

## Reflections on Educating the Gifted

**E** DUCATING the gifted is, indeed, a crucial responsibility but still a partial responsibility—a part of providing for education of all the citizenry in accordance with each individual's capacity to profit from learning. Even though we concern ourselves with the part, the task is still somewhat overwhelming. To be responsible for the education of *one* genius, to say nothing of a million gifted and near genius individuals, should, it seems, create some anxiety among educators. At this moment I am inclined to agree with, or at least consider again, Gibran's advice "On Children":

"You may give them your love but not your thoughts

For they have their own thoughts." . . . and

"You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward or tarries with yesterday."

Who among us is genius enough to teach genius in terms of future needs in this age of change?

The task is especially difficult since students of yesterday have, in general, been taught in terms of past experience and accepted solutions. There is, also, considerable reason to believe that teachers, like others, tend to do unto others as they have been done unto. To what extent can we say that our culture, including our educational procedures, has prepared teachers to educate youth in terms of inevitable, rapid change, to assist in the process

of clarifying questions and problems, and to teach in terms of futures? Whether we like it or not, we must face the possibility that insofar as we are unable to solve continuing problems, we may be the victims of overlearned but inappropriate answers (standardized errors), or have insufficient skill in refining and clarifying problems to a point where they can be resolved.

It appears that authors of articles in this issue of *Educational Leadership* have not meant to present their articles in the sense that they provide final answers. If the reader perceives of anything in an article, or this editorial, to be unusually dogmatic, it will undoubtedly prove to be an attempt to present a point of view with force and clarity but with no intention to establish fixed, standardized practice at our present state of knowledge.

Issues which invariably arise, whether education of the gifted is proposed in terms of homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping, include these facts: Teachers, to say nothing of trained, gifted teachers, are on the critical supply list. Classrooms and buildings are in short supply. When we have made attempts to provide thorough education for the gifted in homogeneous groups, e.g., our medical schools and our training programs in clinical psychology, the cost has been relatively great.

Another question seems in order:

does mechanical, homogeneous grouping, no matter how carefully it is done, operate per se to insure effective education? Very likely other factors are important. For example, concentration of homogeneity of interest and skill of individuals in a community or sub-culture may be a more crucial factor in producing genius.

It is possible, then, that for us to get maximum returns for our time, energy and money expended, each community should concentrate in training gifted in the area for which they are capially prepared. Further, that under such circumstances heterogeneous grouping might be entirely appropriate.

John Hersey in this issue describes Connecticut's committee to study education for the gifted. Undoubtedly, such attention and planning must be done at all levels and especially at the community level if there is to be much support for and benefit from any particular venture in educating the gifted.

In connection with planning for the gifted it is with some misgivings that I view planning *for* rather than planning *with* the gifted. If it is important for anyone to choose the nature of his activity, it would appear that this is appropriate, possibly imperative, in the case of the gifted. How early in the gifted individual's life should relative self-determination be encouraged is still the subject of much controversy. I feel safe in speculating, however, that we have not yet begun to burden the gifted, at any age, with the responsibility for self direction. It is as if we fear potential that is greater than and different from our

own. We tend to give lip service to the idea that the gifted are capable of generating new ideas, yet we are relatively mistrusting and fearful of new ideas and differences. It would seem to be especially important, however, for a teacher of the gifted to clarify his function as a servant of the gifted rather than primarily as a program director and manipulator of a genius in the making.

Further, we agree almost universally that education at its best is provided in terms of meeting individual needs. This leads to speculation that for the gifted, and especially genius, standard procedures are quite inadequate. Where does one find enough Wagners, or Darwins, or Michelangelos, or Einsteins, to justify a standard, group approach in their education?

#### Need for Revisions

Yet individualizing instruction tends to be a costly, time consuming process. There has been considerable speculation recently with reference to the appropriateness of using teachers as jacks-of-all-trades rather than as professional specialists. It has been proposed that teachers can be employed more profitably in tasks requiring professional skill and human interaction. Bookkeepers, file clerks, projectionists, police, baby sitters, librarians, and T.V. would be utilized to perform functions for which they are uniquely suited. Under these circumstances, it is possible that competent teachers could personalize educational experiences to such a degree that the gifted could blossom.

Observation seems to indicate that as the gifted behave, they persevere

because of internal satisfaction more than because of external incentives. Several of the authors in this periodical have mentioned intensive interest and motivation as being crucial characteristics of the productive gifted. We attempt to identify and measure them but if they are as crucial as we suspect, could it be that our task is one of concentrating on the problem of determining how interests and motivation develop and of employing teachers, who will work deliberately in nurturing interest and motivation, the prime movers in giftedness, in addition to serving as resource persons and conveyors of knowledge?

Interests of the young tend to be at variance with the interests of well conditioned adults. It is a real source of friction and yet teachers and adults must recognize that youth's perceptions, some of which are fantastic, have a way of becoming realities for tomorrow's adults. When strange interests and ideas begin to emerge, we quite naturally, because of our training and experience, attempt to get the deviating one back on the familiar track

which has been built for us and which we seem to be committed to maintain. One small girl, with whom I had the opportunity to associate, revealed the effect of adult demands for the young to be realistic when she advised her dolls in play, "Come down off the moon and get in your beds!" Yet this fantasy may soon be reality and we can only speculate as to the extent of parents' consternation when young people decide to spend their first "night out on the moon."

Competent educational leaders are continually challenged to experiment and explore the unknown. The education of the gifted provides a challenging opportunity to produce in a fundamental, frontier area. The following articles will provide a sample of present day thinking which should serve to stimulate hypotheses and to sharpen the issues which confront us when we attempt to educate the gifted.

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