



Young Leaders: Growing Through Mentoring

by **Sandra Manning**

Hey, you got it!” Caitlyn exclaimed as Leisha identified the letter B on a flash card.

Caitlyn is a 2nd-grade student in a gifted and talented program. Leisha is a kindergarten student. Both girls are part of a cross-age mentoring experience that Caitlyn’s teacher implemented with the help of a kindergarten teacher in the same school.

Motivated by a graduate course in gifted education, Caitlyn’s teacher decided to include a leadership skill component in the general education classroom for her gifted and talented students. She designed and initiated a

cross-age mentoring program in which gifted students were paired with at-risk kindergarten students for weekly tutoring and mentoring meetings.

This article describes a model for implementing a cross-age mentoring strategy such as the one described above. The goal of this strategy is to provide leadership enhancement opportunities for gifted learners in the general or gifted education classroom. This article also offers a brief review of the literature on leadership and mentoring as they relate to gifted and talented students.

Leadership

Federal definitions of gifted and talented have consistently made reference to the potential for leadership ability among the gifted student population (Stephens & Karnes, 2000). The definition found in the U.S. Department of Education’s (1993) report *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent* specifically states that these students possess the “potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment,” (p. 26) and it includes leadership “capacity” as an area where

that potential may be evident. Similarly, the federal definition established by the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act (1988) makes reference to leadership ability among gifted and talented students. Both of these definitions state that, in order for these abilities to be developed, there is a need for educational services outside the realm of those normally offered by the schools.

Given that the potential for leadership ability is one quality of some gifted and talented students, how can teachers incorporate leadership training into the school day for these learners? A look at the concept of leadership may provide direction. Karnes and Bean (1996) reported differing views among theorists regarding leadership acquisition. Some see leadership skill as an in-born trait, while others view it as a quality emerging in the midst of demanding situations. However, areas of agreement suggest that leadership skills can be enhanced through experience (Karnes & Stephens, 1999). Individual traits indicative of leadership are good communication and motivational skills (Barr & Barr, 1989), the ability to work with a group to reach a common goal (Clark & Clark, 1994), and the possession of persuasive power (Gardner, 1990).

An examination of the characteristics of cognitive and affective functioning (see Table 1) in intellectually gifted individuals reveals why some of these students in particular possess a proclivity for leadership skill development. Cognitive characteristic traits include a preference for complex and challenging work, high energy levels and motivation, accelerated language development, and the ability to generate ideas and solutions to problems (Clark, 2001; Karnes & Bean, 1990). The characteristics of affective functioning

in gifted learners include flexibility, sensitivity to the feelings of others, independence in thought and action, and the ability to get along with a variety of people (Sliverman, n.d.). These traits are important precursors to leadership skill development.

A clear connection emerges when comparing the cognitive and affective characteristics of gifted students to the leadership traits mentioned. For instance, if communication and motivation are keys to effective leadership (Barr & Barr, 1989), then gifted students' advanced language skills, persistence, and flexible thought processes can be enhanced through leadership training. If, as Clark and Clark (1994) have stated, leadership includes groups working together to reach a common goal, then intellectually gifted students' ability to get along with others may be a key element in developing leadership. Regardless of whether one views leadership as an in-born trait or a skill to be learned, intellectually gifted students' independence, problem-solving abilities, and preference for challenging work can serve them well in leadership training situations.

Children and youth with leadership potential must be equipped to take on leadership roles in society. The National Association for Gifted Children's (1998) Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Program Standards recommend providing differentiated services aligned with the unique characteristics of gifted learners. Since some gifted learners' natural abilities appear to be conducive to leadership skill development, it makes sense to offer them leadership training opportunities beginning early in their school careers. Providing learning experiences to help them become effective leaders can benefit not only the gifted students themselves, but

their families, classrooms, schools, and communities. Teachers can create these learning situations, and mentoring may be one option for challenging gifted student to lead others while developing their own natural abilities.

Mentoring

Mentoring refers to the well-established tradition of an experienced person taking on an inexperienced person, or protégé, for teaching and training in a chosen field. Mentoring is used to help students become more knowledgeable of career possibilities or to learn content traditional schooling cannot provide (Minneham & Struck, 1992; Reilly, 1994). The most common use of mentoring places the student in the role of mentee with an older, more experienced mentor (Nash, Haensly, Scobee Rodgers, & Wright, 1993). Mentoring is a teaching-learning relationship founded on the idea that one person can help another person reach a life goal or develop personal potential (Goff & Torrance, 1999; Weiner, 1992).

