Voices that Matter: Rural Youth on Leadership

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Abstract	Article Info
Although considerable research has explored what it means to be a leader from an adult perspective, little has been conducted from the student perspective as an integral component of leadership education, decision making, or educational change. Findings from a longitudinal qualitative case study presented in this article reveal how youth perceive leadership as a complex construct integrating diverse skills, abilities, learning, and change opportunities as well as team and management processes utilized to improve the world and people in it. Youth perceptions of leadership also include responsibility, active and purposeful self-direction, inspiration, desire and willingness to make a difference, ethical character, and collaborative partnerships with school and district leaders. This article thus bridges the gap in research involving rural youth and informs high school principals and leadership educators about ways to initiate and foster a positive educational change and sense of community among youth, community, school, and district leaders.	

Introduction

Increasing participation of high school students in leadership activities and learning in recent years has greatly contributed to our understanding of collaborative relationships between youth and school administration. Although youth leadership is not an emerging concept, important work is being done to empower youth to take leadership roles in learning activities, community action, decision making, and later their career choice. Facilitation of leadership development at a young age predetermines youth's readiness to assume leadership as family and community members, continuous learners, and future professionals. To provide necessary support and assure educator preparedness to meet student needs in leadership development, it is crucial to understand how leadership is defined from a youth perspective. This is especially true in rural areas, where a substantial percentage of students are from low socio-economic backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) and have limited educational, economic and career opportunities (Gallo & Beckman, 2016; Kannapel, Flory, Cramer, & Carr, 2015). Thus, there is a continuous need to close the achievement gap and promote family and community engagement to reduce high dropout rates among students (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Traditionally, the general understanding of *youth leadership* has been influenced by research conducted with adults. Further, youth are rarely considered as a source of a valid and valuable insight about leadership development and its practice and often perceived as not mature enough to inform leadership education. With this mindset, youth are positioned as recipients rather than active and central partners of leadership development. Such an approach lacks necessary perspectives about the nature of and challenges associated with

student leadership and its development, which in turn impedes the design of effective, engaging, and empowering leadership interventions in any setting or with any group.

This article highlights the importance of student voice and how rural youth perceive leadership and themselves as leaders while developing their leadership abilities. In the following sections, I first describe the relevant contextual details about student voice and its role in education and student development and then position this study in research literature that examines leadership of youth. To explain how the purpose of this study was achieved, a brief overview of the research design is presented, followed by research findings. The article concludes with implications drawn from this study of youth leadership education and student voice in educational leadership.

Student Voice and Educational Leadership

The place and role of students in educational leadership and reform efforts changed over the past several decades. Historically, student opinions were often disregarded and believed to have less legitimacy and value than the views of adult educators and leaders. Over time and through changes in education expectations, this attitude also changed: Students have become active players in their own learning, decision making, problem solving, and knowledge creation (Manefield, Collins, Moore, Mahar, & Warne, 2007). Additionally, engaging students in conversations fosters discovering students' values, beliefs, previous knowledge and experience, thus allowing student voices to inform curricular and educational direction while likewise encouraging and supporting student initiative.

Student voice in this context is a determinant of change. Successful change emerges through recognition of the value of their ideas for school improvement (Fletcher, 2005) and enhances their opportunity for self-reflection, exploration, and development of self-respect (Ranson, 2000) that lead to trusting partnerships with adults, thus influencing student involvement in school and learning. During times of educational reform at local, national, and international levels, student voice has great potential in improving student learning outcomes and increasing the effectiveness of school leadership (Mitra, 2003; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Student engagement with educational leaders to improve schools has many forms: from sharing student opinions and solutions to school issues to collaborating with educators to improve educational outcomes (Manefield et al., 2007).

