Leadership Development: Fixing a Flat Tire, or Re-inventing the wheel

By Ahmed Abdelhakim Hachelaf

AUTHOR

As Civic Engagement Specialist, Hachelaf's focus is on capacity building and education of youth who work to have a social impact. Currently, Hachelaf is an education specialist at Ecole Normale Supérieure-Algeria and a consultant for US-based research and capacity building institutes. He previously worked as a Research Fellow at the Moynihan Institute at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University. Ahmed is also a frequent presenter on civic education and democratic schooling in the Middle East and North African region. In 2012, Ahmed was chosen as a Leaders for Democracy fellow and subsequently was chosen to be the delegate of Algeria in a UN event in New York and most recently as a Caux Scholar in Switzerland. His work has appeared in Revolution by Love, where he spoke to issues of social change through education, and editor for the book Equality & Justice (Parlor Press).

About WACSI
The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) was created by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) to reinforce the institutional and operational capacities of civil society in the region. WACSI also serves as a resource centre for training, research and documentation, experience sharing and political dialogue for CSOs in West Africa.

About WACSeries
WACSeries are analytical periodic write-ups on topical themes and issues relevant to West Africa. These write-ups provide experts, researchers and practitioners a space to reflect, analyse and posit views and recommendations on emerging issues and debates.
The WACSeries Op-Eds are thought provoking and intellectually engaging write-ups that provide critical reflections and analysis of issues relevant to civil society and development in West Africa.

Objectives of WACSeries
• To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
• To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
• To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
• To provide recommendations to policy makers.

Leadership Development: Fixing a Flat Tire, or Re-inventing the Wheel

To contribute to this publication,
contact : research@wacsi.org
+233(0)501440545

Abstract

The paper argues that many of the forms of leadership development performed by international actors targeting youth in civil society become a futile attempt to reinvent the wheel if they do not start and focus on schools. The threefold argument states that schools are by nature multiplying. They have inherently a pay-it-forward dynamic. Critical leadership development happens at an early age and school age is most ideal. And teachers are inherently entitled to lead. In their leadership development endeavour, INGOs' intervention often targets 'youth' when it is sometimes too late to develop some character traits. The whole claim springs from the belief that leadership is the key and that change should start from institutionalised

Introduction

In this paper, I am arguing that many of the forms of leadership development performed by international actors targeting youth in civil society becomes a futile attempt to reinvent the wheel whereas civil society actors working on leadership development have already got the wheel of national systems of schools that are more often than not flat. One of the most recurrent problems when it comes to change is that people think of new frameworks to develop skills trying to start from ground zero. We often think of building institutions and establishing frameworks anew. Many youth development voices call for the establishment of centres for leadership education or call for civil society groups to develop projects for youth leadership development. In this case, the impact can be limited in scope and costly. The rhetorical question that can be asked is: which one is easier, spending huge amounts of funding and time trying to reinvent the wheel or fixing the flat tire; saving time, effort and cost in the process.

In the following paragraphs, I will expand on my argument that is threefold. First, schools by nature are multiplying with a strong pay-it-forward dynamic. Second, teachers are entitled to lead by nature of their profession. Third, critical leadership development happens at an early age and school age is ideal. The interventions of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at the national level often targets 'youth' when it is sometimes too late to develop some character traits such as risk-taking, collaboration, and empathy (see sociobiological Critical Period Hypotheses : Lenneberg (1967); Scovel (1988); Erik Erikson's classic theory of psychosocial development(1968). This is not to claim that learning stops at puberty but many forms of learning is marked by remarkable ease and plasticity within early period including school age. Brown (2007: 59) argues that "the child's ego is dynamic and growing and flexible through the age of puberty". The whole claim springs from our belief that leadership is the key and that change should start from schools. If our educational system is a flat tire, we need to fix it saving time, effort and money in so doing. Public education as an institution is a national asset for any country and it needs to be exploited to the full.

Notwithstanding, the present paper has no pretention whatsoever that leadership programmes targeting school participants do not exist in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and INGOs' capacity building agendas. Rather, they can be unsystematic and ill-defined. The paper suggests that schools should be rendered centres for leadership development. Numerous non-governmental organisations both at the national and international levels and governmental organisations (GOs) work on youth development, with different agendas advocating for different issues and youth leadership development as one of the most prominent.

