

THESIS

DEVELOPING AMERICA'S YOUTH: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY  
OF TODAY'S ADOLESCENT LEADERS

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### DEVELOPING AMERICA'S YOUTH: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF TODAY'S ADOLESCENT LEADERS

This research explores the perceptions that adolescent leaders in a middle school environment related to themselves and peers in a leadership program. Findings were collected through interviews and survey responses over a 4-year period and suggest that male and female adolescent leaders have differing approaches and styles of leading. While the results suggest that adolescent female leaders tend to be more productive and on-task as well as more involved in leadership opportunities, this is not reflective of roles that women fill in the managerial and leadership assignments in various work sectors.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I, Jeanne Marri Choun, owe a great deal of gratitude to my husband who jokes to my kids, “She likes school so much she has never left.” Indeed, I like learning, but I would not be able to continue to pursue this “hobby” if I did not have his support. To my children, may your pursuits in life be challenging and bring you as much joy as being your mother has brought me. And then there are the pinch hitters--all the family members who offered to pick up the pieces of sports practice shuttling, dinner cooking (or children feeding), and/or other obscure responsibilities related to parenting. I appreciate you!

To Rachel, my co-author, my colleague, my co-teaching partner, and my friend, I wouldn't have chosen to travel down this path with anyone else. Just as Kristoff and Anna finish each other's sandwiches, we finish each other's sentences. And while some people might see that as slightly odd, I see it as us having found a partnership that is strong and worthy of celebration. So, to you, my friend, I raise a Starbucks coffee and toast to you!

My co-author and I would like to thank the Ruffs and the McBrides for the scholarship opportunities they provided us at Colorado State University. Their generosity allowed us to focus on what we love and the children of our community. We thank you for your unwavering support over the last several years. We also want to thank all the professors at Colorado State University who allowed us to be the unbreakable, co-dependent pair that we are. We learned a lot in your classes and greatly value your wisdom and expertise. Finally, we owe a huge debt of gratitude to Dr. Ricki Ginsberg who responded to every call, text, and email inquiry with super speed while juggling teaching, motherhood, and academia. She has been a wealth of knowledge and showed us an abundance of support and, not to mention, she is just a super cool human being.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to our past, present, and future Where Everybody Belongs (WEB) leaders. While we may officially be your teachers, it has been all of you that have taught us.

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## **Note on Co-Authorship**

Rachel Bednar and I have been teachers and colleagues for a number of years. As teachers, we put a great deal of value on the power of collaboration. In our school's English department, collaboration is the norm. Each grade level team plans together, creates together, and sometimes even teaches together. Rachel and I have had the opportunity to do all those things and we wanted to apply those practices to the research and writing of our thesis.

Some might find it hard to believe that we wrote a whole thesis together, but that is exactly what we did. There were a few steps and tasks that we completed individually along the way, but the vast majority of this work was done in complete collaboration.

Because Rachel and I were part-time students, we knew that we would have several years to collect data and do research. Investing that much time on a topic, we wanted to be sure that we created a study that we would both be highly passionate about. For the past six years, Rachel and I have run and co-taught the Where Everybody Belongs (WEB) program. We have often discussed how this program is one of the most rewarding parts of our job. So, when Rachel suggested that we craft a study around this program, I was on board. Initially, she suggested we interview select WEB students. I agreed, but I also advised that it would be valuable to gather survey data from all WEB students. Building off my survey suggestion, Rachel brought up the idea of surveying sixth grade mentees, as well. Being that I am a sixth-grade teacher, I oversaw the communication and execution of that plan with the sixth-grade staff and students.

For us to conduct all our surveys and interviews, we had to each complete the CITI training and file an IRB application. While we took the trainings and tests separately, we worked together to fill out the initial IRB application as well as the subsequent renewal applications over the years. To conduct research with students, we also had to seek additional approval from the

Director of Research and Evaluation for the district. I managed our communication with him and secured our approval.

Once we had secured approval for our study, we began interviewing students. Almost all the interviews were conducted together. During these student interviews, I would ask all of the questions while Rachel typed up the responses. There was one occasion where I had to conduct an interview alone because of a scheduling conflict.

After collecting our data, we needed to see what other research had been done in regard to student transition from elementary to middle school and adolescent leadership. I collected several articles on those two subjects and organized them in a shared folder. Then Rachel and I evenly split the articles up. Each of us read and annotated our assigned articles separately and typed up our findings, which we later shared with each other.

Having gained some insight into the research and ideas around middle school transition and adolescent leadership, we began to sort through our own data. We separately re-read through all interviews and open-coded the data, then cross referenced our findings with each other. Together, we determined what the major themes were from our findings. From there we needed to sort our survey and interview results into several categories. I am skilled at spreadsheet usage and data sorting, so I managed that aspect of our work. Not only did I sort student responses into the major themes we established, but I also merged the survey and interview results to all be on one document for easier access.

At this point, we began to draft our thesis. This part of the process was a true collaboration. We know that many individuals who co-author papers split up sections to write, but that was not the approach we took. We truly wrote the entire paper together. Every time we worked on our thesis we were sitting at the same table or sitting on a Facetime call with each



other. We would regularly switch off who was typing and who was talking through the ideas. It was not uncommon for one of us to start a sentence and the other one to finish it. Many times, one of us would start an idea but get stuck with how to best word it and the other would jump in with a suggestion. If one of us could not think of a word, the other was there to lend a hand or pull up the thesaurus. I cannot stress this enough—it was a team effort. For us, co-authorship was not assigning each other different sections to tackle; it was truly writing the entire piece together. We felt that this approach not only helped us analyze our ideas better, but it also made the writing more fluid and sound like one voice rather than a piecemeal of multiple authors.

Though we wrote the entire thesis together, our focuses differed during the process. In general, I am a big picture person and Rachel is far more concerned with details, but during this project, those roles seemed to flip. I consistently was focused on formatting and checking that everything was in the correct place. I also utilized my tech skills to ensure that images were inserted and cited properly according to the graduate school's requirements. Rachel ensured that we were hitting all our main points and cohesively tying them together.

After completing the draft of our co-authored thesis, we did divide up some of the post-writing work. While Rachel crafted the slideshow for our defense, I formatted our document—headings, page numbers, inserting initial pages where we would later write our dedications and acknowledgements. Then, we checked each other's work. Together we split up talking points for our slideshow and rehearsed our presentation. Once we felt confident in our paper and our presentation, I submitted our thesis for initial approval.

We presented our findings together to our defense committee and they saw fit to pass us. In our final revisions, Rachel and I have made separate notes on the co-authorship process as well as how we plan to utilize our findings in our future teachings.

Co-authorship is not for everybody and it certainly comes with its own set of challenges. Managing differing schedules, personality types, and writing styles could be overwhelming for some. For many, dividing and concurring sections of a paper would be the best way to co-author. However, for us, we felt strongly that we needed to be in constant collaboration throughout the entire writing process. As teachers, that is our default setting, and it is what worked best for us. We know that we gained more knowledge and crafted a stronger study because we worked so closely together.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, while we, the researchers of this paper, were supervising a small group of leadership students, one boy saw a copy of *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers* sitting out and asked if he could take a look. Without thinking, we said, “Sure.”

He opened up to the beginning of chapter one and started reading aloud, “‘SEND NOODZ.’ The boy sent the message in the middle of the day, when she was walking home from school. He sent it via direct message on Instagram” (23). Immediately, the 14-year-old boy looked up at his friends, shocked, and shouted, “What?! Are you kidding?! What is this book?”

The text, although only a snapshot into a conversation that the author Nancy Jo Sales recalled, had implications of teen nudity, teen sexual innuendos, and indecent and erotic--not to forget illegal--requests for child pornography. Realizing the book may not be appropriate for middle schoolers, we asked for it back to examine the content.

The student was still beside himself. He posed to his friends, “Have you ever done this? Who does this? Is this for real? Like, seriously, do any of you know people that do this?”

The four other boys and one girl all responded with a resounding, “NO!”

It was at that moment that we realized that too often in the study of teenagers, youth get lumped together in one group. It seems that the media is constantly painting a negative stereotype of American teenagers. They are depicted as self-centered, superficial, and oblivious to the world around them (Petroni et al). And often, the focus is on the negative aspects of youth. One might argue that this is because fear and salacious stories garner more attention. However, the reality of the teens who we regularly interact with seemed oppositional to the depictions of youth in much of what we were reading. *Youth Rising? The Politics of Youth in the Global*

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<sup>1</sup> This section was co-written by Jeanne Marri Choun and Rachel Bednar, with equal contributions from each co-author.

*Economy* notes that, “youth as a social category has always been double-sided, encompassing negative and positive stereotypes” (Sukarieh et al. 7). With this in mind, we wanted to investigate further and focus specifically on adolescent leaders. We wanted to attempt to find more positive aspects in the lives of American teenagers.

## Literature Review<sup>2</sup>

Transition from elementary school to middle school can be a challenging time for many children as many are experiencing cognitive, social-emotional, and physical changes. A case study collecting the perspectives of sixth graders about their transitional experience into middle school found that many students have little connection to school and are not invested in their academics (Rappa). To help students feel welcomed and become successful during the transitional process, a “well-planned and implemented transition program” is necessary as such programs help build student academic and self-esteem growth (Hanewald 72).

The eighth graders in this study are part of a sixth-grade transition leadership program called Where Everybody Belongs (WEB). It is a program developed by The Boomerang Project based out of Santa Cruz, California. The Boomerang Project, an organization founded by three former teachers, reaches over 4,500 schools across the United States and internationally. The organization's mission is simple: “to make schools great, safe and connected places for kids to learn” (“About”). Within the Boomerang Project organization, there are two transition programs which serve two different secondary education levels; the WEB program has been designed to serve the middle school population while Link Crew is geared towards the transition from middle school to high school. Fundamentally, the company believes that teachers and students get back what they give, and through student involvement and leadership education, schools can become safe and welcoming places to learn.

Having gone through the transition themselves, eighth grade students have knowledge that they can pass to younger students, making them an excellent resource for a transitional program. The insight and experience of the eighth graders is invaluable because their perceptions

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<sup>2</sup> This section was co-written by Jeanne Marri Choun and Rachel Bednar, with equal contributions from each co-author.

align more closely with the views of sixth graders than those of teachers and/or administrators. It is important that both males and females are represented as leaders. However, when they are given the opportunity as adolescents, more females take on those roles (Morris).