In this research project, youth voices were recognized as critical components of leadership development and effective school administration. Further, findings confirmed Mitra's (2008) assertion that student voice is essential to reform movements since any action taken to improve a school or district will impact its students. Elevating student voice as part of educational reform can encourage educational leaders to revise and align their mission, goals, and activities with greater focus on social justice, equity, and diversity (Mitra, 2008). Student voice also serves as a catalyst for change in schools and helps to improve curriculum, relationships between students and faculty, teaching and instruction, student assessment, teacher training, student mentorship, and school administration (Fielding, 2001; Mansfield, 2015; Mitra, 2008; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

That said, involving students in educational reform is complex. As noted by Cook-Sather (2015), engaging students in reform efforts requires adults to embrace the diversity of perspectives and its value

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because it has the capacity to generate a new vision, catalyze mission, and inform action. Student voice, in fact, can help to develop partnerships in education and serve as a bridge between community and educational leaders. Manefield and his team (2007) emphasize that involving students as active leadership agents not only builds up their confidence, self-esteem, and respect but also provides practical direction for educational improvement that is secured by student support. By elevating voices of youth to build their individual capacities as learners and equal partners in educational innovation, students become "actors in sharing policy" rather than being the "subject of policies" (Mansfield, 2014, p. 398). Additionally, by acknowledging students' diverse perspectives, informed by their unique experiences in education and leadership development, it becomes important to create a dialogue about the nature of leadership and the role of school administrators in the design and implementation of leadership development interventions.

Youth Leadership in Contemporary Contexts

In recent years, thinking among youth leadership researchers and educators has dramatically shifted. The previous focus on leadership giftedness of individual youth has begun to be replaced by new ideas on the capacity of *every* youth to develop leadership potential and fulfill their leadership purpose (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Klau, 2006). In his essay, Avolio (2016) emphasized one's readiness to lead and learn from other leaders in a specific leadership-ready environment. Priest and Middleton (2016) argue that one's leadership is self-defined and determines an individual's thinking and behaving as a leader and realizing leadership development opportunities.

Throughout the years, researchers of youth leadership have attempted to describe the nature of leadership. Underscoring its complexity, youth leadership has been examined within the context of social and personal development (Day et al., 2014) and found its correlation with responsibility (Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006), leadership giftedness (Roach et al., 1999), and gender-based roles (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). From a competency perspective, youth leadership includes cognitive and intellectual abilities, motivation, self-awareness and self-efficacy, behaviors, past leadership experience, and various interpersonal, learning, and professional skills (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Jones, 1938; Klau, 2006; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Other youth leadership theories outline personal growth and conceptual awareness (Mawson, 2001), activism (Chambers & Phelps, 1993), and personal values, beliefs, persuasion, inspiration, and motivation (Kosutic, 2010) as possible leadership metrics. Although not all scholars agree that motivation and previous leadership experiences are required for effective assessment of leadership in youth (Chambers & Phelps, 1993), those traits play an important role in determining the impact of leadership practice on leader's personality and community (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Mawson, 2001).

Further Research Needed on Youth Leadership

Despite this growing scholarly interest in the topic of youth leadership, there is much that remains unknown. According to Hogan and Kaiser (2005), youth "leadership is one of the most important topics in the human sciences and historically one of the more poorly understood" (p. 169). Research has been conducted *quantitatively* (Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Guerin et al., 2011; Oakland, Falkenberg, & Oakland, 1996; Ogurlu &

Emir, 2013; Schneider, Ehrhart, & Ehrhart, 1999; Zacharatos, Barling, & Kelloway, 2002) and *qualitatively* (Close & Lechman, 1997; Ferguson, Kim, & McCoy, 2011; Haber, 2011; Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006; Hastings, Barrett, Barbuto, & Bell, 2011; Komives, Mainella, Longerbeam, Osteen, & Owen, 2006; Mortensen et al., 2014; Mullen & Tuten, 2004; Roach et al., 1999; Webster & Worrell, 2008; Zenkov, Harmon, Bell, Ewaida, & Lynch., 2011). These diverse explorations on youth leadership and its development revealed that adolescent leaders are motivated, socially and culturally competent, self-directed, responsible, compassionate, and community-oriented. However, while numerous programs and models inform youth leadership and its development, these lack rigorous inclusion of youth insights on leadership and their potential to be leaders. This study was conducted to fill that research gap.

