

Developing African-American Leaders in Today's Schools: Gifted Leadership, the Unfamiliar Dimension in Gifted Education

By Theresa Newsom

Establishing and nurturing the leadership qualities of an individual is the cornerstone of any successful endeavor. In the educational realm, these qualities are particularly important when educators as role models endeavor to establish these same qualities in students in a multicultural gifted and talented setting. Indeed, although the importance of nurturing leadership in children is paramount, in practice it often takes a back burner to other educational issues. Elizabeth Shaunessy and Frances A. Karnes noted that “in 1972, the federal definition of gifted and talented expanded to include leadership ability . . . [and] that if the gifted students in today’s schools are destined to be the leaders of tomorrow, then we must begin to consider leadership training as a major aim of programs for the gifted.”¹ Although this expanded definition seems to be very progressive for 1972, today’s schools do not fully utilize this aspect of leadership within their gifted and talented programs.² Therefore, establishing an educational program that utilizes culturally responsive leadership becomes a task of primary importance.

As a child of the 1960s, I grew up in California, not totally aware of the hardships that African Americans had been experiencing until 1968. On April 5, 1968, I sat in my mother’s kitchen reading the newspaper and was mesmerized by the numerous articles that gave accounts of the life and tragic assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I had never heard much about him until that fateful day when I pored over that newspaper, trying to take in every word and its meaning. A few days later, I remember watching his funeral procession on TV and wishing I could have been a part of this historic time when African Americans, guided by the gifted leadership of Dr. King, brought the plight of African Americans to the forefront of American consciousness. I learned more about gifted leadership over the years by reading the biographies of Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, and more recently, President Barack Obama. These are just a few African Americans who have used their leadership skills while taking action to improve the lives of others during difficult times in American history.



How do we develop this type of leadership in our youth, when so many are disillusioned by a society that has labeled them as “Generation X” or the “Entitlement Generation?” As educators, we can use the classroom as a vehicle to provide instruction that allows our children to reach their fullest potential academically, emotionally, and socially. This includes giving students opportunities to learn how to lead and complete projects that give them success and build upon their leadership skills while learning about their capabilities and interests.

As a young girl, I participated in the “Brownies”(a division within the Girl Scout organization), the school band, sports, and the church choir. By developing leadership skills through these and other widely offered opportunities, starting in the primary grades, educators can build upon these attributes, first identified by Frances Karnes and Suzanne Bean, which are often already evident in young students:

- The desire to be challenged.
- The ability to solve problems creatively.
- The ability to reason critically.
- The ability to see new relationships.
- Facility of verbal expression.
- Flexibility in thought and action.
- The ability to tolerate ambiguity.
- The ability to motivate others.³

In 2004, Amy Bisland, Frances A. Karnes, and Yolanda Baker Cobb developed strategies designed to enhance the development of leadership qualities in children:

Another strategy is to introduce leadership skills through the use of biographies. By reading about current and past leaders, students are able to determine common traits that contributed to the effectiveness of accomplished individuals so that they emulate those traits in their own lives. In choosing biographies, it is important to include individuals of all races because there is a need for people with intelligence, creativity, and critical judgment in decision making in all cultures. Teachers should also include individuals of all ages so that students may be inspired to see themselves as leaders regardless of age.⁴

Also, utilizing a strategy identified by Bisland et al., educators should ask students to select a person in a field that interests them who demonstrates successful leadership (i.e. Benjamin Banneker in math/science). Bisland et al. recommend that “each student should then be encouraged to develop a product to demonstrate the knowledge learned. A few examples of products are a mobile, Web site, essay, diorama, or display.”⁵ Through these strategies, students are able to see and share the results of their activities with the class, thus providing an even greater learning opportunity.

Another approach for instruction is “Investigative Leadership.” This approach encourages students to seek out people who demonstrate gifted leadership traits in their field. Developed by Frances A. Karnes and Suzanne Bean, “Investigative Leadership” enables students to learn about positions in a school, community, or religious institution that they may be interested in holding in the future.

Gifted leadership is a dimension that allows students to develop their potential and impacts many lives locally, nationally, and globally, as mentioned in the biographies of gifted leaders. All too often, giftedness focuses on test scores, academic performance, and IQ. Gifted leadership is another way of identifying children, their influence, and the giftedness they possess inside and outside of the classroom. In writing this article and lesson plan, my goal is to ensure that educators include gifted leadership as one of the essential dimensions of establishing a culturally responsive curriculum in the classroom. When gifted leadership, an important component of gifted education, is not fully developed, the potential of impacting our world in positive ways could be left underdeveloped.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Shaunessy and Frances A. Karnes, “Instruments for Measuring Leadership in Children and Youth,” *Gifted Child Today* 27, no. 1 (2004): 42-47.
2. Ibid.
3. Amy Bisland, Frances A. Karnes, and Yolanda Baker Cobb, “Leadership Education: Resources and Web Sites for Teachers of Gifted Students,” *Gifted Child Today* 27, no. 1 (2004): 50-57.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

