

Is It Elitist To Recognize Unique Abilities To Lead Among Students?

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American schools in general are not leader friendly. One of the main reasons is that they assume a value of equality that can work contrary to leadership development. The fear is that in recognizing those with higher aptitude, we create an elitist situation where others are left out. Obviously, this is a bigger issue when dealing with preteens versus high schoolers who are familiar with AP classes and varsity athletic programs. This is unfortunate for young leaders.

Leadership needs to be defined more narrowly. One reason for the angst in this area is leadership has become a very valuable commodity that sells programs, books, and jobs. “Don’t tell me I’m not a leader. I have value.” We’ve confused self-worth with leading. In the 700 books I own on the topic, less than 5% even attempt to define the concept. At KidLead, we define leadership as the *process of getting people to work together to accomplish what they could not as individuals*. Leaders get leadership going. We distinguish it from confidence, personal responsibility, good citizenship, self-esteem, and character. When you define it more narrowly, you realize that not everyone is going to be the same in this category.

Recognizing capacity is not elitist. Harvard professor Howard Gardner introduced the idea of multiple intelligences. Leadership is a domain within interpersonal intelligence. Common sense tells us that we all have unique talents, gifts, and capacities, as does the positive psychology movement and research conducted by Gallup, *et al.* We’re more effective when maximizing our strengths than when striving to improve our weaknesses. Most who work with children will tell you that a few just naturally seem to be the influencers, whether in preschool, the playground, or athletic teams. In KidLead, we’ve learned how to identify leadership aptitude, literally the ability to learn how to lead. We have a numerical assessment tool adults complete on kids. Since leadership development of kids is a new field, it may help to think of it as more like Gifted and Talented programs in schools that use metrics to establish kids with different academic capacities, or club sports programs where tryouts identify those with greater athletic abilities.

Equality as a value is great, but can be taken too far. I met with Stanford professor, Dr. Bill Damon, who is also the director of the Center on Adolescence. He said, “America is perhaps the only country where equality is valued so highly. We do not realize how these assumptions impact the educational system, often to the detriment of students who have special capacities. This

is also true of young leaders.” When we overlook the idea that some kids have larger capacities in certain areas, we fail to develop them to their full potential.

Research does not support the idea that everyone can become a leader. Having a doctorate in the field of leadership in addition to reading countless books and articles on the subject, I’ve yet to see any hard evidence to suggest that everyone can learn how to lead—depending on how you define it, of course. They *learn* about leadership, but we all know that knowledge and skill are two different matters. I concur that everyone would benefit from understanding how leadership functions and its various roles in social processes. Our prototyping of executive-caliber training for preteens reflects the same conclusion that when selection is haphazard and not based on measurable aptitude, results are lackluster and frustrating.

The bottom line is that there are no wrong kids, but KidLead is not the right program for everyone. Our research and practice continue to show that students with a leadership aptitude of under 3.0 (on a 5.0 scale) do not significantly benefit from concentrated leadership training and may find it boring, intimidating, and unappealing—ultimately frustrating those with higher aptitude they are trying to lead.

The goal is inclusivity more than exclusivity. We want to get those in the program who are most apt to benefit from it, which tends to be the 10-25% with the highest aptitude assessment, depending on the given group. That is why our training programs are not encouraged as “y’all come” and to get as many as possible into them. These are not like AYSO and YMCA sports programs where everyone gets a trophy for participating. We all know parents who think their kid is the next David Beckham or Ken Griffey Jr., but healthy child development also requires parent reality checks. The commonality of kids is that they are not all the same—when we treat them that way, we do them a disservice.

Someone said, “A child is a book to be read, not to be written.” Our job as adults is to help identify the capacities of kids and then assist them in developing more fully. The same is true in every area of life, including leadership.

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