Methods

This study focused on developing a picture of leadership from a youth perspective through answering the following research question: *How do rural high school youth perceive leadership?* As part of this overarching research question, youth were also asked to share their opinions on leadership role modeling and leadership potential. For the purpose of this study, a qualitative longitudinal case study was conducted. The study was conducted over a two-academic year period in a rural high school setting in Kentucky within the context of a youth leadership development course. The main objective of the course was to engage students in local and global community improvement initiatives, responsible decision-making, implementation of technology in classroom, and school-oriented project development. The study population included 16 students enrolled in the course. The

sample was comprised of 14 female and 2 male participants ranging in ages from 15 to 18 years old.

Data Sources and Study Participants

To assure data validity, data were triangulated by employing several methods of data collection, including face-to-face semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. The dataset also included researcher field notes, interview and observation protocols, and subject-relevant documents shared by study participants and lead teacher. Each student was interviewed at least twice for approximately 10-15 minutes. Forty interviews were conducted and produced seven hours of audio data. Observational data included detailed information about observational settings, time, interpersonal interactions, participants' responses and behaviors within the given observational contexts. The observations focused on educational settings and course activities where development and practice of youth leadership occurred, characteristics of youth leadership in practice, nature and content of activities offered as part of the course, and opportunities created by the instructor to practice student leadership. A total of 20 observations were conducted during the study timeframe.

The dataset also included documents collected to augment the observational and interview data to assure credibility of research findings. Collected materials included two types of data—documents provided by study participants and the course instructor, and publicly available documents. A total of 62 documented materials comprising over 135 documented pages were collected. Documents created or provided by study participants and course instructor included students' essays, open-ended leadership surveys, reflections about

course activities (e.g.,, readings, leadership experiences, school values), and students' electronic presentations. Publicly available school and course documents included student organization teams, community mission, school vision and values, course curriculum, and Lead2Feed lessons that were used as a curricular foundation of the course.

Data Coding and Analysis

Collected data were reviewed and organized using a web-based qualitative and mixed-methods research data analysis tool (Dedoose® v.6.1.18), and thematic and structural approaches were used to code the data. During thematic analysis, data were reviewed and codes were developed in Dedoose to organize the data based on emerging thematic patterns and categories. The codes were informed by the research question, and as the thematic analysis emerged, were merged into categories (Notz, 2005; Rabiee, 2004; Szabo & Strang, 1997). Individual quotes were then used to develop descriptive statements for further analysis (Bustamante-Gavino, Rattani, & Khan, 2011; Rabiee, 2004). Once the statements were grouped in themes, the researcher compared and contrasted coded narrative until each category and theme was viewed as an independent, identifiable structure (Burke, 1992). These procedures supported the creation of a narrative structure with logical, reliable, and valid relationships between the research question and study findings (Bowen, 2009; LeCompte, 2000).

Research Findings

Following the initial analysis of data, three themes emerged. First, leadership is viewed by youth as a complex and interconnected

construct that incorporates the elements of personality, management, and team work and leads to positive change, impact, or overall success. Second, every individual has the potential to be a leader. And, third, family members serve as first role models of leadership behavior for youth.
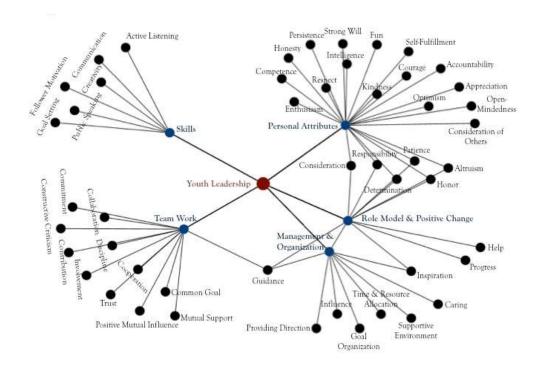
Leadership Complexity

It was clear from the onset that the youth's perspectives on leadership were unique and diverse. In general, they defined leadership as a way to contribute to the community and make a positive change. Matthew noted, "Leadership is using your ideas and ideas of others to better your surroundings and better your people who are around you. And just make the world a better place – making improvements whether they are small or big." Similarly, Emily shared that leadership "is something that you don't have to have a big role, you don't have to have people following you, but you take the stand to do something better."

