

## Student Leadership and Student Government

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>Student leadership is often misconceptualized as merely a pedagogical exercise revolving around simulated political arenas with little to no immediate real political consequence. Other scholarship normalizes students as political outsiders who have to resort to dangerous, exhausting activism tactics for even minute advocacy victories due to their lack of structural representation in education decision-making. An analysis of student leadership in research and practice is presented according to an identified spectrum of low to high student power. This article argues that student leadership has great potential for real political action. The best structure for student leadership is argued to be democratic student government, as well as students having standing roles within education leadership structures. Furthermore, effective conceptions of student leadership must not only acknowledge its developmental aspects, but also account for the real politics inherent in student leadership activities. To conclude, a more political conception of student leadership and student government is advocated for so student leaders' real political activities can be recognized and studied as such in education leadership discourse to prevent student exploitation and tokenism.</i></p>	<p><b>Article History:</b> Received June 11, 2021 <b>Accepted:</b> March 11, 2022</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Student leadership; Student government; Student movements; Education politics; Political education; Student activism.</p>



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**Student Leadership and Student Government**

Fostering student leadership is integral to not just political education, but student representation, advocacy, and activism. To encourage non-student education stakeholder groups and education researchers to contribute to meaningful student leadership that avoids exploiting or tokenizing student voices, there needs to be a literature shift towards recognizing student leadership activities as real politics and ensuring that education institutions and societies provide education decision-making structures sufficient for effective student leadership to take place. For the purposes of this article, real politics is defined as political decision-making that inherently has direct, consequential, and lasting implications for some aspect(s) of human existence, which I hold to be compatible with if not an expansion of Doron Navot's understanding of real politics as "actual political processes, local norms, public discussions, self-interpretations of agents, and public opinion" (2015, p. 544-545). Without effective avenues to exercise leadership and advocate for their interests, students are exposed to exploitation, injury, and, in some cases, death, as has been exemplified in numerous cases around the world, with some notable examples including Kent State University in the United States where students were gunned down by the military (Boren, 2001), Canadian residential schools that exploited Indigenous students (Bear Chief, 2016), student massacres by the government in Mexico (Hodges & Gandy, 2002) and Brazil (Gould, 2009) in the 1960s, Soviet oppression of students in Czechoslovakia during the Cold War (Stolarik, 2010), the manipulation of student governments during the



Cold War by both superpowers (Burkett, 2014), recent deaths of student protesters in Hong Kong (Ramsay & Cheung, 2019) and Nigeria (Maishanu, 2021), as well as prevailing systemic racism and other forms of oppression in contemporary education systems (George, 2020).

Student leaders should not have to risk their lives to have a say in education decision-making. They should not be restricted to the margins or have to negotiate at massive disadvantages with other education stakeholders. A fundamental challenge unique to student leadership is a lack of structures to foster effective leadership activities. Without a legitimate place in education decision-making and organizational structures to discern the collective student voice, student leadership risks being relegated to isolated efforts of individual students, rendering it less effective than the structural power and organized lobbying efforts of other education stakeholder groups. A new paradigm is needed that recognizes student government as integral to effective student leadership that can be sustained over a multi-year period, and on a more conceptual level, emphasizes the importance of structure in fostering student leadership.

This structure-cognizant conception of student leadership would challenge literature and practices that hinder student leaders' efforts to advocate for student interests and not get hurt or killed in the process. Understandings of student leadership purely as leadership training for the future instead of real leadership in the present, especially when taken to the lengths of creating fake leadership simulations that distract from real political arenas where student leadership is desperately needed, are among these misconceptions. Similarly detrimental are certain perspectives on where and how



student leadership should take place, such as normatively framing student leaders as inherent outsiders to education decision-making or as leaders of interest groups in political arenas where the other education stakeholders have vastly superior resources and structural advantages. To meet non-student stakeholders on a fair playing field, student leaders need collective structures sufficiently robust to make up for these disadvantages so student leaders' efforts to enact change within education systems are not set up to fail. Analyses and critique of the above misconceptions of student leadership are outlined to make a case for subsequent recommendations on how structure-recognisant conceptions of student leadership can break new ground toward answering the question of how student leadership can be best conceptualized and implemented to be effective at influencing education decision-making while mitigating risk to student leaders' safety and wellbeing. Cases and literature are presented on a spectrum starting from examples that offer or advocate for the least amount of student power and concluding with those that have the most.

