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The Attitudes of Gifted Students Toward Participation in Special Programs

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In view of limited and perhaps even non-existent empirical evidence relating to how superior students feel about being classified as “gifted,” a questionnaire was prepared and distributed to approximately 500 students who participated in a variety of programs for superior students. The questionnaire entitled Special Program Attitude Survey, deals with factors relating to (1) satisfaction about being in a special program, (2) perceived attitudes of non-program students toward gifted students, (3) perceived attitudes of parents toward their youngsters’ environment in a special program, and (4) reactions of non-program teachers toward gifted students. Since being classified as gifted almost always involves some type of placement in a special program, an attempt was made to approach the problem through questionnaire items focused on perceptions about being in a program rather than being classified as gifted *per se*. Previous experience in program evaluation where direct questions were raised (“How do you feel about being classified as gifted?”) have usually led to superficial responses, and therefore it was decided to approach the question in an indirect and less threatening manner.

Time limitations and unanticipated difficulties in obtaining permission to administer the questionnaire in several participating school districts has resulted in a limited amount of data as of this writing. Under ordinary circumstances, such limited returns would hardly merit mention; however, the consistency of the findings to date seem to allow for a few generalizations about four factors listed above. Responses from both elementary and high school age youngsters are remarkably consistent and overwhelmingly positive. In most cases, more than 90% of the respondents expressed satisfaction about being in a special program. The most frequently cited reasons for this satisfaction were the opportunity to pursue topics of interest and to express themselves creatively. Almost all students said that they were not treated any differently by non-gifted youngsters as a result of their participation in a special program and only a few said that they had experienced difficulties such as being called derogatory names. Most of the respondents indicated that their parents were pleased about their participation in a special program. Very few students reported any difficulties with their regular classroom teachers as a result of leaving their regular classroom to take part in a special program.

These early results, based admittedly on a limited number of responses, suggest that being placed in a special program for the gifted does not seem to result in any detrimental effects on the youngsters so classified. A more detailed report of this study is anticipated after a larger body of data have accumulated.

Although it is generally assumed that gifted students hold favorable attitudes toward participation in special programs, the specific reasons for such satisfaction, and problems that

might be the cause of dissatisfaction have received little or no attention in research studies dealing with programs for the gifted and talented. The purpose of the present study was to investigate students who participated in a wide variety of special programs. The sample population consisted of middle grade children who received special program services for a minimum of four and one-half hours per week but who were not enrolled in full-time special classes. The programs were operated by ten school districts in the state of Connecticut, and although a wide variety of curricular variation existed among the programs, the major organizational design consisted of resource rooms or part-time special classes within which highly flexible and individualized programming took place.

In response to Question 2 of the Special Program Attitude Survey, 3/4 (76%) of the students affirmed that they knew why they were selected for their programs. Nearly 40% stated that election was based on ability; another 12% said that special interests were the main criteria. Many of the young people referred to their recommendations by teachers. Other reasons frequently mentioned included motivation, previous work, and the desire of the individual to join the program. Twenty-four percent of the respondents did not know the reasons for their selection and therefore made no further comments in regard to this question.

Question 3 asked the students if they had wanted to be in their respective programs, and 96% responded positively. One-fourth said they hoped to be able to pursue special interests, and nearly as many referred to the enrichment aspects of the programs as desirable. Anticipation of “a broadened education” and “good learning experience” was expressed, and a sizeable number of students (49) commented on the independence possible in the special programs. Several appreciated the use of better equipment, the opportunity to do research or more advanced work, the increase in self-knowledge, and the possible carry-over to future experience. More general comments described the programs as “fun” (36), “interesting” (28), and “more challenging.” Some students said their desire to participate was prompted by curiosity about the program; and a small number expressed a sense of privilege at being included. Nine respondents were unsure of their feelings and 15 (4%) had not wanted to be in the programs.

When asked if they liked being in the special programs, (Question 4) most students said they did (93%). Comments centered again around (1) the opportunity to pursue special interests (79 students), (2) the freedom to work independently (72 students), and (3) the fun and interesting aspects of the programs (67 students). Seventeen students specifically mentioned the special resources available. “The program offers me a better education” and “I feel like I’m learning a lot” were other positive remarks; and the preference for the special program was clearly seen in the candid statement that “It’s boring in other classes.” Of the 7% who did not like being in the programs, the most frequently given reasons were “too much extra work,” “not enough time for the work,” and the necessity of missing regular classes to attend the special program. However, a larger percentage of the students who responded negatively did not comment further, so the reasons for most of the negative answers are left to speculation.