Students' perspectives on the nature of youth leadership gathered across the 2-year study included critical features such as role modeling, teamwork, personal skills and qualities, and capacity to make a positive change. Youth leadership was viewed as a multifaceted construct incorporating various aspects of personality, management and organizational processes, and ethical qualities. It integrates personal skills, abilities, opportunities for leadership practice, and team processes to improve the world and people in it. Youth leadership also requires responsibility, active and purposeful self-direction, inspiration, desire and willingness to make a positive difference, and strong moral character (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Complexity and interconnectedness of youth leadership

The construct of leadership as shown in Figure 1 above demonstrates the breadth and interconnectedness of youth leadership characteristics described by the study participants. Such characteristics as inspiration, altruism, patience, responsibility, determination, and guidance or mentorship were ascribed to two or more leadership categories when describing youth leadership as a sum of personal attributes, participants emphasized a number of personal qualities making a leader to stand out among others. Responsibility, for instance, was one of the most cited ones. Elaine noted that leaders have

to be responsible for themselves, knowing that they're setting the example, and they need to help others set expectations for themselves, not really just fulfill them. But help others see what they can do. And see what all they can be.

Danielle concurred that "leadership is about being responsible with what you are doing. If you have a project as a leader, you know, your peers expect you to get it done."

Other participants outlined leader's ability to be humble and empathetic as important characteristics. When sharing her observations of leaders, Natasha stated that they do not think highly of themselves. She or he is in a position where they feel that they are as equal as everyone else. They don't really feel like a leader but they are leading." Weston agreed:

They [leaders] don't know that they've done a lot until the work is done. They constantly strive to help others and seek help as well. They don't think they are better than everybody else. They try to learn just like everyone else. When there's a problem that arises, they ask and try to find answers. They are also good at communicating, willing to talk to new people even though maybe they don't like them. Sometimes, [they] just get over the fact that [they] don't like each other. Just work. And, I guess, awarding people for their good behavior I think as being good leadership.

Emily also reported her perspective on leadership, in which she used masculine pronouns.

He tries to understand how people feel and what they think, and I guess be understandable too of their ideas and their opinions. He is intelligent, so I guess that helps because he is someone who knows what he is talking about and he is pretty strong-willed. If he wants to do something, he gets it done.

Leadership, as recounted by youth in this study, is inseparable from a well-rounded, kind, respectful, responsible, and determined character. For example, according to Natalie, it requires "knowing your strengths and weaknesses and using those to improve self first." Self-reflection also inspires others and helps in determining what leadership style is suitable to various circumstances. Empowered by numerous examples of their family members' and peers' leadership styles, students believed no matter what mistakes others make, a leader should always support them, build them back up, and learn from mistakes without blaming others.

Skills is another leadership dimension identified by youth. When describing leadership, they also emphasized goal setting, motivation, active listening, public speaking, creativity, and communication skills. Taylor suggested, "Effective communication was definitely essential to our success. We took many ideas from various people and put them all together to make one big, great idea." Chris added, "As a leader, you have to be able to express your ideas well to the group. But also, be able to listen to other people's thoughts."

With regard to teamwork and management, youth leadership was viewed as a process of creating a supporting environment that encourages mutual trust, goal and group commitment, collaboration, and continuous improvement. Matthew noted, "Leadership is using your ideas and ideas of others to better your surroundings and better your people who are around you. And just make the world a better place - making improvements whether they are small or big." Effective leadership provides guidance. According to Emily,

> *Leadership is not really taking charge, but showing people the way, like guiding them, because leaders should not be demanding or overcontrolling. But they*

should be the ones who are willing to help everybody. It shows people what they
need to do and sets the example.

As a form of teamwork, leadership is "about other people wanting to be with you and learn from you. And being able to teach other people a lot of things," according to Jane. To be a leader in a group, Chris perceives one needs to "have an opportunity to go out and make friends, communicate, help and receive help in return. And just complement each other on what they've done. And tell them ways that they can do better." The students stressed that effective team leadership instates equality of opportunities for each team member to contribute and provides ongoing support, mentorship, and guidance to develop leadership potential and independence in others.

Leadership Potential

The idea that anyone can be a leader was emphasized often by the high school students. At the beginning of the study, a majority of the participants believed in leadership potential in every individual (73%). At the end of the study, 93% of the youth reported they were able to recognize leadership potential in others.

