

## **Boss, not Bossy: Facilitating Assertive Leadership Skills in Year 10 Girls.**

Shirley Anuse Kelly

The Bermuda High School for Girls, Pembroke, Bermuda

### **Abstract**

Wildly popular R&B artiste Beyoncé asserts in her futuristic Afrobeat song, “Who run the world? Girls, Girls!” While the intoxicating lyrics and fast paced beat may resonate well with female students, the message that girls can, and should, lead does not always pack a popular punch. This action research project was undertaken to reset leadership preparation in the wake of the pandemic. For two academic years prior, education at the Bermuda High School has been virtually stripped to its most basic tenets of delivering academic content. Using an online delivery platform, it was nearly impossible to engage students much beyond the academic curriculum. Since the return to (near) normalcy, the school has undertaken to “build back better” by examining our practices and evaluating them to incorporate lessons learned through the pandemic. My research action was to facilitate intentional leadership development experiences with my students. Twenty-six Year 10 students (aged 14 to 15 years) were involved in this action research, that spanned three months, in their Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) lessons. Through class discussions, presentations, and journal reflections, students were led to develop core leadership skills and use them in a variety of settings. I found that the girls appreciated the school taking a very intentional and structured approach to teaching leadership. At the close of this study, 19 of the 26 girls in the cohort formally applied for school prefect positions, with 13 being successful in their bids following closely contested elections. This was a marked increase in the percentage of students applying for leadership positions compared to even pre-pandemic levels.

I found that in order to develop strong leadership, key skills need to be emphasized and embedded throughout the curriculum and all aspects of school life. I also found that the girls felt they were being better prepared for leadership by being in an all-girls school as opposed to their peers in other school settings. Based on these outcomes, the school leadership has agreed to continue these leadership development sessions further this year, and likely, for perpetuity. All school prefects and student leaders will continue to meet with me weekly for an hour in the third term of school to further develop their leadership skills as well as work on the community project, which we did not have the time in the action research to work on.

## Glossary

**Leadership and self-assessing leadership** Haber-Curran and Sulpizio (2017) define leadership as a skill set to solve complex problems. The girls were led through guided discussion and peer evaluation to self-assess key skills that they already possessed, as well as areas in which they identified room for improvement.

**Assertive leadership:** This is a term I use frequently with my daughters in response to one of them being called a “Bossy Boots” in Kindergarten. I have used it intentionally in the past few years every time I hear the word “Bossy” and my students resonate with it, so I purposely used it in this action as a way to engage the students when faced with being thought bossy.

**Perfect girls:** The students identified early in the pre-research phase that fear of failure, or the appearance of imperfection, was a strong demotivator for them in exercising leadership. Through reflective journaling, we examined how we could minimize the impact of perfectionism on leadership.

**Community Project:** Tsikalas and Martin (2015) assert that community service encourages positive risk-taking among girls. By incorporating a student-led and outcomes-driven project into the action research, I hoped to give the students an opportunity to put their skills to use, as well as to extend the lessons learned beyond the scope of an academic exercise.

## **Introduction: Boss, not Bossy: Facilitating Assertive Leadership Skills in Year 10 Girls.**

There has been a clarion call to have more women in leadership positions around the world, sounded loud and clear by the pandemic and echoed in various developments globally, such as the landmark US supreme court rulings, the climate crisis, rising global costs, the threat and presence of a new war in Europe among others.

As an all-girls school, The Bermuda High School for Girls has a unique opportunity to develop our students to meet the needs of the world they will inherit, not the least of which is the need to have well-developed leadership skills. Given the compelling reasons to teach leadership in girls' schools, I sought to use action research to explore how we could use the global reset opportunity to teach, assess, and evaluate leadership skills that would lead to more girls in positions of leadership within our school, and hopefully beyond.

### **Research Question**

How does focused guided instruction improve leadership development within the Year 10 PSHE framework, as measured by the percentage of girls seeking prefect positions?

### **Action Research Methodology**

My chosen action was to facilitate the creation of opportunities where the girls had to develop and use leadership skills. In order to gather rich and varied data, I chose Participatory Action Research (PAR), employing mixed methods as described by Mertler (2019). In particular, I used the exploratory sequential design, in which each stage of my interventions was based on knowledge gathered from, or questions arising from the prior segment. were employed to give a wide array of rich data. Data were annotated and triangulated for emerging themes, and for corroboration of observations which were then assessed against the research question.

