

What of the TALENTED in Today's High Schools?

In planning for youth with superior abilities we must be keenly concerned with the nature of talent and with the kinds of talent that are needed in this era for advancing our culture and civilization.

INCENTIVE FOR more widespread discovery and development of talent in our schools comes from at least two sources: (a) a concern that the great effort to provide educational opportunities for all youth may have left serious gaps in provisions for those with special potential, and (b) a belief that any neglect of the talented represents a loss in manpower and leadership which we cannot afford in these critical times.

In recent years our schools have become increasingly sensitized to the crucial role they are expected to play in this stepped-up talent search. Having been made aware of the possible limits of our talent resources and of the vital need to seek out youngsters who possess outstanding and desirable abilities, schools throughout the nation are facing up to the challenge. Reports from schools indicate increasing attention to and services for the talented. Supplementing these is the growing interest of many professional and community groups as evidenced by their literature, research and special meetings in this area. Despite this swell, the task of designing curriculum to develop potential talent remains a difficult one with a high priority.

How schools determine the kinds of talents that ought to be nurtured is most clearly reflected by the instruments and procedures they use in screening for exceptionally able students. Tests of general intelligence are still highly popular in gauging potential. This attraction to the high IQ was probably inspired by Terman's¹ now-famous studies of some 1500 children with Stanford-Binet scores of 140 and above. His researches shed light on the mental, physical and social attributes of these children as well as their outstanding achievement in adulthood.² He indicated the high predictive validity of the intelligence test in uncovering potential success in aca-

¹Lewis M. Terman and others. *Genetic Studies of Genius*. Three Volumes. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1925.

²Lewis M. Terman and Melita H. Oden. *The Gifted Child Grows Up*. *Genetic Studies of Genius*, Vol. IV. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1947. 448 p.

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Designing a curriculum to develop talent is a continuous challenge.

demic endeavors. Since our schools had traditionally committed their aims mainly toward development of aca-

demic abilities and interests, their search for talent in terms of high IQ could indeed be expected.

Broadened Conception of Talent

But in the thirty years since Terman initiated his studies, we have been broadening our conception of school curriculum to include other than intellectual learnings. At the same time there have been intensive studies of intelligence tests to re-assess the kinds of mental abilities they do reveal. Some research suggests, for example, that present tests do not measure the nonverbal potential of children of lower socioeconomic levels.

Paralleling an expanding view of the curriculum, there has developed a more complex characterization of talent in educational theory and practice. Witty summarized such an approach when he advised that we "broaden our definition of *gifted* and consider any child *gifted* whose performance, in any potentially valuable line of human ability, is consistently remarkable."³ He would include in his definition not only individuals of high intellectual ability but also those who exhibit any number of socially useful abilities which may not necessarily be associated with high IQ. This more inclusive definition is seen in some of the current programs involving identification and development of talented youth. Havighurst in the Community Youth Development Program, for example, screened for children with special abilities and talents of social value, including:

1. High intelligence
2. Talent in creative fields, such as art, music, and writing

³ Miriam C. Pritchard, "Total School Planning for the Gifted Child," *Exceptional Children*, 18:109, January 1952.

3. Special abilities in a variety of socially useful areas, such as mechanics, science, dramatics, athletics, human relations, social organization

4. Creative talent, or the ability to make new and novel solutions to problems.⁴

Bringing more and more talents into the classroom for proper recognition and nurture raises many problems and issues for curriculum planners. The task is further complicated by the absence, as yet, of an accepted comprehensive theory of the nature of talent. We still need a well-developed framework to guide experimentation and program development efforts. Some schools, in earnest attempts to meet their responsibilities, have begun to modify programs and produce materials without any clear notions of what they are planning for; others have begun by refining identification instruments and procedures. Long recognized is the practical value of applying good screening methods early in the child's education so that teachers have ample opportunity to guide the youngster wisely. However, schools still must come to grips with some fundamental problems regarding the discovery of talents if effective educational programs are to be developed. Even though a particular faculty feels it cannot provide conclusive answers to these questions, unless they are given adequate consideration in planning, real progress seems unlikely.

What Is Talent?

