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INFUSING LEADERSHIP SKILLS IN STUDENTS THROUGH PROSE AND POETRY

J.MICHAEL PREETHAM

Lecturer in English

St Mary's College, Yousufguda, Hyderabad.



J.MICHAEL PREETHAM

ABSTRACT

The world is looking for leaders with a vision and also ones who could make decisions which could have tremendous impact on human race. At a time when the term leadership has acquired various connotations, it is imperative for us to look around our close vicinity for constructive ways and means to nurture individuals into effective future leaders in every sphere. Educators have to play an important role to enable students to take the right steps in this regard. With very few role models among the present generation to be emulated, it is of paramount importance for students to look into the annals of prose and poetry for the much needed inspiration to help them in this journey of acquiring leadership skills. With scores of works of prose and poetry-both from the past and present- at their disposal, all it needs is a concerted effort from the teaching fraternity-especially teachers of English, to guide the young minds to read works of prose and poetry, which could prepare them for the future. My paper would dwell on what type of works could be prescribed to the students and how teachers could contribute to help the students to benefit from reading works of Literature. It would also throw some light on methods which could be employed to teach these literary works, so that the ultimate goal of enabling the reader to gather and harness some leadership cues and merits, is achieved. This would hold the students in good stead, in whatever sphere of their life, they aspire to lead.

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership skills or entrepreneurial skills need to be honed in students at a young age. The focus is always on some form of training which could bring about a sudden transformation in the life of a student. This sort of opinion has only led to more and more trainers emerging –some who claim to have the magic mantra to transform people into leaders in just a few days or maybe hours. This false notion among the employers, educationists or owners of educational institutions has done too little to prepare future leaders. It has also influenced the teaching fraternity to accept this ‘myth’ and presume that it is not a part of their job profile to train students, but to complete the syllabus assigned and just leave the training part to ‘professionals’ who are godsend to train and nurture future leaders.

BACKGROUND

The background for the paper is based on an introspection of the following attributes which are expected from a good leader. The Management Advisory Service, UK, in its website, lists the following attributes which a good leader should possess.

- A good leader has the ability of the **ethical person** to shine through to leadership
- A good leader has the ability to demonstrate the **skills, knowledge and experience** to undertake the tasks expected from him/her, both in terms of the job that is required to be completed, but with respect to his/her contribution the wider organisation
- A good leader adopts a leadership style that lends itself to ethical considerations, for example **transformational and adaptive styles** – both of which engage followers in the decision making processes
- A good leader has the motivation to **prevent harm** to anyone
- A good leader ensures a **safe place** of work for staff
- A good leader has **respect** for the law and regulations
- A good leader maintains and **develops skills**, knowledge and experience in themselves and others
- A good leader is **objective, fair and reasonable**
- A good leader takes **responsibility** for his own as well as others actions
- A good leader acts with **conviction**
- A good leader provides **clear direction**
- A good leader **communicates** effectively
- A good leader discharges of a **Duty of Care** to customers, clients and staff

The words and phrases in bold give a clear indication of the traits of an effective leader. It is very clear that the above mentioned traits can in no way become a part of someone's personality just by attending a few sessions on leadership or by reading a book on leadership of a well-known leadership Guru. Rather, these are skills which sometimes take an entire lifetime to gain. ASCA's study (as cited in Leadership Skills through Peer Mentoring: Small Group intervention for Fifth Grade Students to Support Positive Social Integration, 2013) says that the three developmental domains include students gaining attitudes, knowledge and skills that contribute academically to effective learning in school and across the life span, career related to attaining self knowledge and decision making skills, and personal/social to help students understand and respect themselves and others. If we were to go by this statement by American School Counsellor Association, it is imperative that certain characteristics of leadership should be identified right at the school level and then honed.