### **Literature Review**

Fulton (2019) concludes that intentional and measurable leadership development programs are essential to young girls if we are to promote future leadership. They examine various models and emphasize the need for robust programs. Their conclusions are echoed in the scholarly writings of Hembrow-Beach (2011).

Leadership development has long been a distinctive hallmark of a Bermuda High School education. From the youngest students, aged just four, we work to empower each student towards leadership, as advocated by Bailey et al., (2017). Haber-Curran and Sulpizio (2017), describe leadership as a skill set to solve complex problems, not merely an achievement of position. More importantly, the authors explain that leadership can be taught and learned.

In times past, schools have focused their efforts on academic achievement and left key skills like leadership to genetics and happenstance. Given the complex world problems that today's young people face, it is imperative that girls' schools once again lead the way in teaching girls to become leaders. Baldwin et al. (2016) outline four key components of leadership programs as the development of problem-solving skills, self-assessment in relation to others, mentoring experiences, and community issues. These components formed the basis of the action plan that I implemented and investigated.

Compelling evidence shows that girls from all-girls schools are more likely to attain leadership positions than girls from co-ed schools (Bridge, 2022; McConnaghy, 2021; National Coalition for Girls Schools, 2019). Hembrow-Beach (2011) outlines several compelling reasons why girls' schools are uniquely positioned to produce the transformational leadership that is needed today, among them the fact that in an all-girls school, all student leadership is female and girls learn to see themselves as leaders . She concludes that girls' schools have clear advantages

over mixed-gender schools in overcoming racial, gender and socio-economic barriers to attainment.

Previous research from girls' schools has shown that girls can benefit from being taught leadership skills as early as pre-kindergarten (Bailey et al., 2017). The motto at the Bermuda High School is "Empowering Girls." In order to do so, we must give our girls all the skills necessary to become effective leaders throughout their entire educational journey.

Shapiro et al., (2015) found that unless a concerted and sustained leadership model is firmly in place by middle school, girls develop an imbalanced career-gender outlook, assigning leadership and STEM career fields to boys. Kanda-Olmstead (2018) examines a large body of scientific research and personal experiences to suggest reasons why many women are reluctant to go into leadership positions. Some of the reasons include a lack of training and mentoring, poor feedback, and an inherent fear of failure among girls.

Among educators in girls' schools, it is very well known that, compared to boys, girls are less willing to make mistakes. This is sometimes referred to as the perfect-girl syndrome. Much has been written about how to help girls identify and overcome the tendency to become crippled into inaction due to the fear of appearing imperfect. In a popular Ted Talk, Hauser (2019) discusses the likeability dilemma among women leaders, and Madsen (2020) expands by adding that feedback among peers is a powerful tool in teaching young female leaders to overcome the need to be perfect all the time.

Although we have long known the importance of experiential learning and community-based work in developing leaders (Warren, 1996), perhaps it took the pandemic restrictions for us to revisit and appreciate the female collective wisdom espoused therein. Anecdotally, girls are more likely to show leadership skills such as risk-taking in a non-academic setting with their

peers. Programs like Girl Guides (Girls Scouts), The Duke of Edinburgh Scheme and others have long been allies of the girls' leadership development coalition. Tsikalas, and Martin (2015) highlight in particular, the role of the Girl Scouts of America in encouraging positive risk-taking among girls. It is no surprise, therefore, that every leadership training program must involve an aspect of experiential learning beyond the classroom.

Finally, with no punches held back, Knott-Dawson (2020, April 27) vents her frustrations at the apparent lack of intentional leadership development for girls in the school system and opines that it should be a matter of national importance.

While the aims of this research were small-scale and localized, they align closely with larger national and even global goals of development. The United Nations (UNESCO, 2022), in a report called *Mainstreaming the Needs of Women*, outlined that promoting gender equality and empowering women was essential to the development of a nation and progress toward attaining the Millennium Development Goals. This report magnifies the need for girls' schools to leverage their advantage in raising women to leadership positions.

