The Gifted Poor

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ANYONE attempting to find published research data or empirical opinion on gifted poor children will make an interesting discovery—there isn't much available. Such a paucity of research and general information in an area of major importance suggests a limited perception about the gifted that may be causing educators and researchers to ignore a potentially significant number of poor but gifted children. This perception has no doubt grown out of the practice of identifying gifted children primarily on the basis of IQ scores, along with the belief that anyone coming from an economically deprived environment must categorically be behind in development in relation to verbal and visual stimuli, mental maturity, etc.

As a result, efforts to identify or discover gifted poor students are practically nonextant, not to mention the lack of enrichment opportunities so vital to the exponential growth of which only the gifted are capable. Instead, the gifted poor are ignored, remain unchallenged and unrewarded, and survive or drop out of our school systems with acute feelings of frustration and despair. So, in fact, our schools function as if there were no gifted students among the poor and strongly reflect the view that gifted students tend to come from white middle and upper class backgrounds characterized by successful parents and a wealth of stimulating resources and experiences.

This article attempts to reemphasize some of the already well known and not so well known dimensions that must be taken into consideration when thinking about and classifying gifted students. It also presents some admittedly intuitive suggestions for identifying and working with gifted poor students. Before proceeding, however, it should be understood that as used herein, the terms *poor children, poor students,* and *gifted poor* refer specifically to individuals from low-income families. These terms are all inclusive in that they encompass students of all races and cultures found in America.

Data on Poor Children

The fact that poor children do less well on all standardized tests of achievement is no longer a debatable issue. The data supplied by the Coleman report of 1966 clearly show that poor black, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and American Indian children as a whole do not perform as well as white students on all measures of academic achieve-

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ment. In addition, studies such as that carried out by the New York State Pupil Evaluation Program in Ithaca, New York, show that children in poor, rural neighborhoods containing both whites and blacks perform at a lower level than children in the middle class suburban areas (Ginsburg, 1972).

IQ test results follow the same pattern. Study after study has shown that poor children score lower on IQ tests than children from families of middle or upper class incomes.

Since gifted students are and have been identified primarily through IQ scores, the question then becomes one of whether or not the differences in IQ reflect significant differences in intellectual ability. If we accept Paul Torrance's (1965) emphasis on creative behavior as a major dimension of giftedness, the IQ test cannot seriously be regarded as a totally adequate means of identifying gifted children. As Ginsburg (1972) has recently pointed out in his book *The Myth of the Deprived Child*, the types of items used in IQ tests require persistence and endurance rather than creative mental abilities. Supportive evidence of this was provided by Getzels and Jackson (1962) in studies that showed a low correlation between IQ scores and creativity. In other words, high IQ children are not necessarily creative, nor are low IQ children categorically devoid of creativity. If creativity, then, is a fundamental attribute of giftedness (and many psychologists now believe it is), the IQ test is of little help in identifying creative children.

Much has already been written about IQ or achievement test construction and what such tests actually measure or do not measure. Nevertheless, all of us need to be reminded of the problems and difficulties inherent in interpreting results obtained from tests designed to measure the mental abilities and achievement of middle and upper class children when these tests are given to children of the poor. Therefore, it may be worthwhile reviewing a few studies that have identified major influences on the performance of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds during test situations.

Areas of Concern

Until recently, psychologists were agreed on only two major environmental influences on IQ differentials—child rearing practices and cultural differences. Peter Watson (Richardson and Spears, 1972) suggests a third—"differences in motivation due to chronically poor race relations," which could be modified to read "poor race and social class relations."

The evidence presented by Watson is rather convincing. He begins by pointing out studies that have shown how the individual characteristics of the test administrator can affect test results. Some of these characteristics, once revealed, can be controlled, such as changing from a cold, formal introduction to a friendlier and warmer initial meeting with students before testing. Unfortunately, not all characteristics that affect test results can be controlled. These include such things as age, sex, social class, and race.

In building his case to show that poor race relations also affect test results, Watson reminds us that studies conducted as early as 1936 have clearly shown that blacks scored a lower average score when tested by whites

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than when tested by blacks. But it was not until the 1960's that psychologists who were aware of this situation began to recognize that perhaps this distortion of test results was more than just a technicality in testing procedure. By 1960 considerable data had been accumulated relative to the effects of stress on behavior and intelligence.

