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## Middle School Voices On Leadership Matter: Adults Miss "The Small Ways In Which We Lead"

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MIDDLE SCHOOL VOICES ON LEADERSHIP MATTER:  
ADULTS MISS “THE SMALL WAYS IN WHICH WE LEAD”

By

Brenda Backes

A capstone thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Educational Doctorate

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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## Dedication

To all my students who entrusted their voices and stories with me over my many years as a middle school teacher. I am truly blessed.

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## CHAPTER ONE—The Problem

### Introduction

Leadership is a key term often used by employers seeking to hire, part of college applications, and within education. There is a consistent debate over whether leaders are made or born into a leadership role, but the literature has shifted toward the belief that all individuals can lead given the right situation; for example, according to Lavery (2008) and Marinek, Schilling and Hellison (2006) and Bronwyn (2011) cited Lambert (2003), “[The] most common contemporary theory about leadership is that all are born with [the] capacity to lead” (p. 5). There are formal leadership trainings and workshops for businesses and classes for students, but also informal ways to learn to lead at a young age; e.g. within their own social groups, role models, observing leaders and daily trial and error attempts. As Brungart (1996) stated, “successful leaders believe there is value in learning from mistakes and take responsibility” (p. 86).

Although leadership may be a term in high demand, the literature reviewed, for the purpose of this study, does not address middle school students’ perspectives on daily leadership opportunities. Daily opportunities for middle school students seem to be less available, thus heightening my interest in investigating leadership perceptions and experiences with middle school students, primarily sixth graders.

Whitehead (2009) recognized that leadership should be seen as an integrated part of daily academics, therefore, this dissertation brings forth the insights and voices of a sampling of middle school students. The results of this study will bring awareness to how this group views leadership and what opportunities they have had to lead. It brings their voices to the forefront;

considers the informal daily opportunities to lead at school, and may inform educators on the insights and experiences of leadership in middle school.

### **Rational**

While reflecting upon the topic of middle school students' perspectives on leadership, I realized that my interest in this age group and topic stemmed from a place of frustration in what I view as the lack of opportunities for middle school students to learn about leadership and to lead. In examining my own leadership history, most of my experiences occurred after transitioning out of middle school. Throughout my education, I was recognized as a leader while engaged in my extra-curricular activities; however, I rarely spoke or volunteered in the classroom, even though I was an honors student. Yet, due to these outside activities, teachers recognized me as a leader and continued to call on me to participate in the class. I did not mind shooting a free throw in front of hundreds of people, but speaking in class or leading discussions terrified me.

Teachers observed me in different situations such as the newspaper sports editor, athlete, National Honors Society member, and running for student body office. As I considered my middle school years, most leadership opportunities existed outside the academic day. As I considered my own past, I had to ask myself, "If it was not my personality to reach out of my comfort zone in the classroom, would there have been opportunities offered to me to lead?" Everyone will lead something someday, but I wondered, "Do adolescents have opportunities to learn through trial and error, and within experience, in order to broaden their leadership path?"

As a middle school teacher for twenty-three years, I have observed my students dealing with similar leadership issues. The classroom design has changed from rows of desks, listening to the teacher lecture daily, and needing to have one right answer to tables with a context of open dialogue between teacher and student as they pursue learning together. In the past, there were few opportunities to pair and share or to partake in community learning groups in order to



process information together; however, today, these opportunities to construct knowledge together exist. I know what I was afraid of as a shy student, but today, I wonder after years of observation, “Why do many middle school students still sit back and let others lead, especially with such changes in classroom design and environment?”

While concerned with providing chances to lead for all students within the classroom environment, my own personal mind shift occurred while advocating for students. I recognized the need to provide opportunities for students to step in and step up, which was often ignored or challenged by my peers. In the past eight years or so, being told “no” when advocating for students about tapping into their hidden potential and regularly hearing this response from my peers, “No, they do not fit the criteria (test score)” had become far too common. My frustration continued to mount with those responses, including those of administrators, who do recognize that the state testing system does not see the whole child; yet, they did not enhance student growth, but kept skills and leadership opportunities to a limited few.

I argue that such limitations hinder adolescents from being prepared to encounter greater challenges, becoming more involved at the secondary level, and building confidence. A good example of this is if a sixth grader, 11 years old, desires a seat on student council, he or she must apply and then selected to be interviewed by our counselor, leader of student council. They have to seek out this opportunity, formally apply, and undergo an interview. Interviews can be difficult for some adults, yet the expectation for adolescents to do well in a formal interview without mentorship or prior knowledge is an issue. Additionally, although a student may want to lead, he or she may be turned away from an opportunity to lead by an adult, who is often the decision maker.

I have also questioned why students with a more positive outlook may sit back and allow negative voices take over a class of sixth graders. I have often observed the more quiet students and wondered, “Why doesn’t the quiet student who appears to have more insight than anyone else in the group speak up or lead?” and “Why do others take over and lead like a bulldozer?” Prompting further exploration and this study.

This study shares students’ voices on the opportunities teachers provide them to lead within their academic day. There are many educators who like to be center stage in the classroom while other educators share it with their students. I realize the need for various teaching styles to benefit the diverse learners in middle schools; however, my own interests and experiences prompted questions concerning opportunities for adolescents to lead, such as:

- If the teacher never leaves the front of the class, are students having time to explore their own way of thinking and leading?
- What adult biases impact student progress as leaders?
- Are there enough meaningful opportunities to lead within daily academic classes?
- Is leadership integrated within schools so students have a chance to learn from their mistakes and to lead better next time?
- With so much push on curriculum, are educators paying enough attention to this important skill, leadership, for all students or just catching those that naturally come forward?

According to Whitehead (2009), “many leadership studies are focused primarily on adult interpersonal and organizational leadership development and pay little attention to developing the right type of qualities of leadership by adolescents” (p. 848).

### **Problem Statement**

While there is much research (Mitra 2005; Dempster & Lizzio 2007; Davies 2011; Hine

2014; Coffey & Lavery 2017; Kudo; Archard 2013; Starratt 2007; Linden & Fertman 1998; Gehret 2010; Hay & Dempster 2004; Quinn & Owen 2016; Whitehead 2009) on how to work with student leaders in structured programs, like clubs and sports, the literature reviewed for this study does not address middle school students' perspectives on being a leader or leadership in their daily academic lives. Brungart (1996) uncovered that for many students, the school environment is the first time they have the opportunity to try leading (p. 85), yet by middle school, not all students have this opportunity. In addition, Gianz (2002) stated, "Leadership is not reserved for the select few. The capacity to lead resided in everyone to varying degrees..." (p.14), yet some leadership programs are directed for those with high academic test scores. Mitra (2005), Whitehead (2009), Coffey and Lavery (2017) acknowledge that research on adolescent leadership is limited to mostly theory and encourage further studies, including understanding from the voices and perspectives of middle school students. Knowing more about students' perceptions on the kinds of leadership opportunities provided in middle school will impact how educators view adolescent leaders and how they can provide experiences for their students.

### **Context and Importance**

"[T]here has been little empirical investigation of ways in which adults facilitate the development of student voice... youth leadership" (Mitra, 2005, p. 521). All students will lead in their lifetime in some manner, and it is important for them to take hold of opportunities that present themselves with confidence. According to Baskin's (2018) article, "The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills" (P21.org), employers ranked leadership as one of "the top 10" skills desired and as the "second greatest deficit in recent college graduates." Hence, all students must have opportunities to practice leading earlier within their daily academic lives.

Even though students continue to participate in leadership through other activities, such as sports, theater, or application programs like student council, some students continue to be

excluded. For example, some adolescents who possess leadership potential are not able to take advantage of after school opportunities for reasons such as needing to go home to care for siblings. Middle school students may benefit from discovering their own inner leader and style in a safe community, the classroom, where they are allowed to make mistakes and participate.

Students should be prepared to lead, but they need a safe place to test out their own positive leadership style with teacher support. Many middle school students find a way to lead within their personal lives and in their social lives either positively or negatively. The question: *What is the definition of leadership in the eyes of the middle school students and how do they feel about leading?* propels this study. In order for teachers to provide meaningful opportunities, middle school students need to share their experiences on this important life skill: leadership and leading. Educators can impact students' futures by imparting skills everyday.

### **Research Question**

The research question is: *What are middle school students' perspectives on leadership in their daily academic life?*

### **Definition of Key Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms and definitions are used:

**Leadership:** Whitehead's (2009) interpretation of DeBosz and Beaty (1999) definition of leadership is used. They define leadership as "... the capacity to guide others in achievement of a common goal" (p. 849) showing a relationship between leaders and followers working as a collective group or community.

**Adolescent:** According to the Middle Level Education website, the ages for adolescents is between 10 and 15 years of age receiving a middle level education (AMLE,

[www.amle.org/AboutAMLE/ThisWeBelieve/tabid/121/Default.aspx](http://www.amle.org/AboutAMLE/ThisWeBelieve/tabid/121/Default.aspx)). For this study, adolescent refers to middle school students in sixth grade through eighth grade, particularly the ages of sixth graders, 11 through 13 year olds, who have transitioned from an elementary school's focus on "jobs" to "on-the-job" learning in middle school (Davies, 2011).

Community of learners: Block (2009) and Glasser (1986) articulated the need for individuals to belong and to contribute to the community. Block (2009) states that "communities are built from the assets and gifts of their citizens" (p. 14); therefore, monitoring and guiding students to become a community with group norms and a common goal to raise everyone up through growth and kindness.

Informal leading- Informal leading refers to the daily opportunities students have in class to lead with no trainings, lectures, or lessons on leadership. Rather, these are the times when they are working collaboratively at their tables, in literature circles, participating in writer's workshop, class led dialogue or supporting someone during work time.

Formal leading- Formal leading refers to a set of guidelines for students to follow in class, programs, trainings or lessons taught on leadership. For example, the Boy Scouts of America have a handbook for patrol and senior patrol leaders to learn how to lead and provide activities for their troops This means that students following an adult perspective on leadership.

### **Overview of Methodology**

This qualitative research study focused on sixth grade middle school students within the researcher's classroom. The focus on sixth grade middle school students, rather than seventh or eighth graders, is two-fold: 1) the sixth grade students have most recently transitioned from elementary school, thus it may be easier to recall leadership experiences while in elementary

school while experiencing leadership in their first year of middle school, and 2) I, the researcher, teach sixth grade which allowed for ample opportunities to collect data from the middle school students in my class.

A pre and post survey was administered to students gathering information about leadership. Individual interviews, observations and focus groups occurred throughout the academic year which garnered descriptive rich narratives. As Archard (2013) quoted Krueger (1994), focus groups are ““not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, not to make statements about the population but to provide insights into how people perceived a situation”” (p. 340). Collecting initial data and selecting focus group participants at the beginning of the school year was important because the researcher/teacher had not yet built relationships with the students minimizing biases and assumptions that would otherwise affect the group selection.

### **Researcher’s Experiences**

My twenty-three years of experience teaching middle school students and knowledge about middle school development allowed me to stay focused on potential leadership situations while tuning out typical middle school behaviors, such as seeking independence, trying to find themselves through activities and friendships, questioning lessons in class, and seeking attention. It was challenging to keep assumptions and biases at bay, such as, knowing student home life, student interests outside of school, or my own concerns about students’ well being. These may all have impacted the results as initial data collecting was delayed into the school year when stronger relationships and communities were established. In addition, how I build learning communities within my classroom are shared as they may impact why some students feel comfortable to step forward to lead.

