



Tomorrow's Leaders for Sustainability

Fostering Leadership for Sustainability

Ten basic principles for getting students aged 11-18 engaged and active in bringing about change for a more sustainable future

By **Patricia Armstrong**

I MET AN AMAZING young leader this year. He was only 14 years old, but already has taken on a project to install solar panels on the roof of his school, because, as he sees it, the school should be a model to the community in using renewable energy. It has not been an easy project. The school has said that they don't have the money, but he has persisted, producing convincing arguments to any objections raised and generating numerous fundraising ideas. Giving in is not an option. He told me "If I don't do this, who will?" His goal is to have the panels on the school by the time he finishes his final year.

During this time, he has demonstrated entrepreneurship, resilience, excellent communication skills, courage, determination, strategic planning, futures thinking on multiple

occasions. We are only now beginning to realize such qualities are the hallmarks of young leaders for sustainability.

Since I met this driven young man, I've observed many students that shared similar leadership skills and passion for sustainability. More and more schools are successfully introducing and maintaining sustainability initiatives that have similar students actively engaged and encouraged to take leadership.

A recent study of schools in Victoria, Australia has provided evidence that supports the idea that student engagement and empowerment is key to success in sustainability initiatives. The authors concluded:

"Motivating students to identify and take charge of their own projects and also making the work they do visible to the wider school community (through

T-shirts or badges) helps keep them motivated and elevate sustainability work as ‘mainstream’ or ‘cool’ from the perspective of other students.”¹

These observations and research results raised a number of important questions about young people ages 11-18. What does the literature tell us about leadership for sustainability in young people? How can teachers and educators motivate young people to become leaders in sustainability? To what extent can young leaders contribute to their school’s achievements or outcomes in sustainability?

In 2008, with these questions, observations and reflections in mind, Jane Stewart and I co-founded Tomorrow’s Leaders for Sustainability (TLfS), with the broad aim of helping primary (elementary) and secondary (high) school teachers to engage and empower their students in sustainability initiatives. Since then, we have developed training courses for students, run workshops to train teachers in the approach, licensed other organizations to work with schools, conducted one and three-day forums for students in hundreds of schools in Victoria, as well as community leadership courses.

What is youth leadership for sustainability?

There has been very little research on youth leadership for sustainability and what it may mean to young people. One recent study of the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative identified that “students defined leadership in terms of communicating clearly and simply; making new tasks fun and easy; and being positive role models.”²

Taylor³ defined adult leadership for sustainability as:

... a process of influence that occurs within the context of relationships between leaders and their collaborators, and involves establishing direction, aligning resources, generating motivation and providing inspiration to achieve mutual interests. This definition can accommodate leaders and collaborators swapping roles during the process, strong individual leadership as well as distributed leadership (e.g. within a team, where all or some of the members contribute to the leadership process at some time).⁴

At TLfS we have incorporated Taylor’s “process of influence” in the following working definition of youth leadership for sustainability:

Leadership for sustainability with young people is the ability to have ideas, take initiatives, influence and motivate others and complete actions that will bring about change for a more sustainable future.

A 17-year-old student in a Victoria-area school has come up with an even more succinct and profound definition of leadership for sustainability. When asked what she understood by the two terms leadership and leadership for sustainability, the student defined the first as “service for the community” and the second as “service for the environment.”

Ten principles for fostering leadership for sustainability in students

From a search of the relevant literature and our observations and experiences with many schools, the following are what I believe to be the 10 key principles in nurturing leadership skills and attitudes in school age students towards sustainability:

1. Theories, models and styles of adult leadership are not necessarily applicable to young people.

While there are numerous theories, models and styles of adult leadership, there are far fewer on the subject of youth leadership. We cannot assume that what applies to adults will also apply to young people. There are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, the theories, models and styles adult leadership were developed from research on adult leaders of other adults in a range of situations, such as the workplace, the military, sport, churches and community organizations. These are quite different situations to schools, which are places where children learn under the guidance of teachers. In schools, there has been some research^{5,6}, but little work regarding youth or adolescent leadership for sustainability. More research is needed in this important area.

Approaches to adult leadership are based on the cognitive capacity of the adult brain, but brains of children and adolescents are different. We don’t understand yet how these differences may impact on their leadership capacity. What we do know is that during mid-adolescence—about 14-16 years in age—a young person’s brain undergoes rapid changes and this leads to greater cognitive and social abilities compared with younger children.⁷ Often this development is not complete until a young person is in his or her late teens or even early adulthood.

One theory of adult leadership which seems to work for young people is that of *collaborative leadership*, in which people from different groups work collaboratively to achieve outcomes. A good example of this took place at Melbourne Girls College in Richmond, Victoria, where they formed a Sustainability Collective to run sustainability projects. The Collective, made up of students, teachers, parents and people from businesses and the local community, has undertaken many interesting projects including tree planting and a solar powered, open-air theatre night.⁸

While it is tempting to just provide a simplified version of adult leadership training programs for young people, this may not be appropriate. Teachers and educators who conduct training for young people in leadership skills should look for programs that are based on research with young people and are appropriate to their students’ cognitive and social capacities at the time.

