

Common Sense About Educating the Gifted and Talented

John Hoback and Phyllis Perry

Gifted students need special kinds of attention from teachers, particularly during adolescence.

A major concern in education today is the waste of talent among our gifted youth due to lack of challenge, recognition, and opportunity. This concern is fogged by superficiality on the part of the media and further confused by conflicting statements from self-styled experts. The complexities in the situation are compounded by bureaucratic efforts to solve the problem governmentally.

In dealing with education of the gifted and talented we must first understand that it is a complex matter consisting of relative factors, not absolutes. Some people think there is a definite separation between gifted people and the general populace. They say that only the top two or three percent of the population is gifted and significantly different from ordinary mortals. A more realistic view is that giftedness occurs in many people in different degrees and is manifested through many specific talents.

Syphers¹ reminds us that "There are different kinds and degrees of superiority manifested in infinite ways." The youngster who

wins the National Plymouth Trouble-shooting Contest in auto mechanics has gifts just as does the one who wins a National Merit Scholarship to college. Many individuals have a special song to sing. Schools need to help individuals find their song, and provide them the setting and encouragement to develop and sing it. In addition, the really exceptional need special attention.

Definition of Giftedness

The definition of giftedness therefore should be broad enough to encompass a variety of gifts and a diversity of individuals. Yet it must be specific enough to have meaning upon which to base a program. An example of such a definition is offered as follows: Gifted youth are those who are identified by their own performance, by peer recognition, and/or by adult perceptions as possessing an unusually high degree of ability, creativity, and motivation in some aspect(s) of human endeavor.

Areas in which giftedness may be shown include intellectual ability, creativity, leadership, decision making, communication, planning and forecasting, visual/performing arts, and psychomotor activity.

The potential for accomplishment by gifted individuals is outstanding to the extent that individually differentiated learning opportunities need to be provided in order for them to fully use their exceptional talents. The following factors must therefore be approached with flexibility:

- *Time.* Some gifted persons may work slowly. Quickness and cleverness should not be confused with giftedness. Also, giftedness may become evident at any stage

¹Dorothy F. Syphers, *Gifted and Talented Children: Practical Programming for Teachers and Principals* (Arlington, Va.: The Council for Exceptional Children, 1972), p. 4.

of life. Examples are plentiful of gifted adults who were thought to be slow as children, or of "whiz kids" who fizzled out as adults.

- *Cultural factors.* Because of economic affluence, an enriched home environment, linguistic differences, or other factors, sophistication may be confused with giftedness or cultural differences may hide giftedness.

- *Egos.* The ego involvements of parents, teachers, and peers when dealing with gifted students create interactions which may have profound effects. Parents who use children to aggrandize their own egos, the teacher whose fragile ego may be threatened by a precocious student, and peer group egos are all potential dangers for the gifted child.

Once identified, what does the gifted student need? Among the 13 characteristics of an adequate program for the gifted listed by Williams² is "a concern with the development of a wide variety of talents and with different levels of potential." The gifted often have, to an unusual degree, needs that are common to all students, but they also have some special needs. Gifted persons must develop understanding of themselves, of the range of talents in others, and of how to relate to others. In addition to acquiring these understandings, they need to learn the social skills of negotiating, of letting others discover things for themselves, and of not "hiding their light under a bushel." Finding the fine lines between confidence and arrogance, between pride and conceit, and between communication and condescension is very difficult.

Achievement expectations set for the average student do not fully meet the needs of gifted students. It is crucial that the gifted acquire the process skills of self-discipline, self-motivation, and self-teaching. Learning how to set goals and define problems, how to outline proc-

ess or solutions, how to seek resources, and how to evaluate both process and results are important skills for all students. They are crucial for the gifted if these students are to realize their potentials. At the same time, it is important to remember, as Renzulli³ has appropriately cautioned us, that "process is the path rather than the goal of learning."

Some other needs of gifted students include the following:

- *Challenge* for the refinement of talents. Tennis players improve their games by playing against opponents who can beat them. The violinist wants to improve when he or she hears someone who plays better. Complacency is a danger for the gifted. Stimulation is a necessity.

- *Outlets* for creative impulses. The gifted student generally has an abundance of energy and curiosity. All students have a need for self-expression, but the gifted have it to an unusual degree.

