

香 港 資 優 教 育 學 院
The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

Article

LEADERSHIP

The number of domains in which a young person may exhibit above average ability is difficult to count, and not all areas can be described and synthesised in this website. However, an important segment of the literature on gifted behaviours deals with young people's leadership abilities. Every school has particular kids who seem especially attuned to ways to improve some aspect of life around them, and the energy to put their concerns and ideas into practice. Think of young people who start school recycling programmes, who create and build community playgrounds for the physically disabled, who find ways of distributing blankets to the homeless during the cold months of the year. Think too of pupils who start publications or student groups, who get involved in political campaigns, who organise and lead artistic productions. These are important inclinations for schools to cultivate, gifts that help to improve communities and lives long after the last examination papers have found their way to the dustbin.

Researchers have been intrigued since the 1920s by evidence of advanced development of moral reasoning in some pupils. This may be reflected in, for example, a passionate concern for ethical and moral issues, a deep interest in questions of human origins and destiny, or a mature sense of wonder about humanity's relationship to God. Sometimes pupils may take ethical and moral dilemmas in the world so much to heart that they have difficulty letting go; their sensitivity actually proves debilitating for their other work in school. More productively, their concerns may be reflected in their idealism and desire to have an impact on some problem they see. At no point in school are pupils too young to engage constructively with some issues that transcend their own immediate interests. Indeed, teachers may facilitate their inclination to do so by providing opportunities for volunteering and service learning.

Many studies of gifted individuals emphasise that taking the lead on a project, especially one that bumps up against someone's established interests (as so many do) requires courage. People who think in terms of transforming current realities tend to make independent judgments, imagine building new structures, question established norms and assumptions, and ask "Why?" a lot. When bright thinkers apply their inquisitiveness to social realities and social welfare, they take certain risks of alienating the powerful or the established. Adolescents looking to improve their communities often find that their ideas are well supported by some but quite unpopular with others. This is a valuable lesson in the challenges of leadership, and should not be a reason to discourage pupils from making something of their ideas. It will cause them to refine their thinking and learn to defend their beliefs and actions!

If anything, it seems that the energy, creativity, and idealism of young people is under-used in schools. In the course of an education, there are few experiences to rival the personal satisfaction and interdisciplinary learning gained by solving real problems in the real world (including but not limited to the world of school), and feeling that others' lives have been improved by such efforts. Teachers are very important in helping students find opportunities to develop their own projects--things that make their eyes light up and may sustain their attention over a long period of time. (When given the proper support, many pupils initiate projects that absorb them for several years!) Seeing a project to completion, whether it involves helping to preserve an endangered species or helping to found a museum, brings a rich sense of ownership to pupils. It encourages them to seek out other areas where they may make a difference.

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Some schools have taken the approach of forming clusters where pupils work on projects of shared interest in regular classroom time. For more information on this approach, read about the Schoolwide Enrichment Model. Others have cultivated leadership skills through mentoring arrangements, such as linking pupils with community leaders in television, newspapers, corporations, performing arts associations, courts and law enforcement agencies, government offices, and financial institutions. Students assist the leaders over the course of a set time period, then come back together to analyse and reflect upon theories of organisation, techniques for decision-making and problem-solving, and where their own interests might lie.



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