This claim becomes more appealing when we think of education as the engine of change and not simply a wheel. We already have national networks of public and private schools and national networks of potential leaders (teachers) who, with appropriate training and mentorship, can lead the national change and the empowerment effort. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) refer to teachers as the "sleeping giants"; they are the neglected real leaders who have not had their fair share of training and interest. Training should try to awaken those giants so that they can do their gigantic work. This would render leadership not only the privilege of the few but the practice of all as teachers pass on the torch of leadership which is the very nature of the teaching process. Everyone is entitled to lead, and leadership is needed at every level. We need leader-ful communities. Communities where the academicians, the businessmen, women, the parents and each and every one functions as leaders. This may seem as a utopian dream when we consider that not all people accept and systematically aspire to lead.

Providing leadership training and quality education for all segments of society is most inclusive and will allow the majority to grow and form a leadership profile and a lifestyle characterised by appreciable and leadership qualities accepted by society. This can be done to a large extent by incorporating leadership into our school and university curricula. It is not a utopian endeavour but a realistic goal when we apply a large-scale framework that aims to tap attitudes beliefs, day-to-day practices and provide the material and pedagogic conditions to influence teaching methodology and practice.

In fact, leadership has always been trained in a fragmented way. The problem is that it was a privilege of the few and civil society capacity building becomes a privilege. Historically, it is just a narrow class of society that had the privilege of quality education and leadership development. Here, I am thinking of the world of royalties and aristocracies and some forms of civil society leadership development may run the risk of being as exclusionary and as privileging. In liberalising leadership training, we can ensure that everyone will have the opportunity they deserve.

The school itself may become a panacea or a poison. To my mind, myriads of societal problems start in schools as classrooms are small societies that reflect and shape the bigger societies they will grow into.

Problems can also end there if we change the status quo. Societal stratification, marginalisation, subordination, oppression, negativity, passivity...etc could also start in education when teachers and teaching systems are not just and egalitarian; when teachers and school leadership is bossy and authoritarian; and when the system is geared towards conformism and reproduction. Because youth are shaped mainly by their schooling, we deem it a persistent need to emphasise these roles and take the most of this time they spend in school, in developing the important profile of leaders as it is the missing block in most West African educational systems and elsewhere. Schools can be rendered coaching spaces for leadership in different ways. If the wheel is there and the engine is there, why should we seek to reinvent them new? Let's make the car move and build on that.

I. The Apprenticeship of Leadership in Schools

Educators are at the frontline in the mission of empowering youth with the necessary predispositions, values, skills, and information that can ultimately render them successful and productive individuals in their respective societies and in the world at large. They also have the obligation of equipping youth with the critical spirit and readiness to change and challenge the world around them that is fused together in the surface and torn apart by conflicts and clashes at the deeper level. Thus, education for leadership is more needed today in this century. The later has been complicated by many; life becomes more and more interdependent and globalisation is at its peak. Tumults are utterly shaping nations and communities especially in the African continent. This future troubling and challenging yet imbued with opportunities as well.

It is very important to note as well that is it too late when we target the traditional 'youth' who most of the time benefit from civil society programming. One can easily notice that most of leadership development programmes that most international organisations and local civil society organisations (CSOs) organise or fund target youths between 18 to 35. Sometimes this age categories expands to 40. However, ample research suggest that personality traits and leadership development happen critically at earlier stages (Oesterle et al, 2004). Thus, leadership development should start as early as school age. Childhood, pre-adolescence and adolescence are the perfect periods for leadership development(Erikson, ibid). Learners in these periods are characterised by mental and physical plasticity and emotional readiness to learn and change. Psychologists, linguists and other education specialists stress the need to start educating learners in an early age.

There are many research findings in addition to common observations that support this claim and tell us that young children are better learners than adults. They are more adept at learning skills, receiving new ideas and changing convictions and behaviors. Young learners' intellectual curiosity, emotional state and physical and neurologic plasticity allow for faster and more entrenched changes in their character as research tells. Brown (2007, p. 59) argues that "the child's ego is dynamic and growing and flexible through the age of puberty". Series of neurological studies show that the brain progressively becomes stiff and rigid after puberty. By that time, lateralisation of the brain will have been finalised (left and right hemispheric brain lateralisation of competencies and abilities). Observations of immigrants' socialisation ability is also another example. Older generations find it more difficult to adapt and learn the new culture while their kids assimilate easily and perfectly (Alba, & Foner, 2015).

II. Targeting School Age Youth

The seminal work of Erikson shows that personality building is accelerated in adolescence. Adolescents' social development is said to happen in this stage of life. Erik Erikson's classic theory (1968) of psychosocial development coins 'the identity crisis'. Erik Erikson's (ibid) seminal work suggests that learners enter a stormy phase of psychosocial and morphological developments. At this stage, the adolescent makes major identifying choices that determine ultimately who he/she is. Leadership and fellowship are among those big unconscious choices. Adolescents engage in an unconscious effort of testing boundaries and exploring options and making choices. Adolescent students are in a stage at which they are neither children nor adults, and life is definitely getting more complex as they attempt to find their own identity, struggle with social interactions, and grapple with moral issues.

