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Research Brief

# EPL IMPACT

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## INTERNATIONAL STUDY ON STUDENT LEADERSHIP



*A Cross-cultural Study of*  
**Student Leadership in Round Square Schools**



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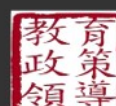
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# Introduction

Most educators would agree that leadership is a valuable skill for young people. Yet there remains a lack of understanding about how students articulate, experience, and perceive leadership. A missing lens on student leadership is significant, given that it should not be assumed that adult leadership theories and perspectives are applicable to young people. The current research explored student leadership across the global network of Round Square schools. The participants were students aged 14 to 18 and their teachers. On the one hand, the geographical scope of Round Square schools, covering more than 200 schools in over 50 countries, enabled an exploration of student leadership across diverse cultural contexts. On the other hand, the educational mission of Round Square is particularly well suited to investigate student leadership. Inspired by educationalist Kurt Hahn, Round Square schools share a commitment to character education and experiential learning to build skills such as leadership. An explanatory sequential mixed-method research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) involved quantitative online survey data collected from 6,760 students and 1,695 teachers across 34 countries. This data informed the framing, collection, and analysis of qualitative interview data from 93 students and 21 teachers at 12 schools worldwide.

The findings provided a holistic understanding of student leadership by illuminating answers to three research questions:

- *How do students at Round Square schools conceptualise leadership as an abstract concept?*
- *How do students at Round Square schools build leadership?*
- *Who can be a leader at Round Square schools and what is the impact of student leadership?*

In the below, we summarise the major findings in relation to the three research questions and present a series of propositions that concisely capture the significance.





## How do students at **Round Square** schools conceptualise leadership as an abstract concept?



### ***The most important qualities of an effective leader:***

For students, the most important qualities of an effective leader were confidence, communication, honesty, responsibility, and listening skills. These qualities were discussed as valuable by enabling leaders to support and positively influence others whilst working collaboratively towards a shared objective.

### ***The prevalence of systemic leadership attitudes and beliefs:***

The students reported more systemic than hierarchical leadership attitudes and beliefs. They believed that effective leadership involves collaboration, ethical conduct, and service, which contrasted with a 'boss' who has absolute authority and dictates instructions to others.

**A 'Round Square effect'?:** The students demonstrated shared perspectives of effective leadership across age, gender, and cross-cultural contexts. The findings point to the potential of a 'Round Square effect' related to how a common educational philosophy and commitment to student leadership in Round Square schools may cultivate common leadership perspectives.

**Leadership role models:** Family, school, and global youth leaders: The students discussed their role models who encapsulate their perspectives on effective leadership. They drew inspiration from family, peers and teachers in school, and global youth leaders. They admired and sought to emulate their capacity to overcome adversity, work collaboratively, and enthuse others.

### ***Perceptions and realities of an inter-generational leadership gap:***

For teachers, an effective leader's most important qualities were communication, integrity, empathy, vision, and compassion. Teachers reported higher levels of systemic thinking and lower levels of hierarchical thinking than students. Despite this, the students often perceived an inter-generational leadership gap with adults believed to display more hierarchical thinking.

# **Proposition One**

## **What it means to be an effective leader**

*'Leadership can be built through diverse activities in and outside the classroom that provide opportunities to experience leadership responsibilities whilst working collaboratively towards a shared objective. Although more formal leadership roles and structured training can be valuable for building leadership, they may not increase leadership self-efficacy, as students become more self-aware and self-critical of their abilities. The students called on schools to expand leadership opportunities and to enable all students to experience leadership.'*





## How do students at **Round Square** schools build leadership?

**Building leadership skills inside and outside the classroom:** The top five activities reported by students for building leadership were groupwork, projects, presentations, hobbies, and sports. For teachers, the top activities were groupwork, volunteering, projects, sports, and presentations. Both groups emphasised learning through experiences, inside and outside the classroom, that involved leadership responsibilities whilst working collaboratively towards a shared objective.

**Experiences and benefits of formal leadership roles:** Two-fifths of students reported holding a formal leadership role, including with sports, clubs/societies, class, student council, and house activities. They discussed leadership roles as challenging but believed that the experience was valuable for building leadership.