2. Young people seem to be more interested in developing leadership through involvement in groups, rather than as individuals.

This important principle, which is based on a 10 year longitudinal study of youth-based organizations in the United States⁹, is about *leadership within a group and for the group*. The principle can also be extended to embrace the practice of older students mentoring younger students.



This doesn't mean that schools should not have environmental captains, as long as these leaders are working in a collaborative way with other students, staff and parents. In my research, several young leaders told me that one of the things that motivates them to be leaders is recognition; having a position as an environmental leader helps give them that recognition. On the other hand, we have observed schools where a whole class took on the role of environmental leaders collectively, with individuals having clear responsibilities, but working together on significant projects. Having environmental clubs or committees is another way of fostering leadership in a group situation.

This principle is consistent with the work of the US psychiatrist, Daniel Siegel, who argued that we need to help young people to have a well-balanced approach to life that integrates personal insight, empathy for others and moral awareness; "behaviours for the greater social good."¹⁰ Leadership in groups helps young people move from the "me" to the "we."

3. Leadership for sustainability is about working towards positive environmental or social change.

As with adults, young people's leadership for sustainability should be directed towards taking actions that bring about change. There is not much point to being an environmental captain or part of an environmental club or committee unless change happens. TLfS resources were designed with this principle in mind. Teachers use the resources to guide students to choose, implement and report back on their projects, and finally, when the projects are completed, to celebrate their success.

4. All young people have the potential to be leaders for sustainability.

Leadership for sustainability is about influencing others to take positive actions to achieve a more sustainable future. Tay-

lor believed that "anyone in a sustainability-focused organization could potentially be a leader at some point in time if they are involved in a process of influence that involves encouraging sustainable practices."¹¹

The key words here are "sustainability-based organization." In a school culture where sustainability is valued, a student has the potential to take on leadership, whether this means as a school environmental captain or organizing their own campaign. Either way, the student is influencing others to adopt sustainable practices.

This does not mean that every student will want to be a leader for sustainability. As young people lead busy lives and many have other interests; sustainability may not be the most important thing for them at this stage in their life. Some may feel that, at present, they just don't have the confidence, knowledge, skills and experience to be an effective leader. Perhaps we should be helping students to look at this from a different perspective: by taking initiative and actions, a young person will develop their confidence, knowledge, skills and experience and become better leaders. One student told me that it's like a cycle, "The more you do, the better off you are."

5. Many leadership skills can be learnt.

There is evidence to show that students can learn and improve their leadership skills.^{12 13} Young people can learn skills such as communication, teamwork, planning, running meetings, giving presentations, planning projects, solving problems and making ethical decisions. These basic skills provide the framework for our TLfS leadership courses.

Nonetheless, leadership for sustainability is not just about developing skills; it is also about gaining knowledge, having good ideas, being able to inspire others and bring out their ideas and strengths, working collaboratively, taking actions, and eventually completing projects and delivering outcomes for sustainability. Some of this can be taught, some of it can be learnt from other students or adults, while some can only be learnt through practical experience and developed over time. Teachers can best help their students to develop their leadership capacity by giving them opportunities for leadership through meaningful projects, recognizing their efforts and achievements, encouraging and guiding them when things become difficult or uncertain, i.e. to not just be their leadership trainer, but their trusted coach or mentor.

6. Young people can be motivated to take environmental actions through positive people and experiences

Research suggests that the best way to motivate young people to take environmental actions is by helping them to learn through *positive people* (teachers, family, friends and role models) and *positive experiences* (outdoor natural experiences and youth groups, events and conferences).¹⁴ As many of us are now coming to realise, focusing on "doom and gloom" scenarios does not work in motivating young people to take environmental actions. Instead, motivate them through inspiring experiences and personal examples of all the little things that you do to live a more sustainable

life; riding a bicycle to school, bringing your own low garbage lunch, turning off lights when you leave a classroom, and growing vegetables at home.

7. The key elements for promoting youth leadership are based on empowering young people.

Researchers Des Marias, Yang and Farzanehkia listed a number of essential elements that they believe are critical to the development of youth leaders. These are: “youth / adult partnerships; granting young people decision-making power and responsibility for consequences; a broad context for learning and service; and recognition of young people’s experience, knowledge, and skills.”¹⁵

This means entering into real partnerships with young people, where the relationships are not power-based and not rescuing students every time something goes wrong (of course, adults must step in when safety is at stake).

8. Youth leadership is best developed through challenging and meaningful projects.

One of the cornerstones of our programs has been fostering leadership through significant projects. This principle is based, in part, on the major US study of youth leadership by Roach et al. discussed earlier. The authors believed that one of the best ways to promote youth leadership is by “... finding ways for young people to commit to work that will benefit others and be judged by tough criteria.”¹⁶ In our programs, students are encouraged to work in groups on projects of their choice, guided by the class teacher. We have seen some unbelievable group projects, during which the young people underwent quite astonishing transformations in their leadership and personal development.