Aladag and Tezer's research (as cited in Leadership Skills through Peer Mentoring: Small Group intervention for Fifth Grade Students to Support Positive Social Integration, 2013) states that helping students acquire and identify personal attributes can help personal development through supporting positive self-esteem, self-acceptance, and self-growth. This further lays emphasis on the importance of help by a teacher to develop individuals into great leaders. A famous quote by Alexander the great goes like this, 'I am indebted to my father for living, but to my teacher for living well'. It is more of an ethical decision of a teacher to take up this self-induced role to become mentors to shape future leaders.

In Kaplan's study (as cited in Leadership Skills through Peer Mentoring: Small Group intervention for Fifth Grade Students to Support Positive Social Integration, 2013), Kaplan who is a distinguished author of literary biographies, in his most recent book, Lincoln, the Biography of a Writer, writes about Abraham Lincoln, who many in the US believe to have been the greatest ever President, that his love of literature played a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining him as a leader.

According to Wikipedia, the Indian classics, especially the stories of Shrivana and king Harishchandra, had a great impact on Gandhi in his childhood. In his autobiography, he admits that they left an indelible impression on his mind. He writes: "It haunted me and I must have acted Harishchandra to myself times without number." Gandhi's early self-identification with truth and love as supreme values is traceable to these epic characters.

Now that we have read that there are so many traits which are required for someone to be called as an effective leader and also that there are two distinct cases of great leaders like Lincoln and Gandhi having drawn their inspiration from Literature, it calls for teachers to play a defining role in providing prospective future leaders with the right arsenal. It becomes very important for teachers to infuse these skills to their scholars making use of Literature. Although the curriculum may not always include works on great leaders and leadership traits and other constraints seem to get the better of the teacher, a concerted effort from them could bring about a big change in students' lives. This task can be taken up by teachers of any subject and is not just limited to teachers of English Language.

NEED FOR STUDY

There is a need for study in this particular area of leadership because:

- Too much importance is given to short-term and intensive leadership training programmes as a quick-fix method to train future leaders.
- This initiative to identify, nurture and develop leadership skills should start early in life ideally or at least in the teens, as a part of their college education.
- It would be wise if education providers understand the importance of a well-planned system of education which has wide scope for customisation giving more freedom to teachers to reinvent new methodologies of teaching to students of the present tech-generation.
- New methods of driving home leadership skills to students from an early age are of paramount importance if a nation expects to put its best foot forward in terms of real growth.

OBJECTIVES

The paper would delve into the following areas:

1. To enable teachers to understand their prime role in leader-making.
2. To look into new methodologies to impart leadership skills through a streamlined systematic process.
3. To identify the type of works of Literature that could be used to influence future leaders.
4. To work out ways and means to impart leadership skills within the contours of the curriculum, but aiming for exclusivity and effect.
5. To aim for maximum involvement of students in the course of imparting and strengthening these life skills.

METHODOLOGY

Identifying different works of prose and poetry for infusing leadership skills and ways to teach them with maximum impact is something that teachers should be focusing on. It would help if certain principles of mentoring are mastered by teachers as this would help teachers to do a much better job while working with future leaders.

In the course of my teaching of prose and poetry these two methods have been used by me successfully, especially for training students in leadership skills. I have been able to elicit maximum yield from the lessons and have had immense satisfaction both at the time of teaching a prose or poetry work and also have been immensely gratified hearing from my pupils of the impact these lessons have had in their future life. I am putting before the readers two of these methods

1. Memoir method:

This is a method which has been used to great effect by me and especially when it comes to poetry and prose which pertains to a biography of a great leader or works of some great personality. The important components of this method are:

- If the focus of the piece of literature is on the personality mentioned or the works of the personality, the teacher provides a lot of information which is exclusive from what is mentioned in the poem or prose.
- Providing a background of the person in focus and then providing elaborate information about the context in which the work was written is of prime importance.
- All the important achievements of the person in prime focus in the work of literature should be compiled and provided to the students.

Note: It is advisable depending on the dynamics of the class and the students being taught, to give maximum work of collecting these memoirs to students themselves, who would then present their findings to the entire class, rather than the teacher doing all the hard work.

