Towards a culture of student leadership and volunteering

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Abstract

Nicky Bourne is a member of CANTARNET, a network of teachers engaged in teacher-led development work with the support of a masters programme led by Judy Durrant at Canterbury Christ Church University. Her article provides an account of Nicky's innovations aimed at engaging students in leadership roles.

I have been Head of the Physical Education School of Learning at Herne Bay High Specialist School and Sports College for three years. Building on experience in my subject area, I wanted to develop an effective model of community leadership training for students (Bourne, 2006). This article concerns the initial phase of the development.

A vision for student leadership and participation

My motivation for this development work arises from my personal discontent with the image branded of young people today. Following the Government's introduction of ASBOs, the school introduced its own 'SASBO' (School Anti-Social Behaviour Order) to reprimand the small proportion of students who exhibit negative behaviour such as smoking, chewing gum, using mobile phones, swearing, being out-of-bounds and causing vandalism and graffiti. Yet within physical education and school sport I often see positive behaviour, where students show respect, interact and communicate well with others, work with younger students, become positive role models and enjoy school. I also see the power of sport and leadership as tools for engaging disaffected students and helping them to change their behaviour. I wanted to widen this beyond my department, to generate an ethos of leadership and volunteering within and beyond the school community and to increase students' confidence, sense of responsibility and feeling of belonging.

Herne Bay High School's 1500 students were recently divided into five mini-communities or families. While the identities of these communities were developing, the prefect system had not changed, except in name. The more mature and responsible students in Year 11 were selected as prefects by the Headteacher, given a very brief talk and allocated duties such as patrolling different areas during break and lunchtimes. There was no formal training and no reward other than adding 'prefect' to their C.V. It was clear that they did not enjoy their duties and lack of respect from younger students frequently led to conflict.

I began to develop a vision of a more effective structure based upon my experiences within physical education and sport. For many years we had been teaching the Sports Leaders UK Sports Leadership Awards to students in Key Stages 4 and 5. I had already worked with colleagues to pilot a mini-community sports leader programme, which immediately got students interacting with students from other year groups. I started to consider how I might develop such leadership programmes across the whole school.

The potential for developing students' life skills and citizenship within the school community rather than in the curriculum is vastly under-used, despite being enshrined in government policy (see DfES 2004a; 2004b; 2005a). This requires a broad view of education to include the development of personality, social skills and life skills. Student voice is essential to this; while Rudduck's work (2003, 2005) emphasises particularly the benefits of giving students opportunity to discuss their learning, here we wanted to consult students to support development of their leadership.

This development work is therefore based on the premise that if participation is to be meaningful, it has to involve students in decision-making (Kirby *et al.,* 2003). It has to move beyond the classroom and beyond the school boundaries, to encompass genuine participation in strategy, change and improvement and acceptance of responsibility for the future of communities as well as schools (Barnes and Collins, 2004; Nelson and Kerr, 2005; Respect Task Force, 2006; Russell, 2005). The new organisation 'Student Volunteering England' holds that the most exciting opportunities are those where students are empowered to create change.

Some ambitious intended outcomes

I planned the potential impact of the new developments in student leadership against the five outcomes for "Every Child Matters: Change for Children" (DfES, 2004b), which sets out the government's vision for re-shaping children's services. I also used statements from the inspection criteria where appropriate (DfES, 2005b). Research suggests that the outcomes of this kind of initiative can be deep and far-reaching. For the individual, leadership and volunteering "…broadens horizons, improves confidence and builds skills" (DfES, 2005a:21), creating employment opportunities by improving communication and team working (Institute of Volunteering Research, 2002). It can lead to better educational attainment and reduces the likelihood of offending, smoking and depression (Feinstein *et al.*, 2005). Young people learn by 'doing' and valuable extra-curricular learning opportunities can complement their formal education experience. Individuals' new perspectives, interests and aspirations should enable them to make a more positive contribution to their communities and our national life (Respect Task Force, 2006), with much potential for learning through leadership and the inspiration to remain active and involved throughout their lives.

The time-scales were ambitious: during 2005-6 I planned to run pilots, gather evidence, plan change, design leadership training and initiate a programme across the whole school for a launch in September 2006. Despite the pressures of time, I felt that the need for a new structure for whole school improvement far outweighed the huge challenge ahead.

