

ABSTRACT

As leadership abilities are used as one characteristic to identify giftedness, leadership skills should be an integral component of program services for gifted students. The present study used leadership abilities as defined by the Leadership Development Program (Karnes & Chauvin, 2000). Gifted students in grades 9-12 in a rural school district volunteered to participate in a year-long program (i.e., Team Lead). Students were administered the Leadership Skills Inventory (Karnes & Chauvin, 2000) before the program began as a pre-assessment of leadership skills. The inventory rendered scores in nine categories of leadership (i.e., Fundamentals, Written Communication, Speech Communication, Character-Building, Decision-Making, Group Dynamics, Problem Solving, Personal Skills, and Planning). Next, students participated in a book club, leadership activities, and the ropes training course. When administered the LSI as a post-assessment, the gifted students' scores increased in all nine dimensions.

Leadership Skills of Gifted Students at the Secondary Level In a Rural Setting

INTRODUCTION

Leadership ability is considered an admirable trait when used in a positive manner. We look to leaders for guidance and strength in times of tragedy (i.e., Sept. 11). We look to leaders for spiritual guidance and advice (i.e., clergy); we look to leaders as figures of authority and decision-making for the good of others (i.e., our country's president, the C.E.O. of a business, school administrators, etc.). Are such individuals born gifted in leadership ability? Are the intellectually gifted natural leaders? Is leadership something that can be nurtured and molded even among gifted individuals? Answers to these questions will be addressed in the following text.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership, among gifted students, has been a topic of interest by many (Davis & Rimm, 1994; DeHaan & Havighurst, 1957; Karnes & Chauvin, 1986) who have studied gifted individuals. Early researchers (DeHann and Havighurst; 1957) used attributes such as initiative, persistence, ambition, and dominance to describe leadership abilities of the gifted. DeHaan and Havighurst (1957) defined a gifted leader as one who was sensitive to the needs of others, affectionate, and agreeable. Tanenbaum (1983) reported that a correlation exists between the exhibition of leadership skills and general intelligence – the more intelligent, the greater the chance for advanced leadership skills. By combining these two notions, one may conclude that gifted leaders, who are sensitive and caring, are more likely to come from intellectually gifted populations.

It should also be noted that the nationally recognized definition of giftedness (i.e., Marland, 1972) includes intelligence, academic excellence, creative ability, leadership skills, and excellence in visual or performing arts. Based upon the assumption that giftedness and leadership are parallel at some level, experts in the field of gifted education (e.g., Davis & Rimm, 1994; Karnes & Chauvin, 1986; Renzulli & Reis, 1985; Roach, Wyman, Brookes, & Chavez, 1999; Sisks & Roselli, 1987) have all agreed that leadership development is an important component of programming for gifted students.

In 1999, Merriman developed and delivered a leadership training program for gifted students. The program entailed participation in a ropes training course by the students for “team-building” and a visit by a keynote speaker to discuss leadership issues. The students also used organizational planning skills (i.e., preparing a registration process, an agenda, break-out session planning, lunch, registration, etc.) as they prepared a leadership conference. The organization of the leadership conference, prepared for others students within their high school, encouraged gifted kids to design, develop, and implement their own leadership training session. While the nature of the leadership training program appears very comprehensive, there was no data collected conveying the leadership skills of the gifted students before or after the learning opportunity.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study involved gifted students at one rural school district in Arkansas. Participation in the leadership course (i.e., Team Lead) was voluntary. From a total high school (i.e., grades 9 – 12) population of approximately 480, 49 were receiving services in the program for the gifted. Of the 49 gifted students, 11 chose to participate in Team Lead. For the purposes of defining leadership and assessing leadership skills before and

after the project, The Leadership Skills Inventory (LSI) (Karnes & Chauvin, 2000) was used. The LSI identifies areas of strengths and weaknesses in leadership and can be re-administered to measure growth and improvement over time. It also measures nine relevant dimensions of leadership by presenting each dimension graphically in scale form on a profile sheet. These dimensions or categories are: Fundamentals of Leadership; Written Communication Skills; Speech Communication Skills; Character-Building Skills; Decision-Making Skills; Group Dynamic Skills; Problem-Solving Skills; Personal Skills; and Planning Skills.

The eleven gifted students answered the LSI as a pre-assessment of leadership skills in September. During the school year, those students participated in a variety of activities (i.e., assigned readings, lessons, and ropes training course activities) for one class period (i.e., approximately one hour) each week. This program, known as “Team Lead”, will be described in detail further in the text. At the end of the school year in May, students were re-administered the LSI as a post-assessment.

The results of the pre-assessment were as follows. Mean scores for each area were: Fundamentals of Leadership - 25; Written Communication Skills - 31; Speech Communication Skills – 38; Character-Building Skills – 44; Decision-Making Skills – 26; Group Dynamics – 49; Problem Solving – 15; Personal Skills – 56; Planning Skills – 44. Table I presents the mean scores of the pre-assessment for each of the dimensions for leadership. These scores are compared to the Ceiling Raw Scores (i.e., the highest score possible) on the LSI.