Highlighting different leadership characteristics and skills necessary to be a leader, the students often mentioned the importance of one's willingness to be a leader and assume fully the responsibility for being one. They emphasized choice and passion of being a leader as well. One of the study participants, Alice, stated, "I think everyone can be leaders if they wanted to. They have the abilities inside them whether they show it or not." Chris agreed, "Everybody has the ability to be a leader. It's just if we choose to use [that ability] or not." Jennifer continued, "I think if you have the passion for [leadership] then you can . . . dedicate yourself to being a leader, then you can grow."

Another respondent, Matthew, was more assertive: "You always have that choice, and you always have that right. You are who you make yourself." Indicating that leadership is authentic to everyone, study participants also agreed that without hard work, continuous self-realization, and willingness to grow as a leader, becoming an effective leader can be challenging. Chris asserted, "Everyone has the opportunity to be a leader. It's not like you are born with it or you are not. I feel like what you do and your attitude and your willingness makes you a leader. So, anyone could be a leader." Maranda also explained:

> [W]e all have leadership values. And I think you need to be enthusiastic about it. You need to spend as much time doing it, and helping others when you are done with your [leadership assignment]. Leadership is helping others when they don't understand something, or not being afraid to ask questions if you don't understand something.

Some high school students also underscored the importance of working hard to realize their leadership potential. According to Bonnie, people "need to be giving their 100% [effort] each day, or at least try" to become a leader. Even if everyone has leadership potential, what matters is "what they did with [it]" and "whether they have the courage and the fighting strength to get up there and actually be a leader."

It is apparent that the high school students perceived leadership potential in everyone and recognized that this potential can remain unrealized if not properly developed and practiced on a regular basis. They shared a common belief that all individuals have a choice to be a leader and the capacity to change and lead in their own way. Empowered by their own and peer examples, these study

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participants believed no matter how often and in what way one assumes leadership responsibilities, every leader is important.

Leadership Role Modeling

All participants in this study believed that personal leadership is ignited by leadership of other people. When asked who they admired as leaders (i.e., *Who do you look up to?*), all the students referred to someone in their family, either parents or relatives. The majority were encouraged by leadership of their parents due to their hard work, diligence, persistence, ability to make others happy, and ability to work through life and family issues. Speaking of her mother as her leadership role model, Maranda provided this justification:

> *She always puts everyone else before her. And that includes clothes and haircut, food, anything. . . . She puts their fun ahead of hers. So, sometimes she doesn't even do anything just so everyone else gets fun and enjoys life. A lot of people look up to her just because how great she is. And she is always influential and always has someone's back.*

Chris recognized his father's hard work and its importance for being a leader,

> *He works so hard, and everything he's got has been through hard work. I think that is really important as a leader is to have that determination. You have to work hard to get there. It's not just going to come to you.*

Although Emily admitted that her father is not in a leadership position, he still exhibits all leadership qualities.

> *He is not in the position that he is a leader, but he works really hard. He works night shift... And he is away from home during the day. So, he gets just a few hours of sleep and he is always helping other people out, takes things for them, and he is just a really hard worker.*

Helping others was another consistent attribute of a leadership role model. While talking about his mother, Chris shared her life challenges and highlighted the importance of altruism for a leader.

My mom is my role model because she is a very strong person. She took leadership on at a very young age to raise her kids. Now I want to help other people, because I know that my mom helped other people, helped us succeed in life.

Alice concurred because her mother has altruistically devoted herself to being a life-long leader for the family: "She had her first kid at 16, and she finished school while raising us. She is taking care of her family. My mom is a leader because she puts others before herself."

Although parental leadership role modeling was commonly mentioned by the participants, the high schools students also learned leadership from their relatives and siblings. For example, Nicole's leadership was inspired by her sister's:

She was seven when we moved from Europe here. She didn't know the English language. So, she had to learn it herself, in school in the first grade. And she had to teach us [because] my parents didn't know English either. So, as we got older, [my sister] still had to translate things for them and deal with all of that. So, I think she had to grow up more than anybody else. So, I'd say she is a leader.

