomery (2017: 2), “it is useful to examine leadership during childhood and adolescence as what occurs during the developmental years can have an impact on the leadership behaviours exhibited later in the workplace as an adult.” Until now however, little is found in available studies that examine char-

acteristics of youth leaders that inspire their peers to follow (Ward and Ellis 2008). In other comments, leadership development in Africa is a wanting area in terms of research (Naituli et al. 2012: 39). This is akin to Groves's (2013) view that there is limited research literature on student leadership and where there are some, the roles of students as leaders is not properly discussed. For these reasons, examining the youth perspective deserves further attention (De Simone 2012).

The essence of effective leadership development is to create capable individuals who can solve problems and contribute to the betterment of the world around them (De Simone 2012). Pfeiffer and Wechsle (2013: 219) attest to the considerable amount of literature on leadership, particularly as it relates to organizations, government, and the military. However, educators and psychologists know considerably less about early precursors of leadership, and, how leadership develops in youth. In this paper, we have focused on students and youths as capable individuals, and inherently, a lot is yet to be studied in this domain.

Hine (2014) advocates for student leadership development within secondary schools. He identifies it as a critical issue worth investigating. In another work, Groves (2013) solicits for the necessity to develop leadership skills in students as agents of change, to begin to extend the change beyond the school into their communities. He approaches his study from a classroom perspective where he expects teachers to carefully consider their responsibility in preparing tomorrow's leaders within their own classrooms. In his opinion, leadership experiences contribute positively to student development. His research suggests that student leadership is of considerable value to students' personal growth - and to the positive cultivation of school culture. It should be noted that as rich as Hine's research is, he gives little attention to how students' leadership could influence the society. His work is in fact limited in scope to the personal development of the students and the school without attempting the possible effects on the society. However, his findings remain welcomed, as it is one of the few papers focusing on leadership especially from the perspective of students.

In their *Nurturing Student Leadership Skills*, Naituli et al. (2012: 39) resonate that leadership development training has great potential

in providing students with opportunities for self-reflection and actualization, which leads to increased self-awareness and promotes development of a personal leadership identity. They recognize leadership deficiency as a deadly disease that needs attention. Fundamentally, their study is concerned with the issue of leadership in agricultural sector in Kenya. Notwithstanding, their result contributes to leadership in general. While students are well equipped with skills and knowledge regarding their areas of study, their argument is mounted on the evidence that institutions neglect the importance of sensitizing students for real challenges awaiting them outside the lecture-halls. Consequently, intelligence fail where leadership skills are meant to be exhibited. Ultimately, "leadership at higher education levels should rise to the immense prevailing challenges and design learning programs and support the creation of a learning environment that foster the skills required to provide effective leadership in a turbulent environment where change is the only constant" (Naituli et al. 2012: 40). For them, the predicament does not solely rest on the institutions; they note that students and youths no longer understand the rudiments of leadership. Nowadays, our societies only equate leadership to political leadership thus implying positions of wealth, authority, power, and fame. As such, young people lack role models, mentoring, and knowledge of what makes an individual a leader within one's sphere of influence. A commendable effort in their work is the awareness that leadership should not be restricted to politics. In fact, leadership skills are needed in every stage of life. In essence, students should be accorded more opportunities to enable them develop their leadership qualities, especially before they complete their college education (Naituli et al. 2012: 44).

Similarly, Terry and Liller (2014: 126) propose an initiative to hone the leadership skills of doctoral students. Their study is delimited to include doctoral students only. In that regards, their contribution can be challenged from one perspective - not every student may have the opportunity of studying a doctorate. As such, other students such as Masters' students are abandoned. Nonetheless, they suggest to institutions to be forward-thinking in how they can best meet the leadership needs of their current and future graduate students. They berate the attempt by institutions that do not favour unique

leadership education needs of graduate students. They therefore encourage institutions to pursue leadership programs in order to prepare doctoral students for leadership roles in a wide variety of settings rather than academics only. Since all doctoral students may not secure employment in academic settings, there is therefore the real need to provide doctoral students with opportunities to develop their capacity to lead for change in both academic and non-academic contexts (Terry and Liller 2014: 134). In the work, they expose one of the epidemics plaguing our modern societies into thinking that a doctorate degree is only valuable in the academics when in a wider sense, the degree may be more useful in the society.

