Cultivating Student Leadership

By Larry Ferlazzo

The *Harvard Education Letter* recently ignited a "buzz" in education circles with a report on four longitudinal studies that tried to identify common childhood characteristics for people who became leaders as adults.

Cultivating student leadership has been a critical part of my classroom practice for the last eight years. I became a high school teacher after spending 19 years as a community organizer. One of the primary reasons I made the switch was that I had witnessed adults making dramatic positive changes in their lives because of the leadership skills they had learned in organizing. Wouldn't it be better, I thought, if people developed these abilities when they were younger?

Here are a few of the strategies that I employ to nurture student leadership:

Develop Power

"Leadership is the wise use of power. Power is the capacity to translate intention into reality and sustain it." -Warren Bennis, scholar, author, and pioneer in leadership studies

You really can't be a leader without having power, which most dictionaries define as "the ability to act."

One way to have power is by feeling a strong sense of self-efficacy—a strong belief that you can accomplish your goals. William Glasser calls this quality the "power within."

Differentiation strategies, including the ones shared by Katie Hull-Sypnieski and me in this space last month, can help to build students' self-efficacy.

Teaching students about learning strategies can also strengthen self-efficacy. This is different from teaching skills. Being able to turn on the car's ignition is a skill, but if you'd lost your car keys, you'd need strategies. We can help our students gain the capacity to tackle unforeseen problems by emphasizing comprehension, not decoding; using inductive learning to ask students to identify patterns and not always explicitly telling the "rule" in advance; and helping them learn to categorize information instead of just listing data.

We can also introduce students to what community organizers call "relational power" when we use cooperative learning activities and invite as much participatory democracy in the classroom as possible. We can be more open to students' ideas about how our classrooms look and where students are seated. We can even let students grade their own work— which *can* work surprisingly well. I have had students grade their own work during my entire teaching career: 90 percent of the time I have left the grade as is, 5 percent of the time I've raised it, and 5 percent of the time the student and I have jointly decided to lower it after a discussion.

Glasser suggests that 95 percent of classroom management issues occur as a result of students trying to fulfill a need for power. Power is not a finite pie. When we share power with our students, it doesn't mean that we "have less power" —but it *can* mean we've created more possibilities for learning and leadership.

Enhance Intrinsic Motivation

The studies described in *The Harvard Education Letter* identified intrinsic motivation as a key childhood characteristic among adults who became leaders. I've previously shared various actions teachers can take to improve students' intrinsic motivation. For example, we can build relationships with students so we can learn their self-interests, hopes, and dreams, and be better prepared to more explicitly connect lessons to them. We can praise effort and specific actions more than intelligence. And we can encourage cooperative learning.

Explore the Stories of Leaders

A substantial amount of recent research has found that reading stories—fiction or non-fiction—can promote empathy and alter behavior. I have my students read short examples that demonstrate leadership and we use them as opportunities for literacy instruction *and* for exploration of leadership characteristics that connect to students' own lives. For example, we have read stories highlighting Martin Luther King's emphasis on developing relationships, Cesar Chavez's willingness to take risks, and Nelson Mandela's sense of vision.

Teach Others

Good leaders also teach others. You may have heard of Edgar Dale's "Cone of Experience": "We learn 10% of what we read, 20% of what we hear, 30% of what we see, 50% of what we see and hear, 70% of what we say or write...[and] 90% of what we teach." Though the research behind this statement has been discredited, many leadership experts (including William Glasser) still quote it often because they say it reflects their personal experiences. I agree. And, of course, numerous other respected studies have found peer-assisted learning to be very effective.

Teaching others not only requires students to reread and return to learned material but it also enhances self-confidence and provides good modeling for peers. When employed effectively, this strategy can help students develop the kinds of relationships that are critical for genuine leadership that moves people into collective action. When peers teach one another, they develop respect for each others' judgment and expertise. After all, how can someone truly be considered a leader if they do not have a following?

"Teaching others" can be implemented in the classroom in multiple ways. Small groups of students can teach short lessons to other small groups, who then reverse roles (in my experience, this set-up works far better than having small groups teach the entire class). Alternatively, individual students can prepare short clozes (fill-in-the-blank statements) and then exchange them, keeping in mind that their statements need to be carefully designed so that their peers can use context clues to complete them. The well-known "jigsaw" concept—in which students become experts and teach each other about a topic in small groups—is yet another useful method. When a lesson includes a cooperative learning activity, I try to identify unofficial "leaders" for each group and have private conversations before the lesson and "de-briefings" afterward with them.

Take Action On Community Issues

We can also develop student leadership by creating opportunities for students to take collective action to improve their community—addressing issues that matter to them. For example, when my class of English-language learners was studying for the U.S. Citizenship test that many would be taking in the future, they went beyond what would be "on the test." They explored what it would take to be an active citizen (not just a citizen in legal terms). One of the criteria for active citizenship, the class determined, was to be engaged in improving the community. But how to begin? How do we decide what issues are most critical to our communities? Students decided they wanted to learn about other community members' greatest concerns.

Each student initiated conversations with 10 other people, including students in and outside of the class as well as adults within and outside their families. They sought answers to these questions:

• What is this person interested in? How do they spend their time? What gives them energy?

• What goals does this person have for next year? Five years from now? Ten years from now?

• What does this person worry about?

• What other concerns about the community might this person have?

Through the process, students identified a lack of jobs as an issue that they wanted to work on, and they decided to focus on job-training opportunities. They invited representatives from a variety of programs to a meeting at the school, then spent class periods role-playing and planning. They contacted their interviewees, convincing a crowd of 150 to attend a multilingual gathering led by students.

Here are some of the students' post-project reflections:

I felt pride in myself because it is not that easy to speak in front of so many people.

I felt important and good for speaking in front of people.

When I saw so many teachers, parents, and friends get together in the meeting, we had more power.

I learned that I can speak in front of a lot of people and do it well even if it is not in my language.

Community organizing and education have very similar goals. Rene Cardenas writes that the purpose of community development has never been to build a road or improve a park but "to teach others to teach themselves, to learn how to learn, and to evolve from a history of dependence ... to one of independence and helpfulness." That's exactly what I'm trying to do in my high school classroom: cultivate tomorrow's leaders.