### **Research Context**

My research participants were 26 girls in Year 10 (aged 14-15 years). They were a predominantly white, mixed-ability group within a largely upper-middle class school. The school is a traditional school with progressive ideals. On the island, the school is well-known for its alumni holding many positions of leadership within the community.

In the last few years, the strategic goals of the school have been focused on teaching leadership skills to students. Three signature leadership programs have been developed. The first is a home-grown Leadership Framework for all year groups within the PSHE curriculum. This program was developed by school staff and has three facets: leading self, leading others, and

leading by example. The second leadership program is a public-private partnership with HSBC Bermuda to teach leadership skills to 17-year-old girls as a summer workshop, called SheLeads. This program was developed largely by an alumna and globally noted leadership development agent, Christie Hunter-Arscott. Our third signature program is an alumni development program called the SheSpeaks series in which we work with particularly young alumni in giving back to the school and community through mentorship and speaking engagements. It is hoped that my research findings will feed back into our leadership programs or forward into other avenues to support implementing our strategic goal of making leaders of our students.

I chose my participants because I have been their head of year and PSHE teacher for over two years, and have built strong pastoral relationships with them and their families. In addition, due to the disruptions of the pandemic restrictions to our school life, this particular year group had not had the opportunity to engage with leadership in the ways that they would normally have. They had limited interactions outside of the year group due to “class bubbles” and missed leadership development during online learning. They were thus perfect candidates for a reset. In addition, they would be applying for their first prefect positions at the end of the research action.

Participation in the research was voluntary. Although all students engaged with the content, they had the option of not having their comments/work/thoughts and images being used in the report. One student’s data were not used, as per parent wishes. Student data used in the report were anonymized and coded.

### **The Action**

Across twelve PSHE lessons students were taught leadership skills, such as communication, setting goals, receiving and giving feedback, risk management, overcoming fear of failure, mentoring others, as well as developing a community-based service project. The

themes for each lesson were discussed with the students ahead of time. Project aims were shared with students and they were invited to create their own aims and assess our collective progress.

Class sessions mainly took the form of group discussions, guided reflections, and interviews, as well as some journaling and two presentations. I invited and received feedback and constructive criticism from the students, both in spoken and written format. There were also individual interviews with students and shared jam boards on which students reflected on topics.

Given the short amount of time available, we designed but did not carry out, a community project within the given time frame. Instead, the community project will be carried out later this year.

### **Data Collection**

The data captured were all qualitative. It was very important to me, as well as the students, to ensure that this action was not simply an academic exercise for me, but rather one that helped advance my students in their leadership development. From the students' perspective, it was also important that their authentic voices were heard. They saw themselves in some ways as collaborators and participants rather than study subjects.

Capturing student voice was a key outcome of this research project. To this end, the following methods were used in capturing students' authentic reflections and thought processes:

- student process journals,
- structured and semi-structured interviews,
- researcher observations and field notes, and
- semi structured questionnaires.

The goal was to collect enough accurate, credible and dependable data(Mertler, 2020). By using a variety of research methods, there were enough data to triangulate the findings. In addition, I engaged in peer debriefing with my line manager in order to ensure identification of personal bias in data interpretations. Member-checking ensured that student voice was authentically captured in the ongoing and final report.

Student process journals were created on an online platform so they could use nicknames or be anonymous. Some entries were prompted by guided questions, others were an open forum for students reflections or ideas. Interviews were carried out during journaling/work times and students chose their interview format; choosing between recording answers to pre-written interview questions or a less formal interview. My notebook observations were used in class, or reflectively after lessons. As the weeks went on, I reflected on the student journals, interviews, and conversations to adapt my content. At the conclusion of the research, students completed a semi-structured questionnaire on how well the aims and objectives of the research action were met.

### **Data Analysis**

All audio and video recordings were transcribed to allow data to be easily coded. Journal entries and transcripts were then coded according to identified themes and keywords, drawn both from the glossary words of the research and common themes among student responses. A particular effort was made to identify and code views that ran counter to the aims of the research or that highlighted areas of deficiency.

Initial findings were shared with the students to ascertain their levels of agreement, and then further with staff.