- *Opportunity* for trial-and-error experimentation. Part of acquiring the components of the learning process involves risk-taking skills and learning how to profit from mistakes.

- *Interaction* with as varied a range of people as possible. The danger of isolation, unreality, and parochialism is great. It is important that the gifted student get frequent feedback and develop understandings of all kinds of people. Very few aspects of adult life allow a person to use talents in isolation.

- *Provision of worthy adult models* in whom to place confidence. While there is danger of the gifted skipping childhood because of adult interests, it is important that they interact with many adults outside of academia.

- *Love and acceptance.* This is another of the needs common to all but of great importance to the

gifted. Feelings of rejection, resentment, and other negative emotions are especially harmful to students who already perceive themselves as being different.

Teachers of Gifted

Teachers of the gifted have some special needs, too. While taking great satisfaction in their work, these teachers must constantly keep in mind the welfare of the student. Van Cliburn's piano teacher must have enjoyed his work. Teaching Marian Anderson to sing must have been thrilling. Julius Erving made his basketball coach look awfully good. Yet it is important that teachers search for gifts and talents in all students and not focus exclusively on the stars. Some of the needs of teachers of the gifted are simply attributes of good teaching accentuated by the pressures of having gifted students. They include:

- *Skill in identification of giftedness in students.* This includes understanding the many varieties of giftedness as well as techniques for eliciting expression from students.

- *Flexibility and tolerance for the unexpected.* The teacher who is dependent on routine and predictability will probably be frustrated by the creativity of the gifted. Joy in discovery is shared by teacher and student as is disappointment in failure.

- *Secure and unthreatened personality.* Having students who

² Clifford W. Williams. "Characteristics and Objectives of a Program for the Gifted," in *Education for the Gifted*, Fifty-Seventh Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Pt. II, ed. Nelson B. Henry (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 147-65.

³ Joseph S. Renzulli, *The Enrichment Triad Model: A Guide for Developing Defensible Programs for the Gifted and Talented* (Wethersfield, Conn.: Creative Learning Press, 1977), p. 8.

know more than the teacher and/or who are capable of correcting the teacher will cause uneasiness and even resentment in an insecure teacher. Teaching the gifted is no place for the defensive or timorous.

- *Intellectual acumen.* This becomes more essential as the age of the students increases. The teacher must often learn along with the student. Understanding the process of how to learn is very important.

- *Mature judgment and leadership in handling groups.* Sensitive balancing of the needs of the group with the needs of the individual, handling of inter-peer conflicts, and helping the gifted student acquire healthy social relationships is an important part of the teacher's task.

- *Imagination and creativity.* The unique needs of the gifted require some unusual approaches to some aspects of classroom management.

Traditional patterns of school organization do not always meet the needs of the gifted. In order to create a climate that enhances the education of the gifted, the administrative leadership must recognize certain needs and break out of traditional modes of thinking and practice. This requires working with parents and staff to achieve understanding of the need for these measures.

A good program for the gifted:

1. Provides flexibility to do independent work and the opportunity to develop self-discipline. Regimentation stultifies many gifted children.

2. Provides flexibility in timing. Rigid regimentation by the clock and calendar often hinders opportunities for the gifted who will need to spend more time on some tasks and will finish others in far less time than average students.

3. Is not location bound. Many of the best opportunities exist out-

side the walls of the school building.

4. Recognizes that a curriculum design of totally delineated courses and units does not fit the needs of the gifted who need open-ended curricula which encourage exploration and innovation.

The main thing that success in school predicts accurately is more success in school. Therefore if the school is to help the gifted student achieve success outside of school it must provide:

1. Flexibility of rules and procedures. The gifted do not fit into the traditional patterns.

2. Varied and well-defined criteria for measuring achievement other than the traditional time-on-task.

3. A wealth of resources including print and non-print materials, open laboratories, private work spaces, and creative adults and peers. The gifted need outlets and opportunities for the expression of creativity in activities with human consultation from a variety of interests.

4. Legitimate opportunities for recognition of achievement without creating undue social problems among peers.

5. Tolerance for controversy. Especially at the secondary level, gifted students may explore and experiment in sensitive areas, creating public relations problems. Helping the gifted distinguish between freedom and license is often a difficult task.

