

Should the Gifted

Be Segregated?

This author looks thoughtfully at some basic issues involved in the practice of homogeneous grouping of the gifted.

IN THE 1920's and 1930's educators became concerned about the schooling of gifted children. There followed a flurry of experiment, a good deal of writing in the journals, and a little bit of fundamental research. Since then with the upsurge of humanitarianism, we have concentrated our forces on the education of the handicapped, the blind and poor-sighted, the hard of hearing, the non-reader, the slow learner, etc., with thus far increasingly satisfactory results. At present, we seem to be returning full circle to focus on the gifted.

Our professional literature,¹ of which this issue of *Educational Leadership* is an example and a symbol, is full of discussion of theory and report of practice. We have, perhaps, been driven to this new frontal assault on the problem by our startled awakening to the cold facts that: (a) the United States

has grown into a position of world leadership; (b) we are in the midst of revolutionary and swift changes in many aspects of living; (c) we have an acute shortage of *trained*, gifted leadership in most fields to handle the new complexities; and (d) in the face of these three developments, an appallingly large proportion of our gifted children are not being given the education to bring their powers and their talents to fruition.

What Are the Issues?

¹As a sample see: *Education of the Gifted*, Educational Policies Commission, 1950; symposium on "Current Theory and Practice in the Grouping of Pupils in Secondary Schools," *California Journal of Secondary Education*, January 1955; G. H. Hildreth, *Educating Gifted Children*, Harper and Brothers, 1952. A glance at the periodical indexes shows a spate of articles on the subject.

Our current drive, therefore, is to re-examine our educational principles and practices, to see what we can do through schooling to provide our country in the future with the leaders so desperately needed. In considering this important and highly complex problem one basic question is that which I have been asked to consider in this paper: Should the gifted be segregated in school and college? To this question there is no general, pat, easy answer. Before this major question can be approached, more specific related questions must, I think, be raised. Some of these are discussed in the following sections.

1. **Who are the gifted and how may they be identified?** If we are to segregate the gifted for better schooling, we must know who they are, and in what areas of human endeavor their talents lie. Democracy has impelling needs for many kinds of giftedness: e.g., for power and insight into human relationships, for creativity in the arts, for abilities to manage business and industry and government, for mastery in science, both theoretical and applied, these among many others.

Never, as far as I know, is any human being equally able in *all* fields. Few, comparatively, are superior in several. Most of us have one or two special gifts which, if developed sufficiently, would bring continuing growth, deepening personal satisfaction, and enriched service to community and nation.² If we should agree to segregate the gifted, we must develop much more fully our student personnel services, refine present diagnostic tests of abilities, interests, attitudes and personality factors. It seems obvious, in retrospect, that past failures and disappointments in experiments in segregating the gifted have stemmed directly from inadequate identification. Most segregation in the past and much of it at present has been based on a single factor such as I.Q. scores, or grades, or teacher judgment, or some combination of these with chronological age. Until we can learn to base such deci-

²On this point see my article, "Are We Discriminating Against Intelligence?" in *Educational Leadership*, for November 1954; and, for a more complete analysis, see M. E. Hahn and M. S. MacLean, *Counseling Psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950, especially Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8.

sions on a composite and coordination of many factors, it is likely to be not too successful.

Our aim in such segregation is to group those who are most alike together for learning. If we use only a single, or two, or three measures, we usually find the differences in the group greater than the similarities. Lazarus³ found, for example, that an "enriched and accelerated" class in reading and creative writing achieved magnificently when it was segregated by *interest* though with a heterogeneous I.Q., median 104. But when, stimulated by an article in a popular magazine about the course, pupils with high I.Q.'s flocked to it, thereby raising the range from 110 to 150 and the median to 120. The result was that this group did neither as well on the final achievement tests nor did it produce either the quantity or quality of writing done by the "lower" group. We have here an illustration of a sound principle of counseling psychology that high ability with little or no interest achieves far below moderate ability with high interest.

2. **Can we segregate the gifted in school and college with benefit and without damage to them and to society?** To this, one answer is that we can do so if we learn to follow the patterns of identification and selection described above. Another answer is that we do practice segregation and that it is inevitable that we should. Especially in high school and college.

