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Talent Potential in Minority Group Students

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Abstract: Pointing out the nature and scope of talent loss among low socioeconomic and minority group members, the author identifies and explores some of the issues in the retrieval of talent potential. Strategies are suggested for identifying and maximizing the development of this unidentified and understimulated segment of our school population. Identification procedures are based on a broadened conception of talent, and the author discusses some new, more appropriate instruments as well as more extensive uses of existing instruments such as tests of creativity. Suggestions for developing talent potential are discussed in terms of teacher characteristics and curricular relevancy.

> It seems probable that our society discovers and develops no more than perhaps half its potential intellectual talent.
> *Robert J. Havighurst (1961)*

There can be little doubt that our nation's largest untapped source of human intelligence and creativity is to be found among the vast numbers of individuals in the lower socioeconomic levels, particularly among the approximately 20 million black Americans. It would be a monumental task to explore all of the causes that have contributed to our failure to discover, stimulate, and make the most efficient use of this neglected source of talent. Intensified efforts to overcome this failure are based in part on the simple realization that an invaluable natural resource is being wasted daily by a system of education that has shut its eyes and turned its back on the children of the poor. The by-products of this waste are evident in unprecedented urban turmoil, in unemployment and underemployment, in rising crime and delinquency rates, and most importantly, in the human despair that accompanies thwarted expression and creativity.

Although massive efforts have been directed toward overcoming the inadequacies of educational programing for the culturally disadvantaged, relatively little attention has been focused on those youngsters within the total population of disadvantaged youth who have unusually high potentials for learning and creativity. The numerous compensatory programs that deal mainly with remediation in the basic skill areas and preparation for entrance into the labor market generally have overlooked the talent potential that exists in lower socioeconomic and minority group youngsters. A number of persons have called attention to the dimensions of this untapped source of talent (Douglass, 1969; Torrance, 1968), and few would disagree that the time is long overdue for a systematic nationwide effort in talent retrieval. This article describes the dimensions of the talent potential among low socioeconomic and minority group members, and explores some of the issues and strategies involved in identifying talent potential and

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constructing educational programs which will maximize the development of this unidentified and understimulated segment of our school population.

The Nature and Scope of Talent Loss

What exactly are the dimensions of the talent potential among minority groups, and what will be the costs of further delay in providing opportunities for the expression of such potential? A large body of accumulated research clearly indicates that gifted and talented children can be found in all racial groups and at all of society's economic levels. With respect to family background, Terman's (1925–1959) study of gifted children showed that, in actual numbers, the nonprofessional segment of the general population contains more than twice as many gifted children as the professional group. Regarding racial and ethnic origin, Miles (1954) reported that many high IQ black children can be found in black communities. Studies by Jenkins (1948) and Witty and Jenkins (1934) indicated that race per se is not a limiting factor in intellectual development, that black children with high IQ's come from a variety of backgrounds, and that educational achievement of highly able black children resembles that of other gifted youngsters. In more recent years, the works of Hunt (1961), Bloom (1964), and others have called attention to the significant role that environment plays in intellectual development. The massive number of research studies summarized in these works have crucial implications for the role that education can and should play in developing the high potential of youngsters from all races and social classes.

In addition to those studies concerned mainly with the older or more traditional definitions of giftedness (i.e., giftedness in terms of IQ), a rapidly expanding body of literature dealing with a broader conception of talent development has recognized that children from depressed areas, low income groups, and racial minorities probably represent our largest unmined source of creative talent (Passow, 1966; Torrance, 1968). The importance of identifying and developing creative talents at all levels of society has caused leading philosophers and educators to focus their attention on this problem. In an article entitled, "Is America Neglecting Her Creative Minority?" Toynbee (1964) commented:

> To give a fair chance to potential creativity is a matter of life and death for any society. This is all-important, because the outstanding creative ability of a fairly small percentage of the population is mankind's ultimate asset, and the only one with which only man has been endowed [p. 4].

It cannot be denied that society stands to benefit from a systematic investment in the development of this vast source of untapped talent; yet, major inequalities of opportunity are still evident in our schools. The inferiority of existing schools for low income and minority group children has been indicated clearly by studies which show that the longer children stay in these schools, the further behind they become in achievement and the wider the gap grows between what they should know and their actual level of performance (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfeld, & York, 1966; Sexton, 1961). Average drops in measured intelligence of as much as 20 points have been recorded as black children progress (or perhaps it should be regress) through grades (Passow, Goldberg, & Tannenbaum, 1967). Other studies dealing with delinquency, level of aspiration, self concept, aggressiveness, alienation, and a host

of other variables reveal similarly ominous findings about the current state of the school situation for disadvantaged youngsters (Coleman et al., 1966; Mathis, 1969; Williams & Byars, 1968). Under circumstances such as these, even the most highly able and well motivated student's from minority groups surely must lose faith in a system where the probability of nonsuccess is so high.