### *Middle School Transition*

It is critical to understand the importance of transitioning students from elementary to secondary school. One organization focused on this transitional process is The Boomerang Project, whose goal “is to help create schools that not only teach students, but reach them as well” through “orientation and transition programs [and] student to student mentoring programs” (The Boomerang Project). Micah Jacobson, the former CFO, lead presenter, and co-founder of The Boomerang Project, has stated that while there is much research around the transition into high school, far less has been done to investigate the move from elementary to middle school (Jacobson).

Students who are connected to school feel a sense of motivation and typically exhibit higher academic achievement. The most successful transition programs are not simply one-day orientation events, but rather, they continue throughout a school year supporting students throughout their whole first year of middle school (Rappa). Hanewald conducted an extensive literature analysis and found that “well-planned and implemented transition programs can support students” as they move into secondary schooling (72).

Students who possess the ability to self-regulate—the ability to manage one’s behavior and emotions—often have an easier time transitioning, but for many adolescents who lack such a skill, transitional programs become a necessity (Shoshani and Slone) as “school attachment [is] associated with lower levels of violent delinquency and aggressive beliefs, as well as with academic motivation” (Frey et al 1). To help curb negative transitional experiences, many

schools have turned to student leaders to serve as mentors to incoming students. However, it appears that some mentors are more effective than others.

Hanewald found differences between males and females entering secondary schools; females are more likely to look forward to secondary schooling. Typically, females made the transition more easily than their male counterparts, leading researchers to infer that the “age at which students make the transition matters, as does their gender and cultural background” (Marston 2). Perhaps females are represented more in adolescent leadership because they have had a smoother transition themselves.

### *Adolescent Leadership*

The practice of having adolescents as leaders for their peers is a long standing one that has been utilized frequently in boarding schools. These students not only serve to guide their fellow classmates, but also represent student views in conversations with administration (Rehn). Knowing that the middle school transition is challenging for sixth graders, schools are wise to empower eighth graders as mentors to sixth graders. Vygotsky “places emphasis on the way in which the presence of an adult or peer with greater expertise can ‘speed up’ and enhance a child’s self-directed learning” (“The Big Three”). This promotes the notion that adolescent leaders have the potential to improve the secondary school transition process for students. Additionally, there is benefit to eighth graders taking on leadership roles.

Self-empowerment for both genders is important to the development of young leaders (Rehn), and it shifts and changes throughout a person’s lifetime based on their experiences and environment (Morrison). We must understand that learning is “a persisting change in human performance or performance potential...[which must be brought] about as a result of the

learner's experience and interaction with the world" and leadership opportunities to adolescents allows them to learn and grow as individuals (Driscoll 11).

Superior overall group performance occurs when a member from the youth group takes on a leadership role among his or her peers (McCullough et al.). Empowerment and control demonstrated signals that youths are exhibiting leadership behavior— "behavior that seems to clearly signify adjustment" (McCullough et al. 2).

### *Gender Roles in Adolescent Leadership*

When it comes to youth leadership research, female roles are predominantly studied; this may be because until recently, male perspectives were considered the status quo (Eccles). Although it is evident that adolescent leadership positions are beneficial to students, oftentimes such achievements are based on male standards and female standards for achievement are ignored. Older female students generally value improving the world through their job more than male students and this trend continues into adulthood (Lupart et al.). According to Lupart et al., there is currently evidence suggesting that for females, adolescence may be a critical time "for the formation of significant values and decision making" (26). Further, females, unlike males, have stressors around choosing multiple adult life-roles—such as motherhood and working (Lupart et al.). If this is the case and adolescent females are actively taking on leadership roles while simultaneously feeling torn about their future roles, then the perceptions of female youth leaders will likely differ from the perceptions of male leaders in a middle school transition program.

### *Conclusion*

Research in adolescent leadership does exist, but it is lacking, specifically related to the roles of male and female adolescent leaders. Through anecdotal evidence and research, female



adolescent leaders have demonstrated different strengths and values compared to their male counterparts. Evidence suggests they are exposed to factors that from a very young age shape their self-worth and perspective, including their future roles within society.

Male and female adolescents not only lead differently, but also potentially view their purpose for leadership differently. Bearing these differences in mind, more research must be conducted around gender roles and perceptions of and about adolescent leaders. Through identifying differing perceptions, educators can better utilize the strengths that both genders bring to the table. When the potential and resources of a community of leaders is maximized, schools can provide a more positive and smooth transition for incoming students.

### **Research Question<sup>3</sup>**

How do the perceptions of female youth leaders compare to perceptions of male leaders in a middle school transition program, specifically around the topics of self-perception, awareness, and views on leadership?

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<sup>3</sup> This section was co-written by Jeanne Marri Choun and Rachel Bednar, with equal contributions from each co-author.

## Methodology<sup>4</sup>

The inquiry originally began with an action research study to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the program. After the action research concluded, we, the researchers, thought there might be value in further investigating both sixth and eighth grade opinions. We collected data from sixth and eighth graders in a middle school. Participants included 414 sixth graders and 112 eighth graders. However, as we began to distil the focus of our thesis, we realized we had an abundance of data, and, thus, decided, for the scope of this study, to focus specifically on the eighth grade students' reported opinions derived from interviews and surveys about self-perception and awareness as well as their views on leadership. This study took place over multiple years because engaging "in persistent and prolonged participation at [a] study cite... is critical in research using qualitative data" (Mertler 142). All eighth-grade participants who were part of this study were also members of the Where Everybody Belongs (WEB) middle school transitional program. Their parents all signed opt-in forms to give consent for student participation in surveys and/or interviews. Due to the large number of students, an opt-out form was utilized to secure consent from parents. The research was conducted over the span of four years. The goal of this study was to determine effectiveness of a middle school transition program as well as provide future guidance to schools looking to improve leadership opportunities for adolescents. We gathered an "in-depth understanding of this particular setting" to evaluate the effectiveness of the program, as well as the perceptions of the leaders (Mertler 141). As with qualitative research, interviews and survey results are not generalizable, but they offer a transferability of findings (Merriam and Tisdell).

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<sup>4</sup> This section was co-written by Jeanne Marri Choun and Rachel Bednar, with equal contributions from each co-author.

This research utilized a general inductive methodological approach. We, the two researchers, are middle school Language Arts teachers, who additionally are tasked with coordinating the middle school's transitional program. Author 1 is a White, cisgender female, with 8 years of teaching experience at a middle school. Author 2 is a White, cisgender female with a total of 10 years of teaching experience, 2 in high school and 8 in middle school. Both of us researchers have been co-coordinators of the middle school's transitional program since its inception. After being trained by The Boomerang Project (the umbrella organization responsible for the WEB program), we began conducting action research around the WEB program during its third year of existence. We first became interested in the possibility of improving the WEB program after meeting with WEB coordinators in other schools in our district. It was our hope that we would research our own program and evaluate best practices that could be utilized across the district as well as study the traits, skills, and opinions of adolescent leaders.

The first phase of our research included surveying eighth grade leaders who served as mentors to the sixth graders. Eighth graders responded to questions on their gender, family background, strengths and weaknesses of male and female leaders, and their own beliefs around leadership. Questions on the survey included multiple choice answers, short responses, and Likert-type scale responses. We utilized a variety of methods of data collection to improve the validity of our findings (Mertler). By using triangulation, we hoped to increase the credibility of our findings.

In the second phase of our research, we conducted interviews with selected WEB Leaders. Many of our interview questions were similar to questions asked on the survey; however, the interview format allowed students to provide more detailed responses. We

interviewed between 4 and 6 eight grade WEB Leaders at the end of each academic year of this study.

### *School Context*

The students in this study are students at a middle school in a mid-sized city in the United States. The school has approximately 600 students in grades six through eight. Eighth graders involved in the study were individuals who were accepted into the WEB Program to serve as leaders and mentors to incoming sixth graders. We, the investigators, run the WEB program at the middle school. This program is utilized in seven middle schools in the district.

According to the mission statement of The Boomerang Project, the goal of WEB “is to provide schools with a structure in which students make real connections with each other, increasing school safety and reducing incidence of bullying. Through this program, students learn that people at school care about them and their success” (“What Is WEB?”). At our middle school, the leadership group is made up of approximately 48 eighth grade students per year. Throughout the year they assist sixth graders with their transition into middle school.

Students apply to be WEB Leaders during the spring of their 7th grade year. The application process includes a written application made up of multiple-choice responses, short answers, and an essay question. Seventh grade teachers also provide input on prospective applicants in regard to how kind and how hardworking the applicants are. Once selected as a WEB Leader, the students receive training prior to the start of the school year. The eighth-grade students help facilitate a day of sixth grade orientation. Throughout the year, leaders meet with sixth graders to engage in team building and social skills activities as well as academic support. We conducted interviews with a small sample of WEB Leaders to assess commonalities on a variety of topics at the end of every school year.

### *Study Procedures*

The researchers surveyed current WEB leaders at the end of their seventh-grade year (immediately following their acceptance into the program) and at the end of their eighth-grade year. We asked opinion questions about their abilities to lead, their confidence as leaders, and their opinions of strengths and weaknesses of male and female leaders. The researchers also selected a handful of leaders with a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and personalities to be interviewed at the end of their eighth-grade year to gather more specific narratives from students.

When deciding which WEB Leaders to interview, we wanted to make sure we looked at both genders. We felt that both genders would need to be represented. When this study first began, there was not a known presence of students who identified publicly as non-binary individuals. We recognize now that our study was designed with binary perceptions of gender. If we were starting our research today, we would have taken a different approach by including various non-binary gender identifiers. While we were familiar with research and changing ideas around gender, that discussion was not prevalent in our middle school culture like it is today. We, as researchers, were concerned that middle schoolers (at that time) might not have the understanding to properly select their gender if given non-binary options. Therefore, we limited gender selection to a binary code. In the final year of the study, two students self-identified as non-binary, and they approached us regarding our error in the classifications. They chose to select the gender they most closely aligned with, but again, we now recognize that this was an error, and we wish we had offered a non-binary option.

We would like to address our use of the female and male terminology. After a great number of discussions, we decided to utilize the female and male terms as our intent was not to discuss the ascribed identity of our subjects, but instead it was to identify our subject's

perceptions about gender. Additionally, we felt that the terms girls and boys seemed too juvenile to describe our teens and women and men were also not accurate descriptors.

