

Curriculum Research

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Planning for Talented Youth: A Research Project

PROVIDING appropriate educational opportunities for talented students is one very important aspect of the continuing challenge facing all curriculum planners—that of building programs which will cultivate every individual's maximum potential in ways consistent with his own self-fulfillment and the requirements of a free society. Since our schools are committed to the education of all children with all their ranges of needs, interests and abilities, it is within this context that planning for the talented must take place. The gifted must not be educated at the expense of other children but, at the same time, their special talents must not be neglected. If all children are to be provided for adequately and equally—they cannot be provided for identically.

The concern for the education of the talented is not really newborn. Schools have, during the past century, tested various administrative and instructional adaptations for their superior students. The current resurgence of interest in this phase of the school's total responsibility stems from two related sources: reassessments by various groups of the goals and purposes of our free public education system, and studies of the nation's manpower needs and resources. Program reappraisals have pointedly questioned the effectiveness of some of our educational procedures for high-ability youth. The

manpower studies in critical areas of specialized talents reveal shortages which could be partially alleviated if schools more adequately identified, motivated and educated students with outstanding capacities.

Recognizing this need for helping schools improve their provisions for talented students, the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation in 1954 launched its Talented Youth Project. Having explored the problems of providing for the talented students in several school systems during its first year, the Project Staff's activities now take three forms: (a) conducting basic studies to clarify the nature and function of talent; (b) assisting schools in the development of their own experimental programs for the talented; and (c) summarizing and interpreting research on the talented through books, pamphlets, journal articles and periodic newsletters. A first publication, *Planning for Talented Youth*,¹ provides a framework within which schools can become acquainted with the available research on gifted youth and begin to develop their own programs for educating the talented in view of what is already known and what remains to be discovered.

¹A. H. Passow, M. L. Goldberg, A. J. Tannenbaum, and W. French. *Planning for Talented Youth*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1955. 82 p.

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Who Is Talented?

The Project Staff recognized early that there is no single, uniform definition of *giftedness* or *talent* which is generally accepted. This is confirmed by Newland's report that in the "last three *Review of Educational Research* summaries on the gifted, no fewer than 51 different terms² were used to char-

²T. E. Newland. "Essential Research Directions on the Gifted." *Exceptional Children*, 21:293, May 1955.

acterize the populations on which research was reported in 126 studies."

As a working definition, the staff considers talent to be the capacity for superior achievement in certain areas of endeavor which have consistently contributed to civilization. For the schools, this means the academic disciplines, creative and performing arts, mechanics, and executive and social leadership. The school that builds on this broad operational definition, will

seek those promising youngsters who need and can profit from an educational program which is qualitatively different from that available to the majority of youngsters.

The Project Staff is cooperating with schools in helping them establish goals for gifted students—the kinds of individuals the programs should aim to develop, and the ways these purposes differ from those of other youngsters. The problems of identifying gifted youngsters can then be brought into focus: how can schools embark on a continuing program of discovering the students for whom the present program lacks adequate challenge, opportunity, or appropriate educational experiences.

Motivation of the Talented

Past research has indicated that capacity or potential alone will not insure the development of giftedness; there must be, too, both motivation and opportunity to use and develop these talents. The Project Staff has begun to study the factors which seem to affect motivation of talented children and to learn why some students with potential seem to achieve while others do not. Research in this area has indicated the importance of social, ethnic and economic background factors in enhancing or deterring motivation. The staff was further interested in school and personal factors influencing motivation and achievement and undertook an exploratory study of such differences between gifted children who are academically successful and others, equally intelligent, who are not. While few significant differences were found, this pilot study provided a number of leads which will now be followed in further

research. Among these will be the gifted child's self-concept, the perceptions of him by the school, home and community, and other similar factors which may help the school to predict under-achievers.

Another projected study will probe the extent and influence of peer prejudices on academically and artistically superior students and attempt to discover to what extent cultural, social and intellectual factors discriminate between those who do and those who do not show prejudice. While this study centers on students' attitudes, a sequel may examine teachers', parents', and community attitudes, and thus shed some light on how these biases affect the motivation of the talented to achieve in those areas in which they show outstanding potential.

Administrative Modifications

Administratively, schools have attempted to provide for talented students in one or more of three ways: (a) by accelerating the progress of gifted students; (b) by grouping students on the basis of special ability—usually called segregation or homogeneous grouping; or (c) by providing special opportunities and materials for talented children within the regular classroom—usually referred to as enrichment.

Analysis of the research on the various administrative plans has, generally, indicated that each has certain advantages for attaining educational objectives but that no one plan is uniformly better than the others for all age groups, for all talent areas, or for all individuals within any area. In this connection, the Project Staff is undertaking a study

which will attempt to assess the effects of special grouping not only on the talented students who are placed in special classes, but also on the students who remain in the classes from which the talented are removed and in classes in which there are mixed groups.

The Project Staff is also concerned with studying administrative and instructional adaptations which can be made in small rural schools to provide more adequately for the gifted. Reports indicate critical underdevelopment of talent in very small schools. Such schools, located in sparsely populated areas, account for a large segment of the total school enrollment.

Enrichment of Instruction

Since administrative modifications serve largely to facilitate the provision of special educational experiences for gifted youngsters, the nature of such experiences is not necessarily defined by the organizational framework in which they occur. The Staff is interested in the concepts underlying enrichment—what is actually done for the talented children in special or regular groups. Regardless of the kind of administrative modifications made, programs must be developed which are stimulating, challenging and motivating to talented youngsters. We need to determine what special skills, attitudes, and behaviors gifted youngsters must develop in order to make a maximum contribution to themselves and to society.

With school personnel, the Staff is exploring the nature of enrichment in order to develop, if possible, a theoretical framework within which will be found guides for answering such ques-

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tions as these: What is enriching? What kinds of learning experiences should gifted youngsters have that average children do not have? And, conversely, what part of the learning that is considered necessary for most youngsters is not essential for talented children? The underlying theoretical base must help curriculum planners determine the ways in which the educational needs of talented youngsters are similar to and different from those of other students. It must help point to the kinds of instructional, administrative and guidance procedures which will best provide for the unique needs of the gifted child, as well as those he has in common with other children.

The problem of developing a theory of enrichment is complicated by the fact that talented youngsters are not a single entity. They differ from each other in their special aptitudes and in their general interests. It is important, therefore, to discover what aspects of enrichment are common for all kinds of gifted youth and which are specific for one or another talent area. We can then begin to untie such other knots as: What helps the talented child retain and enhance a self-directed concern for, and love of, learning and creating? What will help the talented child amass the specific skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to implement the de-

sire to learn and create? What opportunities for original expression and self-development will be most beneficial? What methods or materials will be most useful?

There are many related concerns. All of the problems usually found in any complicated curriculum research project are found in intensified form in planning for the talented. Who shall teach the talented? What are the roles of parents? How can other youth-serving agencies in the community be enlisted? What constitutes an adequate in-service program for teachers? These will be studied as they relate to the central concerns of the staff.

At present, efforts of the Project Staff are being focused on exploring research programs with a number of school systems. Active work is under way in several situations and will be carried to others in the near future. Curriculum workers who are interested in obtaining further information about the HMLI's Talented Youth Project are invited to write to the author of this article.

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