The successful mentor serves as a leader to his or her protégé. The characteristics of a successful mentor include eagerness, creativity, sensitivity to the developmental needs of the mentee, good communication and problem-solving skills, flexibility, and high academic ability (Batten & Rogers, 1993; Clasen & Clasen, 1997). Through the mentoring relationship, the mentor shares information, provides regular feedback, challenges the mentee with responsibility, and is an expert teacher, guide, and supportive role model (Clark, 1995; Clasen & Clasen; Reilly, 1994). Interestingly, many of the characteristics found in successful mentors are exhibited by gifted students, such as sensitivity to others and

the ability to generate solutions to problems.

Wright and Borland (1992) and Coenen (2002) reported on two respective programs that engage gifted students as mentors or leaders in their schools and communities: Project Synergy and Homework Helpers. Project Synergy (Wright & Borland) originated as a research and development project of the Leta Stetter Hollingworth Center for the Study and Education of the Gifted at Teachers College, Columbia University. The project brought together disadvantaged kindergarten students with gifted middle-school students who also came from disadvantaged backgrounds. The younger students were identified as potentially gifted, but with little possibility of entering gifted programs apart from intervention. The overall goal of the project was to help the potentially gifted kindergarten students acquire the basic social behaviors that more advantaged students possess prior to entering school. In the process, gifted middle school students participated in leadership-development activities to enhance their own skill in this area.

Similarly, Coenen (2002) reported on Homework Helpers, a program that employed gifted and talented students as peer-tutors. Implemented in a middle school to provide after-school tutoring help to interested students, the program developers decided to use volunteers from the school's gifted and talented program to give general education students individualized support in homework and organization skills. Based on peer-tutoring research suggesting academic and social gains for both the tutor and tutee, the school trained gifted students in teaching and tutoring strategies. In addition to being identified as gifted by school

Table 1

Characteristics of Leadership Potential in Gifted Youth

Cognitive Functioning	Affective Functioning
High energy levels and motivation	Flexibility
Persistence	Sensitivity to the feelings of others
Processes and retains vast amounts of information	Likes to be in charge
Able to sequence tasks to complete a goal	Gets along with a variety of people
Preference for complex and challenging work	Heightened self-awareness
Accelerated language development	High expectations of self and others

Note. Compiled from Clark, 2001; Karnes & Bean, 1990; Silverman 2004.

district policy, the tutors were also screened for other qualities. Among these was leadership ability. This qualification was consistent with the program goal to “augment existing leadership skill and qualities” of gifted students (Coenen, p. 55).

In both of these examples, gifted and talented students became helpers and guides for other school-aged students in both social and academic skill development. In order to combine the potential for leadership development in gifted and talented students and the characteristics they share with effective mentors, I implemented a cross-age mentoring strategy in my school. The goal of this strategy was to give gifted learners and those exhibiting leadership potential an opportunity to develop leadership skills through mentoring other students in the learning community. While Robinson (1990) cautioned against using gifted and talented students as junior teachers in the classroom, the reader should note this mentoring strategy provides age-appropriate opportunities for the development of leadership skills based on strengthening the character-

istics common to many gifted and talented students. Likewise, opportunities for leadership skill advancement are presented to the students on a choice-basis—participation is strictly voluntary

Cross-Age Mentoring Strategy

A strategy for leadership skill development is suggested to differentiate the curriculum for gifted and talented students and help meet the needs of younger at-risk learners through cross-age mentoring. The structure of the strategy is based on reports from Clasen and Clasen (1997) and Coenen (2002). The steps I took in implementing the cross-age mentoring strategy are explained in detail below.

1. *Collaborate with other educators.* At the outset, all parties involved—gifted and general education teachers, administrators, parents, and students—should be provided with an overview of the strategy to help ensure its successful implementation. Teachers should meet with school administrators to explain the approach and its benefits to both the

gifted and general education students. With approval, explanatory letters can be distributed to other school personnel and parents asking for their input. Responses can be studied to guide further planning. A meeting of interested teachers might be organized to develop the optimal use of the strategy in individual school settings.

My implementation of this strategy involved gifted 2nd-grade students mentoring at-risk kindergarten students in reading, phonics, and social skills. Planning included informal meetings with a kindergarten teacher to identify students in her classroom who might benefit from working one-on-one with gifted students from my general education classroom. When students were identified, the kindergarten teacher gave me a brief overview of suggested skill areas my gifted students might focus on during tutoring sessions.