## Summary

It is important when making decisions that impact others to invite all voices to participate. For this study, I was curious to learn from sixth grade students about their perspectives on leadership. Students provide feedback on assignments, but to learn their inner hopes and visions about the life skill of leading was transformative, as both the researcher and an educator. The student voices heard in this study contribute to how educators may advocate for their students in various situations. Many educators may continue to make assumptions and decisions about adolescents as leaders, but this information may be lost with the absence of middle school students' voices. Thus, I sought the answer to the question: *What are middle school students' perspectives on leadership in their daily academic life?*

Further exploration into the literature on leadership perspectives for adolescents, the definitions of leadership, and leadership theories is presented in chapter two.

## CHAPTER TWO - Literature Review

### Significance of Topic

Leadership opportunities and membership in a community affords students the chance to learn to be open through an exchange of ideas among diverse groups of people, and the ability to find ways to lead in both intimate and large arenas; enriching not only their lives, but also the communities around them. Therefore, this question becomes an important element when communicating on many platforms: *What are middle school students' perspectives on leadership in their daily academic lives?* Research supports practicing leadership early where leadership development begins, “including the capacity to understand and interact with others” (Gardner, 1987, as cited in Kudo, n.d., p. 3). Because communication is a basic youth leadership skill identified by researchers (Baskin, n.d.; Gehret, 2010; Hay & Dempster, 2004; Kudo, n.d.), it develops with practice and over time as adolescents become contributing adults and future leaders of our society (Archard, 2013). Mitra and Serriere (2012) explained that to lead provides a “sense of confidence, a sense of self-worth, and the belief that one can do something” (p. 748). However, these leadership traits can only be developed when students have ample opportunities that positively impact their daily lives.

As students are exposed to more chances to lead, they will fine tune their leadership style and find that both successes and failures provide learning opportunities to improve leadership next time. Middle school students need this time to practice leading in school to learn from their mistakes to better lead later in life. Brungart (1996) states, “opportunities in childhood and adolescence allowed young people to practice leadership activities” (p. 84) and experience the “value of learning from mistakes” (p. 86). Coffey and Lavery (2017) consider leadership in middle school “a critical pathway from primary school based leadership to models of leadership



exercised at senior secondary level and beyond” (p. 2); thus middle school may be a time for students to explore options and find their own voice. “For many young people this is the first time they have the opportunity to ‘try out’ leadership” (Brungart, 1996, p. 85). In addition, if they are not given positive opportunities, some middle school students may seek ways to lead negatively in social settings and/or find that opportunities to lead will pass them by (Linden & Fertman, 1998).

Student impact will continue into future success as they experience positive leadership roles and build confidence in their own voices. Researchers (Archard, 2013; Coffey & Lavery, 2017; Davies, 2011; Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Gehret, 2010; Mitra, 2005; Hay & Dempster, 2004; Hine, 2014; Kudo, n.d.; Linden & Fertman, 1998; Quinn & Owen, 2016; Starratt, 2007; Whitehead, 2009) indicated the absence of the adolescent voice in leadership studies. Additionally, Davies (2011) uncovered from her research in three high schools, that the “importance of learning leadership [is] by leading” (p.101) and the “on- the-job” experience impacts student confidence (p. 102).

Not only was there little research found on the middle school adolescent and their daily leadership opportunities, but the student perspective was limited as well. Davies (2011) found “questions surfaced around how students view leadership” (p. 108), and Coffey and Lavery (2017) recommend needing the “‘student voice’ in any understanding of student leadership” (p. 1) in middle school, while Dempster and Lizzio (2007) recognized the need for student voice in discussions about student leadership, not just adult input. The literature analyzed did address the educators’ role in creating in-class leadership opportunities that are informed by the adolescents they teach. In fact, Mitra (2005) states, “there has been little empirical investigation of ways in which adults facilitate the development of student voice... [within] youth leadership” (p. 521).

Educators of middle school students may be positively impacted if they develop opportunities for students to authentically lead in the class. Whitehead (2009) pointed out that teachers are so focused on curriculum that they can become stuck and only acknowledge existing leaders, missing the potential leaders expressing different characteristics or non traditional paths. As middle school students seek independence, identity, social awareness, and self efficacy, they may not realize they have the potential to lead or have the skills needed for certain leadership opportunities. Additionally, such opportunities may directly impact discipline within a class and school depending on if students feel empowered within their own learning environment. However, "...for adults to empower students they need to be empowered themselves" (Mitra, 2005, p. 545). "Leaders can let you fail, and yet not let you be a failure" ("TED Radio Hour: Disruptive Leadership", 2017).

### **Research Foundation of Topic**

Educational professional development, career training, and within media, leadership has become a common topic or catch phrase when seeking advancement or employing the right candidate. Whitehead (2009) believes that "many leadership studies are focused primarily on adult interpersonal and organizational leadership development and pay little attention to developing the right type of qualities of leadership by adolescents" (p. 848). Various researchers (Archard, 2013; Coffey & Lavery, 2017; Davies, 2011; Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Gehret, 2010; Mitra, 2005; Hay & Dempster, 2004; Hine, 2014; Kudo, n.d.; Linden & Fertman, 1998; Quinn & Owen, 2016; Starratt, 2007) concur with this belief as well. However, this focus is in contrast to the fact that "it is in adolescence where leadership skills are introduced, tested and cultivated over time. It is where leadership starts" (Kudo, n.d., pp. 4-5).

Organized leadership opportunities increase in middle school and carry into high school through sports and clubs, such as 4H, student council, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, JROTC, application classes such as journalism or school newspaper, plus invitation only classes for the gifted and talented students with specific test scores or teacher selected students. When students are in elementary school, they are assigned tasks that contribute to the classroom community and with approximately 25 students in a class, teachers can guide and observe them as they perform tasks. This may provide elementary teachers the opportunity to see leadership potential daily. Whereas in middle school classrooms, most teachers have a minimum of approximately 120 students daily for about 50-minutes, thus observing leadership potential in various formal and informal situations may be more challenging. In theory, once students enter middle school, those daily leadership opportunities decline and change.

There are a lack of theories and studies on middle school adolescents leading within their own classrooms and other everyday opportunities (Archard, 2013; Coffey & Lavery, 2017; Davies, 2011; Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Gehret, 2010; Mitra, 2005; Hay & Dempster, 2004; Hine, 2014; Kudo, n.d.; Linden & Fertman, 1998; Quinn & Owen, 2016; Starratt, 2007) . Some middle school students will seek out leadership opportunities on their own if they are not provided opportunities and guidance within the school day. Students are going to lead, especially within their social lives, either positively or negatively and there will be a point at which it becomes difficult to turn negative leaders into positive ones; their needs will be met on both platforms. Glasser (1986; 1998) promotes building relationships, class controlled classrooms, and sharing power in safe communities in his research on the “quality” classroom and teacher, plus Good (2001) supports students’ intrinsic personal growth. In addition, Mitra (2005) found the importance of resisting to step in especially when failure may occur because showing “power

over developing leaders...shuts down” the process to experiment with leadership (as cited by Whitehead, 2009, p. 862).

### **Primary Research Themes**

Within the literature reviewed, it became clear that there is a gap in the research on the middle school experience and leadership. Research analyzed for the purpose of this study, revealed that middle school student voices; e.g. their perspectives, opinions, and ideas are missing on the subject of leadership. Even though some of the research exposes high school students in leadership roles, school leadership programs and clubs, it was apparent that there is a necessity to not simply acquire programs with adult perspectives on leadership for adolescents. Rather, there were four themes that emerged within the literature focused on student leadership: 1) adolescent child development, 2) leadership defined, 3) student voices and environment, and 4) leadership theories. The subsequent sections will provide the research to support each theme identified.

#### **Adolescent Child Development**

Bowman (2013) acknowledged that in the middle years students “hold strong convictions and beliefs about a range of issues and that leadership, for these students, ‘is a lens through which to view the world, not a checklist of things to do’” (as cited by Coffey & Lavery, 2017, p. 4), and leadership development for middle school students is a “quest to discover who you are, what you care about, and why you do what you do at pivotal moments in your life” (as cited by Coffey & Lavery, 2017, p. 3). The literature also revealed that the notion of leadership in the ‘middle years’ focuses more on development or instruction versus practicing leadership. Linden & Fertman (1998) stated, “Teenagers learn to be leaders by watching the people around them act as leaders. Leadership is learned by watching, imitating, and practicing with people” (p. 48).

Many adolescents want to be needed and feel they have things to contribute to the context but as Starratt (2007) pointed out, the context has to have “value for their lives” and the activity needs to have real life connections or “integrity” for them to participate (p. 171). Conversely, there is risk when taking on a leadership role and “...adolescents often believe that they have no chance of being leaders because it is risky to stand apart from their peers and show their individuality” (Linden & Fertman, 1998, p. 20). However, the risk can be taken if the conditions are right, there is strong guidance and students feel supported. Daily classroom opportunities for students to lead and be heard in middle school are possible.

### **Leadership Defined**

Leadership has various definitions; for example, Whitehead (2009) states, “leadership is the capacity to guide others in achievement of a common goal...a relationship between leader and follower” (p. 849). Whereas, Brungart (1996) referred to leadership as a “form of growth or stage of development in life...a continuous learning process” (p. 83). In regards to adolescents, Kudo (n.d.) viewed leadership as having “competencies: communicating, organizing, planning and coordination, being responsible and accountable for their own actions as well as others, anticipating problems, conflict resolution skills, decision-making, developing interpersonal skills and learning how to delegate responsibilities” (p. 5). And finally, Gehret (2010) summed up leadership by recognizing that researchers do not agree on the same leadership traits, but they all had the following traits in common: “interacting well with others, trust, strong verbal skills, and motivating others” (p. 2). For the purpose of this research, student leadership encompasses the developmental stage of early adolescents in order to allow leadership experiences to support their need for “group activity” rather than personal gains often sought by older students and adults.

## **Student Voices and Environment**

Middle school voices were found to be missing from the scholarly literature analyzed unless they were specifically associated to a school-sponsored club. Clubs, such as student council, were seen as valuable components to practice leadership for the student and community (Archard, 2013, p. 348); however, research on leadership opportunities within classrooms was absent. Mitra and Serriere (2012) concurred that when students had a voice there was an “increase” to their connections with peers, school, and even into the community. However, writings also indicated the importance of teachers providing “authentic” or real life opportunities to lead and learn within the classroom for students to be active participants otherwise students may still be more passive (as cited by Quinn & Owen, 2016). Weiss (2018) summed up the research of Mitra and Gross (2009) and Sands, Guzman, Stephens, and Boggs (2007) that “education and education reform, to be as effective as possible, must have the direct involvement of students” (para. 2). This then moves students from passive to active participation which in turn brings student voices to the table. However, the research indicates the classroom environment as an important factor.