**Experiences and benefits of leadership training:** Two-fifths of students had participated in leadership training over the past year, including conferences, workshops, and leadership programmes. Although leadership training could be challenging, they believed that the experience of being guided to lead activities in a supportive environment was valuable for building leadership.

**Demographics, leadership experience, and leadership self-efficacy:** Female students reported higher leadership self-efficacy than their male peers, but there were no significant differences according to age or region. Leadership roles and training were not significantly related to leadership self-efficacy. First, students often built leadership without holding formal leadership roles or participating in leadership training. Second, leadership roles or leadership training were part of a self-discovery process that made students more reflective and self-critical of their leadership.

**Students' recommendations to schools:** For Students recommended that schools expand leadership opportunities and enable all students to experience leadership. They recommended expanding the number and diversity of leadership activities, expanding leadership training opportunities, and expanding opportunities for younger students (e.g., aged 14-15 years) to experience leadership.



# ***Proposition Two***

## **Leadership is built through experience**

*'The students believed that communication, confidence, honesty, responsibility, and listening skills are the most important qualities of effective leaders. They also reported holding more systemic than hierarchical leadership attitudes and beliefs. Although many perceived an inter-generational gap with adults, there was more that united students and teachers than separated them in conceptualising leadership. Both groups valued leaders who support and positively influence others whilst working collaboratively towards a shared objective.'*



## Who can be a leader and the impact of student leadership?

### ***Everyone has the potential to be an effective leader:***

Students and teachers were confident that everyone has the potential to be an effective leader. They believed that although leadership comes easier to some students than others, and that leadership styles vary, leadership is a learnt skill that can be built by everyone through experience.

***Less confidence in adult leaders.*** Students were less confident about the effectiveness of adult leaders in their societies. Therefore, they believed that young people have both the potential and responsibility to be leaders to drive positive change. Students with higher leadership self-efficacy and systemic leadership attitudes and beliefs were more likely to be critical of adult leaders, whilst also having greater self-confidence that everyone can be an effective leader.

***Leadership motivated by personal benefits and contribution to others:*** Students were motivated to build leadership for personal benefits (e.g., personal growth, career, further studies, and families) and to contribute to their schools and societies. Those with stronger leadership motivation had higher leadership self-efficacy and systemic leadership attitudes and beliefs. The teachers emphasised that leadership was integral to students' self-discovery and crucial for them to realise their potential.

***High potential of young people to bring about positive change:*** Students and teachers were enthusiastic about young people's potential to bring about positive change. Students with higher leadership self-efficacy and systemic leadership thinking were more optimistic about the power of young people. The students believed that schools provide a platform to practice leadership and make an impact. They were keen to participate in decision-making processes to highlight problems, identify solutions, and implement change in schools and societies.

***A commitment to contributing to communities locally and globally:*** For The students' sense of leadership service extended beyond local communities to wanting to tackle global problems such as climate change, discrimination, and poverty. Teachers reinforced students' leadership potential by emphasising their 'huge power' and 'huge responsibility' to create a better world.





# ***Proposition Three***

## **All students can be effective leaders**

*‘Effective leadership is a learnt skill that can be built by all students over time through experience. Leadership experience should be integral to schools as it provides both personal benefits to students and enables them to contribute to others. Students have significant potential to bring about positive change. Therefore, students should be included in decision-making processes to leverage their potential to make a positive impact on schools, societies, and globally.’*







## Implications

Overall, the research can inform schools worldwide about (1) what leadership means to young people, (2) the most effective experiences for building leadership skills, and (3) who can be a leader and the potential impact of student leadership. The findings underline Kurt Hahn's beliefs about the value of practical leadership experience, the leadership potential of young people, and young people's capacity to drive positive change. They also point to the importance of schools providing opportunities for all students to experience leadership for their personal development and to empower them to contribute to schools, societies, and globally.

Round Square schools have always valued student voice and promoted and nurtured student leadership. We hope that the exciting youth perspectives in this report reinforce the organisation's work to date and provide food for thought as they unite with students to further enliven the *Spirit of Leadership*.





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