



Developing **Leadership** **Skills** *in* **Young Gifted** **Students**

by Amy Bisland

As society grows into a more cooperative society, the importance of finding emerging leaders has become crucial. Not only should these potential leaders be identified, but also their talents need the opportunity to develop. As a result, leadership education continues to be a concern in gifted education. However, it remains an abstract concept that is often ignored in school curricula (Karnes & Stephens, 1999). Many districts do not equate leadership education with traditional academic education, and teachers often do not receive proper training in leadership skill develop-

ment. Consequently, students are given limited opportunities to develop their potential.

One of the problems facing current leadership education is the lack of a clear definition of a leader. Some view an effective leader as one who is skilled in group dynamics, can inspire others, and relates well to a wide variety of people (Feldhusen & Pleiss, 1994). Others see a leader as one who is able to communicate well, lead groups in problem solving, structure goals and objectives for a group, and evaluate group progress in achieving its goals (Feldhusen & Pleiss, 1994). A third group defines a leader as someone who induces a group to pursue a goal (Karnes & Bean, 1996).

Many children possessing giftedness in leadership share common characteristics, including the desire to be challenged, the ability to solve problems creatively, the ability to reason critically, the ability to see new relationships, flexibility in thought and action, understanding of ambiguous concepts, and the ability to motivate others (Karnes & Bean, 1990). All children experience leadership in daily life through interactions with their families, peers, and community organizations. Students are constantly reevaluating their roles in each of these contexts (Roach et al., 1999). They may lead in certain areas, motivate in others, and follow in still other circumstances. A child with giftedness in leadership may be one who can balance the many roles in the various aspects of life. These children may also seek to contribute to society in a way that brings personal satisfaction, and they want to feel pride in their accomplishments, while simultaneously feeling like they have aided society. Children with giftedness in leadership may see both their successes and failures as opportunities for growth (Ramey, 1991).

Leadership Education Activities

Schools are sometimes reluctant to provide programming to serve the needs of potentially gifted leaders. Once a child is identified as possessing leadership giftedness, many options for developing the talent are available. A separate curriculum for leadership education is not necessary, for the student may acquire knowledge and skills through activities complementing the existing curriculum (Karnes & Stephens, 1999). Students can learn to organize, write, and present information to others in language arts, which develops their interpersonal and communication skills.

They also can be given the opportunity to problem solve, plan, and critically think through activities such as science or social studies projects (Karnes & Bean, 1990). Extracurricular clubs, athletic programs, and student councils are also common contexts in which students may develop their abilities (Smith, Smith, & Barnette, 1991).

Ideally, leadership education should begin as early as preschool or kindergarten. Working to develop young children's skills in creative drama, group play, simulation, collaborative work, and modeling establishes a foundation for future leadership skills (Karnes & Stephens, 1999). Teachers can incorporate short lessons into their weekly curriculum or choose to teach a thematic concept unit focusing on leadership. Regardless of format, teachers should begin by choosing objectives relating to leadership. Sample objectives with coordinating activities for a unit on leadership are presented in Table 1. The following activities are taken from a leadership unit that was implemented with kindergarten and first-grade gifted students, but they are appropriate through third grade.

Biographies of Great Leaders

Children benefit from reading or hearing biographies about past leaders. By analyzing what made these past leaders successful, students discover various leadership styles and characteristics (VanTassel-Baska, 1994). Teachers select books highlighting a variety of leaders with different ethnic backgrounds and careers to emphasize that people from many walks of life become leaders (some suggested books are found in an appendix at the end of the article). The students participate in short discussions about why each leader received recognition, what positive characteristics the leader possessed, and what obstacles var-

ious leaders overcame on the road to becoming leaders.

Brainstorming Leadership Characteristics

Young children should understand what qualities leaders possess. After understanding the leadership traits, children will begin to identify those characteristics in other children and adults, as well as in themselves. Young children need to be told about common characteristics such as kindness, intelligence, problem solving, communication, cooperation, honesty, fairness, and confidence. Guest speakers from the community should be used to share their experiences as leaders. They can share the characteristics they feel they possess that have enhanced their leadership ability.

To assist students in remembering traits, they could make a mobile with each word on a different shape, make posters of people demonstrating each quality, or make up songs or rhymes to help them remember the information.

Leadership Booklets

During a leadership unit, students keep a record of each leader they study and a list of ideas they have for leadership. The teacher can prepare a form asking for the leader's name, what he or she is famous for, the leadership characteristics recognized, and how the students will try to emulate that particular leader in their own lives. Kindergarten and first-grade students could draw pictures of the leader and their accomplishments, rather than writing. At the conclusion of the unit, students will have a unique reference book to help them recall all of the information studied. This information should be shared with their parents, relatives, and friends.