Throughout the writings on student voice, the classroom environment and how it may affect student voices and taking a risk to lead is acknowledged as beneficial. Middle school teachers are aware of the need for a safe place where students feel accepted and cared for as they maneuver these early adolescent years (Brown, 2004, p. 34). In conjunction with Brown, Davies (2011) expresses the conditions to “assist learning and support student leaders” then students learn leadership through practice (pp. 94-95). Coffey and Lavery (2017) also observed that informal opportunities within the middle school classroom to practice leadership are important to provide a chance for all students to lead. Educators must make these opportunities “authentic”

not a “bunch of jobs” as elementary students experience (p. 9). From the voice of a high school student, Deal (2018), “An educator holds the power to change students’ perspectives and steer them into different paths...Empower[ing] students to use their voice, inspir[ing] them to realize their power to create change, and, above all, listen[ing] to them and their ideas” (para. 8). This reinforces the need for educators to support and encourage students to take hold of opportunities when they present themselves, but the classroom environment should foster a safe place to take such risks as studied by Glasser (1998) and Good (2001) for positive learning experiences such as leading.

### **Leadership Theories**

Child development studies by Gardner (1987) revealed “[R]esearch has shown that ‘leadership development starts early’ and ‘skills critical for effective leadership, including the capacity to understand and interact with others, develop ...in adolescence’” (as cited by Kudo, n.d., p. 2). According to Linden and Fertman (1998), adolescents experience “leading in many ways” (p. 6) and among these are the theories: transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Transactional leadership focuses on people using the “skills” of leadership whereas transformational leadership’s foci is “on the process of ‘being’ a leader, helping people transform themselves” (pp. 8-9).

Within transformational is distributive leadership, where not just one leads but is distributed among the group supporting adolescents’ view of leadership as “a social process” (Linden & Fertman, 1998, p. 116) and “shared leadership” (Davies, 2011, p. 12). Distributed leadership theory as Davies (2011) processed from Harris (2005) and Spillane (2006) is a “group leadership model [that] focuses on interactions between leaders, people around them and their situation” (p. 7). Adolescents respond in various manners depending upon the situation, thus, the

environment influences leadership decisions made by adolescents. As distributed leadership focuses on “interactions rather than the actions of leaders” (Davies, 2011, p. 26) and as students express, “they value their groups and are working to empower others” (Davies, 2011, p. 65). Thus, many adolescents may prefer to work in groups due to their need for socialization which, in turn, may expose multiple leaders to achieve a goal as well as learn over time. Therefore, distributive leadership theory supports middle school students as they seek to find themselves together: who they are, where their interests lie, what they value, and gifts they can contribute to the world around them.

According to von Glasersfeld, the constructivist theory reconfigures one’s knowledge with new information through reflection upon an experience, thus adolescents arrive at their own idea of leadership through their individual experiences (Fosnot, 1996). Linden and Fertman (1998) agreed that “[t]hrough life experience, observation of the people around them, and maybe even education, teenagers arrive at adolescence with a model for doing leadership tasks...” (p. 16). Thus supporting the belief that all learners have the capacity to lead when integrated opportunities to lead are present in the classroom (Davies, 2011). With each new experience, students decide to lead or not as they search for their own truths in life as explained by Starratt (2007):

[I]t is a journey to becoming real, to discovering who one wants to be, who one has to be in order to fulfill one’s destiny. The inner journey continuously grapples with the question of responsibility, of ownership of one’s choices and actions: ‘Do I want to do this, or am I simply doing this to please others, or because I’m afraid to be ridiculed if I speak my mind. (p. 168)



As adolescents work their way through personal trial and error and observe others, they may be confronted by similar questions.

### **Current Research Trends**

The literature reviewed focuses primarily on clubs and school-sponsored activities; however, daily leadership opportunities for middle school students continues to be evasive. Whitehead's (2009) research found that leadership should be "integrate(d)... into the academic process" (p. 863) and not lead only through "exclusivity" environments (p. 865). Hay & Dempster (2004) are in agreement with integrated leadership chances at school, not necessarily a program or club. In addition, when adolescents "see avenues and opportunities to contribute" in school they are more likely to participate in leadership as a learning process (Davies, 2011, p. 106). These researchers agree that adolescents have the capacity to lead as articulated by Bowman (2013):

To lead others, middle school students have to believe that they matter and that they can have a positive impact on their classmates and at school. They have to believe that what they are doing in class, in their school, and in their community counts for something; that their words and actions can move and inspire those in their midst. (p. 59)

The research reviewed does not highlight daily classroom opportunities for middle school students to lead. Some writings leaned toward leadership in the social lives of middle school students with them choosing to lead in either pro-social, positive, or anti-social, negative, manners. In Cox's (2011) high school case study, when "developing leadership skills they need to contribute successfully in both academic and societal arenas" (p. 13). Additionally, there is thorough research to support adult leadership training from scholarly articles to books, yet the struggle to find writings directed toward daily leadership in middle school classrooms continues

to be lacking. A "...review of ...relevant recent research has led us to argue that there is little evidence that leadership is a concept that has been adequately described from the student's point of view" (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007, p. 282). Thus the question is posed: *What are middle school students' perspectives on leadership in their daily academic life?* Secondary questions:

- a. What are middle schools doing to initiate opportunities to lead outside of clubs, sports and leadership classes?
- b. How do teachers guide through opportunities to lead daily without imposing their own biases upon students' perspectives?
- c. How do students define leadership?
- d. How do students see themselves in the leadership capacity within their classes?

### **Conclusion**

There is much research on leadership, adolescents, classrooms, gender and leadership, and leadership programs, yet the voice of the middle school student on leadership remains limited or absent. Thus, it is the goal of this research study to highlight and communicate the perspectives of middle school students on leadership and available opportunities, and with great hope, will subsequently create change in the middle school classroom. The specific methodology to pursue the middle school adolescent perspective on leadership and their personal experiences follows in chapter three.

## CHAPTER THREE - Methodology

### Overview

Chapter two synthesized literature relevant to adolescent leadership. This chapter describes the methodology used to collect and analyze data for this study. The researcher conducted qualitative action research to answer the question: *What are middle school students' perspectives on leadership in their daily academic life?* This chapter explains the rationale for qualitative action research, details in the research participants and setting, data collection methods and tools, data analysis and limitations.

### Research Paradigm and Rationale

Qualitative action research allows observations, interviews, surveys and focus groups for the researcher to gain insight through rich data. In order to investigate answers to the research question, *What are middle school students' perspectives on leadership in their daily academic life?*, the researcher/teacher conducted qualitative action research. The experience of the researcher and her twenty-three years of teaching middle school students, highlighted the inquiry within the classroom and anecdotal evidence noting the lack of student voice on leadership opportunities in one middle school. Surveys were used to garner middle school student populations' perspectives, and interviews and observations provided detailed narratives of middle school student perspectives of leadership. Creswell (2007) explains that qualitative research design (as cited in McMillan & Schumacher, 2010)

... begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of theoretical lens, and the study of research problems, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a nature setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes.

The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflectivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem. (p. 321)

Thus, for the purpose of this study, qualitative research is an integration of Cresswell's (2007) and McMillan & Schumacker's (2010) explanation that analysis "is done during data collection as well as after... [it] is an ongoing part of the study" (p. 367). Influenced by the fact that the research question appears to be limited in the professional research and by the researcher's belief in honoring student voice on the topic of leadership, the researcher wanted to know more about the experiences of middle school students and what they had to say about leadership. Studies on leadership, such as Mitra (2005), Brungart (1996), and Whitehead (2009) as well as others, indicated the need for student voices on leadership. Mitra (2005) stated, "[T]here has been little empirical investigation of ways in which adults facilitate the development of student voice, and subsequently, youth leadership" (p. 521).

The adult in the classroom working with the students was also the researcher. The researcher's role was both teacher and researcher where she was able to make decisions and implement change if necessary throughout the data collection process, better able to maintain sensitivity to the people and places under study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The dual role of teacher/researcher highlighted the awareness of the limitations and biases that the role of teacher may bring into the researcher's lens.

### **Research Setting**

This qualitative action research took place in a western suburb of a midwestern city in a middle school which consisted of sixth through eighth grades with an approximate population of 800 students. At the time of this research, leadership programs were not formalized as part of the curriculum. Student council was the only program where students were selected through an

application and interview process, where students may have gained some planned leadership experience. Extra curricular, after school, clubs were offered that ranged from mathematics club to coding for girls, plus sports were also offered after school. During the school day, students identified as gifted and talented were exposed to leadership skills, however, to be involved, students must have reached a specific threshold on an academic test score to be invited. As of spring 2019, 64% of the student population were white, 6.5% were black/African American, 19.5% were Asian, and 3.8% were Hispanic/Latino. The middle school was comprised of 11% free reduced lunch, 8% Special Education, and 2.5% English learners.

### **Participants**

The research was collected within the researcher/teacher's sixth grade language arts classroom. The 78 research participants comprised one team of sixth grade middle school students from the researcher/teacher's team. The researcher's role as a language arts teacher in the middle school positioned her to conduct the action qualitative research with the sixth grade students on her team. A teacher in the district for twenty years, has a Master's Degree in Teaching and Learning, and was enrolled in an Education Doctorate program.

Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and their parents/guardians' consent to participate was sought. The informed consent letter invited all sixth grade students on the team to participate and described the rationale for the study's focus. The letter offered minor potential risks to participants and assured the parents and guardians of the student participant anonymity. Participants were given the opportunity to opt out of the study at any time.

A second letter of consent was sent to parents/guardians' of students selected to be part of the focus group as well as individual interviews. Focus group participants were privy to the interpreted data and examined if the student population intent was clear and accurate. School

district administration was informed of each step of the research process, including documentation of steps taken. At any time, students and parents/guardians could opt out of the study, and at the end of the data analysis, parents/guardians were provided access to the results of the participants' perspectives on leadership and a completed dissertation was available upon request.

Pre and post surveys with three language arts' classes, a focus group and individual interviews were conducted (Appendices A and B). Specific details are clarified and justified in the next section, *Data Collection Methods and Tools*, which also includes a timeline.

### **Data Collection Methods and Tools**

Maxwell (2013), Creswell (2006), and Lofgren (2005) agree that there is a depth of research on the various interactive approaches for qualitative research. Block (2009) as well as Adams, Jones and Ellis (2015), support interviews and conversations through rich descriptive studies that provide support to others' voices. Triangulated data from surveys, interviews, a focus group, and informal observations constructed a well-rounded perspective of leadership through these middle school students' lenses. The timeline of each step in the study is described below.

**Timeline.** Due to a variety of circumstances at the organizational levels that hindered and delayed this researcher's ability to conduct the research earlier in the school year as planned, the first survey was administered at the beginning of December. Therefore, both the original plan for possible future research and the adjusted plan due to circumstances have been included.

