



EXPLORING THE PERCEPTION AND OBSERVATION OF YOUTH ON LEADERSHIP: A CASE STUDY OF DHAKA CITY, BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

The youth across the globe has reached a remarkable 1.8 billion out of 7.3 billion, and most of them live in developing countries like Bangladesh. Some 47.6 million or 30 percent of the total 158.5 million people in Bangladesh are youths, and it will be between 10 and 19 percent by 2050. This means that Bangladesh needs to invest right now in the human capital of its youths if it wants to reap the benefits of a large demographic dividend (GOB, 2015). Considering the facts, it is urgent to invest heavily on them for their quality education and effective leadership for economic, environmental and social gains. Based on understanding the importance of the youth, this study explores the perception of youth in Dhaka city about leadership, their needs for developing their leadership capacity and focus on their key priorities that they want to work on. Researcher hopes that the findings of this study would have important implications for youth related policies and programmes. It would also assist the planner, policy makers, implementer and stakeholders towards adopting more effective strategy for the leadership development of youths in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Youth, Leadership, Perceptions, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Introduction

It is society's job to prioritize and invest in the building of capacity in young people now, so they can be effective leaders when they reach adulthood (Fertman & van Linden, 1999). There is lot for young people to synthesize on their journeys to adulthood. As well as the physical, emotional and moral developmental experiences of typical adolescence across time, for 21st century youth there are new intellectual, social, technological, and environmental implications for their engagement as effective and influential citizens both locally, and globally. The world is evolving and becoming increasingly complex in terms of technological development, culturally diverse populations, environmental

challenges and global interconnectedness (Bolstad & Gilbert, 2012).

There is much discussion about what kinds of learning and thinking will be required in the 21st century. Academics in future-focused education such as Robinson (2010), Gilbert (2005) and Bolstad (2012) have identified the many skills seen as necessary to build in today's youth. These include: problem-solving, creative and critical thinking, design and collaborative skills, and also the development of environmental, ethical and cultural awareness. Consequently, the way educators think and act must also develop to meet 21st century learners' demands effectively. Developmental psychologist Howard

Gardner spoke in 2008 of his “Five Minds for the Future” as being; the disciplined, the synthesizing, the creative, the respectful and the ethical mind. He purports that practitioners need to do more than assist youth to become experts at something, they need to assist them to grow a conscience and an awareness of who and how they are in the world, and how what they do can impact on others.

Prioritizing social justice principles through teaching social and environmental literacies that nurture the moral, ethical and civic responsibility and capacity in young people is being seen by future focused educators as crucial (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). Many of the capacities mentioned above are also reflected in literature discussing key leadership characteristics required by youth in the 21st century. Aspects that are increasingly being identified as crucial leadership competencies for effectiveness include concepts of self-awareness, social intelligence, and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006). Karnes and Chauvin (2005) also note that because of the increasing multicultural aspects of our society, future leaders must respect and positively interact with diverse populations and as a matter of social justice, will need to encourage and foster the participation of all groups while demonstrating humility and respect for others. As such, the relational nature of leadership is of paramount importance (Komives, Longenbeam, Owen, & Mainella, 2006).

Youth are the largest and perhaps the most critical demographic in Bangladesh today. The youth constitute one third of total

population in Bangladesh. For this important portion of population, determination of national outlook is undeniable. Bangladesh youth policy has acknowledged the importance of youths for Bangladesh’s economic, political, and social well-being (BRAC, 2015).

The youth are the most strong, self-confident, creative and productive guiding force of any nation. It is possible to reflect hopes & aspirations of a nation through the youth. The endless potential of the youth shall be utilized for their own, for the society and for the nation. Development of a nation is totally dependent on the spirit & urge of work of the youth. For this, it is evident to explore and utilize all the potentialities of them (Mansuri et al. 2004). To ensure favorable environment towards productive practical education, training and self-employment for the youth and bringing out all dormant potentialities including their leadership quality aiming at Bangladesh’s progress. The main objective of the present national Youth Policy of Bangladesh is to create disciplined and efficient work force having responsibility of good citizen and creative mentality with a view to involving the youth in the national development stream also having respect towards national heritage and culture through a planned process (Sahel, F, 2010). On the basis of above views, this study tries to understand and explore the perception of youth in Dhaka city about leadership, their needs for developing their leadership capacity and focus on their key priorities that they want to work on.