We thought the opinions of each gender—as defined in this study—might differ and we desired a well-rounded depiction of an adolescent leader. Also, we thought it important to look at leaders who clearly excelled in the group and readily took charge as well as leaders who routinely functioned more as followers within the group. Finally, we wanted to make sure that not all students had the same academic abilities (see figure 1 for the Demographics of Interviewees). Students were asked if they wanted and were willing to be interviewed. All who were asked agreed. Parent permission and consent was secured prior to interviews. Each student was asked the same set of questions (see Appendix A). Occasionally, we needed to ask individuals to expand on or clarify their answers, but we avoided commenting on their responses so as to not influence their thinking. For their privacy, their names have been changed.

*Table 1. Demographics of Interviewees*

<b>Year Interviewed</b>	<b>Student Alias</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Birth Order</b>	<b>Lives with...</b>	<b>Academics</b>
2017	Ivy	8	Only child	Mother, maternal grandparents	average-advanced
	Shane	8	Youngest of 3	Mother, 2 siblings	advanced
	Joe	8	Youngest of 2	Mother, 1 sibling	low-average
	Monica	8	Oldest of 2	Father, mother, 1 sibling	average
	Keesha	8	Oldest of 3	Mother, 2 siblings, occasionally dad is around	low-average
	Scott	8	Oldest of 2	Father, mother, 1 sibling	average-advanced

2018	Cody	8	Oldest of 2	Father, mother, 1 sibling	advanced
	Nora	8	Middle of 3	Father, mother, 2 siblings	advanced
	Jeff	8	Oldest of 2	Father, mother, 1 sibling	advanced
	Shar	8	Youngest of 3	Father, mother, 2 siblings (parents divorcing)	low-average
2019	Kayla	8	Oldest of 3	Mother, brother, 2 siblings, uncle, 2 cousins	average
	Corrie	8	Middle of 3	Father, mother, 2 siblings	average
	Billy	8	Middle of 3	Father, mother, 2 siblings	average
	Greg	8	Only child	Mother	advanced
2020	Gary	8	Oldest of 2	Father, mother, 1 sibling	advanced
	Harper	8	Oldest of 2	Father, mother, 1 sibling	average- advanced
	Bailey	8	Oldest of 2 (+2 step- siblings)	House 1: Mother, mom's boyfriend, brother, 2 step-siblings  House 2: Father, step- mom, brother (aforementioned in House 1)	advanced
	Dwight	8	Youngest of 2	Father, mother, sibling	average



### *Psychological Well-Being (Possible Limitations)*

Students taking the electronic survey may have felt anxiety while taking the survey. Additionally, they may have felt that taking the survey could somehow be traced back to them even though they had the option to opt out or may not have provided any identifiable information. Furthermore, they may have felt that the survey might affect their chances of being a WEB Leader in the future. For these reasons, researchers provided students with instructions clearly explaining that the results would not be tied back to them (unless identifiable information was volunteered) and opting in or out of the survey would not affect their chances of being accepted as a future WEB Leader. Additionally, students who opted out were given a computerized activity to do so that their choice of opting out was discreetly unidentifiable by other students (for instance, they were able to check their grades during the survey time or after they had completed the survey).

Students asked to be interviewed may have felt anxiety about being chosen, might have experienced emotions (either positive or negative) in anticipation of their interview, during the interview, and after the interview. They might have worried about their responses during the interview and might have had concerns about how their answers could be used in relation to their person. Researchers did their best to alleviate any concerns and anxiety with clear instructions of the interview and research process (both written and verbal) and allowed for questions regarding either.

Because both interviewers are mandatory reporters, if anything was said by an interviewee that indicated harm or harassment to themselves or others, we would have been required to notify the proper authorities. All interviewees were made aware of this prior to the interview taking place, which may have limited their responses.

### *Background/Previous Findings*

The researchers conducted preliminary interviews and surveys as a means to assess if there were any trends worth investigating. Our initial findings showed that males and females had consistent opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of each gender when it came to leadership roles. These opinions were consistent with what other WEB coordinators were seeing at other middle schools in the district. However, they conflicted with statistics surrounding female/male managerial and administrative positions in the United States.

## **Data Analysis<sup>5</sup>**

After gathering our data from surveys, we created histograms and word bubbles that showed the frequency of words participants used in their responses when describing strengths and weaknesses of male and female leaders. We did this as a jumping off point to read through and understand the great amount of data. We reread and open-coded interview transcripts. Some codes included personality traits, positive role models, familial connections, and leadership strengths and weaknesses related to gender. Codes were cross-referenced between the researchers and agreement was reached around any outliers.

We again reviewed our transcripts organizing our initial codes into several categories around leadership, program effectiveness, and gender (the self, family relationships, and views on leadership). We reorganized the codes until we reached emergent themes.

For survey responses, we coded data by looking at the common words in responses. Then, we looked for grouped words and synonyms of those words. We grouped that data into the themes we had previously established from the interviews.

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<sup>5</sup> This section was co-written by Jeanne Marri Choun and Rachel Bednar, with equal contributions from each co-author.

## **Findings<sup>6</sup>**

Two overarching themes arose: self-perception and awareness and views on leadership. The self-perception and awareness theme included their ideas of their perceived impact as leaders, perceived confrontation management abilities, perceptions of leadership stress, and perceptions of their peers and adults. The leadership theme included categories of leadership qualities, motivations of leaders, and perceived strengths and weaknesses of male and female leaders.

### *Self-Perception and Awareness*

Data revealed that students varied in their self-perception and awareness. They reported their perceptions related to themselves as leaders. Additionally, they addressed perceptions they believed others have about them.

### **The Self**

Findings revealed students had a conscious perception and understanding of themselves; in other words, students shared how they felt about their abilities or lack thereof. Interview comments reflected students' shared feelings about their impact in their communities of influence, how confident and empowered they felt while leading, their impressions on their own ability to manage leadership responsibilities and stresses, and if they reported feeling as if they were making a difference.

### *Perceived Impact as a Leader*

Over the past four years, we interviewed eighteen WEB Leaders and asked them: Do you think you made a difference in the middle school community? Year after year, the

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<sup>6</sup> This section was co-written by Jeanne Marri Choun and Rachel Bednar, with equal contributions from each co-author.

interviewees responded positively and most noted that their level of influence was thanks to the work they accomplished with their sixth-grade mentees. One student, Cody, responded, “I feel like I have made some [sort] of a difference. I know I’ve made a difference in a couple sixth grader’s lives...And I feel like WEB was a good program to, like, help eighth graders make a difference in the [school] community.” Cody was adamant in his self-assessment, saying he “knows” he made a difference for sixth graders. Such a decisive response shows a high level of confidence in his perceived level of impact. Another interviewee responded similarly saying, “Yeah, I do. I think I have helped a lot of the sixth graders this year to feel welcome and not intimidated by eighth graders” (Bailey). Not only did almost every interviewee note that where they felt they made the most difference was in helping sixth graders, but they also used assertive language in their responses showing that they also feel a strong level of conviction of their power and effectiveness when it came to leading sixth graders.

This correlation is backed by survey responses from 112 eighth grade leaders over the 4 years of this study. Students surveyed in our study were asked about their confidence levels leading outside the school, within the school, with their sixth-grade mentees, and in the classroom with grade-level peers. The majority of leaders reported feeling moderately to extremely—7-10 on a 1-10 scale, 10 being extremely confident—confident in their leadership abilities when running activities for their sixth-grade mentees more so than in any other circumstance.

While the eighth-grade leaders surveyed did not report feeling as confident leading in the classroom, several interviewees noted that they felt they made a difference in their friend groups. One student commented that she had “been a good friend to a bunch of people” (Corrie) while another mentioned he had made a difference because he, “helped friends with

educational problems or family problems” (Greg). Several other students made similar statements discussing how they felt they have made a difference in relation to their friend groups. Though students overall did not necessarily feel confident leading in classrooms, it was evident that they felt confident leading and making a difference when it came to their smaller friend circles.

Based on the evidence collected through surveys and interviews, it was clear that the adolescent leaders studied perceived themselves as making the most difference when working with sixth graders, and this is also where they were reportedly most confident in their own ability to lead.

#### *Equipped to Manage Confrontation as a Leader*

Students were asked if they felt equipped to deal with confrontation with peers and adults. Every single student interviewed responded affirmatively and most of their responses fell into two areas. Most students responded that they felt they had communication skills that helped them deal with confrontation and suggested that these skills were fostered through support from adults.

In relation to their abilities to lead and navigate through confrontation, one student mentioned, “I feel like I have pretty good speaking skills and I can do debate pretty well” (Gary). Similarly, Cody said, “I feel I’m pretty well-equipped, and I like to argue.” Both responses placed value on skills learned and the importance that communication has in confrontational challenges that arise. The above interviewees did not address where the skills were learned, unlike other respondents who attributed their communication skills to the adults in their lives and curriculum.

While some other respondents also noted the importance of communication skills, they attributed those skills as having been learned from adults in their lives. Shane shared, “I have a lot of people I can go to to get help and give me advice, so yes, I’m well-equipped.” Bailey noted that her “parents have worked really hard, well, parenting me, to teach me those skills to be able to confront people when there’s an issue or anything that matters to [me]. I definitely think I have the skills; it's just practicing it and putting it into effect.” Billy shared that he felt equipped to deal with confrontation because he “learned different things like Second Step [anti-bullying curriculum], WEB, things like that, Stand For Courage [anti-bullying student group] throughout middle school and my parents [kind of] taught me to do that a little bit, so I feel pretty well-prepared with how to deal with confrontation.” He provided examples of programs offered through the school system that coached students on strategies to build communication abilities for dealing with conflict and confrontation. All WEB Leaders interviewed were firm in their responses when disclosing their abilities to manage conflict with peers and adults. Based on the evidence, their confidence comes from their inherent communication skills or their learned abilities.

### *Stress*

When asked if leadership is stressful, there was no clear consensus among interview responses; however, most students acknowledged that stress can be present in certain situations that leaders may face. Multiple leaders reported feeling stressed when it came to running sixth grade activities. Dwight shared that he gets stressed worrying if kids will enjoy the activities or not. Other students also shared concerns around running sixth grade activities, but their anxieties focused more on their abilities to manage student behavior, as well as, run and achieve the goals and purpose of the lesson. “I feel like most of the time, for me, it comes

pretty naturally, but there [are] some parts of it that [are] pretty stressful, like dealing with that one kid that doesn't listen to you," shared Cody. He acknowledged that this happens when he is working with his sixth-grade mentees. In looking at Dwight and Cody's responses, it is apparent that there are various factors that incite anxiety when leaders work with sixth-grade students.