Eighty-one percent of the students said they liked the names of their programs, (Question 5). Most who commented thought the names “made sense” and agreed that they described the aims or character of each program. Respondents who answered negatively on this question expressed a variety of feelings in their remarks. Many felt the question was irrelevant in the first

place; others were critical of the “cute” aspect of certain program titles. Some said the name was not descriptive enough or that it gave an inaccurate picture of the activities. Several students felt that the names characterized the programs as “exclusive” and a few claimed that the word “special” in the title gave the false impression of a special program for slow learners!

Question 6 asked the students to evaluate the feelings of other students in the school toward the special program. The largest number (69) of respondents asserted that the non-participating students exhibited envious attitudes toward program participants. A similar number (65) remarked that their peers had no knowledge of and therefore no feelings about the program. About one-fifth of the respondents had noticed positive reactions from other students and concluded that these students approved of the special programs. Others said the average student was indifferent toward the special activities (34) or sometimes revealed curiosity. Many of the students who answered this question were not aware of the non-participants’ attitudes. This might lead one to conclude that either the topic was not discussed in daily conversation, or the program participants had little contact socially with non-participants. Some of the respondents had received negative feedback from other students in the school: “They think it’s a waste,” “They think it’s weird,” and “They tease us” were some of the more negative comments. “They think it’s for brains” wrote one student, which could be construed in a negative or positive light.

On Question 7 the respondents were asked more specifically if their friends who were not in the program treated them any differently since they had been selected for the special group. The large majority (86%) answered a firm “no” to this question, with frequent comments like “Why should they? I’m no different” (43 students) and “They don’t really care one way or the other” (34 students). Twenty-one students admitted that their friends were unaware of their participation in the programs, and a small number stated that they had few or no close friends outside the program. One practical statement came from the student who summarized his friends’ feelings by saying, “It’s all schoolwork.” Of the 14% who said their friends’ treatment of them had changed, 25 reported a positive change by saying, “They ask me for help now,” and “They respect me more.” Some did report teasing and jealousy, though it was gratifying to see very few of these comments.

When asked directly if other students teased or called them names (Question 8) because of their work in the special programs, the respondents’ answers were consistent with Question 7. Eighty-eight percent said no teasing had occurred, and the comments were of the same flavor: “They have no reasons to,” “I’m the same person,” and “They are indifferent.” Most of the 12% who answered in the affirmative had no observations to make, except for the listing of particular names used to tease (“egghead,” “Super Smart”). Three students felt the program isolated them and one had trouble because she had to carry special equipment for her work in the program. However, these types of occurrences were not commonly mentioned, and some students admitted that the teasing that did occur was only in jest.

Student opinion was split on Question 9, regarding their pleasure in telling other students about the special programs. Fifty-five percent said they liked to talk about their work, especially if the others were interested or if it applied to the conversation. Of these students, 30 commented that they talked about the program in order to get others interested or to encourage them to seek membership. “Helping others” was the aim of a few students in their discussions of the activities,

and a handful states openly that they showed their pride in the program by their discussion of it. Most of the 45% who felt less inclined to talk about the program to others seemed to be greatly influenced by peer pressure. “They would think I was bragging” commented 51 respondents, and others declared, “They would make fun.” Many said that the subject was simply of no interest to their friends and thus the program received little attention in daily conversation.

Question 10 was the first question referring to the attitude of students’ families toward their participation in the special programs. Nearly all of the response to this question was positive (96%). Most students said their parents told them directly about their pride in the youngsters’ selection. Others noticed that their parents told others, or “acted happy in general.” “They wanted it,” explained several students. Five respondents commented that there was more interest and encouragement shown at home as a result of their participation, and four others knew their parents were happy when the latter emphasized the responsibility, new experiences, and fun that the students could expect from the program. Of the students who felt neutral or negative feedback at home toward their selection, six mentioned that their parents were worried about their missing classes, several said there was no interest of any kind expressed, and one linked parental disapproval to the fact that he had to change schools for his work in the special program. Over-enthusiasm on the part of one student led to a falling out with his parents; “they were happy about the program until I brought a rat home !”

Surprisingly, two-thirds of the response to Question 11 was negative, as most students felt their parents were no more interested in their schoolwork after their inclusion in the special program than before their selection. The most frequent comment in justification of this response was that “they have always been interested in my work.”