Methodology

There has been much research into and around adult conceptions and experiences of leadership and its impact on both individuals and organizations (Heifetz & Linsky 2015, Camini, L 2013, Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach 2011). What has not been investigated as fully, is youth leadership and the contexts within which young people's leadership experiences and emerging understandings are developed (Dempster, Lizzio, Keefe, Skinner, & Andrews, 2016).

This research provided scope to explore young people's perceptions of leadership and their own leadership practices. Most opportunities for youth leadership are centered within educational contexts with traditional and hierarchical structures (Archard, 2011; Conner & Strobel, 2017; McNae, 2015). In this study, the context of a local community youth organization circumvents traditionally narrow leadership development structures such as those embedded in a school, by bringing together youth from a diversity of backgrounds. The diverse nature of the sample makes this research of significance to all those working with youth in experiential leadership contexts, youth themselves, and those with an interest in leadership and youth development. This study is quantitative in nature where 58 youth of Dhaka city had been interviewed purposely with structured questionnaire and checklist. The age range of study population is 17 to 25 and gender ratio was balanced well in manner.

Youth Perceptions of Leadership

There is limited research exploring how youth perceive leadership and view

themselves as leaders (Dempster & Lizzio, 2016; McNae, 2015; Whitehead, 2011). A common theme that has emerged within the existing literature though, is the idea that youth perceive leadership in quite different ways to adults.

In their extensive synthesis of related literature on youth leadership, Dempster, Stevens and O'Keefe (2016) observed that young adults, in contrast to adults, conceive of leadership as situational, non-hierarchical, relational, collaborative, informal and practical in nature. This contrasts with the actual contexts within which most youth leadership opportunities exist such as schools, where traditional and hierarchical leadership predominate and position young people as individuals performing transactional leadership functions (Bragg, 2013). In their 10 year study of leadership in youth-based organizations, Roach et al (2011), discovered in that youth tend not to draw on personal experiences to contextualize their responses, associating leadership externally with being attractive, athletic, wealthy, bright and charismatic, and affording someone individual status and power. Few youth saw themselves this way, or had formal leadership positions, and thus, did not perceive themselves as capable of being leaders. Given also that very few young people are presented as leaders by the media, it is not surprising that many youth do not readily identify as leaders or perceive themselves in this way.

In addition, youth frequently view their leadership contributions via an adult-centric perception of adolescence that determines them as being 'works in progress' until they reach adulthood (Kress, 2006). Therefore,

leadership is perceived as a future ‘adult’ pursuit, rather than something they are presently engaged in. As Fertman and Long point out (2014), if adolescents believe they are not leaders, they are less likely to seek opportunities that develop their leadership potential, thus their belief becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Roach et al (2011) found that “group alliances matter to young people” (p.18), and for many, their involvements are centered around specific group activities that share a vision, rather than individual pursuits, which means that the situational context for leadership is all important. Within such contexts, leadership becomes a process that exists within the group itself and is fluid and negotiated, rather than a formal, individual, static position (Dempster, Stevens & O’Keefe, 2016). It can also mean that youth display leadership only when they believe it is required of them, rather than an inherent tendency that needs a platform to be expressed (Komives et al., 2016; McNae, 2015; Roach et al., 2011).

Research has found that young people look to one another for different skills depending on situational needs and what they value are skills such as: self-knowledge, relationship building, accessibility and responsibility to followers and/or a group. These matter more than any specific talent or ability to motivate others (Dempster et al., 2016; Roach et al., 2011). Given the situational nature of how youth perceive leadership, it follows that they have a flexible definition of what skills are required to take on such roles, and when this occurs. Roach et al (2011) raise the point that while experience and maturity is

valued in adult leaders, young people pay attention to what may be termed “wisdom in spontaneity” (p.17), or the ability to assess situations quickly and act accordingly. In the eyes of young people, individuals who lose the constant awareness of group needs do not exhibit leadership (Roach et al, 2011).

