

# Curriculum Research

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## Study of Underachieving Gifted

THE "gifted underachiever"—i.e., the student whose scholastic performance is far below that predicted on the basis of measured intelligence and aptitude—has been one of the continuing concerns of the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute's Talented Youth Project.<sup>1</sup> Since 1954, studies of attitudes toward self and toward school of gifted high and underachievers have been conducted cooperatively with Evanston (Illinois) Township High School. These studies have shed light on differences in self perceptions and attitudes of variously achieving high ability students and have suggested the need for experimenting further with special school provisions for underachievers.

An opportunity to conduct such experimentation came in the spring of 1956. The administrative and supervisory staff of DeWitt Clinton High School (New York City) became concerned with the fact that about half of the entering high-ability tenth grade students over a three year period were underachievers. This staff invited members of the Talented Youth Project to study cooperatively ways of helping such

students perform at a level more in line with their potential.

A number of exploratory sessions resulted in the designing of a study, aimed at examining the academic, personal and social characteristics of underachievers and at assessing the effects of programming a group of such students with a single teacher for homeroom activity and one subject class. The arrangement was intended to test the hypothesis that if underachieving students could share their common problems and identify with and receive support from a teacher, their attitudes and scholastic performance would improve.

In June 1956, 102 entering tenth grade students with junior high school IQ's of 120 or higher (Pintner or Henmon-Nelson) and ninth year grade mark averages below 80 were retested on the California Test of Mental Maturity. Seventy students with IQ's of 120 or higher on both the junior high test and the CTMM were selected for the study and paired on the basis of IQ, reading scores, and ninth grade marks. One of each pair was placed in a "study" group and the other in a control group. A third group of comparable IQ but high achievement (ninth grade averages of 85 or above) was identified.

In September 1956, the study group

<sup>1</sup> For an earlier account see A. Harry Passow, "Planning for Talented Youth: A Research Project," *Educational Leadership* 13:249-51, January 1956.

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was assigned to a social studies teacher who also served as homeroom officer. The students were informed that they were specially selected and placed in a "special class" because of their high potential and need for raising the level of their school performance. Dr. Jane Beasley of the Project staff interviewed 26 of the underachievers (15 from the study group and 11 from the control group) and 4 of the high achievers. In addition, data were gathered on self-attitudes, attitudes toward school, family patterns, problem areas, academic aspiration levels, and vocational choices. The parents of involved students met with staff members, learned the purpose of the study, and filled out questionnaires which dealt with some of the same areas as did the student forms.

Iowa Tests of Educational Development, administered in October 1956, indicated that achievement on such meas-

ures is more closely related to intelligence than to school grades. The two groups of underachievers' scores did not differ significantly from the high achievers on any part of the test. However, the composite ITED scores of the control group were significantly higher than those of the study group, even though both groups were alike on all junior high school measures.

The attitude and personality measures provided a revealing picture of bright young adolescents and indicated some significant differences between the high and low achievers among them. There were no differences in their own appraisals of most of their abilities and characteristics, in their occupational aspirations (most preferred professional careers), in the kind or intensity of interests. Families were similar in occupational status, parental educational level, number of working mothers, and family

size. Disruption of the normal family pattern through the absence of the father by death or divorce was much more frequent among the underachievers. Grade expectation was quite different among the high and low achievers with the latter expecting to pass but not anticipating very high grades.

The tape recorded interviews supplemented the paper and pencil data and presented a picture of the underachievers as recognizing that they are bright and potentially capable of outstanding academic achievement, but showing a strong resistance against making the necessary effort. The interviews pointed up great differences among the underachievers and suggested that each must be studied as an individual with his own motivations, his own rationalizations, his own system of defenses.

Because of the fused homeroom and social studies period, the guidance activities did not have to be terminated at the end of one period. Sometimes the social studies period was curtailed in order to conclude discussion on a particular problem raised in the homeroom. Since the group remained together in class as well as homeroom, social studies achievement meant recognition and status among one's peers. The boys in the study group seemed to want to do well not only for themselves but also for the teacher.

At the end of the first semester, the grades of the study group indicated some improvement, but, contrary to expectation, as a group they showed less improvement than did the controls. The differences were largely accounted for by the initial differences on the ITED. However, an analysis of the final grades at the end of the second semester showed that the study group improved in all subjects, except social studies where

they remained the same (possibly a reflection of the teacher's reluctance to be too lenient in grading his special class), while the control group went down in all subjects. The differences were most striking in mathematics, science, and total average. The study group made up its first semester deficit and, in all subjects but English, equaled or exceeded the final marks of the controls.