Adolescence is a time of experimentation and risk-taking after which major questions of identity and objectives are made. Cognitively, adolescents become more capable of abstract and critical thinking and

socially, peers and social relationships take on increased importance (Harder, 2009). This identity crisis is beneficial for youth leadership development. In it, major choices are made. Learners at this stage are at the crossroads of their life and education should help them go through these choices to develop a strong and balanced character. As adolescents oscillate between identity-building and role confusion, education and other social scaffolding structures should intervene to provide them with the clarity of purpose and empowering tools or the opposite. According to Erikson, development mostly depends upon what is done to the adolescent (Op. Cit.).

Besides, in this stage, young adolescents are in search of role models. They are surrounded by heroes, who may very well be negative ones. Examples of the heroes that are surrounding youth today include some celebrities who may be drug addicts, or local criminals or spreaders of wrong ideas. Indeed, there is a need for teachers to be their learners' heroes. In fact, it is the only way to influence struggling adolescent, to be charismatic, emotionally intelligent and a true leader inside and outside the classroom.

Engaged schools and campuses are also part of the argument. The school does not only train on leadership and civic engagement, but, it transforms into a service centre for its neighborhood. Examples of these practices include the notion of service learning, community service and outreach activities that are part and parcel in curricula across the globe.

III. NGOs and leadership development in West Africa

In the West African region, the scene is fraught with nonprofit work that undertakes such a mission. Both international actors and local associations implement different initiatives to build the capacity and strengthen civil society through leadership development. The Next Generation Leadership Programme by the West Africa Civil Society Institute is a case in point. The goal of the programme is to provide middle level civil society practitioners with skills and knowledge that will empower them to be apt to take senior leadership positions in their respective organisations or the civil

society sector in the future. The Future of Ghana also implements a leadership programme. The stated aim of the programme is to champion capacity building efforts that "mobilise and advance the education & training of second-generation Ghanaians". Again, in this case, the targeted groups is youth who range between 16-35 years (an age category that is beyond schooling mostly (see FOG, 2015). The programme however is robust and is akin to the ones in other regions and follows a similar approach. Similarly, LeapAfrica develops the leadership skills for Africans to enable the realisation of the full potential for African people and allowing for positive transformation (LeapAfrica, 2020).

Undoubtedly, leadership development is heart and soul for the work of numerous NGOs and INGOs that are active in the region. Other examples include REPAIR, implemented by the Network for Social and Economic Transformation of Africa in Cameroon and YPLSA (Young Political Leadership School Africa) implemented by NAYMOTE in Liberia. These are examples of the type of leadership development programmes that is important in essence but takes the approach of a select group of young activists who receive intensive training and mentorship, networking and other forms of support for the type of work they are already doing in the hope that they follow up and build the capacities of their active groups and benefit their communities. The apprenticeship of leadership that we advocate in this paper takes the transfer of leadership skills in schools to a new level by tapping the schools' fullest potential. In a centralised system such as African school systems, centralisation acts as a blessing in disguise in the sense that it allows the trickling down of skills through ToT (Training of Trainers) initiatives. The systems are acclimatised with similar forms of in-service teaching training through periodic seminars, training summits

and in-house peer-to-peer training opportunities. If that is not the case, increasing a professional development culture will serve this endeavor and a long-term development for schools that could expand to other areas. The initiative will also have a positive washback on achievement, retention and graduation that the soft skills of leadership are proven to provide.

IV. Where do we go from here?

I want to conclude by some recommendations for policy and practice. It would be important to dedicate part of the leadership development effort to advocacy campaigns within National Ministries of Education in order to incite decision makers to incorporate leadership into the teacher training program be they, in-service or pre-service. Benefiting from the training capacity that is already there and possibly increasing that capacity. Teacher preparation programs should contain leadership component in their theoretical and practical parts (e.g. team building, motivation theories, organizational behaviour, group dynamics... etc.). In-service leadership coaching and peer coaching may be also useful. Teacher trainers train teachers who distribute it to learners who by themselves will have to share it with family members, other future dependents and future co-workers and many more.