Supporting and sharing leadership of change

I see my school as a forward thinking, well-led, well-resourced institution, open to change and improvement in the interest of enhancing teaching and learning and increasing opportunities for the local community. Change may often be instigated by senior management, but increasingly leadership is being devolved to the middle management layer of the school, as reflected by the Headteacher's recent creation of an 'Innovation and Transformation Team' consisting of the Assistant Heads and heads of the main curriculum areas.

I approached this development work collaboratively prior to, as well as during implementation, because this is our normal approach to change. I also built in research to underpin the development at every

stage (Frost and Durrant, 2003). I had considerable confidence that I would have a sound case for raising the students' profile within the existing leadership structure, thus distributing leadership further. The first developments have inevitably been somewhat adult initiated and there is always the danger of using students in a tokenistic or manipulative way to achieve our own aims (Beech, 2005; Miller, 2003). However, as time progresses, I envisage that leadership initiatives will be developed and run by the students themselves.

New developments in student leadership and volunteering

Recognising current success and identifying need

I gathered evidence of the success of the Sports Leaders training programme I had been running for many years, using feedback from students, teachers and feeder primary schools. It is apparent how the level of teacher input declines over the course, until the activity sessions, evaluations and planning are driven almost entirely by the students. I used this evidence of students' empowerment to support my argument for change.

I evaluated the current prefect system through discussions and questionnaires using a broad framework of questions. I met with all one hundred Student Leaders to establish perceptions, issues and needs, squeezing meetings into registration time over 3 days. It was evident that there was some understanding of being a role model and supporting other students, but most felt their main function was being 'on duty' in a particular area. Most believed they had been given the position based upon their own behaviour record, maturity, common sense, reliability and trustworthiness. The most common difficulties were related to the Student Leaders' interactions with younger students who either ignored or back-chatted them. Their training needs revolved around improving their knowledge of how to deal with situations, talk to younger students and find support if needed.

To avoid their complete disengagement, I quickly gathered a team of supportive colleagues to provide generic training. The Youth Worker attached to the school was able to offer a variety of resources used by the Youth Service to train young leaders. However, numerous other Year 11 commitments meant that the first available time would be in April, just two months before the Year 11 would leave the school. Feeling defeated, I resorted to offering a voluntary drop-in session in which we discussed how to deal with a range of

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scenarios. I also made a point of circulating around the different duty areas to offer support, although not as often as I would have liked because of my lunchtime sports commitments.

Eventually I realised I must give up trying to change the existing system and look to the future. The Student Leaders' role as door monitors had to change. The job was such an unconstructive one, only ever resulting in negative interactions and confrontations. The students were called 'leaders', but they were not actually being given any opportunities to lead.

Sharing concerns and gaining support
I planned to create a very different model with the Student Leaders having more status, positive interactions with younger students and a more valuable and valued role in the leadership structure of the whole school. First I had an informal discussion with a senior colleague to check priorities and ideas. Next I needed to gain the support of my colleagues across the school, so sent a simple email to all staff briefly explaining that I wanted to engage some of the Student Leaders in activities beyond their duties, as I felt many had a lot to offer the school. I asked staff to consider any positions of responsibility, jobs or roles where students might assist, giving a number of examples.

I had a wide variety of responses, including the following suggestions:

- a buddy reading scheme working with the English Faculty and learning support,
- establishing a new French club,
- assisting with a variety of lunchtime clubs in sport and ICT,
- supporting Year 7 mentor groups at registration times,
- monitoring and helping to create and update school displays,
- assisting with the school production.

I decided to trial a number of these roles with any current Year 11 Student Leaders who wished to volunteer.

Piloting some initiatives
I devised a form to gauge preferences. Thirty two replies from a Student Leader body of one hundred gave me an adequate number to make a start without being overwhelming. It was important to be

able to demonstrate quality and positive results in order to support the argument for change.

From here the project rapidly developed. I became the facilitator, liaising with colleagues and passing on names of students to team leaders for briefing or training. I kept a database of student leaders, their activities and staff overseeing them. I designed and issued a "Herne Bay High School Community Leadership and Volunteering Record Card" and registered all Student Leaders with the Millennium Volunteers, a national programme which encourages young people to give up their time to help their local communities and has its own certification scheme. We introduced a new prize at our awards evening as well as celebrating any students who completed the challenging targets of fifty or one hundred hours of volunteering.

