



## Young women and leadership development: Co-constructing leadership learning in a New Zealand secondary school.

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Young women's leadership is an area frequently overlooked in educational leadership development. When it is addressed, it is often done so from the perspective of adults, resulting in planned learning opportunities being disconnected from the contexts in which young women lead. This thesis brings young women's voices into educational leadership conversations and illustrates the importance of including their beliefs and understandings about leadership when developing an alternative approach to leadership development.

This thesis describes a qualitative, collaborative action research study conducted between 2007 and 2008 with 12 Year 12 female secondary school students from a Catholic girls' school. This research sought the perceptions and views these young women held about leadership in the secondary school context. The students were involved in co-constructing a leadership development programme (Revolution) with the researcher and participating in it. After the delivery of the leadership programme the students and the researcher evaluated both the programme and the process by which it came about. The questions that guided this research were

1. What are young women's beliefs about leadership and how are these influenced by contextual factors in their secondary school?
2. What would a leadership curriculum that was co-constructed through an adult/student partnership look like?
3. How effective is the process of co-construction in developing a youth leadership programme and how successful is the programme in developing leadership understanding?

Within an action research framework youth-adult partnerships were formed that allowed the voices of the young women and the researcher to be included in the process of designing the leadership programme. The students and the researcher met regularly in the process of creating a collaborative learning community to share perceptions, create, participate in and reflect upon the leadership programme. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to ascertain the young women's beliefs and



perceptions about leadership as well as their preferred ways of learning, what content should be included in the programme and how the programme should be structured, both prior to participating in the programme and after completing the leadership programme.

First, the perceptions and understandings about leadership that the young women held were addressed. The findings indicated that the school was a site of significant influence on the young women's beliefs and understandings of leadership and the opportunities to develop and practice leadership. There was a wide range of beliefs about leadership, ranging from very basic to highly complex, and this influenced the process of co-constructing the leadership programme. The changes to these understandings were later explored after participating in the Revolution leadership programme and this process served as a means of evaluating the effectiveness of the leadership programme.

Second, the process of co-construction that created the content and structure for the created leadership programme was examined. The findings indicated that co-construction was an effective way to create a relevant and authentic leadership programme for young women. It was also a highly complex process that required significant efforts to balance input and share ownership between the researcher and the young women. The co-constructed programme was different from programmes constructed by adults, was influenced by the school context and challenged the young women's existing views of teaching and learning. Overall, both the co-construction process and the leadership programme itself enhanced the young women's leadership understandings and feelings of ownership towards the learning process, and were enjoyable.

This study adds to the sparse literature on young women and leadership as it provides details of how young women perceive and practice leadership in the secondary school. This research suggests that involving young women in designing their leadership learning experiences can help ensure the experiences are meaningful and relevant to the contexts in which they practice leadership.