In the case of the poem 'O Captain! My Captain' by Walt Whitman, the hero of the poem-Abraham Lincoln the leader of America, who held the nation together through the worst crisis in its history, is the person in focus. The poem talks about the sacrifice of Lincoln to bring about equality in America and also put an end to the civil war. He, in death too, symbolises a leader who wanted to provide equal rights to everyone in USA. The teacher/students need to collect information related to:

- a) Setting of the incident.
- b) Significance of the personality.
- c) Achievements.
- d) Political Scenario during the times.
- e) Challenges that he faced as the leader.
- f) (any similar related points totally based on the discretion of the teacher)

The last step would be for the students to complete a small questionnaire. An example for it for the poem 'O Captain! My Captain!' would be on the following lines:

| Questionnaire on the poem,'O Captain! My Captain! | Answer in brief. You are welcome to use a separate sheet of paper for some questions. |
|---|--|
| 1. Give three qualities of Lincoln which are portrayed through the poem? | |
| 2. Was there a need to sacrifice his life for his cause? If so, give one reason for it? | |
| 3. Did the poem bring out any traits that you have displayed in a challenging situation? Discuss | |
| 4. Do you sympathise with the character of Lincoln or empathise with him. | |
| 5. Does any modern day leader remind you of Lincoln. Explain | |

Note: If the task is divided among different students or groups of them, it would work wonders, as the teacher and the class would now have at their disposal a vast array of linked details which could be used, not only for healthy brainstorming at the beginning of the lesson but also would lead to the desired outcome of driving home the characteristics of a great leader. This would leave an indelible mark in the minds of the students. The entire exercise would need at least one session of 2 hours and could be extended to 4 hours.

2. Parallels Method

This is another successful strategy that I have employed in my class. It may not be a traditional method but has worked wonders whenever I tried it out and has led to tremendous response from my pupils and obviously the desired result at the end of the lesson for me.

The important components of this method are:

- The teacher identifies a parallel from the modern era who has displayed similar qualities as those attributed to the protagonist of the play, novel, story, poem etc
- Without losing focus on the original work, the teacher has to discuss, show a video, brainstorm or even write down on the blackboard, the qualities/achievements of the parallel.
- When the audience relates to the parallel, they will automatically be inclined to be drawn to the achievements of the original protagonist of the work of Literature.

- A questionnaire which expects students to compare and contrast the protagonist and his parallel for qualities, strengths, weaknesses if any, learning outcomes, synonymous attributes of the student with the protagonist can form the last part of this exercise.

In the case of the poem, 'Speech to the Young : Speech to the Progress-Toward' by Gwendolyn Brooks, the poet talks about doing your best in whatever you do and not worry too much about the results.

The following lines from the poem describe this feeling

'Live not for battles won.

Live not for the-end-of-the-song.

Live in the along'.

In order to explain the poem better and also blend along a few effective traits of leadership, the teacher can make use of the farewell speech of the great cricket icon Sachin Tendulkar on the eve of his retirement and play the video or audio of it in the class. Then the students could be asked to list out the important observations from the speech and link it to the poem.

In the case of the book 'Animal Farm' by George Orwell, students would understand the characters 'Napoleon, Snowball, Boxer etc , if teachers use their discretion and knowledge to identify modern day leaders from the present times and try to connect their qualities to the ones in Animal farm. This would have greater impact rather than just discussing the character traits directly.

DISCUSSION

A closer look at the methods which have been employed to infuse leadership skills to students through Literature highlights the fact that with a little bit of innovation and simple, yet effective planning, a teacher can bring about a change in the way a student absorbs and understands a piece of Literature.

The ultimate aim of these methods is to enable students grasp some traits which would ideally form a part of their personality in the later part of their life. For it to be a reality, a lackadaisical approach by the teacher would be a deterrent, even if these methods are employed. A focused approach with a lot of groundwork alone, would lead to successful outcomes of these methods.

