

A Comprehensive High School Studies Learning

A continuing local school investigation of learning can furnish evidence upon which to build better programs.

EACH DAY through the doors of Evanston Township High School comes a stream of some 3500 students, virtually all of the young people of high school age in the community. In many respects they are much alike and, indeed, like high school students elsewhere. Still there are striking variations in their interests, backgrounds, abilities, maturity, and more. No one or even two or three programs in this comprehensive high school could advantageously serve all of them—and most surely not all of their fellow students in other schools.

The suburban community in which the school is located has long been willing to support and interested in good education. The school has a large physical plant with facilities of many kinds. Teachers and counselors, by and large, are competent and alert, attracted to the school at least in part by professional opportunities. Traditionally standards for student achievement have been high in both conventionally academic and nonacademic areas. A long history of trying out ways of improving educational offerings, coupled with the interest of a strong administrative staff, has created a friendly climate for experimentation.

Such projects have been based upon

research and theory reported by others, but with an eye to extending and enriching their meaning and to making them applicable in a particular school which, while not wholly different from other school situations, has some unique characteristics. No effort is made to report all of these studies here, but enough is given to indicate directions.

Study of High Ability Students

A persisting interest in programs for students of high ability led to a 1956 Survey of Attitudes toward Self and toward the School.¹ Learning is influenced by the kinds of self-concepts which individuals hold and by their perceptions of learning situations. From this survey data the staff found that students of high ability and high achievement saw themselves "favorably" in four sets of characteristics: personal, such as "appearance" and "sense of humor"; self-reliance, such as "making

¹The development of inventories on School and Self-Attitudes and their summarization and interpretation were based upon extensive interviews done at the school, but were largely the work of Miriam Goldberg and Harry Passow of the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York.

decisions" and "carrying out responsibility"; special talents, such as social or athletic or artistic ability; and intellectual, such as "solving problems" and "thinking clearly." These students perceived themselves more favorably than did underachieving high ability students, high achieving average ability students (overachievers), low ability low achieving students, or a random sample of the general school population.

Characteristics which high achieving high ability students valued were, in general, characteristics which other kinds of students aspired to. Indeed, the other four groups, particularly the most representative random school group, desired high intellectual ability as much as, or even more than, social ability or athletic ability, although these latter two ranked at the top of seven kinds of abilities.

Moreover, these very able students considered as most important of the school's roles a cluster which may be called academic, such as "preparing for college" and "developing new ideas and learning to evaluate ideas critically," the same roles which they saw the school fulfilling most adequately. They perceived their parents as more satisfied with the total school program than did other groups and more willing to treat them as mature and independent in educational matters.

Other survey data showed that the high ability high achieving group had not only a high level of aspiration but also the greatest satisfaction with them-

selves (the lowest discrepancy between their perceived and "wished-for" characteristics) of all the groups mentioned above.

These very able students reported at the same time their preference for classes which offered "challenge," a "comfortable and satisfying class atmosphere," and interest; ease of difficulty in subjects explained their preferences less consistently. These same young people who saw themselves as self-reliant and intellectually able also reported a belief that they learned better in a structured, teacher-directed, regularly evaluated situation than in one in which there was more flexibility and self-evaluation.

Members of the faculty asked themselves what this evidence meant for school learning. The data reassured the staff that the total school situation encouraged the very able to achieve at a high intellectual level and developed in these young people a fairly realistic picture of their own abilities, one which the staff thought desirable and productive of continuing achievement. These students seemed ready and able to learn more effectively in situations requiring more independence and self-direction. Such a change was, of course, not made all at once. However, there has been a steady encouragement of more long-term assignments, more independent investigation of self-chosen problems, and more emphasis on making deeper relationships among the basic ideas of units.

From the same survey, staff members looked at data about underachieving high ability students. They perceived themselves somewhat more positively than did either the random school population or the low ability low achievers. Still these underachievers, who saw themselves not significantly different from high achievers on personal characteristics and

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special talents, appraised themselves as less able in intellectual qualities and in some aspects of self-reliance. They showed the least satisfaction with themselves of any of the groups and significantly less than did high achieving students of similar measured intelligence.

The school's primary roles, according to underachievers, are academic; these are much more important than developing personal or social competence. Underachievers were less satisfied with their school situation than high achieving students or the random school population. They saw their parents as more satisfied with what the school expected than with their achievement and as bringing more pressure on them to achieve.