In spite of these grim statistics, there is a growing realization that a wealth of creative talent is lying unidentified and understimulated in schools that serve urban ghetto and rural poor youngsters. The decade of the 1960's may well be remembered as a period in our history when the education establishment began to pay serious attention to the detrimental effects which result from the inferior opportunities that exist for a large segment of our population. Books such as *How Children Fail* (Holt, 1966), *Death at an Early Age* (Kozol, 1967), *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), and *Crisis in the Classroom* (Silberman, 1970) have literally shocked us into the reality of the situation. If we look upon the activities and pronouncements of the Sixties as the first step in a direct frontal attack upon the problem of educational equality, then the heightened interest of that decade certainly can be regarded with optimism. But our view should not be blurred by such optimism; for scattered attempts to "do something" for the culturally disadvantaged thus far represent little more than the proverbial "drop in the bucket" when compared to the great number of youngsters whose day to day school experience is nothing short of an educational and psychological disaster. If, on the other hand, the ground work laid during the Sixties has not been a false start, then action to correct this crucial problem in our schools remains the challenge and the task before us. The remainder of this article deals with some of the work that has been done in the area of identifying talent potential among low socioeconomic and minority group youngsters and developing educational programs to help this talent potential be realized.

Identifying Talent Potential

A number of psychologists and educators who have wrestled with the problem of defining human abilities have advanced the thesis that a variety of talents contribute to the accomplishments of man. Early definitions of giftedness based solely on measures of intelligence have largely ignored the existence of a much broader spectrum of highly valuable human characteristics. In view of the heavy cultural loading of most standardized tests of intelligence and achievement, it is apparent that an identification process that depends mainly on traditional measures of performance will discriminate against youngsters who have not participated fully in the dominant culture. Attempts to circumvent this problem through the construction of culture free or culture fair intelligence tests have failed to yield measures that neutralize the influence of important factors in mental growth, such as perceptual and linguistic deprivation, the repression of constructive play activities, family insecurity and limited adult role models, and the effects of inferior school experiences. Thus, it seems safe to conclude that both traditional tests and so called culture free tests have had the effect of creating a limited conception of the abilities which our society values. Both reflect the emphasis which the dominant culture and formal education place on the ability to deal effectively with language, symbols, and abstraction.

A Broadened Conception of Talent

In recent years a growing number of theorists and researchers have provided us with a much broadened conception of the nature of human abilities. Foremost among the newer models is the well known structure of the intellect cube developed by Guilford (1967) and his associates. This model consists of a three dimensional classification system designed to encompass and organize 120 possible talents according to (a) the type of mental operation employed, (b) the content involved in the thinking process, and (c) the type of product which results from the act of thinking. Williams and Eberle (1967) developed a similar model which identified 23 classroom teaching strategies that can be used to develop seven productive thinking operations in various subject matter areas, while Taylor's (1968) multiple talent model isolated an additional set of distinguishable abilities in areas such as creativity, decision making, planning, forecasting, and communications.

Taylor suggested a grouping of talents based on the world-of-work needs and pointed out that if we limit ourselves solely to academic talent, only the top 10 percent will fall into the highly gifted class and only 50 percent of our students will have a chance to be above average (i.e., above the median). On the other hand, if we measure students across several different talents, the percent of highly gifted students will increase tremendously:

> When we arrange a group of students on each of several talent ladders, those at the bottom of the old academic talent ladder—those heretofore labeled "educationally deprived"—will rise as a subgroup to be almost average as far as each of the other five types of talents are concerned. A third or more of them are likely to be above average on each new talent ladder. Since we have not been reaching these students, we should try eliciting as many different talents as possible. If we succeed, then those who had not been flourishing in the old talent area will discover some areas where they are promising individuals and perhaps even star performers [Taylor, 1968, p. 68].

Thus, the application of a multiple talent approach in our schools will result in greater numbers of students achieving higher degrees of success both in and out of school. According to Taylor, a natural by-product of this approach will be an increase in the student's individuality. Each student will experience and display his own unique profile across talents and will thus become more self directed.