For the eleventh year, the study group remained together as a homeroom section with the same teacher but, for social studies, were assigned to a woman teacher who had been very successful with honors students. The evaluation at the end of the first semester of that year showed that the new arrangement for the special class had not proved satisfactory. The boys and the teacher were in conflict throughout the semester. The teacher, expecting high quality performance, was unable to accept the erratic, tardy, and often slipshod work of the students. The techniques which she had found successful with honors classes over the years, seemed completely ineffectual in this situation. For the second semester, the group was programmed with another social studies teacher, in this instance a man again. Evaluation at the end of the eleventh grade by the teacher corroborated the impressions of the two previous teachers that the group lacked emotional stability and control. On homework of a factual nature, the assignments were done on time. Homework which required independent thought and organization of materials was subject to delay, stalling, and non-performance. Aware of the danger of strong rebuke and non-acceptance on the one hand, and of allowing the students to "get away" with inadequate performance on the other, the teacher followed a middle course—accepting late assignments, allowing students to

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rework poorly done assignments, and requiring that they incorporate suggestions for improvement. Several class periods were devoted to practical demonstrations on how to do an assignment. The teacher paid attention to each student and tried to understand him in terms of the particular problems and weaknesses presented. In short, the teacher tried to create a warm and accepting climate, allowing leeway in performance standards and consistently showing an interest in the individual problems of the students. He concentrated on teaching the group much needed study skills. On a mid-semester economics test in April 1958, the study group performed somewhat above the average for all academic students.

Even though at the end of the tenth year, the study group showed greater improvement than did the controls, there were "improvers" and "non-improvers"

in both groups. Twenty-one improvers were compared with an equal number of non-improvers. The two groups differed significantly with respect to the ITED composite and correctness of writing scores (the improvers were higher) and on self-attitudes inventory (non-improvers showed a greater discrepancy between their perception of abilities and their wished-for abilities status). Since this latter score is viewed as an index of adjustment, the discrepancy suggests that non-improvers see their ability to perform in various areas as too far from what they would like it to be to warrant making an effort to improve. There were differences in other areas as well but these did not reach statistical significance. For example, the incidence of divorces was greater among the parents of the non-improvers; fewer had reached a decision on vocational goals and, where they did state a preference, it was

less often above the level of their father's present occupation; fewer were only or oldest children; fewer had older siblings in college who could act as achievement models for them. These observed tendencies will be used as hypotheses for further study.

At the end of two years of experimentation with the study described above and with other approaches, these tentative conclusions have been reached:

1. Academic underachievement appears to be a symptom of a variety of more basic personal and social problems. The depth, seriousness, and duration of the underlying problem determine the extent and kind of help a student needs. Some high school students may be beyond profiting from the kind of direct help which the school can provide. The criteria for making a prognosis on the basis of the kinds of information collected have not been arrived at as yet.

2. For those underachieving students who did improve, two factors seem crucial: first, they were able to identify with a teacher who is consistently supportive and interested, who views each student as an individual, and accepts his need for special help; and, second, they received assistance in mastering the skills of learning which many underachievers have failed to acquire in the earlier grades.

3. It seems advisable to separate the teaching and guidance functions for these students so that the person who is working closely and personally with them will not be the same one who has to grade or evaluate them.

4. Grouping these students in a subject class may not be wise since they tend to give each other negative support

which often cannot be adequately handled within the context of the class.

In view of the above conclusions, the plan for 1958-59, in addition to continuing follow-ups of the existing groups, involves setting up special groups of underachievers, who would be together for a daily continuous homeroom and study hour. This would provide opportunity for intensive group and individual guidance as well as instruction in work study skills without involving the teacher in the role of evaluator. In June 1958, 87 students with IQ of 125 or higher and ninth year grades below 80 percent were identified and divided into three matched groups of 29 each. Intelligence, age, membership in Special Progress classes in junior high school, and equivalent reading and arithmetic scores were considered in the matching. Two groups have been designated as special sections with carefully selected homeroom teachers; the third group is distributed among the remaining homeroom sections and serves as a control group. These special groups will be kept intact with the same teacher for the three years of high school. Any student who, after the first year, attains honor roll status (87 or higher) will be permitted to use some of the study period time for one of the school service activities. The two basic purposes of the study—acquiring greater insight into the nature of underachievement and possible modifications for overcoming it—continue to be explored.

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