The first basic question is: What is the nature of talent? What are the

⁴ Robert J. Havighurst and others. [^] *Community Youth Development Program*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952. p. 2.

biological, cultural and psychological factors contributing to superior attainment? Despite voluminous literature, we are provided relatively little insight into what we are dealing with when we attempt to provide for "the talented."

Frequently school planning begins with a decision to give more attention to the "gifted" or "talented" and it then proceeds to set criteria for the selection of students to be included in a particular program. Screening procedures often take on exaggerated importance as they are allowed to master the idea, rather than *vice versa*. To the testing instruments goes the function of determining which talents are worthy of being revealed and developed. The assumption is made that by meeting certain criteria on tests or other devices, a student reveals talent. Such criteria are usually descriptive rather than explanatory—they provide bases for selecting students but do not begin to explain the nature of these talents or how they can best be nurtured. While these procedures have undoubtedly altered the learning experiences of some youngsters, they contribute little to deepen our understandings of the underlying components of aptitude and fulfillment. We know little, for example, about where or how these talents originate; whether we are dealing with one or a cluster of factors; what relationships exist among specific or general potentials; or how we can be sure that promise will be channeled toward fulfillment.

For every leader in almost any area of human endeavor, there are untold numbers who, at some point in their development, have demonstrated simi-

lar potential in existing screening procedures but whose attainment is comparatively negligible. Only half of those capable of acquiring a college degree enter college; about two-fifths of those who start do not graduate; and for every high school student who eventually earns a doctoral degree there are twenty-five others, just as able, who do not.⁵ While finances account for some of these losses, we know there are other important reasons. Research like that of Ausubel⁶ seems to unearth at least one clue in relating the motivation of personal recognition and prestige to achievement. Work sponsored by the Social Science Research Council on various socio-cultural, personal and situational determinants of academic and social achievement may shed additional light on why youngsters who show promise in schools do or do not achieve later.

What Talents Do We Need?

Another fundamental question is: what kinds of talent are needed in our era for advancing our culture and civilization? If we look beyond the school world boundaries into the vast mosaic of superior human abilities and note how strongly each contributes to progress, we can begin to see our talent needs in their deepest, most significant context. Society in each age continually modifies its demands for skilled leadership and, as Terman pointed out, "will decide, by the rewards it gives or withholds, what talents will come to

⁵ National Manpower Council, *Science*, 117:617-622, June 5, 1953.

⁶ David P. Ausubel. *Prestige Motivation of Gifted Children*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1950. 112 p. (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation.)



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flower.”⁷ Highest rewards have not
⁷ Lewis M. Terman, “The Discovery and Encouragement of Exceptional Talent,” *The American Psychologist*, 9:227, June 1954.

necessarily gone to those who satisfy society’s profoundest needs, however; these rewards very often go to persons

who fill immediate ephemeral wants.

The literature today sounds its most sonorous plea for scientific talent and urges schools to give greatest attention to recruiting and training future scientists. When we consider the vital part science plays in the protection and advancement of our way of life, there is logic behind this plea. Yet this current emphasis can overwhelm and distort our perspective in selecting the areas of learning in which talents deserve more careful development. In his analysis of our manpower needs, deKiewiet observed that the "greatest skills we need are not in science or engineering, but in human relations."⁸ Those who would have us believe that schools can best cure humanity's ills by furnishing us with more and better scientists cannot blot out the equal importance of other talents for which the cry is presently not so great. We cannot decide what our talent needs are solely on the basis of the loudest shouts in the literature nor can we neglect in our considerations the needs of the child and his ability to attain self-fulfillment.

Closely related to our talent needs is the question: how can the social attributes vital to potential leaders be identified and developed? At best, our popular mental tests, for example, tell us something about the child's capacity to learn—but nothing about whether he will use his abilities to benefit humanity or to confound it. We need to understand more about ways of guiding learning into socially positive channels.

The school then has the job of bring-

⁸ Cornelis W. deKiewiet, "Education for Survival," *Scientific Monthly* 76:61, February 1953.

ing into focus and perspective the talent needs of our generation and of judging the extent to which it can relate its objectives to their discovery and development. Many difficult value judgments will have to be made as we examine the needs and potentials of our youth and the needs and wants of society in terms of the goals and resources of our schools. In which of several possible directions should we guide youngsters who indicate exceptional abilities in a number of areas? On what basis should we make a decision? Some educators cling to the notion that only training in verbal skills is important enough for schools to consider. Others go to the opposite extreme and take a view that the school can and should nurture an endless variety of human skills. Neither of these two positions suggests a clear demarcation of the school's function in society.

