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Developing Defensible Programs for the Gifted and Talented*

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*What is (or should be) diff*erent *about the types of learning* experiences *that* are *advocated for gifted students? Isn't what* you are doing for *the gifted also good for* nearly *all* youngsters?

Introduction

Unless satisfactory answers to these questions can be provided, programs that serve superior students will be extremely vulnerable to both critics of gifted education and to persons who, though sympathetic with this area, feel such special services are essentially a luxury item that schools can easily get by without. But more importantly, answers are necessary for those who experience pangs of conscience when they can defend programs for gifted youngsters philosophically, but not in terms of day-to-day experiences.

The purpose of this article therefore is threefold. First, some critical questions will be raised about a number of current practices that parade under the banner of special education for the gifted. Second, a rationale will be proposed for special programs that is based upon research studies dealing with the characteristics of gifted and creative persons. The third purpose will be to present a model that can be used as a guide by teachers and administrators in the development of truly defensible programs in this area of special education.

Some Concerns About Current Practices

Far too many programs for the gifted are essentially collections of fun-and-games activities. Children walk into a resource room for the gifted, play a game or engage in craft-type activities until their class period is over, and return the next day to pursue some similar type of experience. In questioning teachers about the purpose or objectives of such activities, the reply is almost always that they are "challenging" and "really enjoyable" to the children.

Although gifted students should have an opportunity to participate in a variety of such exploratory experiences and activities, an important part of all programs for the gifted should be the systematic development of the cognitive and affective processes

* This article is a summary by the authors of *The Enrichment Triad Model: A Guide for Developing Programs for the Gifted and Talented*. Wethersfield, CT: Creative Learning Press, 1977.

which brought these youngsters to our attention in the first place. Systematic development simply means that professional educators should know and be able to defend the types of processes that are being developed through the activities that gifted children pursue in special programs. While freedom of choice in topic and learning style are important, it is the teacher's responsibility to assist a youngster in developing the skills of inquiry that will make him or her a "first hand inquirer" in the particular area in which he or she chooses to work.

When gifted youngsters do undertake individual research projects, there is frequently little difference between regular and special programs in the level or quality of inquiry. References consist or the same encyclopedias or library books used in the regular school program The locus is frequently on the acquisition of knowledge or facts; where differences do exist, it is almost always in terms of freedom of choice, lack of pressure, and the absence of grading. Practices that are limited to this degree of differentiation have raised serious questions about the appropriateness of special programs for the gifted and talented.

Another general area of concern has been a preoccupation with mental processes and an almost complete absence or interest in the structure, methodology, and content of the organized fields of knowledge. In emphasizing mental processes via Bloom's *Taxonomy* and Guilford's *Structure of the Intellect* model, our energies may have been put in the wrong place. While we have attempted to design curriculum that will develop the higher mental processes, it is open for question whether the valid *psychological* concept of mental process has been a useful educational concept so far as curriculum planning is concerned.

This is not to say that we are against process objectives or that these psychological phenomena do not exist and cannot be developed through programming. But it is more than likely that they are things that 'just happen" in good learning situations, and the harder we try to force processes into a behavioral objectives type of format, the more artificial and structured the curriculum will become. Our preoccupation with process objectives has in fact caused us to forget that process is the path rather than the goal of learning.

Rationale for Special Programs

If many of the practices currently employed in special programs are not easily defended, what are the types of educational activities that will satisfy the criteria of qualitative differentiation? The answer to this question involves a variety of considerations, perhaps the most important of which is the definition of giftedness itself. How one defines giftedness is crucial to the ways in which one goes about making provisions for persons in this category of exceptionality.

Research on gifted and creative persons in the adult world has shown that although no single criterion can be used to determine giftedness, persons who have achieved reputations of eminence possess a relatively well-defined cluster of three

basic traits. The first of these traits is generally acknowledged to be an above average, though not necessarily exceptional, level of intelligence. In a review of several research studies dealing with the relationship between academic aptitude tests and professional achievement, Wallach (1976) has concluded that:

> Above intermediate score levels, academic skills assessments are found to show so little criterion validity as to be questionable bases on which to make consequential decisions about students' futures. What the academic tests do predict are the results a person will obtain on other tests of the same kind.

An implication of this conclusion is that entrance into special programs should not be limited only to those students who score in the upper ranges on traditional measures of aptitude. If we accept this conclusion, however, the question is immediately raised—What other criteria should be used for identifying gifted students?