Patterson (2012) stipulates that the more students are involved in student organizations the more likely they are to develop strong leadership skills and behaviors. His contribution to student leadership is not based on leadership programs but rather practical experience where students get the opportunity to interact with their peers in formal and non-formal leadership training. He is therefore under the impression that college organizational leadership experiences would have impacts on student leadership behaviors. He maintains that collegiate clubs and organizations are influential in terms of developing leadership and therefore, should be supported. He adds a voice to involvement in student leadership – student organization participation is important leadership inventory. By implication, involvement in these student organizational activities will assist students in developing higher leadership skills.

Al-Jammal (2015) reproduces Hay and Dempster's (2004) important skills to be imparted in students namely: project planning, reflection, problem solving, team building, decision making, goal setting, time management, project management resource allocation, effective communication networking, conflict resolution, diversity awareness, and self-confidence. Al-Jammal's (2015) attempt to reflect on Hay and Dempster resulted in him also producing 21 (twenty-one) skills every future leader needs. It is worth noting that these skills are acquired through experience and participation. He proposes that a leader must possess the ability to enable, encourage and empower others; be humble and teachable; resolve conflicts; courageous; decision making, self-confidence, diversity awareness among

many other skills. Al-Jammal (2015) goes ahead to give detailed explanation of each of these skills and their impacts on the actual practices of leadership. The highlight of the work surfaces in his conclusion to ensure that leadership skills are taught to children from an early age. Also, his attempt to introduce different skills upholds the dynamic nature of leadership. In a society with diverse range of people, it is largely advisable that a leader possesses diverse skills. His study finally advises that several activities should be put in place for children to acquire these skills at an early stage.

In a similar fashion to student leadership, youth leadership has also received insufficient academic works. Among the existing few, De Simone (2012) notes that youth leadership development increases confidence, personal fulfillment, as well as communication skills, project management skills, responsibility, and a student's ability to take initiative. Such abilities are then transferred into the requirements of work and life in terms of problem solving and decision-making. De Simone cautions that involvement of youths in leadership programs would not only benefit them but also the community at large. As such, Sacks (2009) posits that youths, full of energy and enthusiasm, also have the potential to contribute ideas that can drive innovation and improve outcomes. From De Simone's perspective, youths are capable of transformation ideas and as a result, they must be groomed to implement and actualize those ideas.

In a close study, Kahn et al. (2009: 14) argue: "youth leadership has benefits for the individual young person, their peer group and society more broadly. By investing in young people's personal development, wider economic opportunities could be created, especially for those in disadvantaged communities. Youth leadership development therefore serves multiple purposes: it is simultaneously an end in itself, by promoting healthy youth development, and a means to an end, as youth make contributions through their participation." They profess the need to develop and nurture young leaders by facilitating their leadership journeys. They explore three key stages paramount to the facilitation:

1. Getting young people involved: To get young people involved in leadership programs means making opportunities accessible and appealing to them. Consequently, programs need to be designed to recognize,

- reflect and respond to the specific needs and contexts of young people's lives (Kahn et al. 2009: 20).
2. Developing leadership: Young people must be offered challenges that reflect their needs in an environment of support in which they can reflect on their experiences and are given authentic opportunities to make decisions and effect change (Kahn et al. 2009: 22).
  3. Sustaining the leadership journey: Leadership activities and opportunities should be sustainable to ensure that young people can carry their leadership skills into adulthood, and should include clear progression routes and appropriate support at all stages. This can mean providing routes that allow young people to move from local to regional, national, and even international opportunities (Kahn et al. 2009: 26).

Their study succeeds in extensively discussing these stages. Basically, the first stage seeks for the involvement of youths in leadership programs. The second stage advocates for the need to exhibit what is learnt from the first stage and lastly, offering supports in preserving these acquired skills for the future. They conclude by inviting organizations to create and sustain youth leadership programs with the view to enhancing a formidable youth leadership structure.

Ekpoh et al. (2013: 81) investigate the role of secondary schools in empowering students with youth leadership skills for national transformation. They write:

*"The importance of youth in a country's transformation agenda cannot be overemphasized, because they constitute a significant proportion of population. Besides, they are the next generation of leaders. The United Nations has long recognized that the world's youths are valuable resources for the advancement of societies. They are often the leaders of socio-political and technological developments, as well as, dynamic agents of social change. Young people constitute a vital national resource that can be tapped to promote a country's development."*

Having acknowledged that about youths, Sigudhla (2005) says that if youths are to take an active role in combating societal problems, then they must be given the right tools with which to work. A view also shared by Jones (2009: 258) who suggests that youth must be

allowed practical experiences in leadership roles as a method of nurturing with the support of adults serving as allies. Jones recognizes that young people are an asset to their respective communities. However, to fully exercise their potentials, they must have access to opportunities as well as the relevant information that provides insight on how they can become change agents.