As the school's role is better defined, each of various social institutions will find its areas of responsibility for filling our talent needs. Obviously the home, community and church influence talent—but how much or how? We do not yet know.

Planning for the Talented

Although these basic questions—what is talent? what talents do we need?—have been raised for the past two or three decades, there are significant differences in our approach today which are promising and which may provide us with better insights for educating our talented youth. First, our secondary schools are recognizing the need for making special provisions for talented youth and are not willing to

leave these either to chance or to the ingenuity of the youngsters. "Don't worry about the talented, they'll take care of themselves," is an approach which is neither acceptable nor accepted. Secondly, while many psychological and social blocks still exist, the search for the talented is no longer viewed as looking for the "queer" or the "odd." Although talented youngsters are exceptional in terms of potential, we know they can and do make normal personal and social adjustments. Lack of opportunity to develop potential abilities may cause these youth to escape either into mediocrity or unusual behavior. As we look at what is happening in our schools, these approaches seem promising:

- Faculties should begin to probe more deeply into the nature of talent. Instead of beginning with a superficial tinkering with practices, some groups have begun asking such questions as: What do we know about the talented? What do we need to know if we are to build an effective program in our own situation? Rather than engage in endless debate and argument about the advantages and disadvantages of segregation, acceleration or enrichment, school groups should examine alternative possibilities in terms of the goals they want to achieve. When they make changes, these should be made as hypotheses to be tested to attain particular objectives in a specific situation.

- Faculties should try to understand what the general objectives of their schools mean when tailored to fit children with special abilities and potentials. The objectives in educating the

talented are essentially the same as those for all youth—maximum development of the individual in society. What is there that is different about these goals when applied to the talented? Groups must begin to examine existing programs to see possible adjustments which may help attain these newly interpreted goals. Instead of adding a specific course or altering existing requirements of another, faculties are experimenting with changes which fit into a more comprehensive school philosophy.

- Faculties should analyze existing traditions and administrative procedures to test their validity in practice. Must a child take a year of algebra if he can meet present requirements in far less time? If not—what kinds of provisions need to be made which will make optimum use of this time in terms of our goals for these youth?

- Faculties should attempt total school planning for talented youth rather than indulge in isolated efforts. In considering special provisions, the resources of the entire school should be examined and analyzed for possible contribution to educating these youngsters. Those responsible for extra-class activities, special services, administration and supervision must all be involved with classroom teachers in studying existing programs and available resources.

- Faculties should try to increase their sensitivity to the impact of peers, parents, teachers and community on talented youth and *vice versa*. For example, we recognize that there are teachers who feel insecure and inadequate in working with talented youth

who should be provided with the in-service and supervisory assistance needed to meet the challenge of providing educational opportunities for these youngsters. If understanding of the talent is to be increased and all available resources made available, there will have to be continuous cooperation and coordination among teachers, parents and community.

- Faculties should recognize the enormity of planning for every conceivable talent. Before determining screening procedures, for example, they must define which areas they wish to give attention and what it is they want to achieve. Staffs which have begun with objectives and aims and then utilized or developed identification instruments, have shown evidence of more creative approaches to providing for the talented. The possibility that there are many kinds of talents which may be identified and developed in different ways at various age and developmental levels suggests that faculties

should explore continuous identification procedures.

These are some guides in the work of providing better educational opportunities for talented youth, some of which have been considered and implemented by individual schools. There is no need to urge school groups to give attention to making special provisions for the talented. There is, however, a real need to urge faculties to use a sound approach as they meet this challenge. No shortage exists in "testimonials" about programs and practices but there is a real dearth of experimental evidence of the effectiveness of these programs. As schools begin to provide such data which emerge from research in local situations and these are coupled with researches from other disciplines, we will begin to gain a deeper understanding about the nature of talent which will enable us to do an even better job in meeting the needs of these youngsters and our democratic society.



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