A second and perhaps more influential trait of eminent persons is a high level of task commitment or intrinsic motivation to perform in a particular area. Several studies have shown that accomplished scientists, writers, mathematicians, and architects are far more task-oriented and involved in their work than are people in the general population (Roe, 1952; McCurdy, 1960; MacKinnon, 1964, 1965; and Helson, 1971). As Roe (1952) suggested in her findings on task commitment:

> The one thing that all of these scientists have in common is their driving absorption in their work. They have worked long hours for many years, frequently with no vacations to speak of, because they would rather be doing their work than anything else.

The third trait that characterizes gifted persons consists of abilities commonly grouped together under the heading of "creativity." Eminence in the adult world is usually regarded as prima-facie evidence that an individual possesses creative ability. In fact, the terms "gifted," "genius," and "eminent" are often used synonymously with the word "creative" when describing persons who have made significant contributions; it is usually the originality, novelty, or uniqueness of a person's contribution that brings him or her to the attention of the public.

The study of eminent persons suggests that an interaction exists among the three basic traits that have been discussed—above average ability, task commitment, and creativity—and it is this interaction rather than any single trait or additive factor that results in superior performance. But in order for these traits to interact and manifest themselves they must have some type of problem with which to deal or a certain arena in which to perform. Thus, any definition of giftedness or formula for eminence in the adult world must take into consideration both the cluster of traits and a particular problem area to which these traits can be applied.

A Program Model

The Enrichment Triad Model represents an attempt to integrate the findings on the characteristics of eminent persons into an overall design for programming for gifted and talented students. As depicted in Figure 1, the Model consists of three interrelated types of enrichment activities. The first two types, General Exploratory Activities and Group Training Activities, are considered to be appropriate for all learners; however, they are also important in the overall enrichment of gifted and talented for at least two reasons. First, they deal with strategies for expanding student interests and developing thinking and feeling processes. Second, and perhaps more importantly, these two types of enrichment represent logical input and support systems for Type III Enrichment, which is considered to be the only type that is appropriate mainly for gifted students. Type Ill Enrichment, entitled Individual and Small Group Investigations of Real Problems, is the major focus of this model. As suggested in Figure 1, approximately one-half of the time that gifted students spend in enrichment activities should be devoted to these types of experiences.