Evaluating the pilot initiatives
I decided, for reasons of speed, to evaluate the pilot initiatives by consulting through individual or paired conversations. Although informal and in some cases a little brief and rushed, I had taken time to consider a number of factors prior to the conversations, including the basic pre-conditions of motivation and trust (MacBeath *et al.,* 2003). I needed the students to know that I was interested in what they had to say and committed to listening and I was careful to treat them with unconditional positive regard. I was not over exuberant, as this might have led to students assuming that their positive responses would guarantee changes. I had explained from the outset that I was trialling new leadership opportunities and that these may or may not work. The students were aware that their honest feedback would be helpful with a view to finding those which were worthwhile for both students and staff and which would enrich the school community.

The students responded confidently and openly. Most of the initiatives mentioned above were working well. Others had been less successful for a variety of reasons; where this was the case they were keen to offer reasons and suggestions as to how it could be made more worthwhile. I shared the outcomes and developments with all the Year 11 volunteers and we briefed the whole school staff, which helped to ensure continuing collaborative support.

Seeking support for whole school change

As the scheme was growing rapidly, I needed wider support. A senior colleague, seconded to the school for a year, had been asked by the Headteacher to offer critical friendship and make recommendations for change, so I shared my views and gained her support. I also approached a colleague who was working with Year 11 mentors. I was amazed to find that both these colleagues had already had conversations about the ineffectiveness of the current system and were very keen to collaborate on a proposal for restructuring so we set up a working party. Our proposals were taken to the Headteacher, reinforced with some case studies of leadership and volunteering activities. The principles and practicalities were discussed and debated by the school's senior leaders and we were finally asked to develop more detailed plans.

Planning and approval

Finding time within the normal teaching day for collaborative activity is always difficult. When our proposals had gained approval, we were granted a day off-timetable, which was most productive to enable us to plan the new structure and write a time-framed proposal for implementation. Colleagues outside the working party were invited to offer critical comments to help us to refine the proposal.

The proposed structure divided the Student Leader body into three groups: Sports and Activity Leaders, Peer Leaders and School Leaders, allowing for differing student interests and needs across the school. Staff Team Leaders would be the key point of contact for Student Leaders, facilitating, overseeing and reviewing the work in progress. We planned to involve both Year 10 and Year 11 Student Leaders to ease pressure at examination times, increasing flexibility and sustainability. We also integrated the sixth form leaders, who had previously not had a major role.

We produced a timeline for the launch, selection process, induction and training. All students would receive three modules of generic leadership training led by the Kent County Council Youth and Community Service and could, if they wished, attend a residential course to complete a national accreditation in community leadership and volunteering. We would also continue to link with the Millennium Volunteers scheme.

We all now felt passionately about the need for this new structure, had invested a considerable amount of time in planning it and could

foresee many possible positive outcomes, but the ultimate decision as to whether we could alter the whole school structure was the Headteacher's. It was soon clear that he appreciated our collaborative efforts and he was complementary about our document's sound rationale and logical timeline. We were given the go-ahead and now needed to move fast, to put the structure into place before the end of the summer term.

The start of implementation
I introduced the new Student Leader roles to next year's Year 10 and 11 students in assembly. We issued application forms on which students indicated their preferred category of leader, stating briefly why they wanted to be a Student Leader and what they felt they could bring to the role. We were delighted to receive more than 100 applications. To ensure that all staff were engaged and supportive, we published a list of students who had applied and asked for feedback. Staff from all curriculum areas highlighted students who were not on the list and all of these, when individually approached, agreed to become Student Leaders. We held a meeting of staff team leaders and assistant team leaders to finalise the lists.

The new structure was launched to colleagues at a staff meeting and to students in assembly. Leadership training was booked for students and in the final weeks of the summer term we rushed around making preparations. We informed and congratulated the students on their successful applications, made plans for the initial training on the first school day in September and for the two-day training course with Kent County Council and began to identify roles for Student Leaders. In September 2006 we were ready to induct 41 Sports and Activity Leaders, 30 Peer Leaders and 30 School Leaders, with a good balance between Year 10 and Year 11. Males dominated the Sports and Activity and School Leaders, while a higher proportion of females wanted to develop their mentoring skills as Peer Leaders.

Establishing a review structure
Regular review of the new structure and initiatives has been planned, involving student meetings with staff Team Leaders and staff discussions. It will be important to evaluate our work, from all perspectives – staff, the Youth Service, the main student body and of course the Student Leaders' points of view. The diversity of the work that the Student Leaders will be doing sets particular challenges for monitoring impact. Quantitative data is limited; qualitative evidence will be of more value but measuring the impact of student

leadership on school culture, learning and teaching can be "…as difficult as tracking the effects of throwing small pebbles into large pools" (Cox, 2003:5).