### **Student Leadership is Real**

One mischaracterization of student leadership is that it is a form of leadership practice instead of leadership in practice. This causes students to be viewed as future leaders instead of present leaders in their current capacity as students. This contributes to student advocacy being disregarded as illegitimate and sidelined. Regarding how this may have occurred, perhaps the etymological origins of words describing roles in education institutions helped initiate such conceptualizations of students. The first European universities referred to educators as masters who designed curriculum, pedagogy, and strict punishments to indoctrinate students in ways satisfactory to religious and secular benefactors (Pegues, 1977). The masters designed



pedagogical practices that served to be mainly a process of indoctrination revolving around dictation and recitation of canonical texts (Janin, 2008). Students who did not adhere to the elites' strategic visions were severely chastised and subjected to reprimand by not only the masters, but by local religious and secular authorities as well, which often led to a range of corporal punishments (Haskins, 1975). Any master or student who tried to resist this trend, be it by writing a nuanced paper or teaching new ideas, was charged as a heretic and of corrupting the youth, with notable examples being the condemnations of radical scholars in 1277 (Wilshire, 1997), as well as ruling authorities' staunch opposition to the unconventional teachings of Siger of Brabant (Bukowski, 1990). Students were viewed as not only subordinate, but inferior. Thomas Aquinas, a scholar and intellectual during the thirteenth century who taught at the University of Paris, a school known for its top-down approach (Scott, 1992), believed that students "do not know to judge about such difficult matters" of independent intellectual thought (Bukowski, 1990, p. 75). While these practices took place a long time ago, the key takeaway here is that the very foundation of higher education as we know it today is rooted in attempts to stifle the student voice. These perspectives continued to influence education for centuries after, including well into the nineteenth century in the United States through non-student control of extracurricular life (Caple, 1998), control and suppression of student governments (Crane, 1969), and detrimental biases toward youth (Katz, 1968). Their effects persist into the twenty-first century, with students largely having little say in education decision-making compared to other education stakeholders and debates ongoing as to whether students are capable of representing themselves (Klemenčič, 2018).



The rise of student affairs as an area of study and practice as educational institutional structures expanded in the twentieth century provided grounds to recognize student leadership as something to be cultivated for student development and as part of the learning experience. In the United States, in what is known as student affairs' "first philosophical statement" (Hevel, 2016, p. 254) referred to as "The Student Personnel Point of View," emphasis was placed on "the student's well-rounded development physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually, as well as intellectually" while regarding the student "as a responsible participant in his own development and not as a passive recipient of an imprinted economic, political, or religious doctrine, or vocational skill" (Williamson et al., 1949, p. 2). While this is a step above outright delegitimization of the student voice, and while political education and individual student development in a number of areas is advocated for in the document, student leadership is viewed as something to be cultivated for application post-graduation instead of being enacted while an individual is still a student, with student activities being designed by student affairs personnel for encouraging development (Williamson et al., 1949) instead of more recent approaches that recognize the importance of advocating for students' interests (Croft & Seemiller, 2017).

A purely developmental view of student leadership sidelines the real politics of leadership activities students engage in to advocate for themselves. It also implicitly stigmatizes political arenas such as student governments where student leadership takes place to a realm of political simulations and pedagogical exercises. This contributes to research on student leadership downplaying advocacy accomplishments and challenges student leaders encountered in favour of obtaining information about what students learned from the experience, such as in Kuh & Lund's (1994) analysis of student