Adolescents are aware that within school contexts, leadership opportunities are limited. Bragg (2013)’s study indicated that youth who are seen by adults to have exhibited leadership characteristics adults value themselves, are being hand-picked to partake in formal leadership roles. Their leadership roles confer them status, privilege and sometimes power over their peers who are not chosen or identified as leaders (Fertman & van Linden, 2014). In her study on the influence of school contexts on young women’s leadership perceptions, McNae (2015) found that their involvements can be met with suspicion by fellow students and that leadership opportunities can become commoditized into a form of social capital from which the privileged few can gain further advantages or benefits that are withheld from others, such as popularity, adult acknowledgement and other extrinsic rewards.

Archard (2011) found in her work looking at peer influence on female student development, that youth see leadership influence as either positive or negative, and that the context of this leadership role influence show it manifests. In school contexts, particularly, youth can lead others into destructive behaviours with persuasive influence in an informal situation, or abuse a sense of power that they perceive they have from a formal position, and treat others

detrimentally (Cox, 2011). Within community contexts however, the power dynamic between peers who have and those who have not been identified as having leadership potential is not so clear-cut. Often young people have involvements outside school where they demonstrate and/or grow in leadership potential because of the context of their activities. Some youth express frustration regarding the limited contexts provided by schools and choose to put their efforts in areas of interest elsewhere where they believe there may be more challenge, less hierarchy, and more opportunity to effect change (Conner & Strobel, 2015; McNae, 2015).

Although adults have a multitude of opinions about what constitutes youth leadership, the ones who are best placed to inform practitioner understanding of how youth see leadership and their particular leadership development needs, may be the young people themselves. Seeking their understandings and perceptions is a crucial starting point for any practitioner designing or offering youth leadership development opportunities.

Findings and Discussion

In this study, the sex of interviewed people were 56% female where 44% male. Regarding parentages of age range were 26% were aged 17-19, 36% were 19-21, 22% were 21-23 and 16% were aged 23-25. All participants perceived that leadership was a positive, transformational process of influence over others by someone who inspires, guides and helps groups or individuals to achieve their potential, and

who affects change through wanting to make a positive difference. A number of participants identified the concept of a leader being someone to “look up to”, or who is “at the front”, suggesting a sense of hierarchy, but this was tempered with the developed understanding that they had this role because they had won respect through their influential actions. Actions mentioned included “sharing a vision and creating engagement “and “building people’s ability above their normal limitations”. This perception sat alongside the regularly mentioned notion of a leader being positive “role-model” or “guide” providing “help” that inspires and supports others. Participants’ sense of being guided, pushed, listened to and encouraged by someone they have an on-going relationship with, indicated that relational investment on a personal level seems to have a strong influence on who these youth perceive as leaders. In terms of desirable leadership actions, again, the notion of positive influence for the good of others came through in many participant responses, with passion, inspiration, taking control, making good decisions, role-modeling, “wanting to help people achieve their goals”, and “making a difference in their community” specifically identified. The attention expressed by most participants on strong actions and communication skills commonly associated with leaders such as public speaking, delegation or time-management, also indicated that the young people involved in this research saw leadership as a transformational process of influence, rather than predominately an organizational or managerial task-based position.

Youth's identification with role models is a part of how they perceive themselves, or at least what they hope to be someday. An "essential, and often neglected, dynamic of character formation is the provision of opportunities for students to observe and practice good character and civic virtue." The deliberate study of role models in social studies might enable youth to reflect on what characteristics they consider important in a person and how they might strive to acquire those characteristics. We asked youth in which sector your role model engaged, they answered following in figure 4. Most of the role model youth chose engaged in civil society and secondly in education sectors and only 2% are in politics. Overall, responses to this question fell into four categories. The majority of students gave definitions that were general, such as "a role model is someone to look up to" or someone "you want to be like." The second most popular response described a role model as someone who "sets an example" or "does good things." A third category consisted of responses such as someone "who inspires you," "who teaches you," and who "helps you." While related, each set of responses seemed distinct.

During the survey, we asked youth about what influential position in future they want to lead, 25% replied they want to engage themselves in the international organization (NGOs). They said that international NGOs offer the best opportunities for working for the society and welfare. It is a very vast and varied one, and one needs to find out which cause he/she relates with, which domain in particular would one want to work in, before exploring this arena to work. They also

expressed that the international NGOs offer a huge scope for learning and gaining experience in the sector. Also, if someone wants to study further, they offer vast experience of working in dynamic and challenging environments, and enable one to witness global challenges with a hands-on experience.