#### ***Original Plan.***

##### September 2018

- *survey* administered to researcher/teacher's three language arts' classes 10-20 minutes
- analyze data, color code and find patterns/themes within survey
- make any changes to interview questions necessary from survey insights

October 2018

- *focus groups* meet 30-40 minutes mid to end of October
- transcribe and analyze descriptive narratives

November 2018

- *interview* individual participants 15- 30 minutes throughout November
- transcribe and analyze descriptive narratives

January 2019

- *observations* during group work time in classes one day - take field notes

February 2019

- *focus groups* meet 30-40 minutes beginning to mid February

March 2019

- *interview* individual participants 15- 30 minutes throughout March before spring break

April 2019

- *observation* during group work time in classes - take descriptive field notes and compare to survey data

May 2019

- *survey* administered second time to researcher/teacher's three language arts' classes 10-20 minutes the first week of May
- analyze data, color code and find patterns/themes/changes from original
- *focus groups* meet 30-40 minutes share data for final student input on findings the last week in May
- *reflective artifact* will be completed mid May by focus groups/interviewees

*Adjusted Plan.*November 2018

Sent out parent/guardian permission letters after IRB and district approval. Returned by mid November.

December 2018

- *survey* administered to researcher/teacher's three language arts' classes 20 minutes
- analyze data, color code and find patterns/themes within survey
- make any changes to interview questions necessary from survey insights

Mid -December 2018

- *focus groups* meet 20 minutes
- transcribe and analyze descriptive narratives

January 2019

- *observations* during group work time in classes one day - take field notes
- *interview* individual participants 20 - 30 minutes throughout January and into February
- transcribe and analyze descriptive narratives

February 2019

- \_\_\_\_\_ - *finish interview* individual participants 20 - 30 minutes throughout February
- transcribe and analyze descriptive narratives
- *focus groups* meet 20 minutes mid- February

March 2019

- *focus groups* meet 20 minutes end of March before spring break

April 2019

- *observation* during group work time in classes - take descriptive field notes and



compare to survey data

### May 2019

- *survey* administered second time to researcher/teacher's three language arts' classes

20 minutes mid-May

- analyze data, color code and find patterns/themes/changes from original

- *focus groups* met 20 minutes mid May to choose pseudonyms and 30 minute pizza party

lunch to celebrate the end of the study

- *reflective artifact* collected mid May by focus groups/interviewees

**Surveys.** Google surveys (Appendix A) were administered within the language arts classroom through a link to the researcher/teacher's Canvas LMS page where only the researcher/teacher's students had access. The pre survey was completed in the first week of December, 2018 and the post survey was completed at the end of May, 2019 to the same sixth grade population. The survey was approximately 20 minutes in length; although some students took longer to complete it. The survey was given while students were in class influenced by Fink (2017) who advised, "the more environmental control you have the more accurate your results will be" (p. 118).

The survey consisted of both closed and open questions to elicit more student voices through explanation versus all closed questions, such as multiple choice. Data was loaded into a spreadsheet and graphs for easier readability for the researcher to analyze, code, and find themes. The data was examined three times: once for overall big picture ideas being exposed; second to color code; and the third to verify themes matched students' overall ideas. Based on student responses to the initial survey in December, follow up questions were posed (Appendix B).

**Focus Group.** As described earlier, a diverse population of sixth grade students when considering gender, race, culture, reading level and in class observations created the focus group. In Krueger's (1994) research, focus groups are "not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, not to make statements about the population but to provide insights into how people perceived a situation" (as cited by Archard, 2013, p. 340). The plan was for one focus group to consist of five students per language arts class to total 15 participants. Even though attempts were made to include fifteen students, three students rescinded and stated they would rather not participate; thus 12 students were in the final focus group.

The researcher/teacher was curious if the students would adhere to their own ideas or would be influenced by their peers, which may happen among adolescents. Thus, interviews, focus groups and observations with the same participants was necessary to understand the depth of their experiences with leadership. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) believes these "supplementary techniques... can increase not only the validity of the initial findings but also the credibility of the entire study" (p. 364). The groups met during multi-tiered support system class (MTSS). There was more comfort between teacher and peers to share information as a group as the year progressed. The final group met in May for two 20 minute classes to provide final input to the data collected and determined if middle school students' perspectives were accurately displayed (Appendix B).

**Interviews.** Fifteen sixth grade students were selected at the beginning of the school year in order to prevent preconceived ideas from researcher/teacher, and as stated earlier, twelve students created the group. Factors that determined this group were the same as stated in the above focus group section. These students served in multiple capacities: focus group participant, interviewees and class observations for data to reflect both group dynamics as well as individual

perspectives. Students were of varying reading abilities, such as a gifted and talented student in reading to a special education reader to an English learner. Gender equality, diverse race and a mix of elementary schools also contributed to the participants selected. Interviews allowed the researcher to build descriptive context around the responses. As Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) states: “The live interview situation, with the interviewee’s voice and facial and bodily expression accompanying the statements, provides a richer access to subjects’ meanings than the transcribed texts will do later on” (p. 155).

These semi-structured interviews of about 20-30 minutes provided insight to the qualitative survey completed by the broader group of sixth graders and narratives of personal experiences. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) agreed, “Often qualitative interviews [are] semistructured, beginning with general questions and then probing with more specific questions” (p. 359). In January and February 2019 where much growth had occurred in learning communities half way through students first year of middle school, students were individually interviewed. These were to be recorded, but technical complications with the first student led to hand written notes and transcribed for analysis. Due to this issue, students later read their transcription for approval and created pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Interviews allowed individuals to speak openly without the worry of peers and to clarify their survey views. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) shared Spradley’s (1979) viewpoint on semi structured interviews:

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experiences, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand? (p. 150)

The questions were the same for the focus group to allow for optional elaboration, individual input, opportunities to speak without fear of peers' judgments and to explain ideas about leadership in their everyday academic life and more (Appendix B).

**Observations.** Student interactions in the classroom during small and large groups as a community of learners, as referred by the researcher/teacher, provided sensory description of the surrounding environment through students' lens when peers were leading peers. Observations within the classroom were both formal, researcher/teacher organized, and informal, student organized, interactions. The observations provided additional description and some valid information received through survey and interviews in regards to leadership. Field notes (Appendix C) were taken during these working observations in the role of researcher/observer not participant for three minutes per group. Students were observed in January 2019 and April 2019 when possible growth and change for sixth graders, including their perspectives on leadership within their learning communities (class, table group, designated groups, self selected groups), often evolve within the middle school leadership environment.

**Artifacts.** This researcher/teacher used reflective writing as another avenue of understanding the human condition. One final artifact was collected in May 2019 from focus group/interviewees to add to the narrative data sets previously analyzed: a written reflection. Each student wrote about their personal feelings and insights on leadership in their lives, especially academic life, and ways leadership can be or is integrated within middle school. The participants received this broad topic to allow for open-ended responses beyond what could be anticipated through specific guidelines. These were completed during the MTSS designated language arts day over a two week period. Upon completion, they were analyzed and aligned to corroborate data.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis from pre and post survey, focus groups' transcribed meetings, individual recorded and transcribed interviews, observation field notes and personal reflective artifacts were triangulated to emphasize common patterns and themes. The survey data was read once for the overall big picture of responses and then a second time to color code and identify themes. The transcribed notes from the focus group and individual interviews were coded and themes were identified within the two weeks of the collection. To see if there were any patterns, data among various tools were cross referenced to check validity of student narratives, actions within field notes, and survey choices. The observation field notes may have biases within the data as the researcher/teacher sought connections between data tools from building relationships with the students. The interviews were physically recorded and transcribed, and the focus group discussions had written field notes for detailed descriptions. Finally, the reflective journal artifact contributed to the individual middle school student voices and emotions about leadership and their experiences throughout their sixth grade year. This additional data piece enhanced the study by seeking deeper understanding to the researcher/teacher's inquiry: *What are middle school students' perspectives on leadership in their daily academic life?*

### **Limitations of the Research Design**

Data is collected often from students for learning and growth purposes within the district. The district required prior approval through a request form for any data collected to be used in the research, including all survey questions and answers. A letter was sent to sixth grade parents articulating the purpose of the study and to identify if they wished to opt-out. Timing was a minor factor when gathering data at designated collection points from students due to absences or vacations.

Another limitation was the researcher/teacher and the obvious adult versus adolescent authority positions (Hodkinson, 2017). In my experience, most adolescents want to follow the rules and try to do what is expected both academically and behaviorally at school. Thus, the collection of data over time was intended to provide a context of ease and openness to the conversations between students and researcher/teacher within a natural setting. Their classroom was a place where many of the students in the study feel comfortable. Meeting with students at classroom tables or on the floor of our classroom space, in an effort to be at the same physical level, was also important to soften the authority stances. It was the hope of the researcher that this environment encouraged participants/students to not just say what the student believed the researcher/teacher wanted to hear, but the participants' authentic truth.

### **Institutional Research Board**

The Hamline Institutional Research Board (IRB) has strict guidelines for researchers to protect the vulnerable population. This research has middle school students as participants, thus their age considers them part of the vulnerable population. Therefore, a human subjects online form was filed with Hamline University for approval after the committee supported the researcher to move forward from the proposal meeting. This IRB also provided proof for the participating district that the students are protected during this research.

### **Conclusion**

Through multiple data tools this qualitative study provided insight into leadership through the participating middle school students' perspectives during one school year. The data was supported with rich descriptive narratives from the participants/adolescents who shared their leadership experiences, not only as one who may lead, but also as a follower. The research tools including surveys, observation field notes, written notes, and transcribed focus group interviews

and individual interviews, along with student written reflection artifact contributed to researcher/teacher to reach accurate conclusions. Chapter four shares the results of the data analysis, themes that presented themselves, and relevant student narratives to provide evidence of sixth grade middle school students' perspectives on leadership in their daily academic life.

## CHAPTER FOUR - Data and Results

### Overview

This section provides the results of the study on middle school students' experiences. Several themes resulted from survey and answered the research inquiry posed: *What are middle school students' perspectives on leadership in their daily academic life?* It shares themes and students' perspectives on their experiences, opinions and understanding of leadership through narratives from focus group interviews, individual interviews, observation field notes, and analysis of the pre and post surveys.

The first survey was administered in December to sixth grade students in a middle school setting. It resulted in 78 student respondents. The same survey was administered a second time in May and resulted in 74 student responses. To provide clarity on some of the responses, follow up questions were posed to the focus group and during individual interviews for more personal insight. The survey was given again at the end of the school year in May to determine if there were changes in students' perspective of leadership after one year of middle school experiences. Finally, the focus group was asked for a written reflective artifact the last week in May.

The survey was comprised of seventeen questions on an anonymous Google form and consisted of true/false, multiple choice and open comment box questions (Appendix A). The numerical data shared in this chapter reflect the two surveys, December and May, in the respective order.

### Data Results

The first two questions asked whether the student had ever lead *outside* of school or *in school*. In December 88% stated "yes" to leadership outside of school and in May that number increased to 94%. In December 79% responded "yes" to leadership roles in school and 82% in



the May survey. Students were asked to reflect on the question, *In what ways have you lead others?* Forty students defined leadership in class as “helping others” and 31 students viewed leadership as “telling them (others) what to do.”

Both of the surveys indicated that 23 students lead through specific activities, such as babysitting, sports, and student council while “lead by example” had 13 and 15 indicators. This question was an open comment box so students could write as many responses as they wanted. Data analysis revealed that 14 in December and seven in May defined leadership as “standing up to bullies” and telling students who were “off task to get back on track.” In the December survey, five students shared that they had never had a leadership role; while in May, that number decreased to zero, meaning that all respondents had an opportunity to lead during their sixth grade year. This increase in leadership roles may be because there are more opportunities to lead in a middle school environment than in elementary school or that classroom structure yielded more opportunities.