Altogether, family and close family members were the primary sources of leadership examples because they evidenced the purpose of leadership, its impact, and importance in lives of others. Parental leadership models inspired youth "to be nice to everyone, try to do their best around everyone, and keep them happy," according to Matthew. They instilled confidence in student leadership capacity and demonstrated how putting others ahead of the self can make a positive change in the family and community.

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Conclusion and Implications

The findings from this study suggest that student voice is crucial in understanding the nature of youth leadership. According to the participating high school students, leadership nature is complex, interconnected with skills, character, and abilities, and influenced by organizational and team processes. The overarching purpose of student leadership lays in youth willingness to make a positive change in their families, school, and community. Youth preparedness to positively contribute to other people's lives begins with the development of their leadership potential and purposeful engagement in responsible learning and community service.

Viewing youth leadership as a combination of personal values, virtues, and skills could and should be foundational to youth leadership education and learning. According to students, leadership is inseparable from such qualities as responsibility, determination, persistence, honesty, courage, optimism, accountability, altruism, et cetera. Development of these virtues furthers and improves not only youth leadership but also their personality, which can serve as a catalyst for a positive life-long character change. This is especially important because these student participants perceived a leader as someone humble and who is a great communicator, understands and appreciates others' needs, and is socially and emotionally intelligent, open-minded, and self-fulfilled. These leadership qualities develop and refine over time as student leaders acquire hands-on leadership experience.

Unique Findings

As a continuum, youth participants also viewed leadership within the contexts of organizational and team processes. For them, leadership was a mechanism for effective collaboration, partnership, guidance, support, team contribution, and goal accomplishment. Leadership as a teamwork and managerial process was integrated into positive personal and community change, which was perceived by the high school students as a personal responsibility—that a leader must give back and contribute to the collective growth of community and its members. This finding supports research on youth leadership as a process, thus illustrating youth predetermination for continuous improvement of their personal and team leadership. Although this finding does align with current scholarship, the youth participants in this study emphasized the ethical and altruistic nature of team and organizational work, which is minimally described in existing youth leadership theories.

Many contemporary youth leadership theories are also self-centered, rather than other inspired, focusing little on the role of family members in creating a positive image of leadership and providing leadership examples. In this study, the high school students identified parents and other family members as imperative to their learning and recognition of leadership in themselves and others. Indeed, encountering leadership in family settings shaped participants' understanding of leadership, served as a continuous source of leadership inspiration, and allowed youth to foresee leadership potential in everyone regardless of their socioeconomic status and education level.

Practical Implications

This research suggests three practical implications for *youth leadership scholarship*, *rural community*, and *school leadership*. First, the findings emerging from this study allude to the importance of student voice in defining the nature of leadership. Since leadership development interventions are grounded in adult perspectives of leadership, youth leadership educators, administrators, and practitioners can use these findings to evaluate the extent to which leadership learning materials match the perspectives of youth. The voices shared by youth do not invalidate previously derived research; rather, they emphasize the need to connect youth ideas on leadership with leadership training programs. As similar research shows (Mortensen et al., 2014), everyone is predisposed to leadership. However, leadership potential can and should be furthered in any youth who is interested in a positive personal and community change.

Second, these study findings suggest student voice can be valuable in the dialogue on the nature of leadership in order to make youth leadership education more responsive to the developmental and social needs of youth in marginalized areas. Elevating the voices of rural youth can excite their interest in leadership development and practice, being role models for their peers, teams, and student organizations, thus providing opportunities for youth leaders to serve their schools and communities as equal partners and change agents. Extending this dialogue to their families can also motivate youth to exercise their leadership potential for their family and community common good early on in life to prepare them to lead now and in the future.

Last, the findings of this study have implications for school leadership. A central goal of education should be to create a safe environment within a school to meet students' learning and socio-emotional needs as well as foster student development at an optimal rate. School leaders and teachers have the responsibility to ensure ready availability of tools and frameworks necessary to recognize student leadership potential and provide adequate activities to address different levels of students' leadership development. To that end, school leaders must help teachers discern leadership in youth and design frameworks that emphasize development of a youth leader's personality, skills, ethical qualities, and team processes. This will also support personalization of leadership learning that can lead to a positive personal and community change, youth's commitment to learning goals, learning success, increased awareness of school and social issues, effective communication, ethical action, and responsible decision-making.

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