Evidence from several school studies has shown these students as achieving more or less at an "average" level, rarely failing or barely passing, but rarely achieving at a high level. Occasionally they have been high achievers in some one subject area, but more often not. They have almost always begun to underachieve by the ninth grade and almost always persist in this pattern throughout high school. Less often leaders or members in school or out-of-school organizations than high achieving students, underachievers wished for more such opportunities.

In numbers these students are only a very few of the school's population. Still the faculty has had much interest in them. They have great potential, but are somehow at odds with themselves and their world. Placing them in the more challenging learning situations of honors classes had already been tried, but with little evidence of either greater achievement or a change in self-appraisal.

The staff thought that some one kind of learning situation might be more helpful to them. Teachers tried out three,

developed from beliefs commonly held: that underachievers might do better if (a) the teacher took a friendly interest in them as persons without exerting pressure to achieve and within flexible learning situations, (b) the teacher was impersonal but exerted pressure to achieve in a rather tightly structured curriculum, or (c) the teacher maintained a friendly, personal interest but still exerted pressure to achieve in a structured situation. None of the three groups of teachers, each trying out one of the three kinds of situations with underachievers specially assigned to them, saw much evidence of success, nor did the year-long patterns of marks suggest improvement in learning. Something beyond what is possible in classroom situations seemed needed.

At about the same time, several six weeks' series of group therapy sessions, discussion groups as they were called, were set up for ninth graders.² Enrollment was voluntary, although few refused.

Parents consented to their children's joining a group, and, as a matter of fact, held two discussion sessions of their own. Although the original plan called for bright students who had emotional problems they were unable to deal with, these students were, as it soon became apparent, largely underachievers of high ability. This total group was matched with a group of similar measured intelligence but not identified as having overly troublesome emotional problems. Group sessions were carried on by a professionally trained person and observed over closed circuit television by a few staff counselors, also professionally qualified, who then analyzed and

² The project was developed and carried out largely by Merle Ohlsen and Fred Proff of the University of Illinois, but in cooperation with their own graduate assistants and Evanston Township High School staff members.

evaluated the sessions in expectation of later conducting similar ones.

Results of Study

At present not all of the data have been finally summarized and interpreted. However, observations of professional participants and the testimonials of participating parents led the staff to believe that help in dealing with emotional problems or in clarifying self-concepts is worth further exploration.

Probably the normal school channels of more challenging classes, a school situation which values and expects achievement, or more helpful daily classroom situations have taken care of most of those who might have been underachievers. Those who do underachieve are not taken care of by these means.

Consequently, similar group counseling sessions are now carried on in one of the four large divisions of the school. In another, extensive individual counseling, again by professionally trained counselors, replaces group counseling. In a third division a special "class" is set up to give students special help with study skills in organizing and work habits, some group counseling, and some individual counseling. In the fourth division no special provisions beyond the ordinary counseling available to all students are to be made. The four systems are to be compared.

Still another offshoot of the projects here described was a growing belief that little was actually known of the basic sources of underachievement. Several members of the staff have begun a psychological study³ of a small group of high ability underachievers with the purpose of looking for attitudes toward au-

³ With the help again of Miriam Goldberg of the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation, Teachers College, Columbia University.

thority, self, and school through a series of projective tests and case histories. At the time of inviting selected students to participate, they were told that participation was entirely voluntary and that an individual interpretation of results would be made to anyone who asked for it. The eagerness with which these students accepted the invitation suggested that this study is properly directed toward basic emotional problems. Staff members have believed for some time that the use of the term "underachiever" may be more confusing than clarifying. Perhaps the proper course for the school is not that of changing the classroom learning situation of these young people but of providing the kind of counseling which helps students to free themselves of restrictions upon learning, to be open to learning. Perhaps this will be a proper course for underachievers of average or of lesser ability.

None of the projects reported here has been recounted in its entirety. Moreover, this article might have reported another series of investigations which have stemmed from the use of closed-circuit television. These were centered about new classroom structures for learning activities and about the kinds of activities most appropriate for growth in several kinds of learning. Studies are not to be ended, but are to be thought of as parts of a process of studying.

What the school has found from such studies can not be readily generalized for use in other schools, and not always even for all of its own students. Such a statement merely points up the need for continuing local school investigations of learning. They furnish evidence upon which to build better educational programs and to give both stimulation and security to a school staff, its students, and its community.

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