2. *Enlist potential mentors.* Gifted students in the general classroom or gifted education classroom and others students exhibiting leadership potential may be approached about the project. Depending on the extent of the strategy's planned implementation, students could be recruited through a general announcement and explanation of the project, or they could be recruited informally in individual classrooms. A unit of study focusing on leadership with gifted learners might be used as a springboard for the project. Conversely, leadership skills could be integrated into a social studies unit in the general education classroom, with the strategy being used as a culminating activity for practical application.

3. *Match mentoring pairs.* To ensure the success of the strategy, gifted students are chosen based on interest, parent and teacher approval, and maturity levels. In my case, the

Steps in Implementing Cross-Age Mentoring Strategy

1. Collaborate with other educators.
2. Enlist potential mentors.
3. Match mentoring pairs.
4. Provide training and determine a work plan.
5. Plan for regular feedback.
6. Generate a final product.
7. Evaluation.

selection process was enhanced through collaboration with the kindergarten teacher. Our collective knowledge of the students selected as both mentors and mentees was invaluable to us in matching tutoring pairs. Personalities, learning styles, gender, behavioral characteristics, and other needs were discussed in depth to make the best possible match. Provisions should be made for handling problem matches, as well. Coenen (2002) advised that supervising teachers should monitor tutoring situations closely to provide guidance and encouragement as needed.

4. *Provide training and determine a work plan.* The implementing teacher should be responsible for meeting with the chosen mentors and explaining the details of the project to them. He or she will act as the facilitator during tutoring sessions. The following list is a summary of the points I covered in my implementation of the strategy with gifted student mentors.

- Each student mentor will work with one kindergarten student for 1 hour per week beginning in October and ending in April. Meeting times will be determined by the facilitating teacher, the kindergarten teacher, and the schedules of students involved.
- Activities will be supervised by the facilitating teacher at first, then shared with the kindergarten teacher and her teaching assistant.
- Activities will be flexible and may include reading aloud to the kindergarten student, writing stories, talking together, playing learning games, and addressing other areas of student need as determined by the facilitating and kindergarten teachers.
- Mentors create a lesson plan to guide their interactions during the tutoring experiences (see Figure 1). Note that students should be given guidance questions and statements on the lesson plan sheet to guide their planning time.
- Mentors are required to keep a journal of their mentoring experiences, which will be read weekly by the facilitating teacher. To facilitate focused reflection, I guided the mentors in a brainstorming session to generate a list of leadership questions to be considered as weekly journals were written. These included "How did I help my mentee today?" "What kinds of activities does my mentee like to do in our tutoring time?" "What good things happened during our time today? Bad things?" "What can I do differently next time to best help my mentee?" and "How did I let my mentee know he or she was doing well in our tutoring session?"

	My Plan	What Happened	Materials Needed
Objectives (What do you want your student to learn today?)			
Information (What will you say or do during your mentoring time to help your student learn the objectives?)			
Activity (What kind of game or lesson activity will you do together?)			
Evaluation (How will you check to see if your student has learned the objectives?)			
Summary (Make notes for your next tutoring session.)			

Figure 1
Cross-Age Mentoring Session Plan Sheet

5. *Plan for regular feedback.* To ensure the quality of the experience, the facilitating teacher may use individual conferences with mentors, informal meetings with teachers, and oral or written feedback from the parents of the mentors and the mentees. Asking direct questions about the tutoring sessions and listening to student interactions during the session is vital for the facilitating teacher to gauge the progress being made by both the mentors in their leadership development and mentees in their academic and social skill development.

I kept an anecdotal journal of the strategy, recording statements made by the mentors in individual conferences and group meetings and mentor/mentee exchanges. I pursued negative statements to determine the cause and correct any problems associated with them in a timely fashion.

In my experience with this teach-

ing strategy, gifted 2nd-grade students were eager to pursue tutoring their kindergarten protégés. However, record-keeping and planning with children this age was problematic. As mentioned, a lesson plan outline was given and thoroughly explained to the mentors. There were instances, however, when the facilitating teacher's schedule did not permit timely review and feedback of the mentors' notes. This, in turn, revealed the need for more detailed training of the gifted student mentors to keep thorough and detailed notes regarding mentoring activities to increase their levels of self-direction. It is suggested that teachers planning to implement the strategy take the time necessary to train the mentors thoroughly for their task and insist that lesson plans and journals be completed at the earliest time possible following a tutoring session.