In addition, psychologists were beginning to accept the notion that a test situation should be regarded as a microcosm of society and that the interpersonal contact achieved during testing, especially if the administrator is of a different race from that of those being tested, will mirror the relationships between these racial groups in society at large. If this relation is stressful in society, one can expect it to carry over to test situations.

This carry-over is also reflected in the expectations students have about their chances of success or failure in a test situation. That is, some students are convinced that they will do badly even before seeing a test and, as a result, do not demonstrate their full capabilities. Cronbach (1970) describes a study carried out with black undergraduate students in a segregated university in a Southern state. This study simply varied the directions so that they included either the statement "You will be compared with students at other colleges and universities throughout the United States," or "with other students at this university." As might be presumed, those students who thought they were to be compared with local norms did better than those expecting a nationwide comparison. No such differences were obtained when this study was carried out with white students.

So, a pattern emerges that cannot be denied. Societal assumptions about individuals belonging to lower socioeconomic classes do influence the results of whatever measures are taken of these individuals. Likewise, the real life stresses brought about by the relationships between socioeconomic classes in society at large are somehow transferred to some degree to test situations where this societal relationship is reflected in the makeup of the students and the test administrators.

Such evidence dictates that new avenues be sought for identifying gifted poor children and, in fact, for assessing the talents and capabilities of all poor children without the distortion of results caused by socioeconomic disadvantage.

Promising Developments

In looking at what the future portends in the area of identifying specially endowed, poor children, some recent applications of advanced technology provide us with a glimpse of what may become common practice in identifying all such children, regardless of socioeconomic class.

The work carried out by John Ertl at the University of Ottawa, recently reported in *Phi Delta Kappan* (Tracy, 1972), must be considered as a possible alternative to the present procedures used for measuring mental acuity. His use of a battery-operated neural efficiency analyzer to measure the efficiency and the speed with which information is transmitted from one neuron to another in the brain at least eliminates many of the societal, external influences now biasing our IQ test results. The EI or *Ertl Index* could be more reliable and valid than the present IQ score.

A new IQ test developed by Leon Rosenberg, a Johns Hopkins University psychologist, shows considerable promise in eliminating cultural advantages in measuring intelligence.

This new test, called the Johns Hopkins Perceptual Test, is designed to be "culture free" by eliminating the possibility that preconceived geometric forms which might be subject to cultural influences will appear in the test. These forms, which students must match by picking an identical form, are created by a complicated method under rigid rules. Typically, two random numbers are picked as coordinates and a point is plotted on a graph. Four such points are plotted in the same manner, and a form is created by the drawing of straight lines between the points. More complex forms are created by using more points.

Dr. Rosenberg's work with Project Head

Start showed no difference between the intelligence of black slum children and that of white middle class children. When this test was given to 37 white middle class children in a private nursery school, their test scores correlated closely with scores obtained on standard intelligence tests. For 52 black slum children, the results differed significantly from standard tests. Even though Dr. Rosenberg's test has not been fully tested and standardized, the high correlation with other intelligence tests when administered to white middle class children is extremely encouraging.

Unfortunately, such efforts as the *Ertl Index* and the *Johns Hopkins Perceptual Test* still leave us with the problem of identifying gifted, innate talents that may have no correlation with neuron efficiency or IQ.

A New Perspective

Assuming, then, that the arguments and evidence against present procedures for identifying gifted poor children are sufficiently convincing to make us want to develop new ones, how should we go about it? Obviously, we must begin by deriving and applying a broader concept of giftedness that provides us with the perspective necessary to discover or identify gifted children from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Some significant work has already been done in this direction, relating to the identification and development of innate "talents" in youngsters; however, these efforts become somewhat distorted by the confusion between a "gifted talent" and achievement. For example, we are all familiar with the youngster whose parents have forced him or her into taking piano or violin lessons. Through perseverance, hard work, and parental pressure, the youngster achieves a level of performance of which both can be proud. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to notice the stilted, uninspired, though mechanically perfect, performance of such achievement.[1]

Our job, it appears, is to identify the inspired and creatively talented individuals among a vast array of talents regardless of IQ scores obtained through standardized tests. But to which gifted students should we address ourselves, and how will giftedness in these talents be recognized?