After students reflected upon their leading experiences, the surveys asked them to consider, “How do you know how to lead?” and “Where did you learn this skill and from whom?” In the following sections, students expanded to their multiple choice responses through open comment boxes for more individualized details.

### **Learning To Be A Leader**

Participants identified specific people that exhibited leadership in their lives, thus impacting their perspectives. Students were allowed to select as many choices that applied to their life experiences as they responded on the next question, *How did you learn to be a leader?* “Family member” was identified 57 times in December and 53 in May. Even though this question did not have a direct follow up question for the students to explain their choices further,

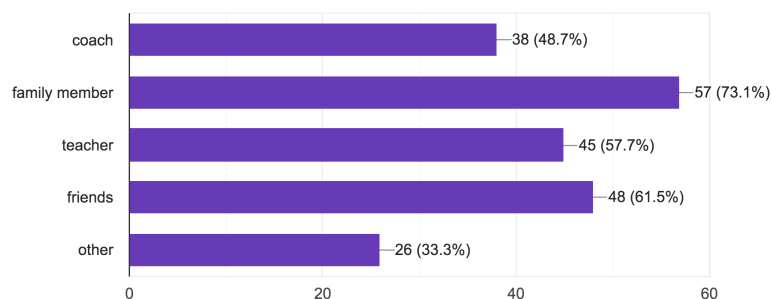
it aligned with survey question number 10, *Who is an example of a good leader in your life?* For example, one respondent stated, “My dad, because he leads positively with a good attitude” (Survey, May 13, 2019). Another described their mother’s way of leading, “[W]hen she comes home every day from work, she always has a story, good or bad, and like in every story she solves the problem. She is a leader because she isn’t afraid to say something that is wrong, and she does the best to make it right” (Survey, May 13, 2019). Another student described, “My family, mom, dad, and my brother. Mostly my dad because he is isn’t the one who gives lectures to me when I do something wrong, he explains it deeply that I always tend to remember it in any situation” (Survey, May 13, 2019). Similar responses were reiterated within the individual interviews as well. Outside of family members, participants selected others who taught them to lead like friends and/or coaches

In addition to family, respondents shared that 48 students in December and 45 in May, identified that “friends” taught them how to lead because “they stand up to bullies” and “[she] makes lots of decisions” (Survey, December 11, 2018); for example, Angelica, agreed that “... [I] had friends who were good leaders and let others lead as well” (Individual Interview, May 1, 2019). Others identified teachers (45, December, and 39, May) and coaches (38, December, and 36, May). Kristiina shared this example, “My gymnastics coach... is organized and helps everyone with their own skills” (Individual Interview, January 10, 2019). In addition, a few commented, “[M]y old coach, he was great and always knew how to help everyone out”, and “my old soccer coach because he has been through cancer and because of that had his tongue removed, but he still coaches” (researcher fixed spelling errors) (Survey, December 11, 2018). The following graphs show the distribution of student choices for all who influenced their knowledge of leadership. (Figure 1)

## December

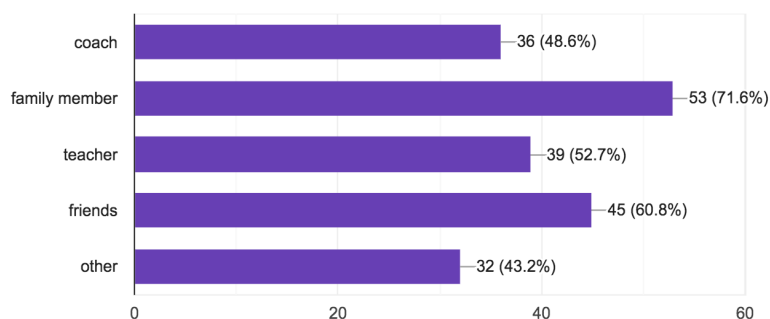
## 4. How did you learn to be a leader? Check all that apply to you.

78 responses



## May

74 responses

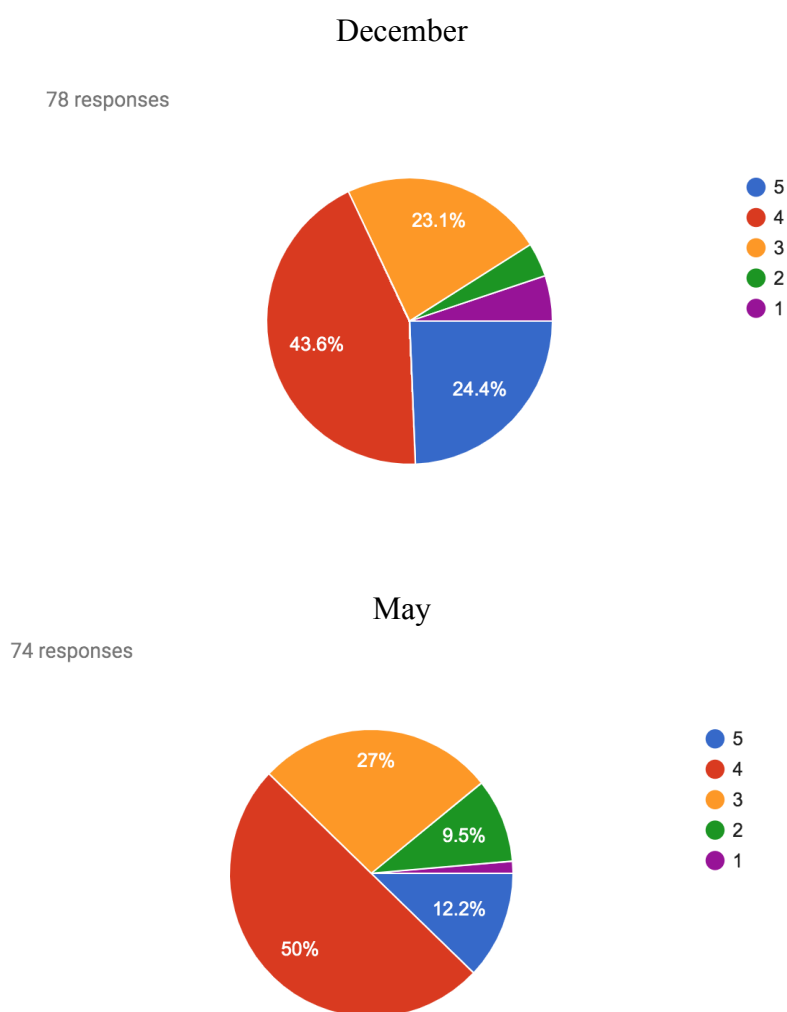


*Figure 1: Survey question #4: How did you learn to be a leader?*

Linden & Fertman (1998) stated, “Teenagers learn to be leaders by watching the people around them act as leaders. Leadership is learned by watching, imitating, and practicing with people” (p. 48). Children of all ages learn through observing others and adolescents have watched those most involved in their lives lead for many years, such as family and friends. Survey results affirmed this in that participants identified family, friends and coaches as the main influences in their learning how to lead. Even though students learn by watching others lead, these middle school students still reflect upon their own interests in leadership opportunities.

## Leader Within Oneself

Participants were asked to consider their own interest in leading and to place themselves on a Likert scale with “5 being you like to lead and 1 being you would rather never lead.” There were subtle shifts between the sets of data from the December survey to the May survey respectively, such as 24% to 12% for a 5, 43% to 50% for a 4 and 23% to 27% for a 3. Meanwhile, 8% and 11% remained for the bottom two areas which indicated they would rather not lead (Figure 2).



*Figure 2: Survey Question #5: On a scale of 1-5, 5 being you like to lead and 1 being you would rather never lead, where do you see yourself as a leader?*

During individual interviews, students were asked to explain their perception of the difference between a rating of a 4 and a 5. Sam articulated that he worried he would “get it wrong” [make mistakes] and “it would depend on the topic” or what the opportunity was to lead. Angelica explained, “In middle school I’m meeting new people so I don’t want to lead as much.” Thomas’s feedback considered group members, “If I know the people more in my group I can see if they can do more, so I don’t need to lead alone.” He added, “If it is a hard topic for me then I would choose three for wanting to lead but to let others have a chance to lead” (Individual Interview, February 19, 2019).

Respondents who rated their “liking to lead” a 3 on the Likert Scale had different reasons for their rating; for example from their individual interviews (2019), Ruby stated, “I get nervous a lot and that doesn’t make me as good as someone who doesn’t get scared, nervous or worried.” Keila articulated, “I’m ok to lead but I don’t want to lead all the time” and added, “My peers know me so they might not listen to me.” Bamu stressed, “Five means I’m ok to lead anybody and that is not true.” Kristiina, who is new to the district, rated the statement a 2 because she “sits back from leading here (at this school), but not at her old school” in which case, she would choose a five. A common theme among the responses was the influence of peer relationships. Whitehead’s (2009) research addressed the “relationship between leader and follower” (p. 849), and the “nature of social-lock, which creates a glass ceiling for adolescents” (p. 857) which can interfere with volunteering for a leadership role. Cain (2016) reminds us that, “Leading isn’t just about you - it’s about the people you’re leading (p. 206).

Several students interviewed pointed out that that the topic of the leadership project mattered in their decision to lead. In his individual interview (2019), Marcus explained, “It depends on the topic. Like basketball, then I’d be a five because I know a lot about the topic,”

and Gupta shared that he would “probably lead more in science or math situations since I am in clubs for these topics” (Individual Interview, March 1, 2019). According to Linden and Fertman (1998) taking a chance to lead brings some sense of uneasiness as “adolescents often believe they have no chance of being leaders because it is risky to stand apart from their peers and show their individuality” (p. 20). This was evident by student responses in they would be more willing to lead when more knowledgeable and comfortable with the focus.

The majority of participants indicated that they would be more willing to lead their “age group” of peers with 42 (December) and 37 (May). Even though in December 29 and in May 26 selected they would prefer to lead “younger” than themselves, and 34 (December) and 31 (May) numbers indicated that “age does not affect me” while leading. Follow up questions with the focus group provided more insight into these responses, such as those that chose “yes” for leading younger individuals was because “they would listen to them and they respect you as the leader” as they indicated “younger” meant around third grade or younger, but those that did not was because they experienced times when “younger kids don’t understand what I am communicating” (Focus Group, December 13, 2018).

Analysis of qualitative data from individual interviews (2019) and focus group discussions (2018) revealed that students may have chosen “my age” or peers to lead because “they understand what I am saying”, “they know me” or one student stated, “it depends because they don’t know me and I’d be uncomfortable talking”. With the selection of “age does not affect me”, the focus group shared that “older people don’t listen to younger people,” some “would feel uncomfortable leading them as they would know more than me”, and “it would feel awkward” (Focus Group, December 20, 2018). These insights reveal that students may not have had opportunities to lead where they believed the learning environment was reciprocal with the

teacher or adult present in the environment. Yet, it also supports the desire adolescents have to lead, especially their peers, which is dependent upon the individual and the situation.