Table I – Pre-Assessment on the LSI Compared to the Ceiling Raw Score

Leadership LSI	Pre X	Ceiling			
Fundamentals of Leadership	25	27			
Written Communications	31	36			
Speech Communications	38	42			
Character-Building Skills	44	51			
Decision Making	26	30			
Group Dynamics	49	57			
Problem Solving	15	18			
Personal Skills	56	63			
Planning Skills	44	51			
n=11					

When a comparison is made between the mean scores on the pre-assessment and the ceiling scores, it becomes apparent that the Team Lead students scored exceptionally high in all nine dimensions of leadership according to the LSI before their participation in the Team Lead Program. In Fundamentals of Leadership, the eleven gifted students' mean score was only 2 points lower than the ceiling raw score. In Problem Solving Skills, the gifted groups' mean score was 3 points lower than the ceiling raw score. The Speech Communication and Decision Making Skills mean score for the group was 4 points lower than the ceiling score. The mean score for Written Communication Skills was 5 point lower than the ceiling raw score. The groups' mean score for Character-Building, Personal, and Planning Skills was 7 points lower than the ceiling raw score. The greatest difference in a mean score and the ceiling raw score was in the area of Group Dynamics where there was an 8 point difference.

After completing the pre-assessment, the eleven students met weekly for approximately 50 minutes. The first nine weeks students engaged in “book club” activities. A series of books were required for reading. For example, the first reading was The Power of Positive Thinking (Peale, 1956). Next, students read Total Self-Confidence (Anthony, 1979). Thirdly, students were required to read Personality Plus: How to Understand Others by Understanding Yourself (Littauer, 1997). Thus, the first readings focused on self-confidence and self-understanding through positive thinking. The next readings were centered around influencing others. Weeks four, five, and six, students read Winning People Over (Kaplan, 1996) and How to Win Friends & Influence People (Carnegie, 1981). Weeks seven, eight and nine, students read Gung Ho (Blanchard & Bowles, 1997), The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership (Maxwell, 1998), and Magic of Thinking Big (Schwartz, 1987). These final readings focused on accomplishments based upon leadership skills. Each week, for the first nine weeks, students met to discuss each of the readings. Students were asked to: “Describe the gist of the book; describe the book’s overall impact; describe any part of the book that influenced or changed your thinking; describe how the text could be applied to your daily events.”

The following nine weeks, a certified trainer of the “ropes course” came into the school once a week to engage students in trust-building and problem-solving activities. For example, students were divided into groups of two. One team member wore a blind-fold; the other did not. The instructor placed eggs on the floor all around the room. The team member without a blind-fold had to instruct the blinded member from one side of the room to the other without damaging any of the eggs. Following a series of six

sessions, the students were taken to the ropes training course to engage in a day-long session. It was convenient that the middle school facility of the school district contains a ropes course site.

During the following eighteen weeks, students participated in a variety of activities from the Leadership Development Program (Karnes & Chauvin, 2000). The manual presents instructional activities to help young people enhance their leadership potential in the nine leadership dimensions of the assessment instrument. Developed over the last seven years, the inventory and activities are geared toward upper elementary to secondary level students. The instructional materials, which accompany the manual, were used in this study. In order to make the student activities congruent to the assessment of leadership skills, they engaged in at least two lessons from each category of the Leadership Development Program (Karnes & Chauvin, 2000). Specifically, students performed tasks (i.e., 1.1; 1.2; 1.3, 1.6, and 1.7) in Fundamentals of Leadership. From the Written Communications category, students were engaged in five activities (i.e., 2.2; 2.3; 2.4; 2.5; and 2.7). To enhance Speech Communication, students participated in three activities (i.e., 3.1; 3.3; and 3.4). While participating in Character-Building Skills, students examined treating others fairly and understanding others feelings (i.e., activities 4.2 and 4.3). Activities, which focused on Decision-Making Skills, were basic and involved understanding decision-making and gather facts (i.e., 5.1 and 5.2). Group Dynamics and Problem Solving Skills were practiced during activities 6.1, 6.2, 7.1, and 7.2. Personal Skills and Planning Skills were demonstrated while students participated in activities 8.1, 8.3, 8.4, 8.5, 9.7, 9.9 9.12, 9.14, and 9.15.

In order to better understand the nature of these activities, an example is provided. To enhance Fundamentals of Leadership (i.e., activity 1.7), students brainstormed and listed various areas of society (e.g., medicine, government, education, etc.) where leadership exists; next, while participating in groups, the gifted students formulated titles of individuals that fit into each category. For Speech Communication Skills (i.e., activity 3.1), students were given newspaper articles and asked to summarize the article then deliver the summaries orally. In the realm of Personal Skills (i.e., activity 8.4), students were asked to list the biggest mistake they ever made. They described how the situation could have been handled. Questions were asked by the teacher: “Why is it important to make mistakes? Why is the ability to admit mistakes important to a leader?”

