



Teaching Character: A Practical Guide

How Can Student Leadership Positions in Schools be Effectively Used to Develop Active Citizenship?

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Abstract

How can student leadership positions be effectively used to develop active citizenship? Firstly, build a model of student leadership that does not simply reinforce a hierarchical, 'pointy triangle', belief. Everyone can and will lead. Secondly, ensure leadership opportunities are purposeful, and not tokenistic. Finally, develop young leaders that look beyond the school gates with a desire to serve others in the wider community. Creating active citizens through student leadership positions is a powerful vehicle of character sought.

How can student leadership positions in schools be effectively used to develop active citizenship?

Student leadership positions are a powerful way to develop 'character sought'. If done effectively in schools, we can equip a generation to become active citizens driven to make a positive change in their communities. However, get this approach wrong and there is a danger of promoting unhelpful stereotypes about leadership, power and authority. Below I will outline what I have found to be the possibilities and the pitfalls of using student leadership positions to develop character. I want to outline three key principles: firstly, what the aims of student leadership should be; secondly, what effective leadership positions look like; and thirdly, how to turn leadership into character education.

Growing up, I fell into the trap of thinking that 'leadership' was a status that could only be acquired once the solid foundation of 'character' had been laid. I remember being frozen with awe as the Head Boy and Girl marched purposefully down the school corridor.

Shrinking to the side of the hallway I wondered if I would ever aspire to such great heights. Herein lies the great danger of student leadership positions. In seeking to empower students the school may unwittingly be propagating the view that leadership is a hierarchical triangle, with those endowed with certain mysterious virtues in the upmost pointy bit. Some lead, others follow.

Since teaching leadership at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, and subsequently implementing leadership programmes in three UK senior schools, I am a strong advocate that student leadership is better thought of as a vehicle for character education and not a prize for certain students who display particular virtues. The aim for character educators is to firmly establish that leadership is for everyone and that everyone can and will lead. As with any other essential life skill, leadership can be developed through practice. The primary goal for a character educator is to establish the principle that we are interested in development, not simply rewarding those who already 'have what it takes'.

The next challenge is creating the right student leadership opportunities to develop character. Although there are often good reasons to maintain a group of students who hold a position for a year or more, for example school council reps or prefect teams, schools should also create leadership opportunities which are completed in just a few weeks. In these shorter leadership appointments, there is a clear beginning (plan), middle (do) and end (review) stage. This allows for targeted reflection and feedback by the supervising teacher. Such appointments might include running a fundraising event, helping with an open day, or putting on a show. Here are three things to consider when creating opportunities:

Firstly, we want to develop character and we also want to achieve the goal for which the position has been created (to raise money, to integrate new students, to represent views to school governors etc). Without the latter there will be little buy-in for the former; there will be no sense of purpose or contribution. If the leadership role is fitting, it will challenge the student: you can only learn to swim when you are out of your depth. Students should be allowed to fail to achieve the aim of a role, but not allowed to fail to grow in character.

Secondly, leadership opportunities must have a genuine sense of purpose and contribution. The aim of the role must have the potential for real positive impact on the community. A job

title without influence is unlikely to result in deep character development. Therefore, supervising such appointments requires a particular kind of support from teachers. Strive to use coaching approaches and ask questions that open new options for change and progress. Avoid just being a mentor, telling the student how to do their job. We do not like this when it is done to us!

Thirdly, consider the wide variety of leadership roles that may be available to students in a school. Students will have different skillsets and will want to serve the community in different ways. Accommodate as many styles and approaches as possible, include both introverted and extroverted students, as well as neuro-diverse students. 'Pedestal leadership' which involves a lot of public speaking is not for everyone; many of the greatest changemakers in medicine, technology and finance avoid the limelight at all costs.

The final step in any effective student leadership programme is to turn leadership into character education. The good news is that by 'doing leadership' the students will have already thought-up new initiatives, made plans, communicated with others, negotiated problems and perhaps have even delivered something new and exciting to the community. At each step, and possibly with little teacher support, students will have found themselves flexing their virtues of creativity, teamwork, fairness, perseverance, and humility. There are a few things that teachers can add which can help make character growth more powerful and permanent. Learning to give and receive feedback on performance will help develop what the Jubilee Centre terms Virtue Reasoning. Regular feedback from teachers, including more formal self- and peer-appraisal, will not only hone awareness of growing character strengths, it will also reinforce the belief that the student's role is valued. Reflective work, perhaps including journaling, will help focus the student on virtues that they intend to develop during the appointment. This will also help young people reframe setbacks as opportunities.

Finally, schools should make explicit that students are developing the virtues of leadership not to impress potential universities or employers, but rather in preparation to serve the community beyond the school gates. This can be done in plenary sessions when students are asked how their newly developed character strengths can serve others in future roles. You can make this experience concrete using a simple table listing a virtue, how it was

useful during the leadership position in school and how it might be useful in the wider world. In this, teachers are in the business of planting seeds for the future.

I have briefly outlined that student leadership positions can be effective in developing active citizenship if schools take a developmental approach, create suitable opportunities and if students are supported to make character gains impactful and permanent. For students to flourish in a rapidly changing world of both possibilities and problems they must be prepared to take a stand and take others with them. Our duty is to set them on that path.