We realised the need to set up an integral monitoring and review process, which will provide evidence of our achievements, successes and pitfalls along the way. It is important that all the Student Leaders are fully engaged in this process, just as they are already aware that they are pioneering the scheme for the school. Younger students can report on the leadership initiatives that we have set up. Sixth form students will assume key leadership roles within each of the three categories of Student Leaders. It is envisaged that the senior students, not the staff, will take on the role of chairing meetings, organising rotas, gaining feedback and monitoring the work of their teams.

Making it last

Although the developments so far are highly embryonic, the sustainability of the new structure is already of great importance. The new structure must be sufficiently robust to withstand changes of key staff and must be embedded to the extent that our Student Leaders seem indispensable. The new system is designed to support all students for their own betterment and development with equal opportunity and access for all. We have been conservative in our use of resources, using the in-house experience of our attached youth workers to deliver the leadership training and requiring very little funding to establish the new structure.

Staff involvement and confidence will also be important to sustainability. I have drawn in colleagues to oversee initiatives that interest them, convinced that their involvement will be rewarded with benefits including enhanced relationships with students and support for their day-to-day work. I am aware, however, that while the enthusiasm of interested colleagues must be encouraged, we must also ensure that they understand the philosophy behind the structure and the need for student empowerment rather than over-assertion of their own ideas.

Another important influence on the sustainability of the scheme is that we want younger students to be exposed to positive role models to raise their aspirations. We believe we are establishing a system that should strengthen over time, particularly if we can maintain a sense of ownership amongst students (Fielding and Bragg, 2003). So

far the students have responded positively, but we need to ensure that this is maintained; if they do not remain engaged or are unreliable or apathetic about their commitment, the continuity of the scheme will break down.

Inclusive student leadership

Although the potential for consulting and engaging pupils is considerable, it can falter if a few fundamental errors are made. The quiet voice must get heard, not just the louder articulates (Rudduck, 2003). This is why we actively recruited some students who would make good leaders but who did not put themselves forward immediately.

I have already explained the importance of voluntary rather than conscripted leadership. The danger in this lies with uncertainty about the students we have engaged and the effects on the rest of the peer group. Accepting this risk, we intended our launch process and the three types of Student Leader role to give credibility and inclusion to the structure. We invited students from both Year 10 and Year 11 to volunteer in an attempt to improve collaboration, and realised that we had attracted a range of personalities, with a mix of 'behaviour backgrounds', allowing each student to start with a clean slate. This gives even the most vulnerable students a chance to take the right road, whatever their previous circumstances. With sensitive monitoring, this type of responsibility can be a very powerful tool in developing reliability, commitment and maturity. Having been surprised and rewarded in seeing some of our more disaffected students progress through the Sports Leader Award programme, I believe the recruitment of a broad spectrum of Student Leaders will bring credibility to the new structure amongst their peers.

A culture of leadership and participation

My involvement has been motivating and rewarding and I have learnt particularly the importance of listening to pupils directly. I hope that I have introduced a structure that is founded on listening to young people's voices, valuing and acting upon their comments and giving them the skills and opportunities that they need to be successful. The initiatives trialled so far were successful because they were allowed the time, support and co-operation from a range of bodies, with crucial support and commitment from the Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team. Implementation now requires a level of trust and 'buy-in' by all parties if it is to work, moving through raised awareness, understanding and belief to true commitment

(Walker, 2004). We need to consider how to sustain this process within the school but also, and much more challenging, how it can be adapted for our four partner secondary schools and numerous secondary schools within the School Sports Partnership of which we are the hub.

Time will determine the success of the new structure within our school and its capacity to be re-modelled elsewhere. I hope that I will be able to make a significant, evidence-based contribution to the next review of the school's behaviour management policy in terms of a reduction in the need for SASBOs. As the scheme develops, I believe we will see more powerful evidence of the beneficial effects of encouraging widespread positive engagement through student leadership, voice and genuine participation.

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See also

Millennium Volunteers: http://www.millenniumvolunteers.gov.uk/

Sports Leaders UK: http://www.bst.org.uk

Student Volunteering England: http://www.studentvol.org.uk