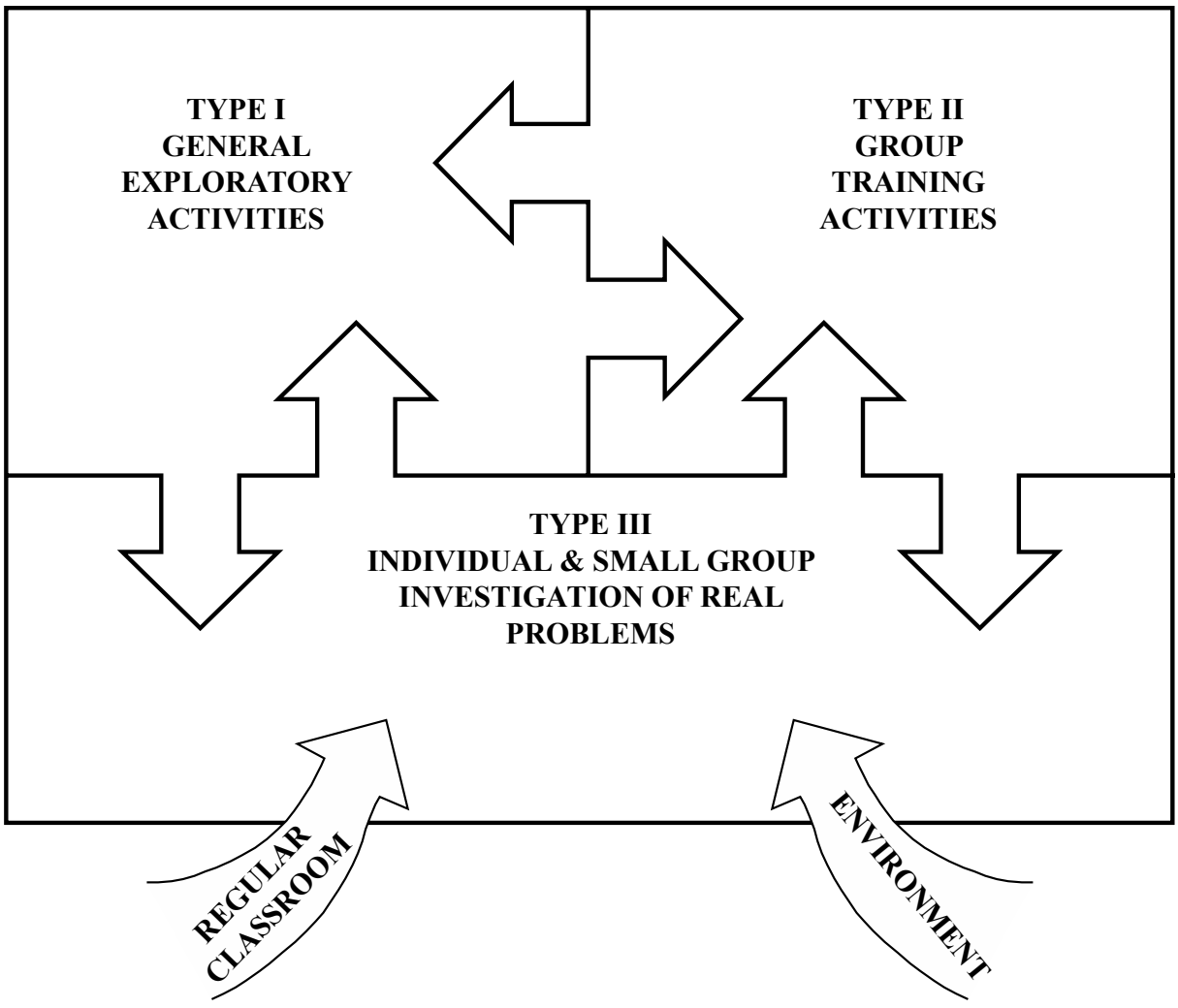

FIGURE 1: The Enrichment Triad Model.

Type I Enrichment: General Exploratory Experiences

Type I Enrichment consists of those experiences and activities that are designed to bring the learner into touch with the kinds of topics or areas of study in which he or she may have a sincere interest. These experiences should enable youngsters to begin to make their own decisions about the topics that they might like to explore at greater depths and higher levels of involvement. Thus, one of the major objectives of Type I Enrichment is to give both students and teachers some hints about what might be a bona fide Type III Enrichment activity. A second objective of Type I Enrichment situations is to assist teachers in making decisions about the kinds of Type II Enrichment activities that should be selected for particular groups of students.

At least two general guidelines are suggested to help achieve the objectives of Type I Enrichment. First, although a great deal of exploratory freedom must be permitted, students should be made aware that they are expected to pursue exploration activities purposefully, and that after a given period of time has elapsed, each youngster will be responsible for analyzing his or her own experiences and coming up with some alternative suggestions for further study.

The second guideline deals with strategies for developing categorical interest centers in the classroom or resource room. These centers should be stocked with materials that are broadly representative of selected themes or fields of knowledge. The selection of appropriate materials for the interest centers is especially crucial because the objective here is not simply informational, but rather to provoke curiosity about the dynamic nature of a field and an interest in doing further research. Thus, it is essential that the materials in each center include descriptive information about particular fields of knowledge rather than mere collections of the accumulated information in a given field.

Type II Enrichment: Group Training Activities

Type II Enrichment consists of methods, materials, and instructional techniques that are mainly concerned with the development of thinking and feeling processes. Over the years a variety of terms have been used to describe these operations or “powers of the mind.” These terms have included critical thinking, problem solving, reflective thinking, inquiry, training, divergent thinking, sensitivity training, awareness development, and creative or productive thinking.

Type II Enrichment activities are an important part of a total enrichment model for the gifted and talented for several reasons. First, such activities, if appropriately selected, provide for a range of response options (i.e., they must be open-ended) so that youngsters with superior potential will have an opportunity to escalate their thinking and feeling processes to whatever levels their own natural abilities allow. Giftedness and creativity are in the student’s response (not the stimulus materials), and it is what the youngster brings to the learning situation that makes him or her gifted.

Second, Type II Enrichment activities also have the potential for introducing youngsters to more advanced kinds of studies. For example, a student who becomes excited about advertising as a result of doing a creativity training exercise entitled “Let’s Write a Slogan” might go on to do very sophisticated work in this area. Thus an interrelationship can be seen between Type II and Type III sections of the model and it is this connection (rather than the creativity training activity per se) that accounts for a truly enriching experience.

Finally, group training activities provide students with the skills and abilities necessary to solve problems in a variety of areas. Since gifted students are characterized by both a wide range of interests and an investigative attitude, systematic experiences in the thinking and feeling processes are necessary tools for more advanced types of inquiry.

By way of summary, Type II experiences should be carefully selected so that they represent a logical outgrowth of student interests and concerns rather than mere random involvement in whatever happens to be available or whatever the teacher might have a fancy for. Purposefully selected activities can help “tie together” the other two components of the enrichment model but more importantly, by viewing Type II Enrichment as one aspect of a total enrichment model, we can help to avoid the danger of making process-oriented activities the be-all and end-all of a program for the gifted.