Eighty-one percent of students answering Question 12 of the Special Program Attitude Survey had brothers and/or sisters in school when they completed the questionnaire. When asked if those siblings had ever participated in the special program or one similar to it (Question 13), only 19% of the respondents answered in the affirmative. Thus, 81% of the siblings of the participants had no similar experience with special programs. Knowledge of these percentages makes the variety of comments on Question 14 very interesting. One-third of the students described sibling reaction as indifferent. Thirty seven others admitted that they did not know how their brothers/sisters felt about their participation. “They are happy for me,” replied 46 students, and several others said that their siblings were proud of or impressed with them. A number of the students’ brothers and sisters had shown curiosity about the program and a small portion of the respondents said the other children in the family would have liked to be included in the program activities. There were surprisingly few negative reactions cited: only 11 mentioned that siblings were jealous or critical of the participants’ special work. Twelve students’ brothers/sisters were unaware of their program membership: this may have been due to a reluctance to “brag” on the part of the students in question, or an effort on the part of parents to treat all the children equally.

In regard to the necessity of staying after school or giving up recess to make up work missed (Question 15), most (82%) of the students replied negatively. Only 13% said they did experience this penalty, and 5% stated that the question did not apply, as their programs did not conflict with regular school hours.

A very small percentage of respondents found that their regular classroom teachers asked them *often* about their special programs (Question 16). Half of the students' teachers inquired *sometimes*, and 41% said their teachers *never* asked about the special activities. Three percent of the students commented that this question did not apply to their situations, but gave no further explanation as to why this was so. Only one-fourth of the students answering Question 17 were ever asked by their regular classroom teachers to tell about their special program activities, and only a small proportion of these were *often* asked to do so. Sixty-eight percent of the students had *never* been asked to talk on the subject, and again 4% said the question did not apply to their circumstances.

When asked if they *liked* to tell their classmates about the program (Question 18), student opinion was split. Forty-eight percent said yes, "If it was interesting" and several indicated that such discussion might encourage some classmates to join the program. However, another 46% replied that this was not enjoyable, as most of their classmates were indifferent or would consider such behavior as "bragging." A few feared name-calling, and three students thought their classmates "might feel bad" in such a situation.

The final question on the survey asked students to indicate whether or not their regular classroom teachers ever became upset as a result of their leaving class to go to the special programs. A large majority of the students answered "no" to this question, explaining that there was no problem as long as they completed their regular classwork. The 13% whose teachers did express irritation attributed the upset to their missing work and the inconvenience of making up tests and assignments. A small proportion of students claimed that the question did not apply, as their work did not conflict with the regular class.

SPECIAL PROGRAM ATTITUDE SURVEY

Age _____ Grade _____ School _____

Name of Special Program _____

Directions: Do not sign your name to this survey. Please answer the questions below by circling the answer that best expresses your feelings. Please explain your answers in the spaces provided.

	Circle One	
1. How long have you been in this program? _____		
2. Do you know why you were selected for this program? If "yes" please tell why.	Yes	No
3. Did you want to be in the program? Why or why not?	Yes	No
4. Do you like being in the program? Why or why not?	Yes	No
5. Do you like the name of the program? If not, why not?	Yes	No
6. How do the other students in the school feel about the program?	Yes	No
7. Do your friends that are not in the program treat you any differently now that you have been selected for this special program? Please explain.	Yes	No

	Circle One	
8. Do other students ever tease you or call you names because you are In the special program? If yes, please explain.	Yes	No
9. Do you like to tell other students in your school about activities in the special program? Why or why not?	Yes	No
10. Were your parents happy that you were selected for this program? How do you know?	Yes	No
11. Are they more interested in your schoolwork now that you are in this program?	Yes	No
12. Do you have any brothers or sisters in school?	Yes	No
13. Are they or have they ever been in this special program or one like it?	Yes	No
14. How do your brothers and sisters feel about your being in the special program?	Yes	No
If you spend some time in a regular (non-special program) classroom, please answer questions 15 through 19.		
15. Do you ever have to stay after school or stay in from recess to complete work you missed while you were In the special program classes? How often?	Yes	No
16. Does your regular classroom teacher ever ask you about the special program?	Often	Sometimes
	Never	
17. Does the teacher in your regular class ever ask you to tell about things that you do in the special program?	Often	Sometimes
	Never	

	Circle One	
18. Do you like to tell your classmates about activities in the special program? Why or why not?	Yes	No
19. Does your teacher ever become upset because you must leave her classroom to go to the special program class? Please explain. (Use the back of this page if you need more space.)	Yes	No