³A. L. Lazarus, "Grouping Based on High Interest vs. General Ability" in the California symposium on grouping referred to in footnote 1 above.

students, if they are not blocked by internal misapprehensions or external pressures of curricular requirements or parental orders, tend to select the fields of learning in which they feel most able and where their interests lie. Teachers themselves—often on inadequate bases, to be sure—spot students when they can who show giftedness and interest in their subject and use persuasion or canny coercion to get them to specialize in their field. A third answer is that there is a “natural?” segregation constantly operating. “Birds of a feather flock together.” Artists, mechanics, medicos, mathematicians, etc., each join their kind. This type of segregation deepens and strengthens as interests move from scattered diffusion into clean-cut channels⁴ and abilities are reinforced with growing achievement. All of these reasons underlie the structure of our many departments, curricula, majors and minors. The point here is that, while a great deal of segregation of the gifted goes on, some of it casual and inadvertent, some of it planned, little of it is as yet well done.

Our fault lies in the fact that we do not segregate our able youngsters nearly enough for their most effective schooling. We do not yet segregate them at the right times and places, for the right purposes, and on criteria that guarantee that their similarities are greater than their differences. Nor do we provide for their *desegregation*, their

⁴ On this point there is much evidence in the reports of the many years of work by E. K. Strong, his associates and followers. See especially his *Vocational Interests of Men and Women*, Stanford University Press, 1943, and the chapters on “Canalization” and “Conditioning” in Gardner Murphy’s *Personality*, Harper and Brothers, 1947.

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participation in heterogeneous activities with a mixed lot of other people, when it is imperative or wise to do so. Only by this process can they be kept from isolation from the realities of democratic life. Only so can they be preserved from developing snobbery and arrogance. Only so can they learn the necessity and importance of becoming competent followers in areas in which they have little or no giftedness that would warrant their trying to assume leadership.

The advantages of well planned segregation of the gifted, so far as we now know, are these: It challenges, it stimulates, it motivates. Cross-fertilization of ideas develops at a rapid rate and brings clarification of concepts. There is vigorous growth in the feel for tools and the mastery of skills and techniques. Psychologically, expanding achievement brings a feeling of confidence, security and adequacy. The pace of learning is swift; the range of attempt and accomplishment wide, and of comprehension deep. I know of no loss of benefits when segregation and desegregation of the gifted are well done. Damage seems to occur to the gifted only when these are badly done. Then they may easily get feelings or habits of superiority, arrogance, snobbery or boredom, indifference, superficiality, sloppiness, or, most hazardous of all, flights into daydreaming. These often occur in the gifted when the pace is slow, the range narrow, and the depth of penetration in millimeters instead of feet

3. *Is segregation of the gifted democratic?* On this point, as Gowan⁵ says, there is continuous argument, much of it superficial, confused, emotional. Why should this be so? Some people, called "anti-intellectual" and "egalitarian" are both suspicious and envious of others who have different or more abundant gifts than their own. Interpreting democracy to mean equality of opportunity to develop and use whatever abilities one has, they assume, nevertheless, that all individuals should be treated as if they all have the same and equal abilities, although even the totalitarian, anti-democratic nations do not act as if they believed this to be true. Such people would, therefore, cut us down to their size, level us off, reject "discrimination" in its meaning of fine perception of valuable differences and sound judgment as to the function of differences. We remember the blasts leveled at Roosevelt's "Brain Trust" in the Thirties and at the "Egg-heads" in recent political campaigns, as well as attempts to destroy the reputations, and hence the service, of some top research scientists. These levelers are made angrier, and are strengthened in their opinions and in their attack by foolish public statements of some of the arrogant gifted themselves. These may talk scornfully of "the age of the common man," or of "the rising tide of mediocrity." Education itself does not escape these attacks. Professors Bush of Harvard and Bestor of Illinois and President Butterfield of Wesleyan, among others, speak of the mass of American children and youth crowd-

⁵ May Seagoe Gowan, "Why Homogeneous Grouping?" in the California symposium on grouping referred to in footnote 1 above.

ing the schools as "like the barbarian invasions of the Middle Ages," or say that "universal education leads to no education," or that "every boy is getting to be a Joe College and each one dumber than the next."⁶

Inevitably these attitudes are picked up and reflected by teachers and students. The gifted youngster is dubbed, in adolescent lingo, a "brain," an "egg-head," of course, or a "drip" and is often excluded from his peer social groups. Many teachers fall in, to a greater or less degree, with this pattern of thinking. They christen the courses for the handicapped, and non-readers, the slow-learners as being the "dumb-bell," "slow-track," or "sub." They call standard, traditional subjects, "the solids," implying that art, music, physical education, shop-work, etc., are froth, and they tend to look down upon students who segregate themselves or are segregated in them, no matter how gifted the students may be. Some teachers are jealous of those assigned to teach the gifted and, therefore, raise the cry of "undemocratic" and complain of "being robbed of contact with any but the 'normal,' 'average,' or 'dull.'"