government representatives, Koller & Schugurensky's (2011) study on Ontario student trustees, and Archard's (2012) study on student leadership in Australian secondary girls' schools, all of which focus primarily on what student leaders learned instead of the advocacy work that they undertook. In other cases, researchers have selected small, disproportionate groups of appointed, token students and youth to contribute to decision-making in generally limited ways within the context of youth participatory action research instead of consulting with democratically elected student representatives, such as in the cases of Griebler & Nowak's (2012) study on health promoting schools and Berman et al.'s (2020) study on youth violence in Canada. A review of the latter work raises concerns that student and youth in the advisory body being offered paid positions over the course of the study risk a system of patronage that can undermine the authenticity of student feedback in the research process (Patrick, 2021). In practice, the exclusively developmental view of student leadership has led to student governments being delegitimized as representative bodies for student advocacy, resulting in policymakers relying on appointed student and youth advisory councils for input instead of student democracies. Some notable examples of this include the Prime Minister of Canada's Youth Council (Canadian Heritage, 2018), the National Youth Council of Pakistan (Dunya News, 2020), the Government of Virginia's Student Advisory Committee (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2020); the United Nations Youth Delegate Programme (United Nations, 2015), and the United Nations Youth Advisory Panel formed in Belarus in 2015 (United Nations Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, 2015). These appointed bodies do not only risk cultivating student leaders primarily loyal to those who appointed them, but also risk tokenizing student leadership, leaving student leaders with little means to enact change through initiating



collective action, and rendering student leaders vulnerable to manipulation by unelected, non-student actors (Coffey & Lavery, 2018; Hart, 1992).

This is taken a step further in political simulations like model parliaments and Model United Nations (MUN), which are by nature fake politics. MUN politics are fake because they take place inside simulated political environments within which decisions made do not directly impact political life, thus directly contravening the definition of real politics provided above (United Nations, 2019). Calossi & Coticchia (2018) outline that though literature exists that argues MUN is beneficial in teaching students about international relations and global political issues, there is a lack empirical evidence to reinforce these arguments. Calossi & Coticchia (2018) go on to conduct their own study of MUN participants to attempt to provide tangible evidence supporting MUN's pedagogical value, and they conclude that MUN is helpful in increasing participants' factual knowledge. However, they also observe to their surprise that participating in MUN made their subjects increasingly view states' primary international goals to be to gain power rather than security or welfare, as well as placing more importance on inter-state conflict (Calossi & Coticchia, 2018). Given Brown, Gordon, & Pensky's (2018) analysis of authoritarianism that warns of the incursion of neoliberal market structures on socio-political life that are ruthlessly zero-sum and exacerbate societal inequities, is an international relations perspective that focuses on gaining power through perpetual conflict really the best approach to instill in the next generation of leaders? Perhaps MUN participants increasingly adhered to such perspectives over the course of Calossi & Coticchia's (2018) study because the simulated politics taking place in MUN were of no real consequence, which may have limited





participants' ability to visualize the cost of their decisions had they taken place in actual international politics.

While these simulations can help teach students about parliamentary procedures, when used to excess they can divert student participation from the real politics of student government (Gordon, 1994). To put this into perspective, the United Nations estimated in 2019 that over "400,000 students worldwide participate every year in MUN at all educational levels" (United Nations, 2019, n. p.) with students' preparations for MUN conferences lasting over six months each year (United Nations, 2020). Can students who have to prepare for over six months for MUN conferences each year also meaningfully contribute to the real politics of student government activities and accomplish advocacy goals? Observed retrenchment, collapse, and participations shortages of student governments around the world thus far in the 21<sup>st</sup> century suggest that they cannot, or at least MUN is not doing real student leadership any favours. For example, the Commonwealth Students' Association reported in 2016 that "51 per cent of Commonwealth member countries do not have a national student organisation (NSO) of any kind," (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2016, p. iii). Furthermore, the Global Student Government coalition (2021), the International Association for Political Science Students (IAPSS) (2021), and IAPSS Asia (2020) have each raised alarm bells about the collapse of the International Union of Students in the early 2000s, the collapse of the United States Student Association in the late 2010s, and limitations placed on student governments in Afghanistan and Pakistan, respectively. Moreover, regarding the professional development potential of MUN, there are a lot less than 400,000 spots in real UN delegations that require directly exercising UN parliamentary procedures; in fact, as of 2012, even the total employees of all UN agencies numbered only 32,417 (United Nations



System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, 2012). The technical, procedural knowledge of political simulations' fake leadership activities may thus not be as crucial as transferable leadership experience in real political arenas. What the UN does offer are opportunities for student governments to have direct input on international policy resolutions that can directly impact students around the world, with one notable example being the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s consultation group for non-governmental organizations pertaining to education (UNESCO, 2019). Instead of just participating in simulated international politics, student leaders can also directly participate in UN decision-making spaces and have an impact on consequential policies. That way, they will not only be able to develop technical knowledge about how UN processes work through MUN, but they will also be able to directly apply their knowledge in real-world political contexts. Only doing MUN leaves a substantial missed opportunity for political education and student advocacy.