Ekpoh et al. (2013: 81) further agree that it is important that youths be empowered with leadership skills in order to achieve meaningful national transformation. In that regards, the schools should be involved in exploiting and developing the innate talents of youths. They understand that today's youths have the potential to understand leadership and develop their leadership potentials which can be recognized and developed through leadership education and programs. As such, it is important that students be given the opportunity to practice and acquire leadership experiences in schools (Ekpoh et al. 2013). Baker (2011) also points out that the more opportunities that youths are involved in, the more likely they are to develop the critical skills that will see them through as leaders throughout life. Ekpoh et al.'s (2013: 85) research is admired for its ability to combine students and youths in the same study. They recognize the roles of schools as integral to SYL development as they must be nurtured and prepared for the demands of the future. Hence, schools should include leadership program and activities in and outside the classroom.

Omoregbee and Koyenikan (2014) examine the training needs of youth organizational leaders in Nigeria. They recommend that youth development agencies should organize leadership training, workshops, and seminars on a regular basis for the general youth to develop certain leadership skills. Such leadership life-long skills activities would thus have the potential to bring about youth development, peer positive influence, socialization, and change in youths. Moguel (2015) confirms that these programs must be tailored specifically toward the aspects of leadership that directly resound with youth. For Eva and Sendjaya (2016), they reveal that students have little exposure to ethics training throughout their leadership programs.

Macneil (2006) admits that the leadership studies field has grown significantly, however, a gap still exists in youth leadership research. This is a point upheld by Moguel (2015: 12) when he

says that “considering the current research available in the area of youth leadership, the results prove quite disappointing.” Kress (2006) excels in identifying one hindrance that youth may face in their attempt to gain experience in the leadership field which is the continued assertion that youths are “leaders of tomorrow”. As promising as the term is, it can in fact exempt youth from having a voice in today’s issues (MacNeil and McClean 2006). This is still true of today. Moguel (2015) declares the SYL field as requiring much more exploration.

Following the above review tendencies, it can be gleaned that the area of SYL is essential to our contemporary societies. However, this is an area that has received poor attention from academia so far.

### CONCLUSION

Albeit there are few academic works on SYL, the information from this paper does not extinguish the vacancy of data expected on SYL development. From this review paper, it is obvious that SYL suffers from sufficient academic research. The current paper also agonizes from the deficiencies of literature, which would have provided more information on SYL. In fact, one can say that academic references on SYL is still in its infancy. Even with the existing literature, some are old and majority have failed to conceptualize the study of SYL. While some studies have suffered from inexplicit discussion, others are vague thereby avoiding the main problem as to why SYL lacks attention both in theory and in practice.

Youths have been addressed as leaders of tomorrow as far back as 20-30 years. It is still surprising that today; they are still leaders of tomorrow. Even more astonishing is that the leaders who referred to them as leaders of tomorrow about 30 years ago, are still the leaders today. One is then forced to imagine when the tomorrow begins. The imminent problem is if the situation continues as such, youths would never be in position to lead until they pass the stage of being referred to as youths. It is within the above context that the researchers observe the need for future research to create sensitization on the looming condition of SYL development.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Further studies should focus on challenges and prospects of SYL development both in the-

ory and in practice. The orientation of the society needs to be assessed and reformulated and in turn, the society may begin to demand for a large participation of youths in the leadership system of our societies. Studies need to be conducted to produce ways to effectively imbibe leadership skills in youths. It surpasses the scope of this paper to analyse every area in need of further research. The objective of this paper is to review existing literature, which would reveal gaps for further researchers.

Concisely, further research needs to be conducted on the field of SYL from different perspectives and diverse academic disciplines. Researchers should also develop creative minds to tackle new aspects on SYL. It is researchers’ belief that other prospective research studies may focus on the gaps identified in this review paper. Thus, fresh literature surfaces which would sequentially reveal new gaps. As such, the field of SYL will begin to accrue some substantive literature as well as gain academic attention.

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