Several students felt stress around the team dynamics and possible confrontation they may have to face with their fellow leaders and adult program coordinators (the researchers). Harper expressed concern regarding the beginning of the year and of not knowing whether her team possessed the skills necessary to foster a well-oiled leadership community. She mentioned, "You don't always know if they're going to help you. Sometimes it is hard to step up and tell people what they don't want to hear" (Harper). Gary also expressed trepidations around his fellow peers stating, "If you're a leader and the people you're leading don't like the way you are doing it or they don't like the way you are leading," possible confrontations may arise which could lead to difficult situations. Corrie went further suggesting a need for her to be taught coping skills for stressful situations because "trying to figure that out by myself can be stressful sometimes." For some leaders, the anxieties around team dynamics can be more stressful than leading mentees. However, unlike Corrie, Greg believed "Leaders should know how to overcome the stress," and "It just matters if you show it or decide to overcome it." He appeared to suggest that leadership skills are inherent and may not necessarily be something that can be taught. While almost all students interviewed voiced awareness and concern around the stressors related to team dynamics, their thoughts for coping with it were varied.

Shane brought up another factor that he felt had the potential to further exacerbate complications around inherent versus learned leadership skills. He pointed out that for



adolescent leaders there is an additional level of stress because the student leaders are being instructed by adult leaders, and the methods the adult leaders use may not be what is most natural for the adolescents to embody. He shared that his stress level rises “because we have to lead how you guys [the adult coordinators] would or how you want us to. It’s not bad, but it can be stressful.” While Shane was the only individual to voice this concern, we found it incredibly poignant and felt it needed to be recognized for its significant implications for coordinators of leadership programs that focus on fostering teen leadership.

For many of the questions asked of leaders, responses were fairly in sync. The discussion around stress in leadership proved to be more diverse. Students shared several factors that contributed to their reported feelings of stress in their leadership position. Factors that led to stress included interactions with sixth graders, team dynamics, and possible confrontations with other leaders and with adult leaders. This was significant because it showed that stress is not a singular object to tackle; there are a number of factors to be addressed if we want to reduce or alleviate stressors for adolescent leaders.

### **Others**

Students described how they perceived peers and adults viewed them as leaders and the level of adult support students believed they had in their lives.

#### *Peers Perceptions*

Leadership is not just about how leaders view themselves, but also about how they think others view them. Overwhelmingly, leaders reported that they thought their peers thought positively of them. Kayla’s comment was representative when she shared that, in regard to her peers, she was, “pretty kind and nice to them.” Corrie responded similarly but placed more emphasis on the conscious effort on her part to have people like her, stating, “I try to be liked

by who I associate with. I try to be nice to everybody. I don't think I'm mean to everybody.” Both teen girls seemed confident that their peers perceived them only in a positive way. Keesha's initial response was confident in that she believed that people thought of her as a “good person, outgoing, and funny” as well as that they saw her “as a leader.” However, she also recognized the various degrees of favorability people may have towards her and was not ignorant to the fact that “there are those people that want nothing to do with me.” Keesha was one of the most natural and boisterous leaders we have ever worked with. She was always a commanding presence in a room. Perhaps her vocal personality made her favorability more divisive to some of her peers. Another outlying response came from Joe's interview. While he noted that his friends like him and think he is fun, he mentioned that his closest friends “don't think WEB is cool.” This suggested a somewhat negative view of Joe by his peers and that his membership in WEB made him less favorable to his friends. However, because he valued the opportunity to lead and thought of it as enjoyable, he did share that he did not let their perceptions alter his desire to lead and be a member of WEB.

From all interview responses it appears that most students in the WEB program perceived they were well-received by their peers within the school community. A few outliers acknowledge that there are factors (louder and more vocal personalities, being in a program that peers do not similarly value) that influenced their peer's perceptions in a negative light.

#### *Adult Perceptions*

When asked about adults' perceptions of them, all leaders interviewed shared that adults viewed them favorably. This is not surprising since all the interviewees were leaders who maintained good standing in their school community during the time of their interviews. None of the responses stood out to be negative. Most students responded with positive descriptors about

themselves which they thought adults would use to describe them. For instance, Bailey described her understanding of how adults viewed her to be successful, goal-oriented, likeable, and as a leader. Keesha also felt that adults saw her as a leader. In fact, Keesha mentioned it twice in her response saying she thought adults perceive her as a “teen leader, outgoing, athlete, leader.” The fact that she mentioned it twice would suggest that she viewed being a leader as something that she perceived was important to the adults in her life. Greg did not hesitate to provide several descriptors on how adults thought of him: hardworking, kind, helpful, good listener, funny, and interesting. He was the only respondent that differentiated between adults and parents. The fact that no other respondent made such a distinction would lead us to believe that all interviewed leaders perceived that the adults in their lives viewed them in a positive light.

### Adult Support

Every interviewee cited having ample support from adults. The responses from most interviews highlighted not only what support looks like and how they receive support, but also who in their life supported them.

In the most basic sense, leaders reported how support is getting encouragement from adults. “If I do something good, someone will acknowledge it,” Joe claimed. Bailey shared a similar example stating that, for her, adult support is when they encourage, “you to, like, keep going and doing what you’re doing or to, like, take a different path if you’re not doing well.” For both leaders, support was just acknowledgement that a challenge was faced and possibly overcome. For some leaders, the support went beyond acknowledgement and affirmation and was more in the form of feedback and coaching. That support may be in the form of highlighting struggles or challenges the leader faced and coaching the leader towards growth in areas where they struggled. Kayla shared:

I feel like I have a lot of support ‘cus they're just, like, if I want something, you should do this, this, and this, but it may be hard, but we'll be here to help you. Like, teachers, my mom, obviously, my dad when he can, and yeah, most adults in my life. It could be something like having talks with me or actually showing me things or giving me tips on how to do certain things or telling me the advantages and disadvantages I may have, but at the same time, telling me it will be ok and just reassuring me.

From her example, we can see that adult support includes teaching teens to identify and work through a problem. This idea was also present in Corrie's response where she mentioned that her mom, who is her "biggest supporter," will "always play devil's advocate to see if I would change my mind" on a given topic or idea. These responses would indicate that positive adult support is not always perceived as being agreeable, but instead, it includes allowing the teen to take onus of her thinking and decision making.

Adult support was reported to be from various sources within the school and home communities. All but one claim to receive support from family members. "I feel like I get quite a bit of support from adults. My parents are super supportive of me and what I want to put my time into," and "My family is big. I have it [support] coming from anywhere," Cody and Ivy said, respectively. Comments that similarly indicate a presence of support from various family members such as grandparents and siblings were shared from several leaders. Based on the responses received, all the interviewees, with the exception of Keesha (as described in the following paragraph), disclosed that they received ample support from their families.

One exception in our interviews was Keesha, who disclosed not receiving support at home. She said, "I feel like my family gives me a lot of negative support...Negative support, kind of, I guess you could say, umm, kind of, is no support at all...[From my] family, I don't get

much support.” Although she does not receive support from family members, adults still appeared to serve as mentors outside of the familial structure. Keesha, an athlete, shared that she does get support from her coaches and it is more positive because “they have a different outlook on what your strengths and weaknesses are.” For her, support looks like “pushing someone, but not past your limit. [And] being their fallback. Being there for them.” So even though adult support was not present at home, Keesha still received support from adults.

In addition to family members and coaches, leaders shared that they received a great deal of support from teachers and their neighbors. All interviewees communicated feeling as though they were being supported by at least some adults in their lives.

### *Views on Leadership*

Data revealed a theme of views on leadership, which included the qualities students reported leaders should possess, the reported factors that motivated students to lead, their beliefs on the strengths and weaknesses of male and female leaders, and their beliefs on which gender are the better and more natural leaders.

### **Leadership Qualities**

WEB Leaders who were interviewed were asked to share what qualities they believed defined a good leader. Their responses seemed to fall into four main areas: interpersonal skills, humanitarian skills, work ethic, and fortitude.

Interpersonal skills were mentioned most often by interviewees as being essential to good leadership. Interpersonal skills are defined as, “of or pertaining to the relations between persons” (“Interpersonal”). Students shared that they thought good leaders were “good at working with others,” and are “not judgmental of others” (Keesha and Corrie). Additionally, leaders mentioned the need to be “supportive and positive” with others and the need for leaders to “do their best to

help other people” (Billy). It appeared that leadership, for these teen leaders, meant keeping a positive, open-mind around and about those around them. Those are essential qualities of good leaders. Furthermore, multiple interviewees mentioned that leaders “have to have good speaking skills” (Gary). Bailey noted that, “as well as [being] a good speaker,” one of the most important qualities for a leader to have is the “ability to be a good listener.” Not only do good leaders need to be able to communicate well with others, but they should “bring other people into conversations” and ask for their “point of view” (Kayla). Out of the 18 interviews, responses on leadership qualities overwhelmingly focused on interpersonal skills and the ability to communicate well with others. The answers given by the leaders showed that they viewed interpersonal skills as one of the most important aspects to being a good leader.

Students interviewed reported that another essential leadership quality is that of the humanitarian nature. The teenage leaders appeared to believe that good leadership is demonstrated through understanding of others. For instance, Corrie said that good leaders must “try to be empathetic and put yourself in someone else’s shoes.” Harper agreed by saying that “they have to have empathy or sympathy with their team. They have to help to understand.” In other words, good leadership looks like what Ivy and Cody described in a simple word: kindness. The teen leaders appeared to see the value of having “respect [for] those around them” (Jeff) and just being a person who is loving and caring (Keesha). In other words, interacting with others respectfully and with the human interest in mind and in practice is one of the key qualities that defines leaders.