Data indicates that middle school students prefer to lead their age group, but that it also comes with a stipulation or two for some. The willingness to step forward to lead was evident, but a lingering “but...” was evident in the individual interviews and focus group discussions. Answers to lingering questions, such as, “Do I know the topic?” and “Who are the followers?” were deciding factors in their willingness to lead. Thoughtful about their own opportunities to lead, the participants also had insights into who they may “let lead” or not.

### **Letting Others Lead**

The survey inquired: *Do you let others lead even when you could?* Fifty percent of participants indicated “sometimes” while 46% were “yes”, and 4% remained in charge as the leader. Twenty-six respondents in December and 33 in May indicated that they do let others lead; several explained they let others lead because “they are better at it, know what to do”, “...it’s a small task to lead versus a big one so let them try”, and “some stepped up faster than me.” However, 25 (December) and 23 (May) respondents stated that everyone “needs a chance to lead and they let them try.” These middle school students strongly communicated with 50% for “sometimes” and 46% for “yes” that not only is it important to lead, but also to support others as leaders. Thus showing the relationship between leader and follower are important to adolescent leadership. Conversely, in December 21 and in May 13 respondents indicated that they would rather not lead due to “being shy”, and “don’t want the attention”, or “it’s too hard but if I have to I will.” While 6/4 respondents do not let others lead because of when “bad leaders want to lead, we know they won’t work”, and finally 3 (December) and 6 (May) participants shared they want to be the leader.

While observing students work on a novel study in literature groups during a Language Arts class in April, the researcher noted an example of a time that middle school students do not let others lead. Olivia had left her group to work alone. When asked her reason for stepping away from the group, she hesitantly stated, “I want to get work done and the others are messing around.” Her decision to remove herself from the group and not follow, provided evidence of the need for leaders and followers to have a common goal. Whitehead (2009) and Northouse (2019) agree that leadership involves achieving common goals between members of a group. To achieve common goals in a middle school setting, educators must understand the various ways in which adolescents define leadership.

### **Adolescent Perceptions of Leadership**

After initial data was gathered from the first seven questions on the survey, the inquiry moved into adolescent perceptions of leadership. When asked: *What is your definition of leadership?* The respondents, 36 in December and similarly, 35 in May, respectively, used the terms “helping”, “guide” or “direct” others to describe what a leader does; while, 11/18, commented that leadership is one who “sets an example” or they see the “right thing to do.” During a focus group discussion, students were asked for insight into “why” specific terms, such as those similar to lead by example, may have been so common. They shared that in fifth grade it was something they heard all year through the DARE program (Drug, Abuse, Resistance, Education); therefore, it reflected in the student responses. With 15/9 respondents seeing a leader’s actions as “influences”, “speaks up”, and/or “makes change”. Northouse (2019) states that “...leadership involves influence...” (p. 5). In addition, affects such as “caring, respectful and being kind” were traits of leadership according to 5/10 respondents, and 10/5 students described leadership as “[a] boss, listens to you, controls others and makes sure everything is



going smoothly. These respondents communicated that there is a vast range of middle school perspectives when defining leadership; however, they are in agreement that leaders complete tasks while being kind toward others as dominated in the surveys, interviews and focus group discussions. These varying definitions may not correlate with the educator/adult perspective, thus they may not acknowledge some types of leadership styles which the adolescent views as leading.

Students were then asked; *Do you think adults miss good leaders in classrooms?* The response was a resounding “yes” with 82% in December and 79% in May. Some reasons were: “teachers are distracted with so many students”, “adults miss the small things students do to lead”, and “many lead outside of school” (Survey, December 11, 2018). The focus group (2019) provided insight into these results, for example, Gupta recognized that “loud kids are seen because they want to control where it [activity] goes,” and Ruby stated, “There is a lot of behind the scenes leading. You may not notice. Leading by helping.” While Olivia understood that some “role model[s] by leading by example [which] leads to missing leaders” (Focus Group, January 3, 2019). Further analysis of this data exposed a specific group, “quiet” students, as missed by adults as leaders. For example, Sam shared, “They could be the quiet kids, lead without taking over, or take action versus talking to lead.” Cain’s (2016) research indicated support for the “quiet” students that the focus group referenced by stating:

“leadership doesn’t require being highly social or attention seeking. ... The most effective leaders are not motivated by a desire to control events or to be in the spotlight. They are motivated by the desire to advance ideas and new ways of looking at the world, or to improve the situation for a group of people. These motivations belong to introverts and extroverts alike.” (p. 63)

Gupta summed it up, “Adults don’t see the full story” (Focus Group, January 3, 2019). The focus group participants agreed that “It happens more than adults think it does.” Although some adults may overlook leadership potential in some students, participants acknowledged those who contributed to their leadership experiences.

### **Dynamics of Positive and Negative Leaders**

Various people influenced the respondents leadership experiences both positively and negatively. When participants were asked who was a positive or “good leader in their life”, parents and other family members ranked the highest with 46, December, and 40, May, responses. While coaches ranked 11/11 respectively. This data affirms the earlier discussion about who they learned leadership from, thus pointing out that parents/family and coaches are good leaders. Yet, “friends as good leaders in their life” increased from seven to 16 by the May survey. This may be because there is often an adolescent tendency to move further away from their family and toward friends as they seek independence and uncover who they will become while keeping parents/family members close by. Teachers were on the list from 10 in December and seven in May, however, two respondents stated “no one” or “not sure.” This left some considerations to be made in regards to students who find themselves without a “good” role model within the realm of leadership. Further investigation would be needed to uncover reasons for these few students. As Bronwyn (2011) acknowledged, “exploring the experiences of student leaders...means that interest is in how individuals interpret...leadership...[and] this knowledge needs to come from the inside” (p. 24). Adolescents need experiences, including observing other positive leaders, in order to find their own leadership style.

Following the reflective question of a role model in their life, they were asked to describe an experience that demonstrated *positive leadership*. Some students simply stated yes on the

surveys with 19/12 respectively. However, situations that involved school had 12, December, and 25, May, responses with explanations surrounding “peers they had to work with on a project together”, “who had chosen to manage a disruptive group member”, or the other end of the spectrum to “help the group understand the task.” Even though this data set increased, the number of examples surrounding friends decreased from 17 in December to 6 in May who demonstrated positive leadership. This was an inconsistency to the earlier question where respondents selected friends as a *good* example, yet at the end of the school year less respondents chose friends as a *positive* example. Students may become more involved by middle school where they experience a larger variety of leadership opportunities resulting in new perspectives by the May survey. Linden and Fertman (1998) shared that this is “...the time for the young adolescent to find their identity” (p. 15) and their “...quest for independence and autonomy” (pp. 11-16) (as cited by Kudo, n.d., p. 28), thus the change of leaders in one’s life evolves and changes with the students.

One such change evident in the data were opportunities to lead in their sports which increased from 9 to 16 by the May survey as opposed to the December survey. The rationale for the increase is unclear because school sponsored sports begin in seventh grade, not sixth grade. Students can play sports earlier, but their sport involvement would have remained similar from December to May just like previous years. Therefore, this increase may be motivated by age development and the desire to lead due to more experience, which fosters more confidence, in the sport, as the focus group shared that they lead if they felt “confident” in the activity.

Finally, 8 (December) and two (May) responded that they had not experienced positive leadership, and a few stated “I don’t know”. This supports previous data on the various student interpretations and perceptions of leadership, including Davies’s (2011) research that addressed

the fact that their experiences shape their perspectives on leadership, including negative influences.

On the reverse side, students shared personal experiences surrounding *negative leadership*. One category of terms that ranked high were situations where someone was “bullying” or “mean” to others with 21, December, and 15, May, comments. Other high ranked terms were “bossy”, “controlling”, or “didn’t do anything” which appeared in 14/27 responses. Some form of “messing around” within groups or class were mentioned 6/10, and adult or teacher examples shared were 3/2. This left a simple “yes” with 5/1. However, 16/9 students stated “no” or they had “not yet” experienced negative leadership by the time they entered middle school. The numbers did decrease by the May survey which may be due to opportunities to observe more leaders and to lead in the middle school setting. In addition, this may indicate that opportunities and experiences with leadership substantiates one’s perspective and possible actions toward accepting the leader role.

To understand middle school students’ perspectives about the role of a leader, the following questions were created. Participants (69% in December and 74% in May) shared that there were times that they “*wished they were leading but did not speak up.*” This data set was intentionally designed to be a multiple choice question. It allowed students to be able to answer honestly without much necessary think time nor the need to recall an example. In addition, when asked, *Have you ever had lessons which taught leadership skills?*, respondents stated “yes” with 66% (December) and 58% (May) respectively. This was followed with their preferred method as “group leader” or with others at 62% (December) and 60% (May) versus “solo leader” or alone at 37% and 39%. Davies (2011) and Hine (2014) support these results that to lead as a group is the dominant choice for adolescents. Even though the students indicated “group leader” as the

preferred scenario, the next question stood to validate their choice through an isolated yes or no response: *Do you believe there is only one leader in a group?* Again, this revealed the adolescent choice to lead as a group over being a solo leaders with 92%, December, and 93%, May, choosing “no”. This evidence concludes that “leadership is a social process; it happens among people” (Linden & Fertman, 1998, p.46) which iterates the study that groups consist of both leaders and followers.

Finally, students were asked on the surveys (December 11, 2018 & May 13, 2019) if there was anything else they would like to share about their leadership experiences. Most students had nothing to add through a “nope” or “not really”, but others provided more voice. Students who did respond, shared these insights:

“[E]veryone should be a leader.”

“[I]t is good to lead because it could have a big impact on who you are as a person.”

“I sometimes want to be the opposite of a leader and follow but what’s the fun in that.”

“[B]eing a leader can be difficult but it pays off and makes me feel good after.”

“I think there is a difference between being helpful and being extremely bossy.”

“[T]here is a leadership program at the Ukrainian Center in July.”

“[T]hat sometimes you have to leave somebody if they aren’t being a good person.”

“[S]ometimes everyone is leading.”

“[M]y definition of leading is taking a chance.”

“[I]t depends on the situation.”

These responses indicate that middle school students want to lead and support others who lead, but there are challenges that may stop them from seizing opportunities to lead or to be noticed as a leader.

To summarize earlier data, these challenges surrounded the students' peers, such as whether they were off task, teasing, or lacked knowledge on the topic or task at hand. Many felt everyone should lead, but indicated it was hard to let some take over due to knowing more on the topic or the history of others misleading the group. Another indicator of leading that was a challenge for students was if students were more on the quiet side and if others just took over. In addition, the definition of leadership itself with a variety of perspectives becomes challenging, such as making decisions, helping others, having the ideas to influence change, taking risks, or to lead by example. Gupta shared that "with people you know you are able to make mistakes without being teased or blamed, but if not close to those in the group then less comfortable to lead at times because they may tease or blame me" (Focus Group, December 20, 2018). Even with challenges, there remained a positive outlook on leadership as evident through the student focus group's self reflections, a written artifact.

