The leadership hidden in everyday learning

By Dr Sandy Geyer
Allcopy Publishers

One of the greatest privileges of my work has been spending time with teachers.

Over many years, through Leadership Literacy for Life and my teacher workshops, I have seen the profound influence that educators have on how young people come to understand themselves and how they show up in the world around them.

While academic learning is, of course, central to education, teachers are also helping learners develop something equally important: the confidence to think independently, the courage to take responsibility, the resilience to persevere and the self-awareness to understand the impact they have on others.

These capabilities have always been central to my work. Long before I undertook my doctoral research, I had become increasingly interested in how they develop and why they seem to shape leadership so consistently later in life. That thinking became the foundation of *Path of the Lion* and, later, *Leadership Literacy for Life*.

Those programmes were built on years of observation and lived experience. Working with business owners, professionals, students and teachers, I saw the same patterns emerge repeatedly. As people developed greater self-awareness, they also seemed to develop self - leadership, stronger judgement, greater confidence, more thoughtful decision-making and a deeper sense of responsibility for themselves and for others.

My doctoral research into entrepreneurial leadership in South Africa and New Zealand gave me the opportunity to explore those observations more rigorously. What emerged was not a different conclusion, but a deeper understanding of why those patterns appeared so consistently.

The leaders who demonstrated the strongest judgement, resilience and accountability had often begun developing those capabilities long before they entered formal leadership positions. They described early experiences that required responsibility, reflection and learning to navigate uncertainty. Over time, those experiences shaped the way they understood themselves, related to others and made decisions as leaders. In today's language, many of these capabilities would be recognised as communication, adaptability, emotional intelligence, self-awareness, critical thinking and collaboration.

Years later, organisations came to describe these kinds of capabilities as *soft skills*. The term has an interesting history. It originated in the United States Army in the early 1970s, where it was used simply to distinguish the skills required to work with people from those needed to operate machinery and equipment. The distinction was never about importance. Yet over time, "soft" has often come to imply something optional or secondary, despite these capabilities consistently proving to be among the strongest predictors of effective leadership.

These capabilities are not soft at all. They are deeply human. Long before organisations began recognising their value, education was already helping young people develop them through everyday learning, as they learned to understand themselves, work constructively with others, respond thoughtfully to challenge and take responsibility for their choices.

That has important implications for how we think about leadership development.

If the capabilities organisations value most are already being shaped through everyday learning experiences, then leadership development is not something that begins in the workplace. It is something education has been nurturing all along.

Perhaps that is one of education's most enduring contributions: not simply preparing young people for future careers, but helping them develop the judgement, resilience, responsibility and self-awareness on which future leadership is built.

About Dr Sandy Geyer

Dr Sandy Geyer is a South African-born educator, leadership researcher, entrepreneur and author. She holds a Doctorate of Professional Practice focused on the preparation of future leaders and leadership self-identity formation, is co-founder of educational publishing companies Allcopy Publishers and Mind Action Series, and founder of EnQPractice.