Some Conclusions

My own conclusions from this brief look at the problem are these:

1. We should segregate the gifted in school and college for specific learning tasks.

2. There are many kinds of gifts with which human beings are endowed.

⁶ From "The Colleges Face a Rising Tide," by Jerry Talmer, *The Saturday Review*, September 10, 1955. See the books by Bestor and the many current articles following this line of attack.

Our planning for segregation, therefore, should include special groupings for each and every kind of high competence.

3. Students who are gifted in one or more fields but who are average to low in ability in others should be desegregated in the latter areas. The academically bright need association with the gifted in art, music, physical education, shop-work, etc., even though they may be duds at these things, for they need to learn to follow in activities where they do not have the abilities to lead and to appreciate and support other leaders.

4. Segregation, to be effective, must be based upon as many factors as possible so that the likenesses of the gifted taught thus together may be more than the differences.

5. Timing of segregation of the gifted is of the essence. It must be at the periods of greatest readiness and greatest need. I would abhor seeing American toddlers for many hours a day in schools for "infant prodigies in music," as Russia does. Feller⁷ has examined and reported the damage of too early and too much segregation of child actors in Hollywood. On the other hand, we frequently see among older people the unhappy results of their *not* having been segregated for learning with others of their own kind in interests and gifts.

6. The methods of segregating and teaching the gifted have not as yet been adequately tested. What evidence we

have to date suggests that any one or combination of these methods, well done, may prove to be effective. Some of these methods are:

(a) Segregation in separate schools such as the Hunter College Elementary School⁸ or the special academic and art high schools of New York City.⁹ The unanswered question about this type of more or less complete segregation is as to whether the students are heterogeneous enough outside their academic or artistic giftedness to provide each other with essential experiences of learning to mix and to follow.

(b) Segregation in special classes in an otherwise very heterogeneous school, heterogeneous both as to pupils and courses and activities. This, from present scanty evidence seems the favored method until professional studies are reached in the graduate school.

(c) The three-track or X, Y, Z system, whereby in each major subject field there are slow, average and fast sections. Objections to this method, somewhat common earlier, are that it is: (1) mechanical and (2) so obvious to teachers, parents and students that it breeds unhealthy and unwarranted attitudes and invidious comparisons with consequent damage to most students.

(d) The widely discussed plan of enrichment, i.e., keeping the gifted in heterogeneous classes but providing them with individual or team assignments and activities suited to their abilities and interests. This would seem to be the essence of good teaching

⁷ Dan Feller, "Introductory Study of Related Factors Pertaining to the Education, Welfare, and Employment of Minors in Motion Pictures in the Los Angeles Area." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, U.C.L.A., July 1954.

⁸ See G. H. Hildreth, *Educating Gifted Children*, Harper and Brothers, 1952.

⁹ "Education of the Gifted in Academic High Schools," by B. E. Donovan, *High Points*, May 1955.

whether we segregate or not. It may be the only feasible solution while crowding and teacher shortages continue.

7. To achieve sound principles and practices in segregation of the gifted we must have, first, extended and im-

proved student personnel services; second, many more kinds of valid and reliable diagnostic tests; and, third, a great deal of fundamental research in the psychology of learning, in personality, in group processes and in curriculum.

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Teaching the Gifted in the Regular Classroom

Many activities and opportunities for enriching the program for the gifted child in the regular classroom are suggested in this article. You will, of course, wish to insert your own ideas.

MANY SCHOOL SYSTEMS place the gifted child in a regular classroom situation. This placement may be based upon the philosophy of the system or it may be the most practical means of caring for a widely scattered segment of the school population. Regardless of the reason for such placement, the classroom teacher is responsible for providing an educational program for abilities ranging from the mentally slow to the mentally superior. This is no easy task. The teacher may think that the problem can be solved by giving the gifted "more of the same" program that is given to the average so he will be "kept busy." This is not a satisfactory solution to the problem—either for the teacher or the gifted pupil.

In order to meet satisfactorily the needs of the pupil with superior mental ability, it is necessary that his program should include many of the experiences enjoyed by the average child plus those that will deepen and expand his already existing superior abilities. These experiences, which are usually termed enrichment experiences, should be a part of a planned and unified program, broad in scope and intensive in nature.

Identifying the Gifted

Before the teacher can begin to plan for an enriched curriculum for the gifted, he must first understand the performance characteristics of the gifted pupil. The teacher must realize that the character traits of the mentally superior child are relative. Even though

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