### **Where and How Should Students Exercise Leadership?**

Literature that intersects with student leadership provides different perspectives on the arenas in which student leadership takes place and should take place. While these bodies of literature tend to move beyond student leadership as purely developmental, they normalize structures that leave student leadership restricted, ineffective, and detrimental to student wellbeing. One of these perceived student leadership arenas are student-led social movements. In addition to being leadership learning experiences, student movements offer potential to enact real political change, with some recent examples being the Chilean student movement's impact on budgetary policy in the 2010s (Carvallo, 2020), the #FeesMustFall



movement in South Africa to lower school fees (Cini, 2019), and Taiwan's Sunflower Movement that involved occupations of key political offices (Rowen, 2015). However, student movements on their own have severe limitations to fostering real student leadership in the long-term, since their often informal structures result in them usually being sporadic; representing a miniscule fraction of the total student populations they draw from; short-lived due to high turnover rates of student populations given annual new enrolments and graduations; run by a small group of core organizers who tend to be from elite social stations while most participants "are sympathetic to the broad goals of the movement but who are rather vague about the specific aspects and who are only sporadically, if at all, directly involved;" and do not have to be democratic (Altbach, 1989, pp. 99, 103-107, p. 103). Consistent observations are outlined in Thierry Luescher-Mamashela's observations on student movements (2012) and reflections on Altbach's contributions to student movement scholarship (2015), as well as Snider's (2018) historical case study on the student movement in Brazil during the military dictatorship of the mid-to-late twentieth century. Furthermore, student movements have often had to resort to tactics that put their lives at risk, including going up against societal authorities and armed forces of oppressive regimes. Some examples of this are evident in twentieth century student movements in the United States as illustrated by Boren (2001) and in Ayers' (2013) autobiographical reflections as a US student leader in the 1960s and 70s, Gonzalez, Vaillant, & Schwartz's (2019) global overview of student movements, and Snider's (2018) research on the student movement in Brazil under the dictatorship.

The structural problems student movements pose for student leadership when used on their own render students at substantial disadvantages when competing with other education stakeholder

groups, let alone societal authorities (Rheingans & Hollands, 2013). When students do not have places at education decision-making tables but are rather outsiders looking in, dangerous physical demonstrations, tactics which should be a last resort, may seem to be the only feasible option to effect real political change, since conventional tactics that other education stakeholders can use are not available to them. Unfortunately, instead of advocating for allowing for more avenues for real student leadership within education institutions, a number of student movement literature works implicitly or explicitly advocate for normalizing student movements as the main bodies for student leadership and representation, as well as the last resort activism tactics that could put students at risk. An early example is Seymour Martin Lipset's (1968) research at the height of the student movement in the United States that conflates student governments with student movements. Altbach's revulsion at the competing superpower-manipulated international student governments of the Cold War (1970) led to an insistence that student movements are more optimal for activism despite his admittance of student movements' limitations mentioned above, especially in countries where student protests have become normalized (1989). Altbach remains skeptical of student governments' potential and advocates for student movements in his historical work on US student politics (1997), responses to twenty-first century student movements (2016), and in recent commentary on student movement scholarship (Altbach & Luescher, 2020). Boren (2001)'s analysis of US student movements, Eagan's (2004) guide for student activism, and Lemay & Laperriere's (2012) study on the Quebec student movement of the early 2010s all focus on student movements within conflated contexts akin to Lipset that do not cover the interrelated nature of student governments and student movements. Johnston's (2015) blissful account of rising student