On the other hand, 22% of youth want to be entrepreneurs. They said that successful people inspire other people to become successful. These hopefuls believe that becoming an entrepreneur will allow them to network with people who have already built great businesses. They think that they have enough potential to find the next profitable idea and change the lives of millions. Seeing someone with nothing grow to become a successful businessperson is enough for these aspiring entrepreneurs to save up money to start their own businesses. In addition, they revealed that many youth struggle with respecting authority. They don't like the reality of having people in superior positions managing their work and looking over their shoulder. Not having the final say in important decisions turns them off, so they seek opportunities where they can have more control over business operations. Even though they don't like authority figures, they believe that becoming their own boss is the only way that they can do work effectively and happily.

It found that only 3% want to engage in family business. Many of respondents echoed "I've been working in the family business since high school. Since graduating from college, I've been in it full time. At 25, I'm leading a relatively small business unit, but it is profitable and is our fastest growing

division. I love my family and appreciate the opportunity afforded me by our family business, but nothing feels right. Work isn't satisfying. I don't feel that I've made my own choices or that I'm in control of my destiny. I don't really know what I want to do or what I should do”.

We asked the youth to rate themselves in leadership potential and only 5% rate themselves extremely high, 11% had very high and 25% had somewhat high and 40% said their leadership potential is not high at all. Most the respondents said that Vision is a leadership trait and we do not have concrete vision. They thought that vision here is not about making lofty statements and putting them up the wall but the capacity to foresee and implement transformational change, that may consume the organization, industry or the world. Here the leadership is not about the position or designation but the vision of the person. The leaders are visionary; one does not become leader after occupying the superior position. Leadership is about focusing on a good mix of culture, strategy and leadership rather than on operational efficiency. They also expressed that a youth that does not know what is expected of them can end up feeling frustrated, and this will ultimately affect how well they carry out the tasks assigned to them. Respondents also revealed that if we initiate a good work, people may bully and intimidate us. Society often scolds us for our mistakes in public and even criticizes us for aspects of their personality or appearance, rather than the work that they are doing. Youth who find themselves working for good causes where the society, people is a bully will often feel demoralized.

In the interview process, we asked youth in which areas they want to develop themselves for becoming an effective leader; 27% of them said public speaking and pitching, 22% interested in team management and 7 % wanted to train themselves in IT skills.

In this study we asked youth whether current environment of Bangladesh is favorable for youth to become an effective leader and 85% did not think it is favorable while 15% thought it somewhat favorable. They thought that youth need relevant and reliable information to make informed decisions and to understand how the choices they make will affect their lives. This can come from a variety of sources, including parents and other family members, teachers, the mass media and other young people. Young people's ideas are constantly being shaped and influenced by their environment. When youth have opportunities to learn and express themselves without fear, they are more likely to be engaged with their parents, peers and communities. They gain self-esteem and become positive role models. National and local laws and, current politics must also promote and support youth's rights and young people should participate in the development and monitoring of these laws. Youth who are denied opportunities for growth and feel trapped by circumstances may come into conflict with the law. How society responds to a young lawbreaker can make or break a young person's future. If given a voice, young people can provide important information about conditions at work or at school and about risks to their own life and that of their community. They

can provide suggestions for change that adults may not have considered and they play a vital role in researching, monitoring, evaluating and planning for good causes.

“As a youth, what are your key priorities for developing a better Bangladesh” we asked the youth in the interview and 80% wants political stability, 75% of them want to create Bangladesh of equality, 65% prioritized gender equality, 43% of them live in healthy society and 38% focused on enforcing the rights of children.

Conclusion

According to the National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition, youth leadership development encourages healthy growth by providing youth the ability to analyze their own strengths and weaknesses; to set personal goals; and to gain the self-esteem, confidence, motivation, and abilities to carry out those goals (USAID, 2010). Positive youth leadership development also provides youths with the ability to guide or direct others on a course of action, influence the opinions and behaviors of others and serve as a role models. Bangladeshi youth having energy, enthusiasm, resilience and fresh vigour can contribute immensely to nation building. This study recommends that Youth leadership must be promoted and nurtured for community solution and overall general development of Bangladesh. This study also suggests that relevant stakeholders must provide coordinated efforts to encourage the youth for engaging and practicing leadership from their own positions.