Suggestions for Identification of Multiple Talents

The taxonomies developed by Bloom (1956) and Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1964) provide another classification system for isolating cognitive and affective processes that clearly identify dimensions of man's repertoire of behaviors. These behaviors often are not measured by traditional tests of intelligence or are "buried" in the general scores which many of these tests yield. A good example is the limited range of abilities sampled by the *Scholastic Aptitude Tests* (SAT). According to a recent report by the Commission on Tests (1970), the SAT has been found to be mainly a measure of developed verbal, mathematical, and reasoning abilities, and thus, it fails to take account of the educational potential of college applicants who for one reason or another have been educationally disadvantaged. The Commission has recognized the need for a

broader conception of college admission criteria and has suggested that the SAT be expanded to include measures of the following abilities:

1. Adaptation in new learning situations.
2. Problem solving in situations that require varied cognitive styles and skills.
3. Analysis, search, and synthesis behaviors.
4. Information management, processing, and utilization skills.
5. Nonstandard information pools.
6. Comprehension through experiencing, listening, and looking, as well as reading.
7. Expression through artistic, oral, nonverbal, and graphic, as well as written symbolization.
8. Characteristics of temperament.
9. Sources and status of motivation.
10. Habits of work and task involvement under varying conditions of demand [Commission on Tests, vol. 2, p. 44].

The Commission further suggested that test procedures should be redesigned (a) to broaden the varieties of subject matter, competencies, and skills assessed; (b) to examine achievement in a variety of contexts; (c) to make greater use of openended and unstructured indicators of achievement; and (d) to assess nonacademic achievement such as social competence, coping skills, avocational skills, and artistic, athletic, political, and mechanical skills.

With these and other models to assist in defining and classifying a variety of human abilities, the next step should consist of the selection or development of appropriate instruments to identify a broad range of talent potential. Bruch (1971) suggested using Guilford's model to diagnose different patterns of abilities reflected in existing test items and to specify factors and clusters of factors that represent the strengths and weaknesses of particular individuals or cultural groups. Tests then could be designed to fit cultural strengths, and such tests could be used to measure both conventional abilities and those talents which are valued most by an individual's own culture. Bruch further suggested a case study battery for the identification of gifted disadvantaged youngsters that would include a profile of their strengths and developmental needs, ratios of time in school to developmental levels and achievement levels, and an analysis of positive and negative factors (both sociocultural and personal) which either enhance or inhibit further development of talents.

Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking

Additional strategies for identifying hidden talent among the disadvantaged have been developed by Torrance (1969). Through the use of instruments such as the *Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking* (Torrance, 1966), youngsters are given an opportunity to respond in terms unique to their own culture. Such an approach avoids the problem of evaluating the child through experiences that are common to the dominant culture, and at the same time, helps to create a psychologically safe atmosphere which will motivate him to put forth his greatest effort. On the basis of research studies carried out with disadvantaged groups, Torrance (1964, 1967) has

identified the following set of creative characteristics which he found to occur with relatively high frequency among disadvantaged children:

1. High nonverbal fluency and originality.
2. High creative productivity in small groups.
3. Adeptness in visual art activities.
4. High creativity in movement, dance, and other physical activities.
5. Ability to be highly motivated by games, music, sports, humor, and concrete objects.
6. Language rich in imagery.

Research conducted by Torrance and his associates over a period of 12 years has led to the conclusion that children of economically deprived and minority cultures seemed to perform as well as those from any other group. In a recent review of the literature dealing with the use of the *Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking*, Torrance (1971) summarized the results of 15 research studies which focused on the creative abilities of low socioeconomic and minority group children. Generally, these studies indicated that although whites surpassed blacks on verbal measures, there were no significant differences on scores of figural fluency, flexibility, and originality; and in some cases, the so called disadvantaged groups surpassed the middle class groups. Although measures of intelligence have been found consistently to correlate positively with socioeconomic status, the research summarized by Torrance seems to indicate that creativity bears little relationship to factors such as race, social class, and level of parental education. Thus, a convincing argument is presented for a relatively culture free method of identifying a bountiful supply of creative talent. Torrance expressed the belief that in many ways the life experiences of low socioeconomic youngsters may actually be more supportive of creative achievement than the experiences of more advantaged children.

> Their lack of expensive toys and play materials contributes to their skill in improvising with common materials. The large families and life styles of disadvantaged families develop skills in group activities and problem-solving. Positive values placed by their families on music, rhythm, dance, body expressiveness, and humor keep alive abilities and sensibilities that tend to perish in more advantaged families [p. 79].