## Discussion of Findings

In analyzing the data, the following themes were identified:

### **The Students Predominantly Looked up to Female Leaders, Particularly Ones They Could Relate to in Some Capacity**

The initial journal entries and discussions asked students to reflect on a leader(s) they looked up to and explain what made them a good leader. Examples ranged from the usual: Oprah Winfrey, Barack Obama, to the more esoteric, such as the Agojie tribe of Dahomey. The most common answers by far were the students' own female relations. In a similar exercise prior, the same cohort had chosen primarily female role models, but more famous ones. Student A commented “leadership is a constant in my house, I am a 5<sup>th</sup> generation BHS student and the women in my family always expect me to be a leader like them.” Warell (2022). agrees: “role models matter, particularly for women.”

Simply by being raised and educated in an environment where female leadership was commonplace, the girls did not see their gender as a barrier to leadership; in fact, quite the opposite. Many students felt they chose more relatable females because they had matured in their understanding of leadership, while others felt that they were more appreciative of their female relatives after witnessing their sacrifices and strengths over the last two tumultuous years. One outlier said that she had noticed “disappointment” from me previously for selecting Megan Thee Stallion as her role model so she made a different choice this time. A surprising emerging theme was the racial diversity represented in the examples of good leadership. This finding underscores the critical role that girls’ schools have to play in leadership. It is clear that being immersed in an environment which emphasizes female empowerment alone is an asset that we can use to deliver key leadership skills.

## **Students Had a Very Balanced View of Their Own Skill Sets and Could Objectively Identify Areas That Needed Improvement**

When asked to identify key skills that a leader needed to develop, the list included good communication, organization, compassion, punctuality, the ability to make decisions, being able to inspire others, a thick skin, the ability to listen to others, a good sense of humor, and confidence. Student B suggested a question change to “skills a leader needs to develop.” The students felt that no leader was complete in their skill set and that everyone needed continual growth. Students listed their own areas of strength and improvement. Working in pairs, they critiqued each other’s lists and then a class discussion followed about how well each student had assessed themselves. Madsen (2020) writes on the importance of feedback on leadership development in girls, and this exercise bore out that girls did indeed benefit from guided feedback on their performance. Student C later said in an interview that “Student D’s list of her skills was near accurate” and she “agreed with her list for improvement.” In discussing self-evaluation and feedback, students said that in the past few years, they had engaged in many such reflections and that they felt comfortable with “not having it all ... yet.” This comment, and many like it, showed a trend of students valuing process over perfection. There is always concern among girls’ educators about the perceived need for perfection among our students, and the inhibitory nature that it often brings with it. Hearing the students articulate that leadership skills needed to be in constant development was a positive outcome that I had not quite expected.

Self-assessment of skills and the feedback session were very helpful for some students. A student wrote, “I didn’t see myself as a communicative person, since I don’t often say much, but my partner said that when I choose to speak, it has meaning, and I am happy to realize that my words are valued.” Other students found the sessions uncomfortable and would have preferred a

more anonymous way of evaluating each other. I concede that peer feedback like this was new to the students and may need a little more evaluation if it is to be used again.

Over three-quarters of students identified effective communication as an area of development. As part of my reflective teaching, I put together a short public speaking workshop and project into this action, laid out in a later section.

### **The Perception of Leaders as “Perfect People” is Diminishing, but There is Still a Strong Desire Among Students to be Perceived as “Perfect”**

In sharp contrast to the discussion on key skills leaders possess, students were less enthusiastic about their own prospects for formal leadership, especially if they compared themselves to their own definitions of more popular girls. This was seen more commonly in private reflection than in class discussions. Student E wrote, “I want to be head girl, I think I have good skills, but they will likely vote for (redacted), because she’s more outgoing and friendlier. She’s popular, and I am not.” Another student privately recorded that she is not likely to be chosen for prefect because of a widely publicized incident that she was named in years ago, despite having made very significant positive changes.

Many students stated that they were not seen in the best light by their peers and felt that these quietly-held opinions would have negative impacts on their prospects. Given the private nature of these observations, it was very difficult to lead a conversation on the topic. To tackle the issue, I asked the girls to envisage being the campaign manager for an unpopular girl, who had good leadership qualities. We talked about how we would go about marketing her skills to this class. In my observation notebook, I recalled this as an “uncomfortable silence overhung the class” and “the girls were not fooled.” It is a theme that will need to be unpicked far beyond the

scope of this research. It may likely be an area for exploration in our leadership development modules across the board.