Type III Enrichment: Individual and Small Group Investigations of Real Problems

Type III Enrichment consists of activities in which the youngster becomes an actual investigator of a real problem or topic by using· appropriate methods of inquiry. In order for a student to become an investigator the focus of his or her efforts must shift from consumer-oriented: productivity to real-problem-oriented productivity. A very subtle but important distinction exists between these two types, of involvement. The student-as-consumer may engage in projects or claim to be “doing research,” but such activity frequently consists of writing ritualized reports about conclusions which have been reported by other people. Nowhere in this process does the student use information as raw data.

Real-problem productivity, on the other hand, focuses on the identification and delimitation of problems that are similar in nature to those pursued by authentic researchers or artists in particular fields. Thus, activities that are considered to be bona fide Type III Enrichment experiences should reflect the student’s emulation of the professional investigator to such a degree that the student actually becomes a professional himself or herself.

The success of a Type III Enrichment activity is in large part dependent on the degree of task commitment or motivation that the student brings to the investigation. Task commitment is a function of the realness or sincerity of students’ interests, and thus, the first major responsibility of the teacher in carrying out Type III activities is to assist students in analyzing their own interests. Several issues should be considered in

the identification of student interests. First, many youngsters will have already developed intense interests and commitments to particular topics or areas of study. In such cases our major responsibility is to help them focus their interests and to translate these interests into solvable problems. In addition, several student interests will undoubtedly result from General Exploratory Activities (Type I), Group Training Activities (Type II), the regular curriculum, and the environment in general. These existing or newly developed interests are “naturals” for Type III Enrichment experiences and should be capitalized upon whenever possible.

One way of obtaining some useful leads for exposing students to relatively new areas of potential involvement is through a community survey that seeks information about both the vocational and avocational interests of parents. Such a survey can also identify persons who might be willing to follow up an exposure activity (i.e., lecture, slide presentation, or visit to their laboratory, studio, or office) with some intensive involvement with individuals or small groups of students. Youngsters can also be helped to examine their present or potential interests through the use of interest inventories.

The second responsibility of teachers in developing Type III Enrichment experiences consists of providing students with the tools of inquiry appropriate for the fields of investigation being pursued. In order to do this educators should learn how to teach some general exercises in inquiry training. It is important to keep in mind, however, that exercises in inquiry training are only helpful up to a point. Like “discovery learning,” they are highly controlled and can quickly become ends in and of themselves.

General instruction should also be provided in *advanced* library skills. Teachers should familiarize themselves with the existence, nature, and function of the full range of reference materials that are available for in-depth study in most fields. These materials include such items as indexes, directories, periodicals, source books, dictionaries, specialized encyclopedias, and abstracts.

Perhaps the most important thing that must be learned in order to promote Type III Enrichment is how to identify and locate How-To-Do-It resources. Almost every field of study has such guides and some are written at relatively elementary levels. It is important to analyze all resources in terms of an individual youngster’s reading and conceptual level and to serve as a translator whenever a particular concept is beyond the child’s level of comprehension. If the teacher cannot serve as a translator, the assistance of a person with specialized training should be sought.

The third and final responsibility of the teacher is concerned with helping students to communicate the results of their investigative work in a realistic and meaningful manner. Creative and productive persons are highly product-oriented and rarely engage in creative work without an audience in mind. Indeed, one of the major characteristics of a real problem (as opposed to a training exercise or presented problem) is that the producer is attempting to inform, to entertain, or to influence a relatively specific but nevertheless real audience.

Developing relatively realistic outlets for student products will require persons involved in the education of the gifted to exercise their own creativity. Assistance in this effort can be sought from creative/productive professionals and with persons from various interest groups. Local organizations, such as historical societies, science clubs, and dramatic groups might be explored as potential audiences, as should children's magazines that routinely include the work of young people.

Identifying appropriate outlets and audiences for student products is a very important part of the management function of teachers. Unless the time is taken to perform this role in an energetic manner, there is little likelihood that Type lll Enrichment will achieve a truly qualitative difference from the usual project activities that are popular in most programs.

The extent to which all students can pursue knowledge as a first-hand inquirer or turned-on professional is not yet known. As far as gifted students are concerned, however, the history of human achievement (and indeed, the history of many programs for the gifted) is filled with examples of bright young people who not only emulated the methods of professionals, but who were in fact professionals themselves. Gifted children can unquestionably function in the manner of true inquirers, and for this reason it is recommended that investigations of real problems be the mainstay of programs for the gifted and talented.

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