6. *Generate a final product.* At the end of the mentoring project, gifted student mentors present their completed journals along with an essay of their feelings, reactions, and thoughts about the experience to the facilitating teacher. If possible, a fun and informal gathering of mentors and mentees along with family members can be arranged at the end of the school year. In my case, kindergarten mentees were invited to a year-end party in our 2nd-grade classroom, which provided an opportunity for both mentors and mentees to report their activities to a larger audience and share their feelings about the experience. Mentor essays were read to the group, and individuals were invited to ask questions of both the mentors and mentees about the experience.

7. *Evaluation.* A final step in the implementation of this strategy is evaluation. The mentors' journals

and essays may be evaluated by the facilitating teacher for ideas on improving the project for future implementation. Individual conferences with mentors, informal meetings with teachers, and oral or written feedback from the parents of the mentors and the mentees can be used to determine the value of the experience. Positive statements about the experience, gains the kindergarten teachers see in their low-achieving students, and heightened levels of self-esteem in both the mentors and mentees may indicate success. If a more formal assessment of leadership in gifted students is desired, instruments for teacher and self-assessment can be used (see Shaunnessy & Karnes, 2004, for information on many commercially available assessment instruments).

In my implementation of the strategy, the kindergarten teacher used informal observations and phonics skills assessments to monitor the kindergarten students' academic gains. Gains in leadership skills were assessed informally through student conferences and observation during the tutoring sessions. This method of ongoing assessment was helpful in keeping the strategy moving forward and understanding my students' needs and concerns related to the experience.

Observations

The following excerpts taken from anecdotal records highlight the positive impact the strategy had on developing the leadership skills of my gifted students. Insight and observation are applied to each one to give the reader a more informed view of the value of the strategy as a means of helping both gifted and general education students.

- *"Is it time to tutor?" "Can I ask the kindergarten teacher if we can tutor early?"* Gifted student mentors were eager to begin their tutoring sessions each week and were disappointed when larger school functions prevented or curtailed time with their mentees. This indicated that students were taking the mentoring responsibility seriously and embracing their leadership roles.
- *"I'm going over the letter B with him again today. I don't think he's got it."* Gifted students developed sensitivity toward their mentees. They progressed from the novelty of the experience for themselves to the benefit of the learning relationship for their mentee.
- *"Can I use the counting bears in my tutoring time?"* Gifted students began to monitor the progress of their mentees, develop meaningful goals for instructional time, and integrate their own instructional materials into the tutoring sessions.
- *"She likes to play moving games."* My gifted students began to notice the individual learning styles of their mentees and incorporate variety into their sessions to meet student needs.
- *"I'm going to make a list of all the ABC's and mark off the ones she knows."* The need to assess the knowledge of their mentees became important to some of my gifted students. I perceived this as a positive step toward their seeking to understand their mentees and developing self-direction in planning activities to meet the needs of the kindergarten students.
- *"Tutoring is fun."* The novelty of the experience was motivating for both the mentors and mentees.

Going deeper, however, a learning relationship was forged between the 2nd-grade mentors and kindergarten mentees. While one has to remember that growth in young children is not always immediately apparent (Wright & Borland, 1992), the potential for growth in self-esteem for both the mentors and mentees is great. Even though outcomes were measured informally, the positive interactions between the students were well worth the time and effort needed to implement the strategy.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this teaching strategy was to aid in the development of leadership skills in gifted and talented students. While much research has been done on the effects of peer tutoring in a variety of instructional settings (King-Sears & Bradley, 1995; Maheady, Sacca, & Harper, 1988; Mathes, Fuchs, Fuchs, Henley, & Sanders, 1994; Topping, 1989), little has been uncovered on the effects tutoring relationships can have on leadership development in gifted and talented students. The informal evidence gathered using the cross-age mentoring strategy revealed the development of dispositions important to strong leadership. Teaching and learning relationships grew as the gifted students engaged meaningfully with their mentees. Decision making, sensitivity to individual needs, problem solving, and planning skills were all evident in the guidance gifted student mentors gave their kindergarten mentees.

Future research in this area should focus on formal assessments of gifted students' gains in leadership skills and the development of a standardized method of implementing the strategy.

More attention could also be placed on assessing the academic and social growth of the mentored students. The potential for building learning collaborations between gifted and general classroom educators and their students, bringing to light the unique needs of gifted learners, and creating an enriching schoolwide learning community through this type of cross-age mentoring strategy warrants further investigation. [GCT](#)

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