The use of flash cards, group tasks, individual tasks, clear instructions and time based assignments will only help in bringing out the best from the students.(Hutchinson, Waters 1995) use a clear distinction in their ESP classes by using the headings like starters, analysis, prediction, matching and follow up to have a customised framework for a class, but it depends on whether the teacher has enough time to use all of these in the classroom. Teachers can come up with their own guidelines in order to be comfortable with the handling of the session. However, the bottom line is that a lot of preparation needs to go into the teaching of the lessons using the above discussed methodologies- memoir and parallels.

Some benefits of using the Memoir and Parallels method are discussed below:

- 1) **Participation:** Both these methods involve participation from students. In fact it is one of the prime components of these methods. If the students are not a part of the scheme of things, these methods would be surely a big farce. Participation in the form of collecting information, presenting the details in front of the class, helping in editing of a video, participation in a brainstorming session or debate- all these are possible with active participation and at the end of it this participation would have taught the pupils some lessons for life.
- 2) **Enthusiasm:** Allotting the tasks to students is also a skill that the teacher needs to have. If the teacher delegates work/tasks in such a way that healthy competitiveness among the students is achieved, there is an automatic enthusiasm that permeates into the class and this is a sign of healthy learning. To achieve this, the teacher has to play a big role. There could be the desired effect of providing the necessary enthusiasm to take up challenges and achieve big goals as the protagonist in the work of Literature would have achieved.
- 3) **Fillip to de-motivated students:** These methods, if used effectively and in a focussed manner, would not just help in the form of enabling students with a low esteem to shed it after the lesson is taught, but also lead to increased motivation levels as the main purpose of teaching this lesson is to drive home the skills

that many of them lack or have never thought they actually possessed. The filling of the questionnaire also would be a revelation about certain innate traits they never realised they possessed.

- 4) **Gain awareness and knowledge:** The students would gain both knowledge and awareness by collecting information about the leader. They would also benefit a lot from what their mates would have gathered in the form of inputs. On the whole, it would enrich them greatly.
- 5) **Stimulate Leadership qualities:** The leadership qualities possessed by the protagonist in the play/ poem/ novel would inspire the student. It would also stimulate him/her to emulate those traits.
- 6) **Motivation to read similar works:** If the entire exercise is taken up sincerely, it would motivate the students to read similar works and in the process, improve their reading skills, knowledge and leadership skills too.
- 7) **Easy Comprehension:** It would serve the ultimate purpose of making the lesson easily understandable. Even slow learners wouldn't miss out on the essence of the lesson and the teacher's endeavour would be a successful one.
- 8) **Stepping into the shoes of the protagonist:** This is bound to happen to the pupil as he/she would be so engrossed in the lesson and the heroic feats of the protagonist in particular. This would certainly spread positivity to the entire class and the individual too.
- 9) **Greater connect with the teacher and students:** This exercise is aimed to create a greater connect between the teacher and the pupil-something that is found missing in the educational set up of the present times. The constant interaction, collective aim to excel and also the coordination between the two parties is bound to bring in a very good sustained relationship. This would also help in improving teamwork, another life skill in high demand in the present age.
- 10) **Ethics of good leadership could be imparted:** If the choice of the lesson is good, it would impart a few good leadership traits and ethics for life, qualities which endue students with an aura of invincibility and power- something that honest leaders automatically possess.

CONCLUSION

This initiative of mine is aimed at enabling teachers to go that extra mile to achieve the much needed satisfaction element at the end of a session. This could happen only when our lessons impact the future decisions of students, empower them to take the grind and ultimately result in preparing leaders of ethics, power and magnanimity. However, as I have mentioned in my paper, it would be a fruitful exercise only, if a lot of groundwork forms the crux of the lesson. It is no doubt like a small seed planted into the students' mind, which may not reap immediate harvest, but is going to bring about a life-changing personality change, often visible later in life.

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