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Figure 1: Sex of respondents

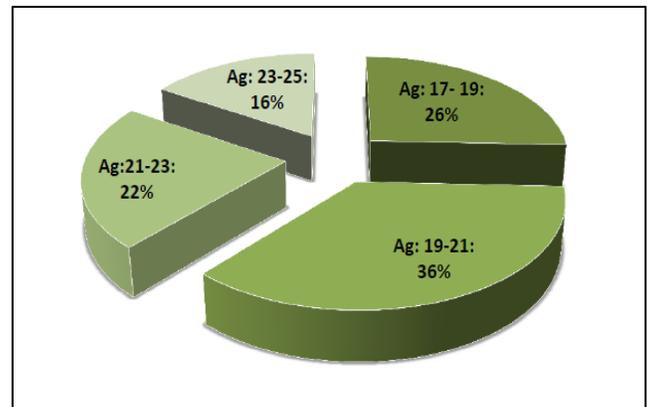
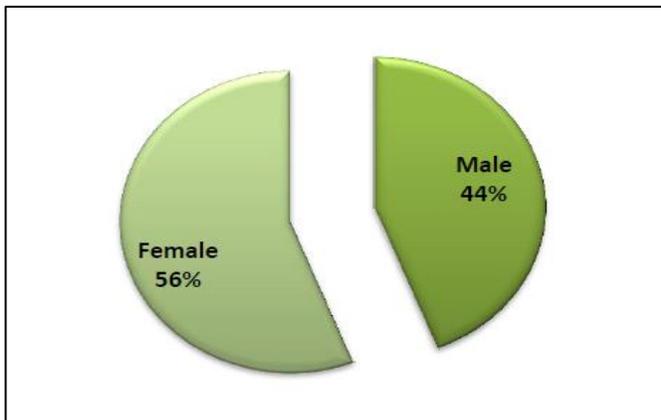


Figure 3: A leader must have the following qualities stated by youth respondents

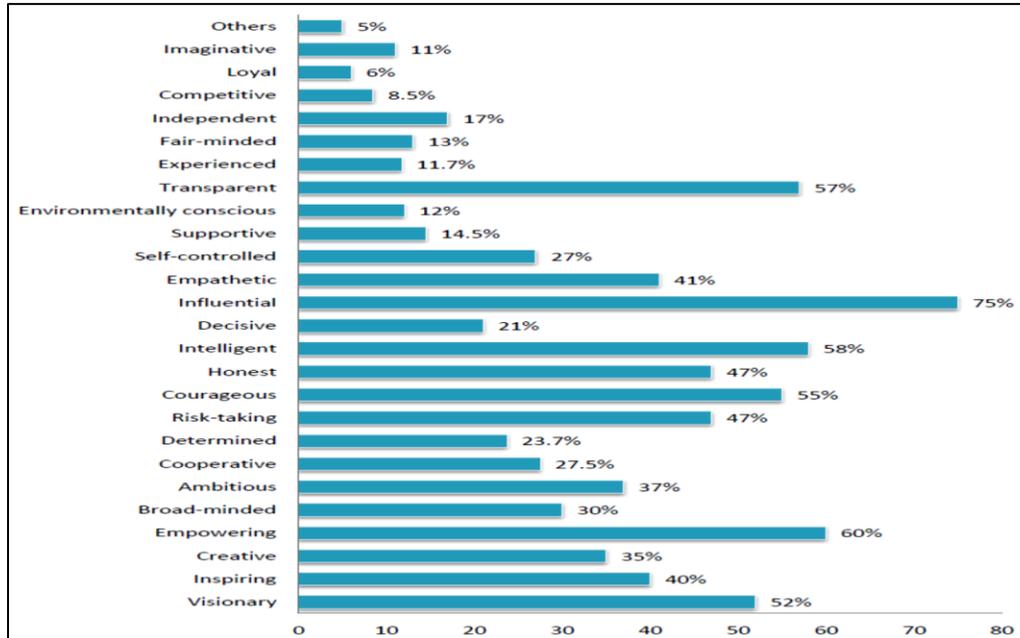


Figure 4: Your (youth) role model of leader engaged in which sector?