The likeability problem among girls has been widely researched and studied by authors and many public speakers. The girls were shown the TEDTalk video on this subject by Hauser (2019). It was noted that the girls were far more comfortable discussing how “other girls want to be liked” than how they themselves felt that way. There was general agreement that they identified with it, but there was no particular agreement about how to proceed to address it. Student D stated, “maybe it is not a problem, and is just the way girls are. Maybe that’s what makes us always want to be better?” Another agreed, saying, “boys think everyone likes them, or that people that don’t like them are jerks.”

### **Students Like Being Given a Platform to Speak, but do not Have Enough Opportunities to do That at School**

In response to students' desire for opportunities to practice public speaking, I designed a short symposium based on pointers garnered from a local all-women's public speaking coaching group called WeSpeak. The girls were then given an opportunity to create a short speech on a topic of their choice to be delivered in front of their peers. This exercise proved very popular with the students and, with the permission of some students, formed the basis of a video presentation of my findings. There were topics ranging from, “A comprehensive analysis of Taylor Swift’s albums; from best to worst,” “Why sleeping pods are needed at BHS,” “My fears (and why I hate fish),” to “Why I should not have to take Spanish,” and “Today you will learn to hold your breath for up to 2 minutes.” I found the students to be completely engaged in this work. They helped each other in the research, planning, and making of speeches. They were encouraging, attentive, and supportive during every speech and one student described it as “the

highlight” of their week. Student G wished we had this every term, and writes that she “may give the public speaking club another try.”

### **Community-Based Service is a Useful Tool in Developing Student Leadership**

In defining leadership as a “set of skills for solving complex issues,” it is understood that complex issues must be presented, in the real world, and students given a chance to come up with strategies to solve them. Given the short timeline of the project, it was not practical to plan, carry out and evaluate a community-based project.

### **Conclusion**

On January 25, 2023 Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand and a key female leader that my students look up to, announced that she will not be seeking re-election, citing burnout. While it is not the first time that a world leader has bowed out of a race, the reason certainly is a newsmaker. In stating her fatigue, Ardern gave voice to the burnout that many female leaders often cite privately. My students took her resignation hard, but also found in it a renewed call for more female leadership. One student noted that, “women bring a fresh new voice to the room” and another agreed, saying, “No one else would admit to just being tired of it all.” In their responses, I felt that the time for being upfront, intentional, and relentless in teaching girls to become leaders is certainly here to stay.

Knott-Dawson (2020) expressed frustration at the lack of purposeful leadership training in schools for girls. I take a more optimistic view of things. I believe that the social disruption of the pandemic and the “reset” is just the opportunity that girls' schools need to not just reset the dial, but to build back better, and fulfill our mission to girls.

The outcomes of this short research action lead me to conclude that girls are looking for ways to develop their skills to lead. They are aware of their own limitations and are looking for

ways to build on their areas of weakness and get past the fear of appearing imperfect in their leadership roles. They want to have an opportunity to lead and are becoming more comfortable with the idea that they may make mistakes.

As the conclusions of this research action were being finalized, I won a proposal to expand the SheLeads program into the middle years. I cited some findings from my action research to support the need to teach leadership to girls. In March of this year, twenty-seven Year 9 students from all the middle schools on the island were engaged in the maiden middle school SheLeads program, which, by my assessment, was a success.

### **Emerging Research Action Proposals**

Unsurprisingly, even more research proposals have emerged from this short research. Most importantly, I have been given permission to continue this project with the newly-elected student leadership council and, hopefully, a community project relating to the school's response to the earthquake in Turkey will be developed. I am very pleased by this development and should have a clearer idea how the outcomes of those findings along with these will be used in future leadership development lessons.

### **Reflection**

I completely enjoyed the learning process of carrying out an action research project. Initially I thought it would be great professional development, but I severely underestimated how much benefit I would get, and how far this could enrich the lives of my students, colleagues and even students not currently enrolled at my school. I have a more academic framework in which to evaluate any changes I make to my teaching, as well as a whole new set of research and writing tools, not the least of which was the APA referencing. I cannot overemphasize the friendships that I have made, both personal and professional in these last two years, and how

rewarding these are to me. Finally, I am deeply indebted to Debbie Hill for her untiring dedication to my cohort and her personal warmth and friendship and mentorship

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