Work ethic was another quality that emerged in several student responses. The researchers considered anything having to do with determination, hard work, and perseverance to fit within the realm of work ethic. Kayla shared that a good leader sets “a good example and they

are not slacking on work just because they are the leader or boss. They are putting in the same amount of work as everyone else.” In Kayla’s case, it was not just about being a hard worker, but making sure that a student pulls their own weight and that they recognize that being in charge does not exempt them from having to put forth effort. Dwight responded similarly saying that a good leader is “hardworking” and “positive.” They also must “push and go out of the way to do something more powerful to help others.” From Dwight’s response, we can gather that determination is key as he noted that leaders must go beyond their comfort zones to help others. Keesha noted that, in her opinion, a good leader is “determined.” And Jeff responded that strong leaders “strive for excellence” and “make sure the outcome is best for the group or the objectives they’ve been sent out to do.” Through numerous leader responses, we saw the continuous focus on work ethic and the ability to stay on task and accomplish tasks for the betterment of the group.

Fortitude, or the strength to face challenges, is another character quality of a respectable leader. Good leaders are confident (Harper and Gary) and must demonstrate courage (Harper and Shane). Courage, according to Shane, is important if the leader needs to “step up in a group of people and take charge. That is a good leader. [They must be able to] take over a situation and be able to lead well.” Good leaders were perceived to need “to be able to take over a situation if it is getting bad” (Joe). So, not only is it important for leaders to be able to face challenges—positive or negative—with bravery, people in a position of leadership must recognize “when there should be a time to let someone else take charge and they can understand that and leave the job to that person” (Greg). Courage, according to the leaders interviewed, is not just about standing up and standing out, it is also about knowing when to step back and amplify the voices of others.

In exploring the responses given by our adolescent leaders, there was not one singular quality that was described to make for a good leader. The fact that every student response included multiple criteria and that those criteria often straddled different areas of focus shows that the interviewees saw that good leaders are multi-faceted in their skill sets. As Bailey put it, “You need that balance.” Students perceived that good leaders must be well-rounded and demonstrate competency in a variety of areas.

### **Motivations**

Students were asked to share what motivated them to lead. Their responses all tended to fall into one of two areas: they stated that they were driven by a desire to help others or they reported feeling an innate ability to lead.

A strong desire to help others and possibly “to contribute to make the community a better place” was the main motivation that WEB leaders expressed as their drive to lead (Bailey). “I feel like it’s just a good way to impact and help other people,” Nora stated, “And that makes a difference and is important.” While they certainly felt that helping others was important, several of them mentioned their own past experiences that led them to self-reflect and find motivation for the future of others. For instance, Keesha stated,

Through what I’ve been through, not only as a teenager but also as a child, for those kids that don’t have a figure in their life, to be that person to be there for them. You want to, as a leader, make sure you look out for not only the people you care about but also the other people: the people who don’t have someone, who need that leg up, or something like that.

She appeared to have learned from her past and those experiences have motivated her to want to do better for others. And while the experiences Keesha reported using as motivation to help



others may not have been all positive, on the other hand, Shar expressed that her positive motivation to help others was because she wanted to be just like her “old WEB Leaders. They were great.” In other words, leaders expressed that their motivations were derived from both their past negative and positive experiences. Nonetheless, their desire was for the betterment of others’ experiences with a mentor and to “steer someone in a positive direction” and a direction that “could have possibly changed [their mentees] entire future” (Corrie). The leaders interviewed seemed to be motivated by helping others, though some recognized that they received gratification from positively impacting others. Monica admitted that impacting others also “will help [her] a lot in the future,” and Billy disclosed that helping others “puts a smile on my face.”

Shane shared that while “people think [leadership] is a choice... the best leaders don’t think about leading, they do it because it is natural.” For some, according to him, it is natural to lead and for others it is natural to follow. Kayla also emphasized that for some people leadership abilities are a given saying, “It’s just kind of, like, second nature to me.” Cody answered that, “It’s kind of, like, a part of my personality, like, wanting to lead. Like, I always want to be in charge of everything and, like, tell people where they are needed.” These adolescents, according to their responses, saw themselves as having an intrinsic motivation to lead.

It is interesting to note that although multiple leaders claimed to be “natural leaders,” within their responses, they also commented that they had influence from a brother, mother, or former WEB Leader (Shane, Kayla, Shar). While these leaders view themselves as natural leaders, within that same response, they disclose that they are “natural” because they got that skill from observing a sibling or a parent “drilled” it into them (Shane and Kayla). If that is the

case, then it would seem that the desire to lead was taught more so than it is inherent. Yet, based on their answers, the leaders did not recognize that. This discrepancy will be analyzed further in the discussion section.

### **Strengths/Weaknesses of Males/Females**

All interviewees, as well as all survey respondents, were asked to share what they thought were the relative strengths and weaknesses of male and female leaders. Data revealed that participants viewed male and female leaders to have very different strengths and weaknesses and revealed a shift in opinion from the beginning of the year to the end of the year with regards to which gender students thought were the better and more natural leaders.

#### *Perceived Male Strengths*

When asked about the strengths that male leaders possess, the responses from interviewees varied, but the leaders routinely mentioned that male strengths included being dominant and outspoken, having the ability to command and take charge, and being fun.

Keesha stated very pointedly that male leaders, “Are the more dominant gender.” Similarly, Bailey expanded on that idea when she said, “Our worldviews males as more powerful, so they have that on their side when they are trying to lead. They are already seen in the eyes of people as someone who can make change.” Both these female interviewees responded feeling strongly that males appear to have an advantage where people inherently perceive them as more dominant. Male interviewees also noted their gender seems to have an easier time (Gary) and are more willing (Cody) to take charge of situations that arise. This may be due to the opinion that they are “not afraid to be tougher on the kids, and when [they] need to clamp down, they [males] are not hesitant about it” (Gary). Dwight emphasizes that this may be because “They can get their voice out there really well”; Gary may have provided some

further insight on this when he stated that “they can project [their voice]” to get their ideas and thoughts across to others. Based on interview responses, males and females noted an edge that males have when it comes to dominating in leadership situations. Survey results also supported this perception. An overwhelming number of survey respondents used “confidence” and “confident” as descriptors to describe strengths of male leaders. In fact, the various forms of the word confident were the most often used classification for male leadership abilities. Moreover, they listed “assertiveness,” “assertive,” and “asserting” as adjectives to categorize male leader strengths. Building on to the claims made by Dwight and Gary, survey findings indicated that eighth grade WEB Leaders believed that males are not only “loud” but also “louder” than females which gave them an advantage as a leader.

Male and female leaders expressed that another strength they noticed males possess was the ability to command and take charge in leadership roles. As we already shared, Cody mentioned that they are not afraid to take a tougher stance when dealing with the sixth graders they lead. Likewise, Ivy commented that they, “really influence a lot. The kids want to follow them, but they [the kids] are still educated and kept in line.” It is important to note that the idea of males being viewed as more commanding and able to take charge is seen by both genders, as evident in Ivy and Cody’s comments. Billy and Harper shared some insight as to the potential rationale in Ivy and Cody’s responses. They stated that males “try to be more heroic and brave” (Billy) and also bring more of a sense of strength (Harper). Survey results showed that many leaders felt similarly to the interviewees as a number of them cited the words “control” and “controlling” as labels of male strengths. The fact that interviewees and respondents to the open-ended survey question (What are some strengths of MALE leaders?) mentioned that a

strength of males leaders is their ability to command and take charge shows that this is a dominating thought among adolescent leaders.

Many interviewees shared that being fun was a strength that they believed males possessed. Nora stated very simply that male leaders are “super fun.” Male leaders “are really good at lightening the mood. If you are sad, they know how to take your mind off it and invite you [in]to things” (Corrie). It was not only female leaders who described their male counterparts as “fun,” though. Shane noted that adolescent male leaders “lead a little less formal[ly] at this age” and are “friendlier.” His opinion suggests that the male ability to be fun comes from the fact that they are not as strict or formal in their leadership styles. Because they are not as strict or formal in their leadership styles, this could explain why one survey respondent indicated that males were easier than some females are in their management of sixth graders. Survey results echoed the interview findings, indicating that male leaders have the ability to create an atmosphere that is engaging, either through activities or jokes.

#### *Perceived Female Strengths*

Interviewees also shared what they viewed to be the strengths of female leaders. Most of the leaders had detailed and more varied responses when speaking to the strengths of female leaders. For the most part, the comments shared by leaders about what they perceived to be strengths of female leaders fell into one or more of the following categories: ability to connect (emotionally and with girls), the tendency to initiate and complete tasks through their self-determination, being diplomatic, and being mature.

The strength that was mentioned most often in regard to female leadership was their ability to connect with others emotionally as well as being able to build strong connections with girls. Greg shared that female leaders are “more caring, like a mother figure” and

“generally are more caring than males... and they kind of just make things more safe and calm.” Survey results concur with Greg’s statement as the words “care” and “caring” were the most used descriptor when listing strengths of female leaders. Ivy also reported thinking that females “connect with kids quicker because of emotions.” Nora believed that this allows female leaders to “connect with girls better” than males can. Corrie echoed a similar sentiment stating that females “work better with girls than boys would.” Survey results showed that many leaders viewed females as being understanding and compassionate. These qualities are perhaps why Greg described female leaders as “safe” people and why Gary characterized that “they can make people like them more.” Perhaps this likeability is because many adolescent leaders, including Dwight, view females as “really positive.” When asked the open-ended question on female strengths as leaders, the overarching qualities that were mentioned focused on the abilities of females to be understanding, caring, sympathetic, and compassionate; all of these qualities are beneficial for leaders to create connections with their followers.

Interviewees voiced frequently the idea that females are determined and empowered to initiate and complete tasks. According to Monica, females “will get stuff done [and] get it done quicker.” Joe agreed, stating that they “do stuff straight away and tell the kids [the sixth-grade mentees] what we’re going to do” and they “get everything going.” Joe and Monica’s responses emphasize the ability that females have to take initiative and accomplish tasks in a time conscious manner. Other interviewees noted that a strength of female leaders is not only their ability to do a task, but to plan and strategize the best ways of going about that task. Shane highlighted the abilities of females to “follow the instructions more directly [and] get things done more efficiently.” Planning is a female strength and as Dwight further noted, “some of my [guy friends] would never plan anything if they [the females] weren’t there.” From Dwight’s

quote, we can see that he is drawing a comparison between female and male leaders and is placing emphasis on the female's ability to not only accomplish tasks but also motivate others (males) to initiate tasks. Going beyond task completion, several interviewees commented on females being determined to be strong and successful leaders. In sharing about her fellow females, Keesha noted, "I feel like we are a lot more determined to become not only a great gender, but great people ourselves and, kind of, show males how the job is done." Bailey had similar sentiments in her response, sharing, "I think being a female leader you already have to work harder and so they have an element of power and having resourcefulness. They, kind of, have to find their way and be creative as leaders so they stand out." The focus for these girls' responses were less on the concrete ability and determination to create a product but more on the abstract idea of determination and empowerment and what those qualities mean for female leaders in general. Scott recognized this drive in female leaders saying that, "they want to succeed more" than their male counterparts. Based on these interviews, determination is a key strength of female leadership.