The focus group, who were also the interviewees, were asked to write a final written reflective artifact on leadership. Even though they could approach it from any angle, common themes emerged once again: "it is a good thing to lead", "it matters who is in the group whether one leads", "to lead is to help others understand the task", "good leaders need to learn from their mistakes and from others", "things changed over the course of the year as many may have been 'shy' in the beginning", "there are many opportunities to lead in middle school everyday but sometimes they don't always take the chance to lead" (Artifacts, May 20, 2019). A few quotes stood out in the written artifacts (2019): Ruby shared, "Leadership in school for me is more important than anything outside of school. There is more than one perspective." Kristiina reflected, "After a full year of middle school, I am still more self-conscious about leading than when I was in elementary school." Olivia wrote, "It brings up a feeling of confidence..."

Leadership is a skill where you're getting yourself out there and trying to lead a group or a partnership onto the right way. In sixth grade, people grow and learn and use their knowledge to help others... It is social and fun.”

Data analysis revealed the good and bad of being a leader, as students expressed a level of importance about leadership. Either it will matter to them “later in life” or “it is a good thing to try to lead” (Artifacts, May 20, 2019), thus middle school students want to find ways to lead through various opportunities that help them learn how to lead in the future. Hodkinson's (2017) research concurs, “...it is clear that once on the leadership path students are more likely to be selected for further leadership opportunity” (p. 46).

Within chapter five, the results of the data analyzed will provide several findings through the middle school students' lens to the inquiry question: *What are middle school students' perspectives on leadership in their daily academic life?* Limitations, implications and possible future studies will be explored, including strategies and insights learned by the researcher/teacher of middle school students.

## CHAPTER FIVE – Conclusions and Recommendations

### Summary

This study stemmed from many years of student observations of middle school students who could lead, but chose not to step forward. Many adolescents already lead through in their social or personal lives such as, babysitting, sports, volunteering and in other subtle manners, yet, some may hesitate to lead in school situations. I believe everyone will lead at some point in their life: individual lives, neighborhoods, government, businesses and beyond, but to have the means to influence, practice, fail and succeed early in life while leading, allows students to reflect and “stretch” themselves as they impact their future and in turn affect their communities. Starratt (2007) reminds us that middle school students will become adult citizens who can “... vote, debate, [change] public policy, manage households, participate in neighborhood projects, and earn a living...” (p. 181). Yet, the middle school student’s perspective or voices about how to lead, experiences in leading and or how to develop leadership opportunities were absent from the research reviewed, and according to Mitra (2005), “there has been little empirical investigation of ways in which adults facilitate the development of student voice... youth leadership” (p. 521). Thus the research inquiry: *What are middle school students’ perspectives on leadership in their daily academic life?*

Through surveys, focus group discussions, interviews and observations, I sought student narratives in an effort to understand their perspectives on leadership, why they choose to lead or not lead, and what opportunities were offered to them in a middle school sixth grade setting. I was interested in how they define leadership, what experiences, positive and negative, they have with leadership and leading in their daily academic life. The narratives exposed answers to this inquiry.



Data results showed that many of the student participants in the study want to lead, believe “leadership is important to learn”, and want to help others lead, but they worry about “making mistakes, leading their peers in the wrong direction”, and dealing with negative peer interactions (Survey, May 13, 2019 & Focus Group, January 3, 2019). Students in this study felt that adults often overlook “some students when they are leading” which “leaves only the vocal ones” to be noticed as students with leadership potential (Focus Group, January 3, 2019). These findings are factors that helped to answer the question. Thus, this six month study revealed that middle school students’ perspectives on leadership in their daily academic life is that there are plenty of opportunities to lead if adults lend their support through the students’ lens.

The findings through narratives can impact how educators, including others who work with adolescents, approach the topic of leadership, leaders, and leading on a daily basis. With intentional support to this area of study through the young adolescent lens, relevance, engagement and empowerment can lead to deeper connections that foster strong middle school environments.

### **Summary of Findings**

Over the years, I have pondered why some students lead and some do not and how some choose to lead and why, thus bringing to this study some of my own biases and assumptions on what students would reveal. I assumed that some were more shy or introverted, like myself, and are selective when they speak up to lead. Over time I came to realize that many sixth graders come to the middle school environment attempting to find their way and a sense of their true self, thus may sit back, observe first, or remain in their comfort zones and lead by action versus talking. For example as one student shared, “I’m a doer, not a talker.” This statement caused me to reflect on my own practice, especially when my students work and lead in small groups.

Influenced by a statement Gupta shared during a discussion, “Adults miss the full story” (Focus Group, January 3, 2019), I will not forget this comment nor take it lightly in my future practice as an educator. This statement encapsulated the evidence throughout the data that one group often overlooked as leaders are the “quiet” students.

### **Quiet Students**

An unexpected, yet important, finding continued to resonate throughout each data set: “quiet” students. Quiet students itself was not unexpected, but the number of comments exposing peer awareness of such students stood out in the narratives. It was often expressed that they may not directly lead due to views shared during a focus group (2019), such as, “I am loud because I want to control where things go so they probably stay quiet” (Gupta, January 3, 2019). Keila’s insight about when others choose to lead, “They may not be noticed because they lead without taking over like through actions instead of talking”, and coming from one of the quiet members of the group, Nate, “The topic matters. I’m more confident to lead groups when I’m more comfortable with the topic and others in the group.” This is an important finding of this study. Even the most vocal students recognized quiet students and their lack of opportunity to lead. Engaging in intentional observations specifically focused on quiet students and unexpected leaders in the classroom may provide greater awareness of the students in the class. These insights point to an opportunity for future area of study.

In Cain’s (2016) research on introverts, she questioned, “Why shouldn’t quiet be strong?” (p. 178) which applies to leadership because leadership looks different for various students. Focus group (2019) students concurred by expressing that everyone is different which means they may lead differently, too. No matter who the student is, they believed there were plenty of opportunities to lead in school as was evidenced in their written artifacts. One participant shared,

“There are many opportunities middle schoolers have to lead. But sometimes they don’t always take the chance to lead” (Anglica, May 1, 2019). Keila shared, “...there’s a lot of opportunities where you could lead (in middle school), but not many kids really try and lead. Sometimes you might not have the confidence to speak or it might vary on the situation or people you’re with” (Written Artifact, May 20, 2019). The situation may also be influenced by whether the student is leading alone or with a group.

### **Group Leader Versus Solo Leader**

As indicated in the data, many adolescents preferred to lead with a group versus alone which remains consistent with the research; specifically Davis’s (2011) discussion on transformational leadership which included Lee’s (2006) study that revealed the “focus young people have on shared leadership” (p. 12). This was evident through both surveys when the respondents shared they would prefer to lead with someone so that they can “bounce ideas off someone, if they do not know something the other student can help, and to help with their confidence” (Survey, December 11, 2018 & May 13, 2019). However, Olivia pointed out that to lead alone can also be positive, because “when there are too many vocal leaders in the group there would be too many ideas and the project would not move forward. Then, it would be easier to lead with one vision” (Individual Interview, February 15, 2019). A few voices on the survey and within the focus group stated they would not have to worry about leading with “a bad leader if we were the only leader” (Survey, May 13, 2019 & Focus Group, February 28, 2019). Even though middle school students had experienced a time when being the solo leader had benefited the situation, overall leading with a group was the more favorable choice as communicated through student surveys, interviews and focus group discussions data.

## Negative Leadership

Another finding associated with leading a group raised a question about leadership and negative peer interactions or influences that occur in the classroom. According to Kudo (n.d.) and Brugart (1996), research indicates that leaders need time to make mistakes when trying to lead, but the student voices shared that the negative experiences with peer leadership was more “off task, goofing around, or mistreating others through bullying.” Glasser (1998) and Good (2001) argued that students will lead either negatively or positively depending if their needs for power, love, fun and belonging are met. Thus, the negative interactions may be connected to how the follower is relating to the situation with their peers rather than how one is leading. Nonetheless, the negative behaviors do affect students leading.

At the time of this study, there appeared to be little to no research to address the negative peer interactions of followers that occur while adolescents are leading. There was some research on how selected high school leaders worried about their peers’ comments toward their role as leaders, but none in regards to daily interactions with peers. This new perspective on leadership plays a vital role for students trying to lead as it creates worry and fear for some middle school students; thus they do not choose to lead within certain student dynamics. This is relevant to the research secondary inquiry: Why might students choose not to lead? Even though fear of negative interactions from peers is evident, the data still revealed that the participants preferred to lead their peers as stated in chapter four. Therefore, leading one’s peers is a challenge for adolescents and may stop students from taking advantage of opportunities to lead in an academic setting.

## **Heart in Leadership**

Data revealed many concerns about fear and embarrassment, such as, “leading a group in the wrong way to lose points in class, or made fun of for making mistakes”, especially on the May survey where these concerns increased among those surveyed. One participant, Sam, shared, “The only reason I don’t want to lead (sometimes) is because I don’t want to get it wrong” (Individual Interview, February 22, 2019). These are honest fears as students shared they would “like to lead people they know because then they felt more comfortable” (Focus Group, December 20, 2018), but in school, groups are mixed up frequently for students to work together on projects. And yet on the positive side, many expressed heartfelt care for others as “all should be able to try to lead” (Survey, May 13, 2019) and Beatrice added, “There are a lot of things you can learn leading and everyone should have the chance” (Individual Interview, March 27, 2019). Participant Olivia reflected, “I will not speak up to lead if I know someone is trying and they never lead as much as me” (Individual Interview, February 15, 2019). The data provided evidence of heart and sincere care among adolescent leaders and followers.

## **Adults Overlook Leaders**

Participant responses to the survey question, *Do you think adults miss good leaders in the classrooms?* was an overwhelming “yes” with 82% and 79% (Survey, December 11, 2018 & May 13, 2019). The participants were asked to explain their answer on this survey question, plus the focus group (2019) provided more elaboration. Responses were:

- “I think the extent of how much the teachers know about students is very little. They only know the extent of what they choose to pay attention to in their classroom. Silent leaders are a thing that some teachers might not pick up on.”

- “[S]ometimes adults miss the small things that people do that make a big difference.” The focus group (2019) elaborated upon this response with examples that included “helping another student understand”, “letting someone else lead in the group who doesn’t lead very often”, and “more than one may be leading and they only see the one student leading when they [walk] around.”
- “[T]eachers and adults have a lot to do so they miss when someone was leading”, especially those who are “quiet”. Another respondent shared, “I think that adults miss good leadership because they are often multitasking and don’t notice it.” This contributes to the “intentionality” under *implications for practice* section below.
- “[A]dults look for the typical leaders”; those who “lead every day by example, helping others understand the content, or speaking up for other students.”
- “I think they do [miss good leaders] because I have had people who are great leaders some of the time and they let other people lead... [A]dults sometimes only focus on the good leaders that lead all the time and don't look at the people who are a good leader [and] let other people lead to give it a try.”

This aligns with Whitehead’s (2009) study that many teachers are so focused on curriculum that they may only acknowledge existing leaders, thus missing the potential leaders expressing different characteristics or non traditional paths. In addition, Cain (2016) shared,

Society often overlooks ...introverts. We idolize the talkers and the spotlight seekers, as if they are the role models everyone should be emulating. It's an especially powerful force in school, where the loudest, most talkative kids are often the most popular, and where teachers reward the students who are eager to raise their hands in class. (p. 10)

## Limitations

Although the research conducted in this study provided valuable insight into the middle schoolers' perceptions and experiences of leadership, there are some limitations to the research. The literature reviewed for this study provided research inclusive of perspectives ranging from high school, college, and into the business field in regards to leadership. However, research on adolescent leadership development through the voices of middle school students on this topic need to be honored. There is a gap in the research. More research is needed in this area through extended questions to this study, such as, "What opportunities do students believe they have in middle school classrooms to lead?"