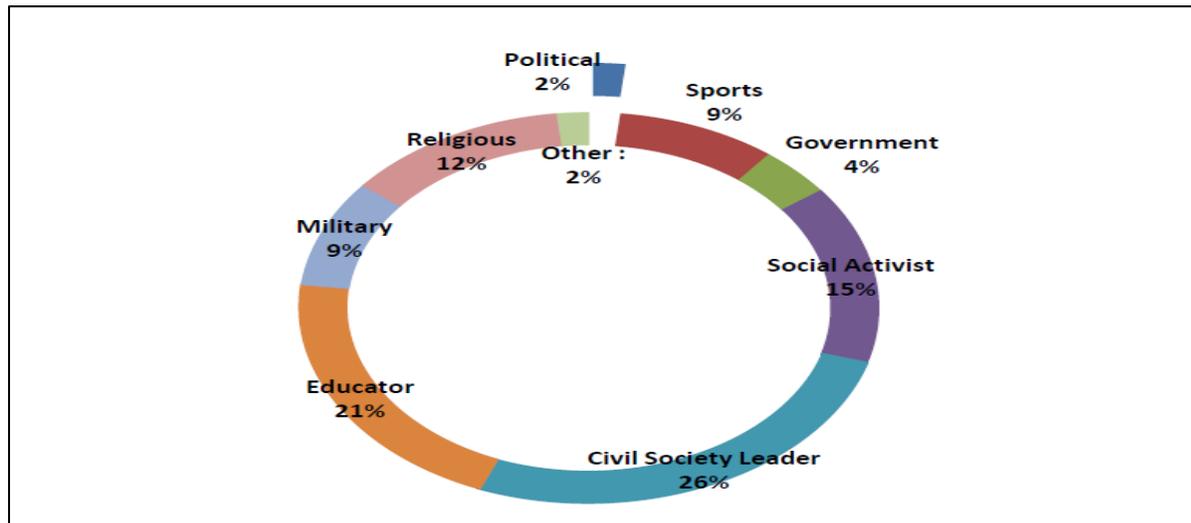


Figure 5: Youths in Dhaka City prefer an influential position in the following sector