Many interviewees highlighted that another strength of female leaders is their ability to be diplomatic. They discussed how females are collaborative and cooperative when working with others. Jeff shared his view that "females may have the more diplomatic side of things." Corrie's response elaborated on that idea stating that they can "see both sides of the story really well." For the leaders that discussed diplomacy as a strength, they seemed to interpret that word as being open-minded and willing to look at issues from multiple perspectives. Harper shared a profound take on the possible reasoning for why females possess this strength, saying that "because females have, kind of, a rough history with equality, they, kind of, bring more of a sense of what the unfairness is in the world. That can be very helpful because it is good for us

to be aware of people that aren't like us and that they need to be treated the same." According to Harper, past historical experiences and challenges faced by women have created a more inherent ability for females to empathize with others and be tactful in their leadership style.

One final strength that students attributed to female leaders was that they tend to be more mature. Shane mentioned that females act "more like the instructor" when running group activities with sixth graders, and Greg, as previously stated, reported females as "being more caring, like a mother figure." Perhaps these similes were used to describe females due to the mature nature of female teens at this age. It is widely known that girls tend to demonstrate brain and behavior development earlier than boys, and Corrie seems to know this common knowledge. She stated that at their age teenage girls are more mature. Students interviewed went on to describe some skills that exemplify maturity. Monica discussed that when it comes to female adolescent leaders, "they tend to be more organized." Nora's response had more to do with the ability of maintaining a level of control, not only with sixth graders, but with their peers as well. She stated that in general, females are "better at keeping order." In their responses, students recognized a higher level of maturity, not only in their behavior, but in their ability to manage the behaviors of others.

Overall, males and females were described to have contrasting strengths and skills in their leadership roles. Males were perceived as dominant, outspoken, and fun while females are largely perceived as having an ability to connect, being task oriented, diplomatic, and mature. These qualities and skills may be in stark contrast with one another; however, the fact that both groups bring diverse and different strengths to the table, makes for a well-rounded leadership group.

### *Perceived Male Weaknesses*

Leaders had many ideas about what they perceived to be weaknesses of male leaders. The response that came up most often was that males had an ego that at times hindered their ability to lead effectively. Interviewees also noted that male leaders could at times be controlling and headstrong and that, sometimes, their leadership suffered due to off-task or procrastinating behaviors.

The most mentioned weakness of male leadership was their egotistical behaviors. Gary cheekily put it when he said, “Well, they have an ego, so that can be a problem.” Not only does he note that they have an ego, but that it can be a hindrance to their leadership ability. Further demonstrating an interpretation of this negative trait, Ivy stated, “Males assume they are right unless proven wrong.” This can lead to a stubbornness, and Kayla describes the thought process that may go along with that as being, “No, no. I think this, and you can’t change my mind.” This stubbornness can lead to an inflated sense of self and “sometimes they can get a little cocky” (Dwight). Male leaders “try to act big” according to Greg. These interviewees are drawing a differentiation between having confidence and having an ego that becomes detrimental to the productivity and climate and culture of the group. Common survey responses included several descriptors for male leadership weaknesses such as having an ego, arrogance, stubbornness, and cockiness. Overall, as a survey respondent said, male leaders were perceived to be overconfident.

Controlling and headstrong were two other descriptors students highlighted as deficiencies in male leaders. They are seen by the teens interviewed to be combative in their approach to leading. “A lot of the time, males may have a more aggressive approach” to their style (Jeff). According to the perspectives of some leaders like Billy and Greg, respectively,



“They are more dominant” and “too stern at times.” These comments focus more on how the male leaders act. Harper and Bailey’s responses looked at the possible motivations for these contentious behaviors. While Harper noted that they can be “a little bit headstrong,” she hypothesized the reason for this being that “They tend to want to be in control.” The findings from the surveys also indicated that the eighth graders reportedly considered male leaders to be controlling and overpowering, often exhibiting how much power they had or their powerful nature. Bailey recognized that these perceived negative behaviors could lead to male leaders getting what they want; however, they sometimes may “have a hard time seeing the whole picture.”

The final weakness that was most often attributed to male leaders was their tendency for procrastination. Male leader Joe recognized that “males will procrastinate until they are told to do something.” When comparing male and female leaders, Monica reported that “It is easier for [males] to get off task” even once the task has finally been initiated. Other interviewees and survey respondents gave possible reasons as to why males either procrastinate or get off task. Corrie reported feeling that “Boys can very easily turn [things] into a joke.” Additionally, survey respondents added that often, males are more likely to mess around. One survey respondent in particular shared that “Most can be distracted by friends easily...Also, sometimes what their friends are doing is more important than the role as a leader.” It is important to note that male leaders recognized this distracted and off-task quality in themselves and in their peers. Joe stated that “Most of the time, the boys are the crazier ones,” and an anonymous male survey respondent used the pronoun *we* to state it simply, “we mess around.”

### *Perceived Female Weaknesses*

Interviewees also had thoughts on the weaknesses that female leaders tend to possess. The issue that was referenced most often as being a weakness of female leaders was that they can get caught up in drama. Leaders furthermore noted that females tend to have a harder time asserting power and control. Female leaders were also seen as perfectionists and, at times, having control issues.

With regards to power dynamics, female leaders were described “to be more quiet and struggle with power a lot” (Monica). While Monica defined the weakness, some other leaders explained potential rationale as to why women in leadership roles struggle to assert dominance. Keesha’s explanation revolved around historical inequalities, stating,

They are very, like in the 1940s, females didn’t have any sports. They only stayed home, cooked, took care of children. As we have grown into a better society (not that we’re a great society, but we’re better), we have more rights now. We were weak at once. I mean, we still are, but we have pushed this gender. We are getting it [equality] little by little, but we are still getting an outcome.

Bailey’s response is somewhat similar. She recognized that “Sometimes [women] aren’t willing to step up as much because of what could come from it.” They have to “take things slow when they’re making change” (Bailey). While one might expect female leaders to pick up on this inequity, some male leaders, such as Greg, also noted this lack of equity that females have historically faced and that it may have an impact on their current leadership abilities. He stated, “They are more targeted...more targeted to be put down...They’re, kind of, just not as seen as much as males would be,” and they are “put at a disadvantage.”

One interesting discrepancy between interview and survey responses on weaknesses of female leaders is that while the interviewees discussed a struggle for females to assert control, many survey respondents highlighted female leaders as being too bossy and too controlling.

The final weakness of female leaders that was readily mentioned was their involvement in “drama.” The involvement in such drama can be detrimental to the female’s ability to lead according to students interviewed and surveyed. Gary shared that when it comes to female leaders, “they have lots of drama that can get in the way.” It is important to note that Ivy recognized that this type of behavior may sometimes be created by females themselves, as “They can bring more drama.” Dwight put it succinctly when he stated that when it comes to females, he perceived that one of their weaknesses is “definitely more drama.” This drama, one anonymous survey respondent noted, was perceived as serving as a distraction from leadership responsibilities.

Male and female leaders were perceived to have different weaknesses that impacted their ability to lead. Male leadership suffered due to off-task and/or procrastinating behaviors, often caused by their headstrong personalities. Female leadership was hindered by their involvement in drama and their inability to assert power and control in group dynamics. Additionally, they were perceived to be perfectionists who at times have control issues.

#### *Better Leaders vs More Natural Leaders*

Eighth-grade WEB leaders were also asked in surveys two questions prior to starting their leadership experience and after their year-long experience as leaders. They were asked:

1. Who do you think are better leaders?
  - a. Males
  - b. Females
  - c. About the same

2. Who do you think are more natural leaders?
  - a. Males
  - b. Females
  - c. About the same

The overwhelming majority of students reported feeling that males and females were “about the same” in both entry and exiting surveys when it came to being better and more natural leaders. However, within the minority responses where surveyed students responded either a preference towards male or female leaders, some intriguing data emerged. After serving as a leader and working alongside their peers, by the end of the year there was an increase in the number of respondents who thought females were better and more natural leaders. The percentage of students who selected males as better or more natural leaders did not change from the beginning of the year to the end.

## Discussion<sup>7</sup>

Two overarching themes arose in our findings: self-perception and awareness and views on leadership. These two themes were the focus for our analysis.

In a study conducted by Anderson and Schneier of a sampling of college students, students' internal perceptions of their control in leadership situations were related to their leadership performance (McCullough et al. 2). Simply stated, when students feel like they have control and agency of a situation, they feel as though they excel as leaders. In other words, their confidence, as described by Merriam-Webster.com as "a feeling or consciousness of one's powers or of reliance on one's circumstances" and the "faith or belief that one will act in a right, proper, or effective way," with their leadership abilities were connected to their understanding that they were responsible, and perhaps accountable, to a goal or a group. As the interview and survey results showed, eighth grade leaders self-reported feeling most confident when they were tasked with leading sixth graders. When they were leading their sixth graders, their role as a leader was clearly defined; parameters were put in place that gave them control and agency within the setting. The same cannot be said for the eighth graders if they chose to lead in their classrooms, with their friend groups, or in the community. It was when they were given responsibilities to lead their mentees and were held accountable for their actions and decisions that eighth graders reported their highest levels of confidence, and this was consistent with McCullough's study analysis of college students.

One possible reason for eighth graders reporting feeling more confident when leading sixth graders could be that the eighth graders were clearly labeled and defined as leaders when they were with their mentees--they even wore shirts that denoted them as leaders. When in

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<sup>7</sup> This section was co-written by Jeanne Marri Choun and Rachel Bednar, with equal contributions from each co-author.

classrooms among their peers, there was often more pressure for the eighth graders to fit in. What's more, there could have been a negative stigma around eighth grade peers who might see the WEB Leaders as "teacher's pets," so WEB Leaders were less likely to take control in those situations and, therefore, they did not see themselves making as much of a difference within their peer community at school.