Partner Decision-Making Scenarios

Small children should be encouraged to see things from different perspectives. By talking about feelings and ideas, young children will begin to understand themselves and how their actions affect others (Hensel, 1991). Teachers should develop short age-appropriate scenarios that require young students to make ethical decisions or consider someone else's point of view. For example, a scenario might involve a student seeing another student cheating. Children are placed in pairs or small groups to discuss what they would do with their assigned problem, and they illustrate their decision by drawing pictures and explaining their choices to the class. The teacher then facilitates a discussion to see if the class agrees with the decisions.

Group Dynamics

Children need to learn to work with other people as early as possible. One way to promote collaboration is to require students to work on a project in groups. One example is to divide students into small groups of 3 to 5. Each group is given a variety of unrelated materials, such as drinking straws, tape, paper plates, rubber bands, yarn, and toothpicks, and the group should create something using only the materials provided. This activity encourages the development of group decision making, communication, and teamwork.

Leadership Games

One game to develop leadership skills is the memory game. Teachers make two cards for each leader being studied. In playing, the students will begin to be familiar with the names and faces of great leaders of the past and present. These cards may also be used to

Objective	Suggested Activity
• The student will name characteristics of great leaders.	Biographies Brainstorming Leadership Characteristics Fairy Tales/Children's Literature
• The student will differentiate between positive and negative leaders.	Biographies Fairy Tales/Children's Literature
• The student will classify leaders based on characteristics.	Biographies Fairy Tales/Children's Literature
• The student will define "leader."	Brainstorming Leadership Characteristics
• The student will identify leaders in business. (in politics, in the arts, female leaders, etc.)	Leadership Booklets
• The student will generate solutions to problems.	Partner Decision Making Scenarios
• The student will demonstrate listening skills.	Simon Says
• The student will demonstrate decision-making ability.	Simon Says Partner Decision Making Scenarios
• The student will evaluate ideas and solutions.	Partner Decision Making Scenarios
• The student will apply knowledge of leaders from the past and present.	Leadership Games
• The student will describe own future leadership activities.	Connections to the Future

play other card games such as "Go Fish" or "Old Maid."

Second- and third-grade students could make their own game at the conclusion of the unit as review or a project

to be evaluated. Examples include "Leaderopoly" or trivia board games focusing on questions from various categories about leaders.

Simon Says

The children's game "Simon Says" is also an effective way to teach leadership skills to young children. Each child has an opportunity to make quick decisions and give instructions, as well as to practice listening skills. Both listening and speaking skills are crucial to the effectiveness of leadership. This game also emphasizes the importance of following directions and rules.

Fairy Tales and Children's Literature

Once students have become familiar with the concept of leadership and characteristics of leaders, they may begin identifying leaders in books other than biographies. Fairy tales, fables, and common children's stories contain many examples of effective leaders. After reading a story, students should identify the leaders and discuss what characteristics each leader possessed. Would they have made the same decisions as these leaders? Fairy tales also provide an opportunity to discuss positive and negative leaders.

Connections to the Future

Students should be given many opportunities to apply new information about leadership to their lives. After studying about leaders in various career fields, students can draw pictures or write stories about what they will do when they grow up. Students should also continuously work on a leadership mural illustrating how they will be leaders in their own schools, communities, or religious affiliations. Other activities that emphasize leadership connections include role-playing, guest speakers, teambuilding, and simulations.

Partnering With Parents

A final resource to consider in edu-

cating young gifted leaders is parents. Teachers should encourage parents to provide numerous opportunities to practice leadership skills in daily life by participating in the planning of family vacations or activities and making as many decisions as possible in order to develop critical thinking and evaluation skills. Family discussions about current events may also increase a child's ability to think independently and make decisions. They may also allow children to complete self-directed and self-evaluated projects at home (Karnes & Bean, 1990). Most importantly, parents should be encouraged to be supporters of their children in all leadership efforts and be models of effective leadership skills and attitudes (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Teachers may choose to offer a parent workshop or leadership sharing day as a component of their unit.

The final step is to assess how much progress each student has made in his or her understanding of leadership and the ability to lead. Evaluation of gifted leadership units and programs are often done through rubrics or self-evaluations. The students are asked to rate themselves in various areas of leadership before the unit begins. After the children have completed the program, they are usually asked to rate themselves again in the same categories. With very young children, teachers may interview students to evaluate their understanding of the concepts taught instead of using a written rubric. By looking at the differences indicated, a teacher can evaluate student growth. This process also assists a teacher in identifying areas that may still need improvement (Chan, 2000).

Conclusion

By ignoring the needs of students gifted in leadership at a young age, it is possible that they will not develop the

skills necessary to reach their full potential as leaders. Teachers and parents can help students to build a foundation early in life by acquiring the skills and concepts necessary to become successful leaders. Teachers should have access to workshops and leadership resources such as books, videos, software, and children's biographies to assist in planning for leadership education. Parent education is also an important aspect of leadership education. By working together, parents and teachers can provide an environment and numerous educational experiences for early childhood gifted children to begin on the path to successful leadership. [GCT](#)

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