Biographical Indices

The recently developed *Alpha Biographical* (Institute for Behavioral Research in Creativity, 1968) provides another strategy for identifying creative talent among disadvantaged and minority group youngsters. This instrument, consisting of 300 items through which an individual is asked to describe himself and his background, is based on the belief that past behavior, experiences, and self descriptions can be used as indicators of future performance. A number of research studies carried out by the developers of the Alpha indicate that it can be used as an aid in identifying a number of different talents which are important for both academic performance and performance in a variety of work situations. The significance of this instrument lies in the fact that creativity scores and scores on a number of other factors bear little or no relationship to race. In other words, for certain abilities, the *Alpha* does not discriminate against persons from racial minorities.

The *Sub-Cultural Indices of Academic Potential* (SCIAP, Grant & Renzulli, 1971) is another instrument designed to take account of problems of test bias, the cultural distinctiveness of minority group members, and the growing concern on the part of high schools and colleges to identify high potential minority group students for supportive educational programs. The instrument consists of 145 items which ask students to indicate how they feel about themselves and how they would react in situations that are common to their every day experiences. There are no right or wrong answers to the SCIAP items, but rather, the instrument yields a profile that points out student preferences and learning styles in areas such as: the organization and management of information, commitment to social responsibility and leadership, flexibility in social situations, originality in cultural context, initiative and persistence, self concept, attitudes toward education, and support of family and school toward continuing education.

Language and Developmental Considerations

Two additional considerations should be pointed out in discussing the issue of identification. First, one of the major characteristics of the disadvantaged is their inability to master the linguistic and grammatical structures of the dominant culture. For this reason it is necessary to develop identification strategies which are not language dependent. Furthermore, because most youngsters have a greater facility with the spoken rather than the written word, it is especially important that the disadvantaged child not be required to "write down" all of his responses. Tape recorders or human recorders can serve in uncovering higher forms of thinking which might otherwise go undetected because of limited writing ability.

Finally, the identification of talent potential among the disadvantaged should be a continuous process that begins in the early years and that is carried out with unusual frequency. Until more and better predictive instruments are available, talent searches should take place in the classroom on a regular basis. Because of the dynamic nature of abilities such as creativity, efforts to make long range predictions should be replaced with frequent assessments of a variety of talents. These assessments should be followed by carefully designed classroom activities which are constructed specifically to enhance those talents which have been identified.

Developing Talent Potential

Although strategies for identifying different types of human abilities are in varying stages of maturity, enough is known about developing talent potential to allow us to do some systematic programing in this area. Two major factors in the development of outstanding abilities are (a) the characteristics of the teacher and (b) the relevancy of the curriculum.

Teacher Characteristics

One major generalization about teacher characteristics stands out from the vast amount of recent literature dealing with programing for the disadvantaged: "Experienced teachers who feel personal satisfaction in working with disadvantaged students are the key to successful compensatory education in poverty area schools [*Phi Delta Kappan*, 1970, p. 338]." This was the finding of a study which investigated 32 programs reporting substantial improvements in the achievement of low income students. Thus, careful teacher selection appears to be a major

consideration in programing for the disadvantaged. Furthermore, in situations where talent development is a primary goal, it is especially important to select teachers who are committed to the task of working with disadvantaged youngsters in the development of a variety of talents. Teachers without such knowledge are likely to approach talent development in a piecemeal and haphazard fashion.

Space does not permit a detailed discussion of the several approaches to talent development which can be found in the literature (see for example, Gregory, 1967; Parnes & Harding, 1962; Williams & Eberle, 1967); however, two general suggestions are offered as necessary first steps for systematic programing in this area. First, the teacher should have a functional knowledge of one or more of the models described above. Using the model(s) as a guide enables the teacher to plan a wide variety of activities that are designed to nurture specific talents. If teachers are unaware of the behavioral characteristics and dimensions of various types of abilities, it seems unlikely that they will be able to plan purposeful activities to promote the development of these abilities.

A second suggestion relates to knowledge about specific strategies that have already proved their usefulness by promoting creative problem solving in business and industry. Techniques such as attribute listing, morphological analysis, brainstorming, and forced relationships are easy to learn and readily adaptable to a variety of classroom situations. However, it is the teacher's initiative in applying these techniques that will make the difference between an exciting, "mind expanding" experience and a routine classroom activity. The teacher who is coverage dominated, i.e., one who judges his effectiveness by the number of chapters or units that he covers during a given period, probably will never find time to develop abilities other than the so-called basic skills.

Relevancy of the Curriculum

While remediation in the basic skill areas must be an important goal of compensatory education, it should not, of course, be the only objective of the programs which serve the disadvantaged youth. Activities for talent development can be built into areas of the curriculum, and because of the inherent fun and excitement of activities such as the type described above, added dividends are likely to accrue in the form of increased motivation and improved performance in the basic skills of learning.