Self-confidence and self-empowerment, both perceived about themselves and in their way of speaking about themselves, were evident throughout the interviews with the eighth-grade leaders. Jay Conger and Rabindra Kanungo's theory of charismatic leadership "defined psychological self-empowerment as a process between an individual and their environment. Psychological self-empowerment is a motivational concept, stemming from internal need states, such as self-determination, impact, competence motive, and self-actualization" (Morrison 24). In an instance of confrontation with peers or adults, all eighteen leaders interviewed responded that they were equipped to deal with the situations in which they found themselves; however, the males interviewed were more confident and self-assured when responding to the question. For instance, although Ivy replied that yes, she is fairly confident and outgoing, her response was hesitant and followed by, "I would like to think so. [PAUSE] It's weird to talk about yourself" (Ivy). Without further hesitation she added, "I am not trying to brag about myself. I don't want to make myself sound like a better person than I am." Similarly, Shar responded, "Yeah, I guess..." demonstrating hesitation in her response (Shar), and Harper responded, "Um, I do. I guess again it would have to depend on the situation, but yeah, I feel like I am," demonstrating an initial confident response, followed by a second-guessing of her abilities (Harper). The male interviewees were overall more self-assured in their responses. Gary said, "I think I am, yeah. I feel like I have pretty good speaking skills and I can do debate pretty well" (Gary). Notice how

even though he began his answer with, “I think I am,” he then supported his response with skills he possessed. His reflection confirmed his response rather than second guessing it. There was a notable difference in how male and female leaders responded to the questions. While all had positive responses around their levels of self-confidence, the males were much more secure in their responses.

When questioned about the strengths and weaknesses of male and female leaders, student responses were consistent with one another. All students interviewed identified that males excelled at connecting with kids. They believed they tended to lead by example. Females were said to excel at taking initiative and getting tasks accomplished. For weaknesses of males, all responded that boys struggled to crack down and often allowed the girls to take on the instructor role. Students all shared that females struggled to maintain power and control within groups. It is clear from the student perspective that female leaders assume the role of teacher/instructor while male leaders assume the role of friend. Monica, for instance, found that organization is a strength of females; “they get stuff done” (Monica). She envisioned females giving instructions in front of the class. Joe also pictured female leaders taking on the role of teacher more than male leaders. “The females kind of get everything going and tell the kids what we’re going to do,” he stated. “The males make sure everyone is doing what they need to do” (Joe). Joe thought that while girls got right to the task, boys would procrastinate. This perception that males take on the friend role, coupled with the fact that all respondents noted that females are consistently the ones who get tasks accomplished, would allude to the idea that females are the more natural adolescent leader.

A study conducted in a middle school through the University of Notre Dame Australia by Coffey and Lavery came to a similar conclusion as they noticed a lack of participation from boys

in leadership activities. When discussing the “real issues” with getting boys to fill leadership positions within the middle school, one participant questioned:

‘are we feminizing the (leadership) activities?’ He commented further, ‘boys don’t want to be seen to be a part of organising something they perceive more attractive to girls’. A third participant proffered, ‘Girls tend to be better organized and can appear to be better leaders’. As she pointed out, ‘boys tend to have a great idea and then drift. Boys are easily pulled away; it’s more fun to kick a footy’. (195)

Based on interview results, we posed the same questions regarding strengths and weaknesses between the genders in a survey given to WEB Leaders to see what trends arose from a larger response pool. Though this data was already presented in our findings section, we thought it powerful to put student responses in the visual form of a word cloud, which tracks and emphasizes the most frequently used words from the collective responses. Additionally, having side-by-side visuals of the previously reported findings allowed us to compare and contrast the responses. In the images, the size of the words is based on frequency of use in responses. The more often a word was used to describe leaders, the larger the font size. Figure 1 summarizes the responses previously reported in the findings section about perceived strengths of male leaders. Figure 2 summarizes the responses also previously reported about perceived strengths of female leaders.





Figure 1. Strengths of Male Leaders



Figure 2. Strengths of Female Leaders

Noticeably different between the two descriptions is the word *fun*. The word *fun* in the male word cloud appears on the left side, prominently displayed as a value that both males and females perceive in teen male leadership. On the other hand, the quality of being fun is recognized as of minimal importance or significance within female management as it is barely visible. Also frequently mentioned for male leaders were the descriptors of *confidence* and *loud*. This reiterated what many interviewees mentioned about male leaders being perceived as highly confident and able to get their voices heard while managing others.

The biggest strengths that were mentioned for female leaders were related to their ability to connect with others. Words like connect, caring, kind, and understanding stood out when describing female leadership strengths. These survey responses aligned somewhat with the answers of interviewed leaders. These findings showed that females are viewed as more empathetic leaders who can focus on the social emotional connections within their groups. Alternatively, males thrive at the social and engaging aspects with those around them.



For males, some of their most notable perceived weaknesses were being distracted, cocky, overconfident, and having a penchant for messing around. The word “task” is also prominently displayed in the cloud; however, those responses tended to state that males were often “off task.” One survey respondent shared, “Males tend to want to have more fun and get off task.” Another wrote, “They Don’t [sic] always stay on task.” And one more shared that “they [males] get off task easily and are pushy to do what they want to do.” With regards to their overconfidence, it should be noted that the word cloud emphasized the word *confident*, but when responses were looked at individually, every time the word confident or confidence was used it was always preceded by the qualifying descriptor of *over*. While *confident* was mentioned as a strength of male leaders, there is clearly a fine line where having too much confidence becomes detrimental.

Females most striking perceived weaknesses were being emotional, shy, and quiet. *Hard* was also a descriptor that stood out in numerous responses. Interestingly, it was paired with a variety of different descriptions of perceived weaknesses. One survey respondent wrote that female leaders “may not push you as hard as you need. They may also push you too hard.” Another shared that, “Sometimes [they are] unable to make harder choices.” One more wrote, “They have a hard time taking the lead role.” Someone else disclosed that for females it can be “harder to get themselves heard.” It is interesting to note that the weaknesses of females are connected to their strengths, just as they are for the males. Where females are seen to excel at making connections and being empathetic, if they display these qualities *too* much, they are then viewed as *emotional* and that is perceived negatively.

Both the eighth-grade males and females are attempting to make interpersonal connections within their groups. From the responses regarding their relative strengths and

weaknesses, we noticed that for females the pathway to building those connections with their mentees was a quieter, more emotionally driven route that was highly relational. Males, on the other hand, sought to make connections to the whole group, rather than one-on-one. So, their avenue towards relationships could be viewed as more performative in nature. While the approaches that male and female leaders took were quite different, each group appeared to have found success in their varied styles. Yet, there appeared to be a fine line for both groups. If either method was overly executed, then what was a strength took a detrimental turn and became a perceived weakness.

Based on our collected data, we found that when it came to starting and completing tasks and activities, females tended to outperform males. Males surpassed females in terms of being more socially engaging leaders when working with sixth grade students.

Survey responses regarding weaknesses of male (figure 3) and female leaders (figure 4) also depicted some stark differences between the genders, but there was one striking similarity between the two. In both visual representations of student leader responses, two words that were used often were *can* and *sometimes*. This may show a hesitation for students to speak negatively about their peers and it may also demonstrate and represent an uncertainty that youthful leaders have about their role at this age. If their responses included definitive verbs such as *is* or *are*, then the attributed qualities would have appeared to be more static. Instead, the leaders' word choices appeared to offer grace to the shortcomings of their peers. The positive significance of the words *can* and *sometimes* is that it leaves room for growth and change because neither gender's weaknesses are unalterable. It showed a sign of faith that they had in each other's potential as leaders. The students recognized the importance of not attributing the shortfalls of





it would only make sense that effective leaders are ones who put people first. It is possible that the values of the adults in the community have trickled down to the youth leaders as those same qualities seemed to be mirrored in the youth's responses. Perhaps youths in varying situations would choose alternative qualities of effective leaders based on the values of adults around them.

One final small but significant piece of data to analyze is the slight change in perceptions that occurred from the beginning of the year to the end of the year when students were asked to identify who were better and more natural leaders: males or females. While the majority reported that they were about the same, more students thought females were the better and natural leaders at the end of the year. This shift in perception may show that once students have been deemed as leaders and have worked as and served alongside adolescent leaders, for some, that experience led them to change their perception and conclude that females are better and more natural leaders. When we consider the responses of interviewees in relation to this data derived from surveys, it is consistent with the perceptions that female leaders are more task oriented and better equipped to initiate and complete the group's responsibilities and objectives. Interviewees Dwight, Keesha, and Jeff all recognized that doing the work is necessary, but the boys do not do it. Our research shows that while both male and female adolescent leaders recognize that good leaders complete tasks and follow through with their goal, both genders identified that females are much more driven and more often possess this ability than their male counterparts.

## Future Studies<sup>8</sup>

According to a research news article published by NPR, “women have made up a majority of college-educated adults for roughly four decades.” Furthermore, a data analysis conducted by the Pew Research organization and collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Women, ages 25 and older, now account for more than half of the college-educated workforce (50.2%)—an 11% increase since 2000” (Matias).

If interview and survey responses from teenage leaders themselves indicated that after one year of being in a leadership program that some students perceived that females make better and are more natural leaders than males at this age, and if women are the majority of college students and are a majority of the workforce, then why are they not the majority of leaders in the workforce? In fact, they are significantly underrepresented in leadership roles. According to the US Equal Opportunity Employment Commission,

“Despite overall increases in participation rates for women in [official, managerial, and professional occupations,] barriers to entry may still exist. In 2013, women represented 53.2 percent of Professionals, while they made up only 38.6 percent of Officials and Managers” (“Women in the American Workforce”).

As our findings show, there seems to be differing levels of self-confidence and self-empowerment that remain consistent as males and females enter their early leadership positions, both in an educational setting or later while in the workforce. While self-empowerment for both genders “ebbs and flows over one’s lifetime in relation to the environment, whether it is work, school, or family life,” Morrison believes that it is pertinent and relevant to the life of youth and therefore warrants further investigation (25).

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<sup>8</sup> This section was co-written by Jeanne Marri Choun and Rachel Bednar, with equal contributions from each co-author.