movements in the United States in the twenty-first century appears oblivious to the backdrop of the United States Student Association's decline that is indicative of retrenching student voice in the US (International Association for Political Science Students, 2021). Normalizing student movements as the main or only avenue through which student leadership can be exercised is also problematic because it tacitly frames students as decision-making outsiders, delegitimizes democratic student governments, and relegates students to play on a perpetually disadvantaged playing field with little or no opportunities to influence the rules. In other words, the lack of a place at decision-making tables forces students to risk their lives protesting, and to write that off as a normal part of political life or as the ideal way to do activism ignores the inherent power differentials between students and non-student education stakeholders and sets students up to fail when it comes to enacting policy change. Even in countries where there is not direct threat of violence, mass protests require much more time and effort than participating in conventional decision-making processes, and can thus pose risks to students' curricular activities, economic livelihoods, and social spheres. Students should not have to risk injury and death to make their voices heard. Perspectives that over-glorify student movements risk perpetuating the political ostracization of students and normalizing violence committed against student activists.

Another body of literature expands upon the student movement arena to view students as an interest group within education decision-making. Determining where these perspectives sit on the spectrum of student power can be determined by assessing how much power and agency is given to the student interest group. At the low end, students are relegated to providing feedback on surveys that may or may not influence education decisions (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001). While these



practices can be beneficial to improving education systems when used in combination with other opportunities for real student leadership, when used on their own, these methods individualize student feedback and do not require students to deliberate and engage in student leadership activities as a collective (Thune, 1996). A rationale for these kinds of approaches is that future students can individually use survey data to when selecting schools and programs (Brennan & Shah 2000). However, this rationale does not offer much benefit to current students who are providing the feedback. As the level of recommended student power increases along the spectrum, calls for student feedback to trigger tangible actions gradually grows stronger, which range from student feedback being implemented occasionally (Harvey, 2002) to being a regular, structural part of the evolution of educational institutions (Williams, 2014).

Eventually the spectrum moves beyond student surveys to give rise to calls for students and/or student representatives to collaborate or negotiate with other education stakeholders. While the issues of appointed student advisory councils referenced above intersect here, there are also works that recognize the potential of student governments and other democratic student organizations to provide feedback based on students' collective will, which implicitly identify elected student representatives as real leaders in their own time (Golden & Schwartz, 1994). There are also cases where students are directly elected to positions on education institution governing bodies (Kouba, 2018). Analyses at this stage on the spectrum revolve around the question of how best non-student stakeholders can work with student leaders to improve education systems, ranging from consultations where student leaders express students' collective ideas and concerns to the other stakeholders that hold decision-making power (Klemenčič, 2012). The high end of the spectrum entertains the



idea of student leaders working in partnership with non-student stakeholders to implement projects together (Klemenčič, 2018). Roger Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation theory illustrates this by envisioning student leadership and voice as ladder rungs, with the lower rungs being student manipulation and tokenization while the highest rung envisions students being able to lead initiatives and work with non-students in the context of a fair partnership power-wise to accomplish student advocacy goals.

The issues with the students as interest groups conception stem from not fully accounting for the steep power advantages non-student stakeholders have over student leaders. This power gap poses substantial obstacles for student leaders to advance students' interests and can lead to an illusion of a fair playing field that ends up being tokenism in practice. For instance, apart from rare cases such as the medieval University of Bologna where students gained control over education decision-making (Haskins, 1975), in many university governing bodies where students have elected seats, student leaders do not have enough representation to effectuate meaningful change or be a decisive factor in education decision-making, as has been evidenced in examples in Australia (Naylor & Mifsud, 2019), Canada (Pennock et al., 2015), Chile (Núñez & Leiva, 2018), assorted European countries (Pabian & Minksová, 2011), and Norway specifically (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). Non-student stakeholders also have structural mechanisms of power over students that can be used to stifle student leaders, including control over grades (Godrej, 2014) and disciplinary procedures (Mugume & Katusiimeh, 2016), while students do not have as much of a say in the equivalent procedures pertaining to non-students (Sanchez, 2020). Even in instances where student leaders and non-student stakeholders engage in seemingly equal partnerships where duties and input are shared,



student leaders generally have much fewer resources at their disposal to dedicate towards project implementation elements including but not limited to research, capacity building, funding, and time than their non-student counterparts given the comparative disparity between the resource capabilities of student governments versus education administrations and non-student stakeholder organizations. This calls into question the extent to which the highest rung on Hart's (1992) ladder are actually being realized. Furthermore, Hart's focus is on children as opposed to all students (1992), which leaves room to theorize further levels of student autonomy at the postsecondary level, including the capacity for students to organize and implement initiatives on their own. While students as interest groups perspectives may give the impression of being able to theorize a fair playing field, the vast power differences between student leaders and non-student leaders largely stemming from the societal structures each stakeholder group has still set student leaders up to fail.

