

The Challenge of the Gifted Child

Theron Freese

As they identify and meet more adequately the needs of gifted children, teachers in a superior school system are beginning to give better attention to every other pupil as an individual with special needs and special gifts.

MEETING the needs of gifted children has always been a matter of real concern in the Long Beach, California, Public Schools—as it is in other school systems. Many fine things have been done for the gifted child in Long Beach over a considerable period of time. However, in January of 1951 a concerted effort was begun to develop a program which would ensure a sounder, more consistent approach to meeting the challenge of the gifted child. This is a brief progress report on that project.

Children have numerous kinds of gifts, all of them valuable and important both to the individual and to society. One of the first tasks confronting the steering committee appointed by Superintendent of Schools Douglas A. Newcomb was that of defining for the district the meaning of "gifted child."

In examining the various types of giftedness, the committee gave careful consideration to the adequacy of existing provisions in different areas. It also noted the dangers inherent in spreading an undertaking too thin, especially when a project is to be carried on by people already busy with many important activities.

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The committee concluded that children with gifts in such areas as music, art, dancing, public speaking and leadership already had excellent opportunities. The members decided, therefore, that the gifted child should be defined as the one with high academic or intellectual potential and that the project should be aimed at better meeting the needs of that individual. This in no way denied the importance of every child. Nor did it ignore the many fine things already being done for the intellectually superior child.

The most important results of this undertaking have not, of course, been publications, or reports, or programs on paper, but rather growth on the part of people as they have worked together in the committees which have shared the task.

Identifying the Gifted

The original steering committee surveyed the available literature. It found, of course, that identification, grouping, acceleration and enrichment were the magic words. All of these were controversial in the literature and conflicting points of view were amply supported. The need, manifestly, was to do something for children, not to engage in debate.

Problems of identification consumed many meetings. Many purely arbitrary

decisions had to be made, for gifted children are not a discrete category of individuals. They are part of a continuous scale, and they vary greatly amongst themselves. But a line must be drawn somewhere.

It was finally agreed to identify the top 5 percent of the elementary school population involved and the top 3 percent of the secondary school population. Cutting scores were established for the intelligence and reading tests used in the district which gave those percentages by including every child who qualified by either test or by both. For a number of reasons, especially because the percentage was somewhat higher than that frequently associated with the expression, the term "gifted" was replaced for the project by "very superior."

A comprehensive data sheet was devised to be completed for all pupils identified by existing test scores in grades 4-12. A major purpose of the data sheet was to inform the classroom teacher that the pupil had been identified and to make pertinent data easily available without his always having to consult the cumulative record.

Teachers were asked to submit lists of those pupils whom they considered to be "very superior" in academic ability. Many names appeared on these lists which were not supported by test data. These pupils were re-tested. Only in those cases where the new test data qualified the pupils were they considered as identified. This is still a bone of contention as some teachers feel certain their judgment is correct regardless of test scores. On the other hand, teachers were frequently amazed when pupils not on their lists were identified as

"very superior" by the test scores. This helped greatly to point up the need for the project.

Committees Tackle Problems

At this point working committees were established in the elementary, junior high school, and senior high segments. These were cross-sectional committees involving teachers, librarians, counselors, supervisors and administrators. They met bi-weekly for half a year. The literature was again combed by these groups as they worked on the problems of grouping, acceleration and enrichment. The final reports of these subcommittees were articulated by the three chairmen and the original steering committee. Meanwhile many of the schools had faculty committees at work on the problem. In the high schools many departmental meetings were being devoted to this area.

Grouping

In considering the problem of grouping it was realized that there is no such thing as a homogeneous group. The conclusion was that grouping was not the answer to meeting the challenge of these children. In the elementary schools, where classes are thoroughly heterogeneous, it was agreed that the identified pupils might be scattered evenly throughout the rooms of that grade level in the school or might be concentrated as all or part of one of the three working groups in one room. A carefully balanced experiment was conducted testing both methods, and neither was found to be particularly better or worse than the other.

In the junior and senior high schools, where some degree of ability grouping

already existed, it was agreed to experiment with academic sections of identified and near-identified pupils, making certain that the pupils involved would be heterogeneously grouped in non-academic class situations. Numerous elective classes were already highly selective by the very nature of the subject involved.