Teacher Resources

1. D. Adler, *A Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holiday House, 1989).
2. *The Black List: Intimate Portraits of Black Americans*, dir. Timothy Greenfield-Sanders with interviews by Elvis Mitchell, HBO (DVD), 2009.
3. *CNN Presents: Black in America*, with Soledad O’Brien, CNN (DVD), 2008.
4. Ilene Cooper, *Up Close: Oprah Winfrey* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).
5. Marian Wright Edelman, *Lanterns: A Memoir of Mentors* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).
6. Farmer’s Insurance Group, *Freedom’s Song: 100 Years of African American Struggle and Triumph* (Los Angeles: Farmer’s Insurance Group, 2006).
7. John Hope Franklin and August Meier, eds., *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).
8. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *African American Lives* (DVD), Alexandria: PBS Home Video, 2006.
9. *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story*, dir. Thomas Carter, Perf. Cuba Gooding, Jr., Kimberly Elise, TNT, 2009, film.
10. Oren Harari, *The Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002).
11. Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley* (New York: Ballantine, 1987).
12. Michael Jackson, *Dancing the Dream: Poems and Reflections* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).



- 13. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006).
- 14. Barack Obama, *Dreams from my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (Three Rivers Press, 2004).
- 15. Faith Ringgold, *If a Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks* (Riverside, NJ: Simon & Schuster, 1991).
- 16. D. Sterling, *Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman* (New York: Scholastic, 1987).



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Lesson Plan

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Connections to Elementary/Secondary Students

Students' leadership skills are not normally addressed in academic settings. This lesson provides students with opportunities to identify their gifted leadership characteristics by creating a project that enhances their skills while making a connection with the school and/or the community.

Goals

- Students will gain knowledge of the significant contributions of African American leaders who used their leadership skills to pursue a goal within the historical, social, and cultural contexts of American history.
- Students will examine the contributions made by each leader, from a historical perspective, and discuss the impact each made on society during his/her lifetime as a gifted leader.
- Students will demonstrate their leadership skills by creating and implementing a project and presentation for the class, school, or community.

Objectives:

Students will be able to create and present a project, using their leadership skills, after they have researched gifted African American leaders, their leadership characteristics, and contributions made in American history.

National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards:

Culture and Cultural Diversity

- Assist learners to apply understanding of culture as an integrated whole that explains the functions and interactions of language, literature, the arts, traditions, beliefs and values, and behavior patterns.

Activity

1. Begin by activating students' prior knowledge of leadership by having them complete the leadership questionnaire. (For example, see Activity 1 worksheet)
2. Using the Cornell note system (http://lsc.sas.cornell.edu/Sidebars/Study_Skills_Resources/cornellsystem.pdf), students are to list these characteristics for leadership and give examples. (For example, see Activity 2, graphic organizer.)
3. Begin by activating students' prior knowledge of famous African Americans in history who demonstrated leadership by brainstorming African-American leaders. This includes discussing their contributions to society, the roles they played, and the outcomes of their contributions. Information will be included in students' Cornell notes. (For example, see Activity 3, Cornell note-taking.)
4. The teacher selects two short biographies to read aloud to the class to further the discussion of leadership characteristics and contributions from a historical perspective with relevancy to today's world (try online at <http://www.multiculturalchildrenslit.com/>).

5. Students select an African American gifted leader of their choice to research and examine his/her leadership style, attributes, and relevancy to the world today.
6. Students report to the class their findings about their person, their leadership characteristics and style, and how the connection they made with their figure impacted them.
7. Students create an investigative report, blog, video, song, rap, etc., that highlights their leadership skills, making the connection of relevancy to their school, neighborhood, and/or community. Students share with the class, parents, and/or school.
8. Students write a four-paragraph essay on what leadership characteristics they have in common with their chosen leaders and how they see themselves putting those talents to use now and in the future.
 - Paragraph one – intro/general discussion – ending with a thesis statement on the chosen leader and the student’s connection
 - Paragraph two – details about what the student has in common with this leader
 - Paragraph three – how the student plans to use these gifts/talents now and in the future
 - Paragraph four – conclusion beginning with a specific rewording of the thesis statement and ending with general discussion

Activity 1 - Leadership Questionnaire Worksheet

- Define leadership in your own words.
- Describe what leadership looks like, feels like, and sounds like.
- How do leaders use their unique/special characteristics to show leadership with your peers?
- Give an example of someone who exhibits leadership behaviors. Where was this done?
- Tell about a time you used leadership skills. Where was it done?

Activity 2 – Graphic Organizer Describing Leadership

Leadership Skills	Definition
Communication	exchange of ideas
Organization	orderliness
Strategize	direct, plan

Activity 3 – Cornell Note-Taking

African-American Leader	Leadership Skills or Characteristics
1. Martin L. King Jr.	communicator, organizer, strategist

Assessment

- Students will give an oral report or demonstrate the project they created (in Activity 7 above) related to the African American leader they researched, including information about their gifted leadership characteristics, the contributions made during the historical period, and their impact today.
- Students will complete an individual or group project, model, or investigative report to share with the class during the unit of study.