Attempts from within the students as interest groups conception to get around power imbalances student leaders are up against end up creating additional leadership barriers for students due to the conception's difficulties with holistically accounting for the extent to which the disparities are embedded within neoliberal societal structures. These attempts have generally involved efforts to professionalize student governments so student leaders can more effectively advocate for student interests and implement initiatives to improve the student experience (Cuyjet, 1994). This has led to the development of student government-administered services for students and the hiring of student government staff to assist with implementing student leadership activities (Stover & Cawthorne, 2008). However, without ample attention given to maintaining student government democracy, professionalization efforts have resulted in





the corporatization of student governments, which when combined with neoliberal conceptions of students as consumers (Luescher-Mamashela, 2012), has limited student leaders' autonomy. One example is the domination of unelected, non-student staff in student governments being potential determinants of the extent to which organizational knowledge is preserved, as well as using their longer time within student governments than elected students to undermine student democracy in favour of their own interests to the point of corruption, with notable examples including the imposition of staff dominance over certain aspects of the International Union of Students in the last years of its operation (International Union of Students, 2000), Sanchez's (2020) account of student government staff in the United States, and fears of the student press in Oregon being stifled as reprisal for reporting on alleged student government staff corruption (Byrnes, 2010). This corporatization issues appears to be particularly bad in Canada, with incidents of theft, misappropriation of funds, or other forms of mismanagement by staff alleged to have taken place in the Holland College Student Union in Prince Edward Island (Human Resources Director, 2014), the Student Federation of the University of Ottawa (Miller, 2019), and the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) in the 2010s (Ziafati, 2017). Titus Gregory (2013) goes as far as to allege that CFS staff power undermines student voices within the organization. Another example involves student governments becoming dependent on funds from non-student stakeholders to develop and maintain a level of professionalism sufficient for implementing their service structures, which risks student governments and student leaders becoming beholden to these fiduciary interests before those of the students they represent (Warner, 1996). Moreover, student government professionalization has been used as a justification for policies to treat student governments as if



they were companies competing in a free market, which has in practice led to student governments being substantially weakened, such as in the implementation of voluntary student government membership in Australia (Jackson, 1999), New Zealand (Meads & Smith, 2018), and Sweden (Klemenčič, 2012). In these instances, student governments end up becoming like the very student leadership-limiting structures within education systems they were designed to oppose. For student government professionalization to be conducive to student leadership, it must be supported by legislation which allows for structures of incorporation that mitigate the risks of corporatization and allow student democracy to flourish. This requires a thorough understanding of student leadership, the obstacles it faces, and the importance of student government in providing structural supports to alleviate those obstacles and empower student leadership activities.

### **Student Leadership, Student Politics, & Student Government**

For real and effective student leadership to be actualized and supported in education systems, structural avenues need to be created that allow students to meet other education stakeholders on a fair playing field. The ideal level of student power necessary for such real student leadership may be found higher on the student power spectrum than the students as interest groups conception but below the amount of student power exercised in the case of the medieval University of Bologna. While the medieval University of Bologna case poses interesting theoretical implications for student leadership that are beyond the scope of this analysis, such as whether it could be replicated in the twenty-first century and how beneficial such an education system would be, it is important to note that student leadership does not have to necessitate student domination of education to be effective. In fact, there are cases to be made without



resorting to ageism to argue that total student control of education would not be beneficial for students. For instance, it could be argued that complete student control over curricular affairs would not be in students' best interest since students cannot create what they have not yet learned. For student control of curriculum to be conducive to education, the fundamental meanings of what constitutes a student and an educator would likely have to be changed or merged together, though this would also be beyond the scope of this analysis. The problem is rather that student leadership is so structurally disadvantaged that students have had to resort to giving their lives in attempts to enact change. Student leaders thus need a fair playing field in relation to other education stakeholders that holistically addresses the disadvantages they face while avoiding the trap of student government corporatization. This would not only allow student leaders to challenge other education stakeholders when necessary but would also allow student leaders to collaborate with their school communities more effectively. As has been demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, effective student leadership can be pragmatically beneficial to education institutions in times of crisis (Schuiteman et al., 2020).