Acceleration

Acceleration was considered carefully by all three subcommittees. They concluded that this device was no major solution to the problem. However, in studying practice within the district they found that in the revulsion against the excessive acceleration of three or four decades ago the pendulum had swung to the point where essentially no special promotion was taking place. It was the final joint committee recommendation that each identified "very superior" pupil be considered by his principal and counselor each year with a view to the possibility of accelerating him.

In those cases where they feel that the child would profit from special promotion and he is physically mature, has shown good personal-social development, has made superior subject achievement, and where the parents consent, acceleration will be worked out. However, it was agreed that this would normally provide only one year's acceleration in the total program and practically never more than two years—one in the elementary division and one in the secondary division. This would mean college entrance at 17 or 16. For the majority of those identified as "very superior" there will continue to be no acceleration.

Enrichment

The area of enrichment, all the committees agreed, is the crux of the problem. In examining the literature they reached the conclusion that this was one of those topics about which everyone talks and writes and about which very few actually do anything. Teachers were urged to provide new and extended experiences and not to fall into the trap of thinking that enrichment means more of the same. Enrichment does not necessarily mean something added on top of the regular activities. Actually, it may mean substitution of activities where the child does not need the regular work.

Upon the recommendation of the three subcommittees, all teachers in the district were urged to submit written accounts of enrichment practices which they had used, which they had known other teachers to use, or which they thought would be worth trying. A summer workshop group composed of elementary, junior high and senior high school teachers analyzed these accounts carefully and developed selected examples in various subject areas and at various grade levels. These written accounts were not intended to be a reservoir from which teachers would draw rigid practices but rather a source of stimulation to creative activity on the part of teachers.

Then, at the end of a year and a half of intensive work, three mimeographed publications were issued—one for each segment—each entitled, "The Very Superior Pupil—A Temporary Outline." Each of these reports contained a brief history of the project, the definitions and policies established, the agreements

and recommendations of the committees, and the enrichment suggestions appropriate to that segment. The enrichment section composed the bulk of each publication. Each teacher received a copy at the opening of the fall term.

At a meeting of all principals and supervisors, ways and means were discussed for putting the project into high gear. It was agreed that the principal was a key person in this as in all instructional matters, and that he would be responsible for the "very superior" pupil program at his school. He would also have considerable latitude in determining with his faculty what particular approach they would take for the year. It was understood that each school would be expected to report its progress at the close of the year.

A number of interesting enrichment practices and devices were already in operation. More have now been started. A few examples are the following: Special literature classes have been set up in elementary schools for select sixth grade pupils who meet regularly with the school librarian to discuss books and share their reading. This is also being done by large groups in two senior high schools on a no-credit, after-school basis. All the senior high schools have special mathematics and science teams which meet outside class time.

The junior high schools have been working on a program in which identified pupils complete the two years of seventh and eighth grade arithmetic in either one year or a year and a half, thereby freeing time for enrichment through additional electives. In one junior high school identified pupils have completed introductory algebra and plane geometry in the ninth grade,

each subject taking only one semester. This will free time for these pupils for an additional year's elective in the senior high school.

One of the most interesting and promising types of enrichment was suggested by high school teachers. Identified pupils with special interests not adequately provided for in regular classes meet with an interested teacher one day per week during that teacher's conference period. The pupil misses his regularly assigned class for that period on that day. But this creates no problem for these pupils. The period is devoted to discussion, encouragement and the steering of reading on the subject. Examples of topics chosen are geology, astronomy, navigation and nuclear fission.

Instructional guides issued by the district have always given some attention to enrichment activities for the abler pupil. Upon recommendation of the committees, special attention is now being given to this matter whenever a new teaching guide is issued or an old one is revised.

The reports submitted at the end of the year by the schools were most encouraging. The project is only well begun. But good things are happening for children. Practically every teacher in the district has given more thought to the gifted child and his problems than ever before. Pupils who are not achieving according to their ability are a matter of more general concern now that they have been identified.

Best of all, this attention by teachers to "very superior" pupils as individuals with special needs means inevitably better attention to every other pupil as an individual with special needs.

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