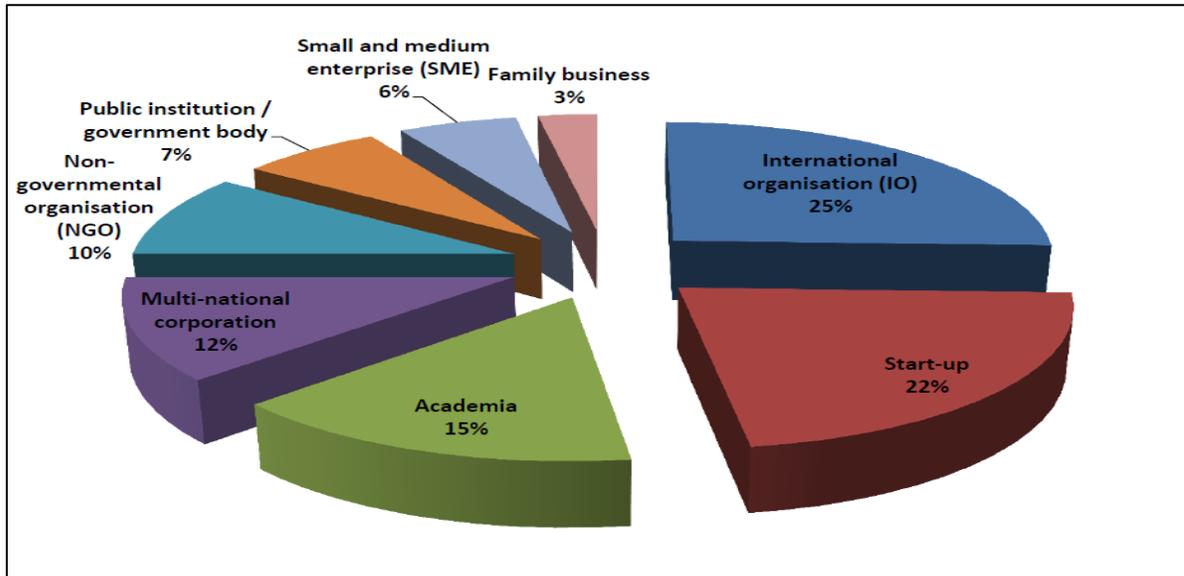


Figure 6: Self-ratings of leadership potential by youth

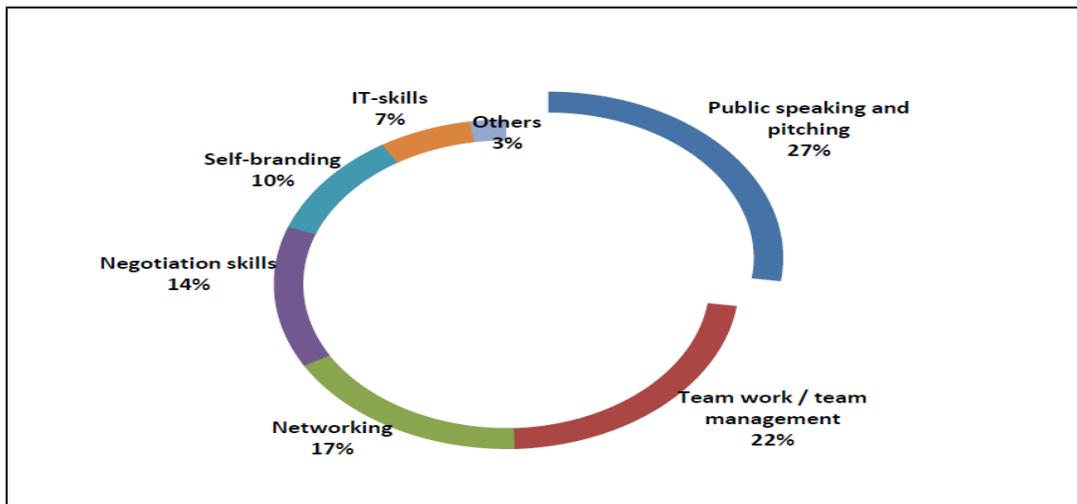


Figure 7: The youth wants to train themselves for leadership in the areas of

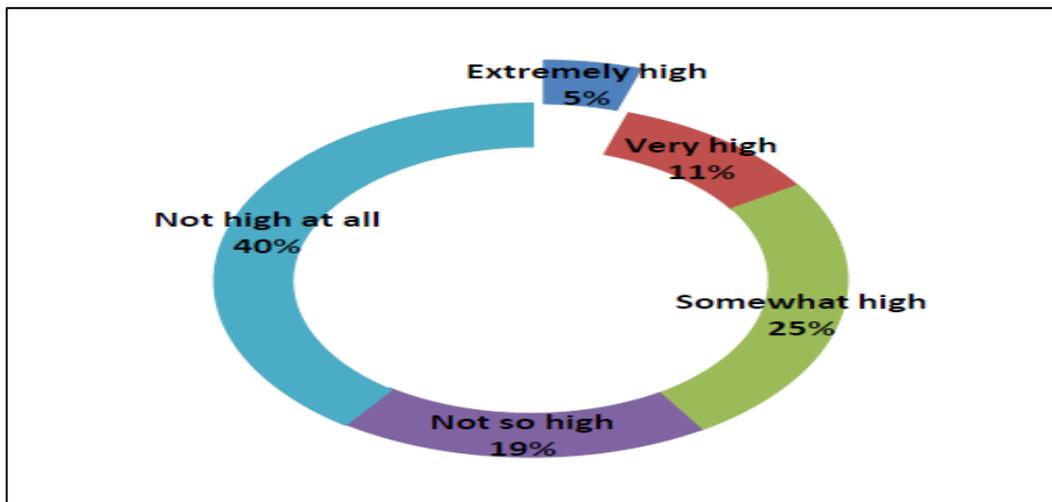


Figure 8: Key priorities of interviewed youth for the development of Bangladesh

