

UNLOCKING STUDENT LEADERSHIP GIFTING

What Every Educator Needs to Know...But Most Do Not

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ID-ING WEEDS

I grew up on a farm in southwest Iowa, where raising livestock and growing crops taught me the essentials of cultivation—preparing the soil, selecting seeds, watering, fertilizing, and eventually harvesting. One day, when I was about 10, my father and I stood in a neighbor's soybean field, admiring its uniformity. Suddenly, he pointed to a lone stalk of corn that towered several feet above the soybeans.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked.

I glanced at him, confused by what seemed like a ridiculous question. "It's corn," I replied.

"No," he said. "It's a weed."

I was dumbfounded. I knew the difference between corn and weeds. Seeing my confusion, my father explained, "A weed is whatever you're not trying to grow."

This memory resurfaces when I consider leadership ability in students. In the field of gifted and talented (GT) education, leadership potential stands apart, sometimes viewed as an outlier—perhaps even a "weed." But is it truly out of place, or have we simply failed to cultivate it?

IS LEADERSHIP A WEED?

WHY IS LEADERSHIP OVERLOOKED IN EDUCATION?

The Marland Report (1972), a foundational document in gifted education, defined gifted and talented children as those demonstrating exceptional ability in areas such as intellect, creativity, and, notably, leadership (Marland, 1972). Yet, despite its official recognition, leadership remains the most neglected aspect of GT education. For example, at the 2015 National Association for Gifted Children convention, which featured over 400 workshops, only three mentioned leadership in their titles, and just one focused on leadership as a gift (NAGC, 2015).

Leadership ability is not a minor footnote in gifted education—it is a critical talent that shapes the future. Yet, in many educational settings, it remains an afterthought.

Leadership development has historically not been part of traditional academic curricula. Schools prioritize intellectual and technical pursuits, but 21st-century skills increasingly highlight collaboration, influence, and problem-solving—all hallmarks of leadership. Without champions advocating for leadership education, it remains outside the core academic framework.

Behavioral psychology warns against hoping for A while rewarding B (Kerr, 1975). Schools say they value leadership, yet their structures reward compliance—standardized testing, rigid curricula, and top-down mandates leave little room for students to practice leadership. The focus on general test scores often sidelines leadership identification and development.



THE HIDDEN GIFT: IDENTIFYING AND SUPPORTING YOUNG LEADERS

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For years, I viewed leadership as an adult competency, something to be developed “someday.” But my work with students worldwide has challenged that assumption. Leadership ability emerges early, yet most school environments suppress it.

The Marland Report classified gifted students as having special needs, warning that neglecting their abilities can cause harm (Marland, 1972). Yet many schools still fail to nurture young leaders, often mistaking their assertiveness for disruption.

In compliance-driven cultures, students who take initiative may be seen as troublemakers, rather than emerging leaders.

We cannot afford to wait until adulthood to recognize and develop leadership talent. The leadership pipeline should start early, just as we support young prodigies in math, science, and the arts.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND LEADERSHIP TALENT

The debate over whether leaders are born or made has long intrigued researchers. Neuroscientific studies indicate that leadership aptitude has genetic components (Loehlin et al., 1998). However, environmental factors—such as mentorship, opportunities, and structured training—play a crucial role in shaping young leaders.

Most definitions of leadership in youth programs focus on citizenship, responsibility, and self-esteem. While these are important qualities, they do not define leadership. A more precise definition is: “Leadership is the process of helping people accomplish together what they would not or could not as individuals.”

We refer to this as the “O Factor”—the ability to organize people to achieve a common goal. True leadership is not just

WHY SCHOOLS SHOULD PRIORITIZE LEADERSHIP EDUCATION

about influence; it is about catalyzing action.

Research on Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) shows a strong correlation between school climate and academic success (PBIS, 2012). However, PBIS research overlooks one key factor: students influence each other far more than teachers influence them.

By identifying and developing student leaders, schools can reduce bullying, improve peer engagement, and strengthen student-led initiatives. Rather than focusing only on compliance, schools can strategically empower young leaders to shape positive environments.

A Harvard Business Review study found that the average age of first formal leadership training is 42 (Zenger, 2012). Imagine if we waited until 42 to teach people how to read. The missed opportunity is staggering. Early leadership training provides a 10- to 30-year head start in leadership experience, a chance to develop ethical decision-making at a young age, and the ability to refine leadership skills before high-stakes roles.

Many existing GT assessments fail to distinguish leadership-specific traits. Instead, they focus on general social skills. To accurately identify leadership talent, an assessment should measure leadership-specific behaviors, rely on peer/adult ratings rather than self-reporting, and use performance-based observations in group settings. The NYLI (Nelson Young Leadership Inventory) is designed to assess leadership potential holistically, incorporating multiple perspectives and real-world behavior indicators.

IDENTIFYING LEADER TALENT IN SCHOOLS

Identifying leadership ability without providing development is educational malpractice. Schools should implement project-based leadership training, provide real-time feedback through Socratic coaching, and establish structured mentorship programs. By using age-appropriate executive skill training, we can prepare young leaders before they enter high-risk leadership roles.



THE TIME FOR CHANGE IS NOW

Educational systems usually take time to evolve. The QWERTY keyboard was designed to slow typists down, yet even after technology improved, we kept the outdated design (Rogers, 2003). Similarly, schools continue outdated practices that ignore leadership potential. But the science, tools, and technology now exist to develop leadership ability in students.

The Marland Report's inclusion of leadership ability was an invitation. It's time educators and leadership experts accept it. The next generation of great leaders is sitting in today's classrooms. Will we recognize them before it's too late?



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