The final weeks of Team Lead involved students in the ropes training course. A certified trainer took the students to the course on a Saturday. Students walked the log, scaled the wall, and depended upon team members to solve problems and/or insure safety in several of the activities. At the completion of all the activities for Team Lead, the gifted students were re-administered the LSI. The following information and chart on Table II represent a comparison between the pre-assessment and the post-assessment scores in terms of the mean score for each category of the LSI.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Table II – Comparison of Mean Scores on the Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment

Leadership LSI	Pre X	Post X
Fundamentals of Leadership	25	26
Written Communications	31	34
Speech Communications	38	39
Character-Building Skills	44	49
Decision Making	26	29
Group Dynamics	49	53
Problem Solving	15	16
Personal Skills	56	60
Planning Skills	44	47
n=11		

The mean scores on the post assessment were: Fundamentals of Leadership – 26; Written Communication Skills – 34; Speech Communication Skills – 39; Character-Building Skills – 49; Decision-Making Skills – 29; Group Dynamic Skills – 53; Problem-Solving Skills – 16; Personal Skills – 60; Planning Skills – 47.

When comparing the pre-assessment to the post-assessment, Table II illustrates the gains made for each category of leadership according to the LSI ranging from 1 point to 4 points. In Fundamentals of Leadership the mean increased 1 point; Written Communications increased 3 points; Speech Communications increased 1 point; Character-Building increased 3 points. Group Dynamics increased 4 points; Problem Solving increased 1 point; Personal Skills increased 4 points; Planning Skills increased 3 points.

Table III provides another visual of the gains made from the pre to post-assessment by illustrating the difference in the pre-assessment mean scores, post-assessment mean scores, ceiling raw scores, and the highest mean scores performed by the norming Groups.

Table III – Comparison of Pre-Assessment, Post-Assessment, Ceiling Raw Scores & The Highest Mean Scores of the Normed Groups

Leadership LSI	Pre X	Post X	C	HSN X
<u>Fundamentals of Leadership</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>24</u>
<u>Written Communications</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>34</u>	<u>36</u>	<u>28</u>
<u>Speech Communications</u>	<u>38</u>	<u>39</u>	<u>42</u>	<u>30</u>
<u>Character-Building Skills</u>	<u>44</u>	<u>49</u>	<u>51</u>	<u>44</u>
<u>Decision Making</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>29</u>	<u>30</u>	<u>24</u>
<u>Group Dynamics</u>	<u>49</u>	<u>53</u>	<u>57</u>	<u>44</u>
<u>Problem Solving</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>13</u>
<u>Personal Skills</u>	<u>56</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>63</u>	<u>53</u>
<u>Planning Skills</u>	<u>44</u>	<u>47</u>	<u>51</u>	<u>39</u>
<u>N=11</u>				
C - Ceiling Raw Score				
HSN - Highest Scores of all Normed Groups				

Table III represents the leadership abilities of the Team Lead group at the beginning of this study compared to the group's post-assessment. Gains were made in every category as noted earlier. Comparisons are also made between the Team Lead group at the beginning of this study and the scores of the group used to norm the LSI. The small number of gifted students, which comprised Team Lead, scored the same or higher in every category on the pre-assessment compared to highest scores by the groups used to norm the assessment. For example, for Fundamentals of Leadership, the Team Lead group of this study scored one point higher than all the groups used to norm the assessment. The Team Lead students scored eight points higher in Speech

Communications on the pre-assessment than any groups used to norm the LSI.

Following the year-long program of leadership activities, the discrepancy between Team Lead scores and the groups used to norm the assessment were even greater.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the text, accompanied by visuals, it is apparent that: a) the gifted students of this study began the program with appreciable high leadership scores according to the LSI; and b) the gifted students of this study improved leadership scores from the beginning to the end of the program. Specifically, what effect did a leadership program have on the leadership skills of gifted kids from one school in Arkansas? Even though the mean scores of the pre-assessment were high compared to the groups used to norm the assessment, an increase from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment was noted in all nine dimensions of leadership according to the LSI. The participants of the study improved leadership skills in Fundamentals of Leadership (by 1 point), Written Communications (by 3 points), Speech Communications (by 1 point), Character-Building (by 5 points), Decision-Making (by 3 points), Group Dynamics (4 points), Problem-Solving (1 point), Personal Skills (4 points), and Planning Skills (3 points). It should be noted that the greatest gains were made in the realm of Character-Building skills. Scores in Group Dynamics and Personal Skills were also greatly improved. Almost all of the activities for Team Lead emphasized some form of the group decisions, group problem solving, or group discussions. Maybe, the required group experiences were in part the reason for the drastic increase in Character-Building and Group Dynamics. Other positive effects of Team Lead were noticed in strengthened friendships among the

participants. While friendship was not measured, nor is it an element of leadership, it was an added positive effect of the students' time together.

The results of this study may not be generalized to other populations since the group was small and members were not randomly selected. The quasi-experimental design used for this study was necessary due to the limited number of gifted students available and the voluntary basis of Team Lead. Thus, the author recommends that the study be replicated in perhaps other rural schools or in larger schools with larger programs for gifted students.

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