A new paradigm conducive to student leaders needs to combine student leadership's developmental and real political aspects to emphasize that while student leadership helps create future leaders, it is also a form of real leadership that affects students' lives in the present. While political simulation activities can be beneficial learning exercises, too much emphasis on fake political arenas detracts from real leadership experiences that students must engage in to ensure that their interests are influential in education decision-making processes. A combined developmental and real political perspective would allow the developmental aspects to help students improve their real



leadership activities and achieve more student advocacy success. This reconciliation should be easy to implement in future research since real student leadership has been demonstrated to be more beneficial for students' leadership development than tokenism and simulations (Soria & Johnson, 2020). The idea of student leadership as leadership training has also been merged with a cognisance of students' immediate advocacy goals to suggest that student leadership experiences through student government not only prepare students for leadership post graduation but help them become better student leaders and improve student advocacy efforts while they are still students (Rosch & Collins, 2017).

Future student leadership research also needs to advocate for structures that ensure student leaders not only have a place at education decision-making tables, but also have sufficient power to ensure that the decision-making arena is equitable. Student movements should be viewed primarily as tactics student leaders can use instead of the main places where student leadership occurs, and activism tactics that put students at risk should not be accepted as simply the way things are, but instead should be highlighted as student leadership crises and signs that student governments are not strong enough. The students as interest groups conception needs to be expanded upon just as it expands on the student movements conception. This can be done by first understanding students as more than an interest group. In contemporary society, some level of education is a necessity for socio-economic survival and effective political citizenship. While other education stakeholders such as educators and administrators chose their professions, student status is often not a choice. Some perspectives advocate for students to be viewed as labourers (Brophy, 2017), which has been helpful in contextualizing phenomena the mid-twentieth century student



movement in France (Fields, 1970), unionizing graduate students and postdocs who do work for their universities (Cain et al., 2014), or forming the student union subtype of student government that focuses on service provision and coalitions with organized labour in activism (Seth, 2004). However, the students as labourers conception is too narrow on its own because it does not account for the social and political aspects of education. If student status is an unavoidable state of being that all citizens must pass through, conceptualizing student government as a distinct level of government may allow for a more holistic view of students than as an interest group. This would emphasize student government's political nature, which could promote professionalization while avoiding corporatization by likening student governments to governments instead of corporations and conceptualizing students as primary citizens instead of merely consumers or labourers. It would also promote understandings of student government having its own jurisdiction over certain aspects of the education experience and reinforce student government independence from non-student stakeholders. This could result in interactions between student leaders and leaders of education institutions being more horizontal, with each side having their own exclusive areas of control. Liaisons between supra-campus student governments and non-student governments could be viewed as a form of intergovernmental relations. Moreover, it would hopefully steer student government professionalization discourse in a similar direction as government and public service professional development instead of merely professional development for private companies, non-profit organizations, and labour unions.

For implementation, legislation would likely be needed that outlines the unique organizational nature of student governments with more democratic safeguards than mandated structures of non-



profit corporations. To resist the dangers of corporatization while preserving professionalism, such legislation would benefit from enshrining elected student leaders and their constituents as the primary wielders of power within student governments. Unelected staff working in student governments can be likened to public servants committed to non-partisanship regarding student government politics instead of simply business professionals. It may be beneficial to outline another class of student government staff that can be likened to political staffers that change with each elected administration to prevent staff loyal to previous regimes from filibustering newly elected student leaders who have different ideas than their predecessors. Such legislation should also outline student government jurisdiction to prevent encroachment by unelected, non-student actors into student government and student leadership activities. Student leadership would benefit from legislative clauses that outline minimum requirements for knowledge preservation to account for student population transiency and short term-lengths of student representatives.