There is a discrepancy between the number of women who continue into higher levels of management and leadership. This disparity of equal gendered leadership is even more troubling because of the apparent natural leadership qualities exhibited by female adolescents in our study. We see a value in the continuation of investigating the gender differences among adolescent leaders, especially in the elementary and middle school levels, as research conducted around these age groups is typically less than that of high school and beyond.

What is puzzling is how this seemingly inherent ability to lead plays out as girls grow up. Patrick Morrison, author of *Exploring the Role of Psychological Self-Empowerment and Self-Esteem in the Development of Adolescent Leadership Self-Efficacy: A Mediation Analysis* writes:

“There has been a clear underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in the workforce. This has not only been evident on Wall Street and in Fortune 500 companies, but also in government departments and non-profit organizations. Women currently account for the majority of college students and the majority of the workforce, yet they still continue to hold fewer leadership positions and earn lower wages than their male counterparts.” (19)

What causes the shift from strong, early female representation in leadership to later it being a higher representation of male leadership? As WEB coordinators, we get far more female than male applicants for WEB Leader positions. In grading and ranking students on kindness, productivity, and their application responses, our females typically score significantly higher than males. For instance, during the selection process for the 2019-2020 WEB leadership group, out of 55 total applicants, 19 were males and 36 were females. That year, 8 of the top 10 applicants were females and half of all male applicants were in the bottom 25% of applications.

In the 2018-2019 WEB leadership group, 53 applicants were female while 39 were male. That year, the top 20 applicants only included two males. It is worth noting that applicants' names are concealed during application scoring so that there is no bias based on an individual or their gender. Applications are also scored by each of the two WEB coordinators separately to ensure consistency in scoring. WEB coordinators at other schools in the district typically described their male leaders are also typically “weaker” and less driven than females. One WEB Coordinator reported that,

“In general, we have much higher participation in leadership roles at [our school] by female students than male students. Also, female leaders tend to be more detail-oriented and better able to self-regulate their behavior in a leadership position than our males.

While we have had some excellent male leaders, the trend is that females are often more effective leaders than males at the middle school level.”

There are current studies investigating the disparity between female and male leadership in the workplace. Sadler and Linenberger discussed how women report needing to constantly alter their leadership style to be successful and not to be viewed as threatening by their male peers. Female leaders are changing the way they lead to accommodate how males perceive women should lead while males, however, are not needing to reciprocate. The authors go further to say that women need to be flexible in their leadership styles, rather than utilize the style that is most comfortable and natural to them. This is reminiscent of Bailey’s interview where she commented that “being a female leader you already have to work harder...They, kind of, have to find their way and be creative as leaders so they stand out.” Bailey also noted that “Sometimes [women] aren’t willing to step up as much because of what could come from it.” She observed that for women to make change, they must take things slow. This could be another possible

reason for why there are fewer women in leadership roles because they are met with conflicting ideas and expectations for how they should lead. They are able to get things done, but fear being interpreted as too bossy or aggressive. Not only that, but they face the stress that comes with regularly having to adapt their own leadership style to be a leader who others are comfortable with. While we as teachers want to encourage all of our leaders to be aware of various leadership styles and to understand and appreciate each other's strengths and weaknesses, we are disheartened by the thought that our female leaders will have to be more accommodating than males in possible future leadership roles.

We, the researchers, plan on using our findings to enhance instructional strategies and techniques specific to the needs and deficits of leaders. As the interviews indicated, most leaders stated that their skills were natural although several contradicted themselves when they stated that they were imparted onto them by siblings or parents. Due to this, we still find a need to teach these skills that will enhance their leadership abilities. We want to continue encouraging our students to work towards growing multiple leadership qualities while, at the same time, valuing the strengths that their counterparts bring to the table. The ultimate goal being that all leaders will be able to take learned skills, including those to reduce and alleviate stressors, into future leadership roles and opportunities.

Moving forward in the research of adolescent leadership, we encourage researchers to home in on the impact that gender and self-confidence play in adolescent leadership. More specifically, we urge researchers to try to identify timing and causes for the transitional locus of control between male and female leaders. Our hope being that in the future, the workforce will be more balanced and we will see a more equal representation of women in leadership and

managerial roles as we have found that they are not lacking in qualities that have been identified by youths and adults to be desired in leaders.

## Conclusion<sup>9</sup>

Research on adolescent leadership is still in its infancy. This is understandably so; after all, the period defined as adolescence has recently been expanded to include emerging adulthood, and the field is shifting toward more student-centered learning and trust in students. If the “concept of youth...is a social construction, and both its scope and meaning are continually changing,” then we as researchers must give attention to specific sub-groups within adolescence and the evolution of individuals during this period (Sukarieh et al. 4).

Youth lies between a state of glory and reflection. Ultimately, they may appear as powerless, young kings and queens with all hopes placed upon them with agency dependent on their predecessors’ wisdom, will, and permission. But our goal is to not to direct students on a set path, but to work alongside them in developing skills required to be successful on any path. Furthermore, our goal is to offer space for youth to have opportunities at which they may feel ownership and agency to create and execute their will, further enhancing their interests and desires to continue their leadership work into the far future.

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## **Practical Applications for Teaching**

When we first began this study, I was hopeful that we would find concrete answers to various questions. How naïve I was. While I have certainly gained tremendous insight into the perceptions of my student leaders, there are several questions that remain very much unanswered and still push me to continue this process of growth and learning as a teacher and a human being.

One of the issues that I continue to ponder is the concept of innate versus learned skills and/or qualities that leaders possess. Some respondents attributed their skills, such as their communication skills, to adults in their lives. Through the guidance of adults, students acknowledged receiving guidance and learning qualities that allow them to be better leaders. What surprised me, however, is that all our interviewees still considered the skills they possessed to be natural and innate to them. They failed to see that along the way they had parents, siblings, or other people in their lives that often guided them through the problem solving process or provided them with guidance in their daily lives that they then could apply to their leadership.

Shane brought up another factor that he felt had the potential to further complicate the idea that their skills were not in fact inherent but were perhaps more learned. He pointed out that for adolescent leaders there is an additional level of stress because the student leaders are being instructed by adult leaders, and the methods the adult leaders use may not be what is most natural for the adolescents to embody and/or replicate. He shared that his stress level rise “because we have to lead how you guys [the adult coordinators] would or how you want us to. It’s not bad, but it can be stressful.” While Shane was the only individual to voice this concern, we found it incredibly poignant and felt it needed to be recognized for its significant implications for coordinators of leadership programs that focus on fostering teen leadership.

As we shared in the Findings section of this paper, Shane shared that he believed that leading “is natural” and that the best leaders don’t need to work to be good at what they do. In other words, he did not see leaders as people that learn from others, but instead they have innate abilities that allow them to be successful. Kayla and Cody emphasized that same attitude by stating that leading, for them, was second nature and a part of their personalities.

I continue to ponder Shane’s comments when he said that sometimes it is stressful to be a leader when he is asked to lead in the way that he thinks we want him to lead. I wonder if that stress is caused by a possible feeling that he does not have all the tools or skills needed to be successful. If that is the case, naming and teaching specific and varied skills should then be a priority in the leadership program that I co-lead.

This drives to believe that perhaps my practice as a mentor and teacher to youth leaders could be enhanced by creating curriculum that helps my students see that the definition of leadership is more complicated than we anticipate it to be. My practice could include:

1. Sharing with students the results of this study. Thoughtful conversations about leadership as an innate and natural quality or a series of learned skills could lead students to push themselves to want to engage further in their development as a leader. It may give them to drive to learn more skills instead of accepting their fixed reality.
2. Teaching students about various leadership styles and how to identify which style they most associate themselves as valuing. Rich conversations about value systems that drive leaders and guide their practice daily could help our youth leaders understand that perhaps great leaders are in fact drawing their skills from two

different, yet coexisting, fountains—that of inherent abilities and that of learned processes and routines.

3. Teaching leaders that flexibility as a leader is key and flexibility includes valuing different types of leadership styles and valuing the strength of each style within the group. The more students are aware of strategies, techniques, and values of various types of leaders, the more they would be empathic to the needs of all.

Another question arose from this study and remains constant on my mind. I wonder if the stereotypical and traditional gender role perceptions that our students provided about male and female leaders are learned or inherent. In other words, are they just repeating what their community and our society is teaching them about male and female qualities or are those qualities truly inherent to males and females?

Regardless of what it is, as an educator, I think it is my responsibility to allow for students to have a space where they feel safe and willing to pose these questions regarding stereotypes, to push back against fixed and oversimplified ideas and beliefs about gender, and to engage in meaningful and thought provoking conversations about the various ways that they choose to lead. Perhaps acknowledging that fixed ideas about gender and leadership hold students back from growth would allow them to be more open to learning and fostering some of the qualities that the students in this study expressed as being needed qualities of any leader, regardless of their age or self-identified gender.



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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. How do you deal with confrontation? With peers? With adults?
2. Do you feel you are equipped to deal with confrontation?
3. What are your peers' perceptions of you? What do you think are adults' perceptions of you?
4. What is your awareness of the current political climate? What do you think about it? Who influences your awareness/thoughts about politics?
5. What are your interactions with media? TV? Internet? Articles? Can you list all the social media platforms you use?
6. What do you do in your free time?
7. What are your favorite TV shows or movies?
8. On average, how much time per week do you spend with your friends?
9. On average, how much time per week do you spend with your family?
10. Who is in your family? Who do you live with?
11. What are your top priorities in life?
12. How do you define success? What is success?
13. What are instances of peer pressure (positive or negative) that you have experienced?
14. What is your relationship with your family like?
15. What is the educational background of your parents?
16. Are your parents still together?

17. Do you think you have made a difference in the middle school community?
18. What qualities define a leader?
19. What motivates you to lead?
20. Is it stressful to be a leader?
21. Who are your role models (as a leader)?
22. What strengths and weaknesses do males and females bring to the table as leaders?
23. What level of influence do you feel you have as a leader? On a scale of 1-10, 1 being “I have no influence” and 10 being “I have hugely impacted the community and people listen to what I have to say” how would you rate your influence?
24. How much support do you get from adults? Who supports you? What does that support look like?
25. When in leadership do you feel most confident? When do you feel least confident?
26. What hurdles do you face being a leader?
27. What empowers you?
28. How are you viewed or treated differently from your peers?
29. Do you or have you ever had a job?
30. Is there anything we did not ask you that you think we should know about you, about being a leader, or about being a teenager?