High potential disadvantaged youngsters are vitally interested in the social changes taking place around them in their neighborhoods and in the society at large. Thus, it is little wonder that they get "turned off" by a curriculum which deals with the exports of Brazil and the names of Columbus' ships when rallies against racism and demonstrations in Washington are the real issues with which they would like to deal. These issues provide excellent opportunities for constructing activities that promote decision making and social leadership skills. Exercises which encourage imaginative solutions to real life problems have a much greater likelihood of promoting creativity than the time worn chore of writing a story about "what I did last summer."

In their book, *Compensatory Education for the Culturally Disadvantaged,* Bloom, Davis, and Hess (1965) called attention to the importance of curricular relevancy by listing the following objectives as one of the four major goals of education for the disadvantaged:

> Increasing stress must be placed on those aspects of interests, attitudes, and personality which will promote the further growth of the individual, enable him to find satisfaction in the things he does, and help him to find meaning and fulfillment in his life. The effects of automation, the shorter work week, urban living, and the fast pace of change on the national as well as international scene require individual character development which will enable each person to live with himself and with others under conditions very different from those which have prevailed [p. 3].

A somewhat simplified and yet operational definition of a relevant curriculum is: a set of experiences which deal with topics and issues that youngsters would talk about if given a free choice. If we are really serious about a process centered rather than content centered curriculum (and experiences that attempt to promote specific talents certainly must be considered process oriented), then the issues that youngsters prefer to talk about, those that they discuss before and after the school bell rings, provide fertile ground for the development of a wide range of talents.

Basic Elements of a Total Program of Talent Development

Although highly qualified teachers and relevant curricular experiences are considered to be major factors in programing for high potential youngsters, a total approach to talent development also should include a number of other characteristics. Douglass (1969) pointed out four essential elements of an ideal system for maximizing the talent potential of low socioeconomic and minority group members.

The first element is greater flexibility in the ways in which schools are operated and performance is evaluated. The classroom unit must be broken down into small learning modules where individuals and small groups become the main focus of instructional efforts. Although the school may continue to serve as a "home base" for the learning process, Douglass suggested that early in the elementary school years students should be provided with extended periods of learning time in institutions that usually are not considered schools:

> These would include places where knowledge is stored, such as art museums, science institutes, and libraries . . . places where knowledge is being put to work, such as farms, hospitals, airports, machine shops, sheet metal works, and construction . . . places in which some kind of education or learning or on-the-job training is under way . . . places where knowledge is being discovered such as research institutes and laboratories [Douglas, 1969, pp. 10–11].

The second element would consist of an early start in the education and socialization processes. Low socioeconomic group children often enter school with the accumulated deficits that result from poor nutrition and limited stimulation in infancy and early childhood. These deficits may lead to intellectual inhibition and an inability to take advantage of the educational opportunities that may be open to them in later life. Douglass advocated a program of nursing

schools and day care centers where each child will be assured of services of professionals and paraprofessionals who are knowledgeable about early childhood experiences that are beneficial to later development. These centers might be located throughout the community in schools, hospitals, or factories, and they should provide continuing education programs for parents and substitute parents.

An early apprenticeship is the third element of a total program of talent development. Beginning at an early age, students should be given frequent exposure to different ways of making a living and of participating in leisure time activities. Too often, children from low socioeconomic group families have no real contact with a father figure or they see their parents employed only in lower level occupations. They have little opportunity to observe the variety of talents used in the broad spectrum of occupations, and thus, they have a limited conception of the many kinds of talents that are valuable to our society and available for their exploration. Early apprenticeship programs would help youngsters to see the real world's conception of talent rather than the school's traditionally limited concern for only academic ability.

A final element which is necessary in the development of talent potential is the creation of a more open system. The grade by grade progression has failed to meet the needs of students who do not "fit in" at the start or who are not willing to "play the game" by the existing rules. If we truly respect the individual differences and preferences of all people in our society, then we should not force them to follow a relatively prescribed system of learning. Students should be free to alternate school and work experiences with other experiences which they may wish to pursue. They should be free to drop out of school for a given period of time and allowed to reenter the system without fear of punitive action or relegation to programs which are essentially remedial in nature. Access to first rate educational programs should be readily available to every person at every stage of development regardless of his previous success or lack of success in the system. A more open system will allow adults as well as young people to have an opportunity to explore and develop talents that may have been thwarted earlier in life.

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