Overview

RONALD S. BRANDT

NOVEMBER 1981
VOLUME 39
NUMBER 2

ISSN 0013-1784

A few nights ago I watched Zubin Mehta conduct the New York Philharmonic. Without a score, he confidently led the musicians through one flawless performance after another. Mehta grew up in India, where his father understandably discouraged a career in Western music, but he persevered to become a smashing success as head of a great symphony orchestra.

What accounts for such monumental talent? What contributes to development of people like Mikhail Baryshnikov, Martin Luther King, Katherine Hepburn, and Herman Wouk?

Benjamin Bloom and his students at the University of Chicago have been studying talented persons to learn how they became so superbly skilled. In this issue they report findings on swimmers, pianists, and mathematicians, comparing circumstances of their development with learning conditions in schools.

At first glance, it might seem paradoxical that a man widely known for championing mastery learning—which assumes that students can be equally successful—should turn his attention to a tiny elite. Bloom's purpose, though, is consistent with his views on mastery learning and his earlier work on human changeability: he wants to know how to produce more talented people. If others were raised under similar circumstances, he asks, might not they be equally talented?

When Bloom compares talent development with schooling, school practices naturally come out second best. He concedes it's probably unfair to compare them but does it anyhow, believing that even minor changes in schools may bring higher levels of talent in society.

Julian Stanley is equally concerned with developing talent, but his views on education are somewhat different from Bloom's. He is preoccupied with helping mathematically gifted youngsters move through the secondary math curriculum as quickly as possible, so he wouldn't agree that able students should be held back so all can master the curriculum equally well. And though he wants better learning conditions for "mathematically precocious youth," he thinks their talent is mostly what they were born with, not something they have learned.

A brilliant psychologist and mathematician himself (he is author of a number of books and articles on measurement and statistics with titles like "An Important Similarity Between Biserial r and the Brogden-Cureton-Glass Biserial r for Ranks"), Stanley knows from experience how plodding through the standard math curriculum can bore a mathematically talented teenager. In the last ten years he has located thousands of students and helped them zip through high school courses to higher level work. Tall and gaunt, the 63-year-old former Georgian talks rapidly, citing test statistics and illustrating his contentions with accounts of mathematics prodigies and their remarkable histories.

Stanley helped start a three-week residential summer program for gifted students at St. Mary's College in Maryland. Senior Editor Nancy Olson visited the program in July to describe its unusual features.

Last year we invited readers to describe procedures used to plan curriculum in their schools. From the resulting contributions, we chose some for this month's special feature on curriculum planning practices. One of the more unusual is an account by Colonel Richard Evans of progress by the U.S. Marine Corps in Instructional Systems Development, which incorporates mastery learning. Two other articles report glowingly on using mastery learning in elementary and secondary schools. Tanis Knight explains how schools in the Vancouver, Washington, area resolved practical concerns related to the mastery approach, and Joan Abrams reports impressive gains in test scores by the Redbank, New Jersey, schools from emphasizing outcome-based instruction. ■