Confrontation with ethical questions is inevitable when dealing with education for the gifted and talented. (Hersey's *The Child Buyer*⁴ should be required reading for all who deal in this area.) Can we effectively guard against warping an individual to fit our concept of what a gifted person should be? To what extent does the school have a right to require or coerce a student into "well-roundedness"?

The Gifted Adolescent

Special attention needs to be given to the gifted student during adolescence. These years of a person's life have been traumatic in any era, but are especially so in our present unstable society. The gifted student may experience these traumas to a more intense degree than the typical student.

It was not happenstance that many of the social aberrations of the 1960s and 1970s involved highly gifted young people. Many of those involved in rebellions, some of the most severe drug abuse cases, some of the suicides, and some psychotic sociopaths had records of being gifted. This dramatically illustrates the need for the secondary school to deal with values systems and controversial issues.

Some aspects of adolescence that place pressure to an unusual degree on the gifted include the following:

- *Physical health.* The changing hormonal balances, sexual development, and awkwardness due to erratic growth patterns all produce confusion and self-consciousness. If the gifted student already feels like an oddball, adolescence can intensify that feeling.

- *Identity crisis.* Sibling rivalry, multiple options, peer pressure, and the instability of our social structure often combine to create emotional confusion for the gifted adolescent. This is especially true in an unstable family situation. Unfortunately, family instabilities often surface in parents' lives about the time children reach adolescence.

- *Idealism.* Especially in the academic and creative areas, the gifted students' talent for abstract reasoning, their search for generalities, and their exceptional perceptivity make them very idealistic.

⁴ John Hersey, *The Child Buyer* (Des Plaines, Ill.: Bantam Books, 1975).



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They are, therefore, understandably impatient with the illogical, irrational realities of the adult world.

- *Social insecurity.* The social insecurity which is normal in adolescence is often heightened in the gifted because of their perceptivity and sensitivity toward others. The same qualities that produce fine poetry, art, music, and literature can also subject their creators to intense emotional pain and suffering, even alienation.

- *Ethical awareness.* The need of the gifted for values clarification and development of ethical awareness is especially acute in our technological, mobile, crowded society. With computers and other technology now so readily available, many sociopathic opportunities are within the reach of adolescents. Home-made nuclear devices, genetic and behavior modification, and embezzlement of funds are just a few of the staggering possibilities.

Each school administrator needs to embark on a program to lead the faculty in working out the best program for that particular student body. This program falls into three stages. Each staff must assess how intensively they need to dwell at each stage.

1. Understand education of the gifted and establish goals. Achieve staff consensus on definitions. Discuss issues and reach agreement on if, and to what extent the gifted will be pulled out into separate programs and what the gifted program is to accomplish.

2. Design activities in the

regular curriculum that allow for the identification of gifted and encourage achievement by all students.

3. Design programs for the cultivation and development of talent in those identified as gifted and talented. Develop inventory resources. Decide upon evaluative criteria and methods.

Ultimately, each student who has been identified as having talents that warrant special attention will need to have an individual educational plan. Skill in developing such plans will require special training for teachers. Those who

are concerned with elitism may take heart from the remarks made by Edwin W. Martin,⁵ deputy commissioner for the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, U.S. Office of Education. Martin argues that "some of the good instructional practices that are designed for very bright children will be helpful in improving instructional practices for all children." He goes on to say that "gifted programs will tend to become a reform element in elementary and secondary education."

Programming for gifted and talented students must be fluid and dynamic. It should be thought of as a verb, not a noun. It is always evolving, requires constant assessment, modification, and nourishment to grow and to remain healthy. *EJ*

⁵ Edwin W. Martin, *Education Update*, Issue #5 (New York: Scholastic Magazines, Inc., Fall 1979), p. 2.

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instruction and praise and encouragement as part of indirect instruction. These teacher evaluational behaviors are conceptually and empirically distinct from the dimension of direct versus indirect instruction. In fact, to the extent that they may be related at all, praise and encouragement form part of the complex of behaviors that define direct instruction, as Rosenshine has pointed out in several publications.

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Back to the Classroom

I vacated the teaching profession to pursue what I thought would be a more challenging, rewarding career. How wrong I was!

Educational Leadership, presented to me by my graduate professor, inspired me to renewed dreams and goals. The articles, especially those on "leadership" (March 1979 issue) by Gordon Cawelti and James MacGregor Burns, raised in me a consciousness that had been suppressed for a year now.

Thank you. To the classroom, I will return.

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