At one secondary school in western Victoria, groups of students were expected to undertake a significant community project and were allowed to work out of the school on their project for one day a week. At the end of the semester, the groups gave presentations on their projects to all the Year 9 classes. Each project had a social enterprise component in which students were expected to raise money for a local charity. The projects included making recycled paper stationery, helping to rehabilitate a golf course that had been burnt out in bushfires, environmental photography and environmental odd jobs at a local primary school (digging vegetable gardens, fixing leaky taps etc).

9. Encouraging students to undertake environmental and social actions can help students to feel more connected to their school.

This principle is based on research that has showed that connectedness to school is an important factor in helping young people to develop into successful adults.¹⁷ It then can be argued that students who are undertaking projects at school feel more connected to their school and may go on to become more successful adults.

10. Training for leadership should start when a person is young and continue throughout life.

Many authors advocate starting leadership training when young¹⁸. Teachers and educators who are running youth

leadership programs in schools are not only helping their students to become better leaders in their school, but are also helping them to become better leaders and adults, starting the lifelong journey of leadership development.

Pat Armstrong has worked as a sustainability educator for many years, and now specializes in youth leadership for sustainability and professional development programs and other approaches that bring about lasting change. She is also a doctoral candidate at RMIT University, Victoria, Australia, undertaking research into adolescent leadership for sustainability. Pat would like to thank Jane Stewart (her co-founder of Tomorrow’s Leaders for Sustainability) and Dr. Colin Hocking for their contributions to this paper. Teachers and educators can purchase TLfS resources from www.leadersforsustainability.com/. She would welcome feedback on the ten principles described in the article, and can be reached at pat@leadersforsustainability.com.

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Visioning a Green School

Suitability: upper primary (elementary) and secondary (high) school students.

Teacher Background

Teaching ideas

Introduction

1. One of the characteristics of good leaders is that they can create clear “visions” or “ideas” for the future.
2. Many top athletes use this process to imagine achieving their personal or team goals.
3. In sustainability, many “experts” paint scenarios of the future which are “doom and gloom”. There seem to be so many problems and barriers that it is often hard to see a positive future. This can be very upsetting for many people in the community.
4. Many people are now arguing that we need create positive futures by focusing on achieving goals and on solving problems, not dwelling on the problems themselves.
5. This activity will help a person to envision a positive future, to overcome barriers to achieve a dream.



Discuss with students:

1. What are some of the features of your school that you would describe as demonstrating or modelling sustainability – Environmental (e.g. the energy saving features of the school, the water tanks) Social /Cultural (Fair Trade events), Economic (saving money on energy bills, saving fares by using bikes)
2. How do you learn about sustainability at school? (in many subjects, it is a strong part of science, integrated into the curriculum, etc.)
3. Show images of schools with sustainability programs (www.ceres.org.au has many cases studies of schools with outstanding sustainability programs.)

- Students are allocated into four groups and each group chooses one of the four schools listed below.
- Students prepare a model of their “school” and their presentation.
- Remind students about the tips for giving clear presentations.
- Students give presentations.
- Debrief activity: What did you learn from this activity?

Time required

15 minutes for introduction and outlining of activity, 30 minutes to build models of “schools”, 20-30 minutes for students to give presentations and 5-10 minutes to debrief. Total time of 70-85 minutes.

Student Information

Purpose

To create a vision of a green school of the future that will be sensitive to the environmental conditions of a local area and the social and cultural needs of a local community.

Materials

- Natural materials – cones, nuts, seeds, twigs, branches, flowers, shells, pebbles
- Construction materials – blocks
- Plastic model animals and cars
- Sand tray

- Water
- Pipe cleaners
- Bamboo skewers
- Butcher's paper
- Labels, markers, tape
- Card
- Scissors

What to do

Imagine that it is 2018. Your group has just won a prestigious National Environmental Award for the category of Green Schools. Your group was involved in designing and building a new school that:

- made little impact on the natural environment
- helped to build a strong community
- respected the cultures of the local people
- paid for the extra costs of the sustainable features from savings in energy, water and waste disposal

The judges were very impressed by the leadership shown by your team and your exciting design. They also commented on how the team was able to come up with a design that cleverly integrated the environmental, economic and social/cultural sides of sustainable development.

Work in small groups. Each group has to imagine that it is 2018 and they have been asked to give a presentation after the announcement of the award, explaining their design, how it all came about and the benefits it has brought to the local community. The group can use any props they like in their presentation: e.g. butcher's paper, 3D models, etc.

In your presentation, your group will need to cover:

- How the project got started
- Your final design
- How you managed to meet the needs of the school and its community
- Who was involved in the planning and the design
- How you got all these people to work together
- How long it took
- The barriers you faced and how these were overcome
- Some of the benefits of the new school for the students and the community
- How you feel about it now

Each group can choose one of the following schools:

1. A primary (elementary) school in a small, isolated indigenous (i.e. Native American or Canadian) community
2. A primary (elementary) school in a small rural town. The old school was burnt down in a bushfire and replaced with a new building.
3. A new primary (elementary) school in a booming new suburb on a major city. The new suburb has special sustainability building requirements, such as compulsory solar water heaters on all new buildings and grey water recycling.
4. A large secondary (high) school in an inner city. The old school was demolished and replaced by the new buildings.

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