LEADING FROM AUTHENTICITY: USING STRENGTHS-BASED COACHING TO CLARIFY THE LEADERSHIP IDENTITIES OF GRADE 11 BOYS

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INTRODUCTION

St Andrew's College has been developing a cross-grade leadership education programme, branded internally as 'Leading Edge,' over the past four years. The intention is to provide as many opportunities as possible for every boy in the school to lead throughout their school journey and to move away from dependence on a formal leadership title in order to lead.

Towards the end of their Grade 11 year, the boys put forward motivations to serve as school Prefects in Grade 12. In general, the motivations in past years reflect a lack of maturity and insight in that the motivations are not grounded in the strengths, skills, and competencies of the individual, and reflect a lack of personal awareness of service and leadership. I wanted to help boys clarify their leadership motivations through this action research and was curious about the possibilities of using coaching towards building a deeper awareness of self.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

> How can personal leadership narratives help Grade 11 boys to clarify their leadership identity?
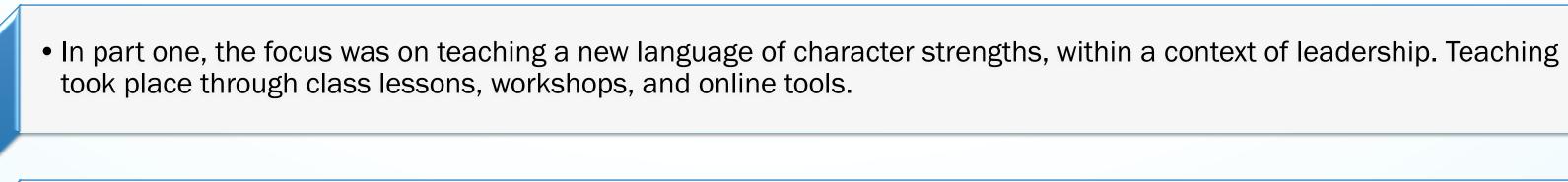
RESEARCH CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

St Andrew's College is an independent, Anglican senior school of about 500 boys located in Makhanda (previously Grahamstown), South Africa. The participants were a group of fifteen Grade 11 boys (age 16-17) in the final term of their year as they prepared to transition into the formal leadership positions of Grade 12. This is the point in time when they put forward motivations in the form of written applications for the various formal school Prefect positions.

THE RESEARCH ACTION

The research action consisted of three distinct parts.

1 • In part one, the focus was on teaching a new language of character strengths, within a context of leadership. Teaching took place through class lessons, workshops, and online tools.

2 • In the second part, individual coaching conversations were held with the participants, structured around the theme of the boy's personal leadership goals for his Grade 12 year. I used the coaching conversation to reflect back to each boy several aspects of his underlying way of being, and then to discuss the feedback in order to build his self-awareness.

3 • The final step was for the boy to express his personal leadership narrative as a short video using the digital storytelling medium of Adobe Spark (to incorporate text, images and music).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data collected were qualitative in nature, which aligns well with the very individual, personal and context-specific nature of the topic: personal leadership identity. Data collection took place through a variety of methods: pre- and post-worksheets, video recordings of coaching conversations with participants, researcher observations and field notes, participant leadership motivation letters, student self-assessments and online tools, participant written reflections, and submissions of the final personal leadership narrative digital story. I considered where to locate each participant within the stages of the Leadership Identity Development (LID) Model (Komives, 2006), comparing my data with the categories of the model. I then further grouped and coded the common themes longitudinally and horizontally across the cohort of participants.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Self-awareness was Evidenced by a Shift in Boys' Language

What are my signature strengths?	• "Everyone has different qualities, leading is just noticing those qualities within yourself and others and then using them the right way."
What is my body saying unconsciously?	• "I am very passionate about certain topics and my body language and expressions show that."
When am I most in flow?	• "I was able to take out a vital question: how to apply the getting into the zone like in a tennis match into other areas of my life."
What are my blind spots?	• "I always saw leadership as a servant role … this mindset hasn't changed. Just the reminder that small things matter. Enjoy the small moments too."

2. A Boys' Leadership Identity Development Stage Correlated With his Desired Leadership Mission

Stage 2 – Exploration/Engagement	• "It sounds like you are already the head of your club?"; "I'll claim it!"
Stage 3 – Leader Identified	• "The house is a shambles and it didn't work sweetly. I want to get order back into the house"
Stage 3 to 4 Transition	• "A grade 8 or 9 boy shouldn't be scared to engage with an older boy. I want to bridge the gap. That's what I'd like to achieve"
Stage 4 – Leadership Differentiated	• "To meet a goal - I'm caring, I'm loving - everyone must come together, even if it means I don't go as far. We did this together as a team."

CONCLUSIONS

My findings indicated that interventions that seek to build the self-awareness of boys can be used as part of leadership identity development. Specifically, individual coaching conversations can surface awareness of different aspects of self, integrating across the domains of language, emotions and body. This awareness can be evidenced by new language the boys are able to use in their personal leadership narrative. A complementary finding was that increased self-awareness did not necessarily correlate with the boys' location within a leadership identity developmental continuum. The horizon of leadership impact available to the boy may be correlated to his developmental stage.

Further inquiry might follow a cohort of boys on a longitudinal study, certainly beyond the three-month scope of this action research and preferably over several years, in order to further understand the applicability of the LID Model for adolescent boys. A second angle of inquiry might look to map the activities of our school's 'Leading Edge' whole-school program to the LID Model in order to provide leadership identity development pathways for our boys that are even more individualized, in order to meet them where they are in their own development journey, as well as to look for any gaps in the program. Finally, the LID Model could be used as part of a tracking or measurement tool to profile the impact of the 'Leading Edge' program over time.

KEY READINGS

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