Another limitation was the variety of circumstances at the organizational levels that hindered and delayed my ability to conduct the research earlier in the school year as planned; therefore, the first survey was administered at the beginning of December. Even though these circumstances allowed the researcher time to learn about the students over three months which could have influenced the selection of the focus group, this researcher had made a list of students for the focus group, also the interviewees, by the end of September. Fortunately, this kept true to the initial plan of selecting students early in the school year to maintain the integrity within the focus group versus later when relationships had developed. In extension, this then did change the amount of time for interviews to once versus twice, but did maintain the focus group discussions and observations as planned.

A possible further limitation was the time frame of the study. Another year of data with the same age group could solidify the data collected with similar responses or the findings could vary with a new group of sixth graders entering middle school. Which in turn influences this study with my own biases as a teacher of middle school students for twenty-three years, where I

have observed many students in leadership roles and/or missed providing opportunities for students to lead.

### **Implications for Practice**

These findings impact any individual working with adolescents, especially where observations or interactions are made on a daily basis. Coaches need to be observant for leaders both verbal and quiet and may need to shift their perspective on the traits of a leader. Parents can support their child by encouraging them to lead their way and to be comfortable with mistakes in any aspect of life. Counselors and educators can examine their style of teaching and interactions in order for students to share their voices in a safe classroom environment.

As I reflect upon my own practice in lieu of these findings, the areas to keep visible are intentionally planning lessons that honor quiet students and becoming more diligent while supporting groups of learners. During observational moments in class, I will bring intentionality to the forefront by encouraging and recognizing all facets of leading. In order to change my lens, at least one day a week I will dedicate time to focus on supporting middle school students and provide opportunities for leadership as influenced by the research and findings of this study, not just when the opportunity arises. I will diligently practice my classroom mantra, “We are confidently right, and we are confidently wrong”, into the area of leadership as defined and expressed by middle school students in this study. In addition, I will implement the following strategies into my practice based off the middle school perspectives in this study.

- Intentional lesson planning with middle school students’ voices in the forefront. This will allow me to support my students in leading through their own lens. Recognizing that leading by example and helping another classmate is seen as leading by middle school students. In addition, this understanding of various adolescent definitions expands the



simple and complex nature of leadership as identified by the students, such as helping someone understand the assignment to influencing change for the better.

- Support students in groups as they lead together. There are many opportunities to lead in my class; e.g. partners, tablemates and group assignments. I will acknowledge the care and heart that each is bringing to the group, as shared by the respondents in this study. I will guide students through dialogue on ways to lead best for their particular groups' dynamics, such as invite others into their discussion and acknowledge what others shared first before they contribute. In addition, this will allow me to intercept the negative peer interactions that may occur in groups with more sensitivity, thus creating a more positive experience for all students.
- Be attentive to non-traditional leaders and quiet leaders. I will take time to observe students who may “appear”, my bias, as not leading, and seek out ways in which they may be leading. This may require me to ask questions to understand the student's actions, and, in addition, I will need to encourage thoughtfully until one steps forward to speak. I may need to collect more written documentation from all my students to understand how they lead others best. Gathering more information for the purpose of supporting students in the classroom is often a means to more academic knowledge so then I need to do the same with leadership as well.
- View leadership through various lenses in order for all to experience opportunities to lead in a safe classroom environment.

Two areas I will continue to observe and seek understanding are 1) the concerns the participants expressed on negative peer interactions, and 2) ways in which to bring this new information and awareness to my peers. The participants made clear that they want to be heard.

All of these implications could benefit others who work with adolescents, especially middle school students, as they create conditions for student leadership.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

#### **Future Research Needed**

There are multiple opportunities for future research on the topic of leadership and middle school students. This research study revealed the need for a more intensive focus on middle school students' experiences with leadership. At the time of this study, the body of research on this topic was limited. Young adolescents deserve more research to influence teaching and learning in the area of leadership.

Secondly, the results of this study revealed that quiet or introverted students are often missed for leadership opportunities. Cain's books (2013, 2016) on the quiet introverted student would lend support and improve understanding of how quiet students lead and the challenge to be heard in a middle school setting.

Another angle to extend the research would be the peer to peer interactions which were brought up often in the data. As the surveys revealed, most responses did not change or minimally, but the negative leadership from working with peers, other adolescents, was shared often. The participating students "worried about who was in their group, having to do all the work, behaviors, and embarrassing [themselves]" (Focus Group, December 20, 2018). Teachers manage and model group work continuously; yet, more guidance on how to talk with each other in groups and ways in which to support or lead these middle school students needs to be addressed as well. Whitehead (2009) studied the importance of resisting to step in especially when failure may occur because showing power over developing leaders shuts down the process to experiment with leadership. It may be assumed by middle school teachers that students know

how to lead and engage everyone, but the assumption extends to teachers of other grade levels as well. How many educators/adults feel comfortable guiding students to be better leaders? What resources are readily available to consult on a daily basis, not just in a club or activity? In addition, do educators have the definitions that middle school students use for leadership in order to expand?

Finally, the data revealed that middle school students felt there were opportunities to lead during their academic school day. However, the results do not reveal what types of leadership opportunities exist in the classroom from the students' perspectives nor what types of leadership experiences students would like to have during their school day. Along with these perspectives is another lingering question, do educators provide opportunities students prefer in the classroom?

### **Research To Expand This Study**

This study could be extended if one followed middle school students throughout their middle years and collected narratives, including perspectives, as they encounter other opportunities and challenges while they mature in regards to leadership. To follow a group into high school could also be accomplished if the inquiry involved the evolving adolescent leader in their daily academic life.

To expand on the notion of supporting middle school students as leaders in school daily, it would enrich the research to find middle schools that are engaged in leadership for their *entire student body*, not only select groups of students or outside the school day. The intent would be to uncover lessons taught in a middle school for all to practice and make mistakes as they work to find their own leader identity. As stated throughout this research, there are books and research on leadership, but again they focus on hand selected students, clubs, sports and other activities or older age groups, but what about every adolescent having the privilege to learn how to lead

within the school setting and ways to do so that impact their environment in small and large ways? Are there middle schools that currently focus on an overall school environment that supports the future leaders within each student? This could be investigated as there is a gap in the research on the topic of school-wide leadership commitment.

Finally, one could use this study to narrow the focus on one or more results of the student narratives about their experiences with daily middle school leadership, such as negative peer encounters while leading, fear of leading, ways in which quiet students lead, how educators support these students' perspectives on leadership, or do the leadership views correlate between adult and adolescent perspectives? There is research on adult leadership and on youth leadership from the adult perspective, but one could take these student narratives and sync them with the adult perspectives on leadership to create a cohesive study. This could positively impact future work in cultivating adolescent leaders through a united lens.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study revealed that many middle school students want to lead and care about their learning, but they need support from the adults surrounding them to do so. In order for this to occur, educators must understand student perspectives on leadership in their academic lives. These narratives impacted the researcher's inquiry: *What are middle school students' perspectives on leadership in their daily academic life?* There are opportunities in middle school to lead, as stated by the student participants, but now knowing student perspectives on leadership, how do educators encourage each to take the risk to lead?

A starting place for educators to support middle school students is to study and use the various definitions and views on leadership and leading revealed in this study. From "helping and guiding, speaking up for others, set[ting] an example, a boss, controls others and influences"

(Survey, December 11, 2018 & May 13, 2019) the spectrum is large and varied for those involved with adolescents on leadership. However, research supports that everyone has their own life experiences and middle school students learn to lead by observing others in their life, thus a vast array of perceptions which relates to the constructivist theory where knowledge is ever changing through acceptance or rejection of new information.

If this is supported, it will create a culture shift from recognizing only the outspoken and content knowledgeable students as leaders toward acknowledging and inspiring all students to lead in their own way and be accepted. If these perspectives are ignored, than leadership is limited to a few which brings a disservice to many possible future leaders. Brungart (1996) went further and stated, “leadership development is advanced when leaders take time to think deeply” (p. 86) and reflect upon their own actions. Therefore, if supported, time will be offered in classrooms for student reflections as a time for students to grow. As supported by Sinek, “inspired leaders... all think, act, and communicate from the inside out” (Sinek, TED, 2018). Whitehead (2009) recognized that leadership should be seen as an integrated part of daily academics, and the data and rich narratives concur that daily opportunities to lead are available to middle school students, at least in this study, and it has brought awareness to how adolescents view, define and interact with leadership through positives and challenges of leading. Educators now, with these new perspectives, can find ways to encourage through the students’ lens to take the risk to lead.

As the researcher, but more importantly as a middle school teacher, the participants’ voices have encouraged intentionality when fostering conditions for student leadership in the classroom. As the students shared through the survey, focus group discussions and interviews, adults miss “the small ways in which we lead” (Focus Group, January 3, 2019).

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### Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. Have you ever been a leader outside of school? Yes/No
2. Have you ever been a leader in school? Yes/No
3. In what ways have you lead others? (open comment box)
4. How did you learn to be a leader? check all that apply
  - coach
  - family
  - teacher
  - friend
  - other
5. On a scale of 1-5, (5- being like to lead and 1 being- would rather never lead) where do you see yourself as a leader?
6. What age do you like to lead? check all that apply
  - Younger than me
  - My age (peers)
  - Age does not affect me
7. Do you let others lead even when you could? yes/no/sometimes
- 7a. Explain/describe your answer to #7. (open comment box)
8. What is your definition of leadership? (open comment box)
9. Do you think adults miss good leaders in classrooms? yes/no
- 9a. Explain/describe your answer to #9. (open comment box)
10. Who is an example of a good leader in your life? (open comment box)
11. Have you experienced positive leadership? Describe the situation. (open comment box)
12. Have you experienced negative leadership? Describe the situation. (open comment box)
13. Have you ever wished you were leading but did not speak up? yes/no
14. Have you ever had lessons which taught leadership skills? yes/no
15. How do you like to lead? sole leader (alone)/group leader (with others)
16. Do you believe there is only one leader in a group? yes/no

17. Anything else you would like to share about your leadership experiences?  
(open comment box)

**Appendix B: Interview and Focus Group Questions  
(Interview follow up question order)**

13. Have you ever wished you were leading but did not speak up? yes/no
6. What age do you like to lead? check all that apply
  - Younger than me
  - My age (peers)
  - Age does not affect me
7. Do you let others lead even when you could? yes/no/sometimes
10. Who is an example of a good leader in your life? (open comment box)
12. Have you experienced negative leadership? Describe the situation. (open comment box)
15. How do you like to lead? sole leader (alone)/group leader (with others)
5. On a scale of 1-5, (5- being like to lead and 1 being- would rather never lead) where do you see yourself as a leader?

**Appendix C: Field Observation Note Templates**  
**(made multiple copies per class)**

Location/Environment	People Description	Observation	Dialogue
Class A			

Location/Environment	People Description	Observation	Dialogue
Class B			

Location/Environment	People Description	Observation	Dialogue
Class C			