It is my belief that NGOs and INGOs should enlarge the age range of what we call youth to include school age young actors. The younger the actors are exposed to LD programs the better. NGOs can also partner and encourage schools to render extra-curricular activities such as clubs and sports as rich and powerful experiences for leadership apprenticeship both for teachers and students. Community service and service-learning programs in addition to campus/ school engagement are powerful spaces for leadership development. School associational life tend to affect later forms of engagement. School-based activities and schooling in general effects either positively or negatively the (future) citizen's engagement/disengagement in the civil and political process. Many researchers have pointed out that civic and political participation in adolescence is a good predictor of political engagement and interest in adulthood (Oesterle et al. 2004). Probably, there is an intentional and systematic effort from authoritarian actors, who established the link and want to prevent these forms of engagement to develop and happen.

Conclusion

To sum up the discussions above. I want to re-emphasise a number of points. The main claim is to recognise that the school is arguably the most important social force and instrument in developing leaders. Leadership development can be done as early as school age and there are myriads of techniques and approaches to do so. Leadership is a complex set of values, attitudes, knowledge and skills that is trainable and transferable. The most appropriate venue for its dissemination is the classroom. Investing in large-scale leadership training for teachers such as ToT programmes (training of trainers) and leadership coaching, mentoring are highly needed (cf programmes by / funded by US department of state, European Endowment for Democracy, European Union, and the International Insitute of Education).

The process pays off at the end. It is investing in a project that has the nature of 'pay-it-forward' dynamic as aforementioned. Thanks to the multiplying effect, the output we get far exceeds the input we put in at the outset. The return on investment is certainly high as all school participant acquire an attitude of sharing power and distributing leadership to the people around them.

Again, if education is a flat tire, it needs to be fixed. We do not have to throw the baby with the basket water, and not to throw the flat wheel with the expandable parts. In school, the generation contains next political leaders, business managers, teachers, doctors, parents, factory workers and others who build our economies and solve our social and political problems. The schools can equip them with machinery for diagnosing, problem posing, problem solving, decision-making, and evaluating among other skills that could apply to different problems and different contexts. Thus, adaptability, creativity, intuitive knowledge, decision making and risk taking, independent thinking, critical action and high intra-personal and interpersonal skills are all trainable skills. Leadership is the amalgam of all these skills. This claim does not however belittle the role of political and civil societies and the private sector in equipping youth with leadership that is needed in this generation to function as autonomous and productive individuals and team players. It argues that youth leadership development is an endeavor that should start early and populously at schools. It purports that any other approach to youth development that neglects the school is a futile try to re-invent the wheel.

References

Alba, R. D., & Foner, N. (2015). Strangers no more: Immigration and the challenges of integration in north america and western europe. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Brown H. D (2007) (5th Edition), Principles of Language Learning and Teaching, New York: Pearson Education.

Bush. T, & Middlewood. D. (2005), Leading and Managing People in Education, London: Sage Publications.

Erikson, E. (1968), Identity: Youth and Crisis. In Harder. A. F. (2009), http://www.support4change.com/us/bios/Harder.html, accessed on: Mai, 5, 2020.

Future of Ghana, (2015), About Us, https://futureofghana.com/about-fog/ Accessed on 24/07/2020

Harder. A. F. (2009), Stages of Identity Development http://www.support4change.com/us/bios/Harder.html, accessed on: Mai, 7, 2020.

Helterbran. V. (2010), "Teacher Leadership, Overcoming 'I am Just a Teacher' Syndrome.", Education 131.2. (363-371)

Katzenmeyer. M., & Moller. G. (2001), Awakening the sleeping giant. Helping teachers develop as leaders. In Raffanti. M. A. (2008), "Leaders "Sitting Beside" Followers: A Phenomenology of Teacher Leadership."(58-68), Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research 3.1

LeapAfrica (2020), Who we are, https://www.leapafrica.org/who-we-are/ Accessed on 24/07/2020

Lenneberg. E. (1967) The Biological Foundations of Language in Brown H. D (2007) (5th Edition), Principles of Language Learning and Teaching, New York: Pearson Education.

Oesterle, S et al, (2004) "Volunteerism during the Transition to Adulthood: Alige Course Perspective." Social Forces82(3):1123–49.

Phelps. P. H. (2008), "Helping Teachers Become Leaders.", Clearing House 81.3. (119-122)

Scovel .T. (1988), A time to speak: A Psycholinguistic Inquiry into the Critical Period for Human Speech. In

Brown H. D (2007) (5th Edition), Principles of Language Learning and Teaching, New York: Pearson Education.

Tolhurst J. (2006), Coaching for schools : a practical guide to building leadership capacity. London: Pearson Education Limited

WACSI

Strengthening Civil Society

@wacsiorg   WACSIWA   WACSI   @WACSI