Step Aside, So Student Leaders Step Up

As someone who was a natural leader as even an elementary student, I have spent much of my career nurturing student leaders. Unlike my experiences in “Student Leader” after school, during school day clubs, I have deliberately given my students a chance to “own” their own projects and to “demonstrate” their own socializing skills, promotion skills for their projects, and “leading” on the site in person when the culminating projects are presented to an outside audience of peers or adults. Imagine my frustration based on my own “defying” template leadership speeches, writing formats and scripted projects/or outline fill in literally posters, when my student leaders reach back to me and my colleague instructors, begging for explicit “directions” and “templates.” How can I to some extent a natural born leader and then as someone who continued to lead by defying job, role expectations and following my “gut” instincts, inculcate my eager student leaders in actually independently “leading,” not being “led”?

First, I personally start by asking the students to explain why they “see” or “consider” themselves to be leaders. I listen as they talk about their criteria or initial concepts of leadership. It is interesting hearing that some student define leadership solely on the basis of getting good or top grades and being well behaved in school, a school regulation follower. But some have already by age 11, been leaders in writing or creating arts or school projects or in being on teams where they have served as self-designated captains or mentors for peers. Interestingly this type of “knowing” they could “help”/”lead” others ranged from school plays, art expos, sports teams to current steam projects such as robotics, programming and game design. Indeed any school collaborative student group or team build seem to also have been for many of my middle school leaders, the initial eye-opening experiences that led to their realizing they were “leaders” because they helped team members or “found” solutions to overcoming obstacles and challenges. It was also informative to hear that some of the key Stem specific vocabulary of “challenges,” “prototype testing,” “building a solution,” ”generating ideas,” “conducting research” and “stating a problem,” had transferred themselves into the students’ conception of themselves as leaders or potential leaders. In addition, students who had accompanied parents who did community leadership or organization leadership, whether as neighborhood tenant, block organizers, church, social group, job team (i.e. ems, police, hospital, union) or had shadowed family members at work, had very concrete ideas of what leadership included. A few with parents who had tried to get investors or loans for business knew about those pitches and conversations. Finally some students had also already experienced a real world necessary leadership role as young children in their families because they had had to “translate” for adult non English speaking members to fill out necessary government, lease and medical forms or help English speaking family adults “get through” treatments and pick up supplies. For them, they had a sense of ‘’leadership” as a meaningful mature responsibility with power and some pathos included. If time is allotted, it is useful to the students as a model for themselves and as models for other peer school or site leaders to write up these definitions or personal leadership life indicators as well or be videotaped sharing them, so that other school leader groups can use them as an initial idea base for a discussion.

Once the students have shared their own ideas about the meaning of “leader” to them, I lean in with my own experiences as a student leader. These include my recognizing that I should go with my own on site ideas for speech making as a leader. That insight occurred when I was ten and was literally in the process of making a speech at a community event. I was the child leader representative. My speech had been authored and timed according to a topic format the group adult leader had selected. It also had a time limit. I had practiced the speech which I memorized in front of the adult group leader several times to the leader’s satisfaction. Since I loved public speaking even them I had also practiced it at home to my mother’s satisfaction. But on the day of the event the adult speaker prior to me, said something that piqued my interest. Suddenly in the midst of my speech, I decided to turn to the previous speaker and pick up on what that adult had said, I ended my off the cuff, unscripted remarks with a laugh line that got the audience’s attention, in a positive way. I smiled back at them and glimpsed my mother looking initially horrified that I deviated from the script, but proud. When I walked off the stage, the event adult runner said: “You are a speaker.” I knew I was and I liked saying what I thought. From then on, I deliberately switched texts of template articles and speeches at last minute to suit my ideas. Usually I got away with it. I watched and worked with audiences. Given any project, I put my own spin on it. As an adult, I watched students, read research, tried new ideas I developed and published them. My own definition of leadership, no one else’s. I also lost some positions, some friends and even points from some adults along the way, the price of leading. I shared my ideas and experiences with leading authentically with the students as simply one path I had taken. Of course, the experiences of young leaders like Malala, Greta and others can also shared as well as those of neighborhood student leaders.

Once the personal experiences of current or former student leaders have been discussed, the next step in nurturing student leaders, is the actual scope of a student run project, production or publication. The key in whatever you pursue with the students is less detail and set templates with specific word limits and style, rather than more. Multiple formats of acceptable end products with specific content or outcomes needed to satisfy the target audience or organization focus. So for our spring 2023 UN Middle School Junior Ambassador Project, the students selected and explicated why they chose two SDG Sustainable Development Goals – Zero Hunger and No Poverty. They created logos for each of these and decided that although the Project had its own logos and tee shirts, they wanted theirs with their designs and their names. They networked with the PTA to raise money for UNICEF. They decided to talk in teams with individual classes using a PowerPoint Presentation and their own passion to share ideas with their peers. They prepped a banner and poster for Ambassador Wallace, the Jamaica Ambassador to the United States. They developed questions for him before he came and then raised these questions with him plus of course developed some when he visited in May, 2023. While dedicated and equally passionate adults Keitha Rhoden, Social Worker head of the Student Leadership Council and Michelle Myers- Guidance Counselor, facilitated, watched and logistically planned the Junior Ambassador Program, neither of them templated the expected student project or audience outcomes nor did I as the Curriculum person. Together as trainers, we curated online and print resources and even brought in a US senator intern who had at 18, already worked with the Pennsylvania Bar Association and the Pennsylvania Council for Social Studies to talk with these younger peers, but we did not step in to lead the Junior Ambassadors. That was their mission, their task, and their choice.

At the culminating event, a gathering of the peer Middle School Junior Ambassador leaders from across NYC – 20 other schools, my colleagues and I stepped back, and watched. Wonder of wonder, the Middle School Ambassadors, did not ask us what to do. They spotted US Ambassador to the United States Linda Thomas Greenfield and they stepped up to chat and share their newsletters and their tee shirts. They talked with her about their project. We stepped back, and basked in their stepping up to lead. By not leading them to leadership, they were able to lead. Stepping back key step in nurturing students who step up to lead.