Joseph P. Rice (1970), a former co-director of Project Talent in California, has compiled an interesting compendium of talent classifications in his book *The Gifted: Developing Total Talent*. Even though his main emphasis is on academic, creative, and psychosocial talent, he does state that talents not included under those categories will vary markedly from region to region. He further indicates that continual talent searches need to be undertaken in order for a school to identify its indigenous talent pool.

What this implies is that identified talents will vary with time and place and that talents not previously identified or even considered may reveal themselves unexpectedly. Such conditions, then, preclude a static and totally predetermined identification of talents as well as a single source of participants. But what does all this have to do with identifying the gifted poor who have not been recognized and selected in the past to participate in special programs for the gifted?

In view of what has been reviewed earlier concerning the performance of poor children on achievement and IQ tests and the incapability of IQ tests to assess creative behavior, and considering the broader concept of giftedness now being accepted by an increasing number of concerned educators, a certain notion presents itself that perhaps merits serious consideration in our efforts to identify gifted poor children.

A Revealing Environment

Rare indeed is the teacher who has not been pleasantly surprised when accidentally encountering an "average" or "below average" student performing at an unexpectedly high level outside the classroom. This surprise is further enhanced by the fact that the student is often involved in an activity not formerly identified with the student (for example, the struggling history student who, unknown to the teacher, is an accomplished

[1] My thanks to my colleague Professor William McDougall for pointing out this distinction.

cellist). Likewise, it is not that uncommon a phenomenon to find that a passive, unresponsive student in the classroom is elsewhere, through some miracle of transformation, an outspoken leader among his peers.

Such diversity in performance adds empirical evidence to the studies mentioned earlier which together suggest the need to assess gifted, talented behavior among poor children in an environment that eliminates or significantly reduces the constraints and influences associated with socioeconomic conflict. We perhaps should begin thinking in terms of establishing a "revealing environment"; that is, one that is totally familiar and unthreatening for poor children and that permits the full range of expression of latent talents.

Perhaps part of this environment might have to exist off school campuses with input from trained observers and facilitators from the same socioeconomic class background as that of the students. These facilitators would serve as liaisons between the off-campus settings and the schools. Such individuals could also serve as liaisons between available community resources and the students to provide opportunities not readily available in schools that now become accessible for voluntary exploration by students.

Whatever opportunities are provided, on or off campus, they must be made available in a noncompetitive, self-paced, self-actualizing environment that will allow latent, gifted talents to reveal themselves. That is, the environment must be such that students are not competing with one another, and especially not with youngsters from a higher socioeconomic group. Furthermore, variable blocks of free time must be made available for children to reveal their innate approach tendencies toward new and attractive stimuli in time with their own unique rhythm of expression. And, finally, this environment must be open-ended enough to allow exploration and its attendant enjoyment or rejection without external evaluation.

Of course, provisions must be made in such an environment for offering students additional learning opportunities above and beyond those established for identifying gifted youngsters. For when contact is made with a gifted and unique talent that is revealed to the child for the first time, it may express itself like an all-consuming fire that will die without enough fuel to feed on.

The types of opportunities that may be provided in this proposed "revealing environment" could initially be identified by liaison personnel through focus interviews with youngsters that zero in on what they would like to do if they had the chance, or what they enjoy doing most. This, plus intuitive additions of experiential opportunities that could be added or removed on a trial basis, would permit a wide field of exploration for youngsters that live in a highly constrained experiential environment.

The realities of school finance, time, and unexpected pressures will undoubtedly vary the number and quality of exploratory opportunities that can be provided in any one school or school district. Nevertheless, the effort is the thing, and perhaps of greatest importance is the new awareness and concern about the inadequacies of standard measures of ability. If this concern can now be shifted to initiate unique efforts for identifying the invisible gifted poor, we will have taken a giant step forward in salvaging one of our country's most neglected resources.

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