In literature, this reconceptualization would place student leadership and student governments in the realm of the political, encouraging scholarship on these respective topics that bridges the developmental aspects of education research with research methods and practices from political science. More research is needed that is conducive to real student leadership, especially regarding democratic student governments through which student leadership is embodied through elected representatives of student populations. This involves recognizing student leaders as real leaders instead of just leaders in training. To accomplish this, student leaders should be studied not just as phenomena, but as consequential political actors, and the actions of student leaders and their student governments should be recorded as



political histories similarly to how non-student political leaders and governments are researched. A recent example that moves toward studying student leadership in this way is a case study on student leaders in South Africa that allows former student leaders to express their perspectives on student leadership not as anonymous subjects but as named political actors (Webbstock & Luescher, 2020). Once thorough histories of key student governments are established, it will be easier to pinpoint notable student leadership case studies for empirical research, since studies on student leadership as a phenomenon that do not tap into these histories risk being brief and disconnected snapshots of student leadership that miss out on long-term trends in student leadership practices and student government development that helped set the stage for what the studies observe. This will be an immense task, as student governments have existed for at least about a thousand years (Janin, 2008) and in education institutions around the world, but having an understanding of the larger contexts student leadership operates in will be invaluable in identifying the systemic power imbalances student leaders face when engaging in advocacy, as well as theorizing ways to empower student leaders and student governments in the future.

### **Conclusion**

For student leadership to effectively advocate for students, student leaders need structures that empower them to have a fair chance to impact education decision-making and negotiations. The real and present political consequences of student leadership cannot be ignored or dismissed as merely a learning opportunity, since in certain contexts, the suppression of student leadership can endanger students' lives. While developing students' leadership skills for the future is important and political simulation activities have an inherent



learning value, these kinds of perspectives and activities should not be pushed to the point where they undermine real student leadership. Furthermore, students should not be tokenized through appointed advisory bodies that risk patronage, do not represent the student populations from which their members were drawn from, and offer students little to no potential to carry out real student leadership.

In addition, the avenues through which student leadership takes place must be effective, sustainable in the long-term, and conducive to student wellbeing. While student movements can be effective tools at student leaders' disposal, they should be but one tool in a multifaceted advocacy strategy. An overemphasis on student movements, especially when involving tactics that could cause students to be harmed, risks normalizing students as outsiders to education decision-making and ignores the temporal and democratic limitations student movements are prone to. While conceptualizing students as interest groups can encompass democratic student governments and the inclusion of student leaders in formal leadership structures of education institutions, it faces challenges accounting for the systemic power disadvantages students face in comparison to other education stakeholder groups that leaves student leaders limited to make change if not set up to fail in an illusion of an equal partnership. Attempts to professionalize student governments to alleviate the power disparities using students as interest groups lens can lead student governments into neoliberal snares of structural delegitimization and corporatization that create additional barriers for student leaders.

A way forward to foster real and effective student leadership would be to move beyond the students as interest groups conception by normatively theorizing student government as a distinct level of government with its own jurisdiction and inherently political





structure. This reconceptualization can help foster a more equitable balance of powers between student leaders and non-student education stakeholders while encouraging the development of legislation and professional development discourse that account for and support the sustainable professionalization of the inherently democratic and government-like features of student governments. It can also foster literature that frames student leaders as real political actors and student governments as real political institutions. Reconceptualizing student leadership in this way and emphasizing the important impact student government has on student leadership can help overcome ageist and anti-student biases in literature and practice. This would contribute towards empowering student leaders through a structural place within education decision-making that gives them the potential to create meaningful change without having to sacrifice their lives or their safety in the process. Student leadership needs to be as collective and representative of student populations as possible to avoid tokenism, and this requires equitable, democratic, and student-run structures that best encapsulate the nature and positionality of students' existence within education systems, similar to how other education stakeholders have their own structures to conduct their leadership activities and contribute to education decision-making. Students are not just leaders of tomorrow; they are also unavoidably leaders of today. Their structures need to support them as such.

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