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# The Identification and Development of Talent Potential Among the Disadvantaged

By Joseph S. Renzulli

ALTHOUGH massive efforts have been directed toward overcoming the inadequacies of educational programming for the culturally disadvantaged, relatively little attention has been focused to date 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 have by and large overlooked the talent potential that exists in lower socio-economic and minority group youngsters. A number of persons have called attention to the vast dimensions of this untapped source of talent (Douglass, 1969; Renzulli, 1969; Torrance, 1968), and few would disagree that the time is long overdue for a systematic nationwide effort in talent retrieval. The. purpose of this paper will be to explore some of the issues and strategies that are involved in (1) identifying talent potential among the disadvantaged and (2) constructing educational programs that will maximize the development of this unidentified and under-stimulated segment of our school population.

## Identifying High Potential Disadvantaged Youth

A number of psychologists and educators who have wrestled with the problem of defining human abilities have advanced the thesis that a large variety of talents contribute to the accomplishments of man, and that 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 readily apparent that an identification process which depends mainly upon 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 reflect the emphasis which the dominant culture and formal education place on the ability to deal effectively with language, symbols, and abstraction; and by so doing, these measures have had the effect of creating a limited conception of the abilities which our society values.

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 that is designed to encompass and organize 120 possible talents according to (1) the type of mental operation which is employed,

(2) the content involved in the thinking process, and (3) the type of product which results from the act of thinking. A similar model developed by Williams and Eberle (1967) has identified twenty-three classroom teaching strategies that can be used in developing seven productive thinking operations in various subject matter areas, and Taylor's (1968) multiple talent model has isolated an additional set of distinguishable abilities in areas such as creativity, decision-making, planning, forecasting, and communications. And the Taxonomies developed by Bloom, et al. (1956) and Krathwohl, et al. (1964) provide us with yet another classification system for isolating cognitive and affective processes that are clearly identifiable dimensions of man's repertoire of behaviors. These behaviors are often not measured by traditional tests of intelligence or are "buried" in the general scores which many of these tests yield.

With these and other models to assist us in defining and classifying a wide variety of human abilities, the next step in identifying a broader range of talent potential consists of selecting or developing appropriate instruments. Bruch (1970) has 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 could then be designed to fit cultural strengths, and such teats could be used to measure both conventional abilities and those talents that are most valued by an individual's own culture. Bruch further suggests 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 socio-cultural and personal) that either enhance or inhibit further development of talents.

Additional strategies for identifying hidden talent among the disadvantaged have been developed by Torrance (1969). Through the use of instruments such as **Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking** (Torrance, 1966), youngsters are given an opportunity to respond in terms of experiences that are common to their own culture or unique to their own experiences. Such an approach avoids the problem of evaluating the child in terms of experiences that are common to the dominant culture, and at the same time, helps to create a psychologically safe atmosphere that 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: high non-verbal fluency and originality; high creative productivity in small groups; adeptness in visual art activities; high creativity in movement, dance, and other physical activities; high motivation in games, music, sports, humor, and concerts; and richness in language imagery.

The recently developed **Alpha Biographical Inventory** (Institute for Behavioral Research in Creativity, 1968) provides us with another strategy for identifying creative talent among disadvantaged and minority group youngsters. This instrument, consisting of 800 items in 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 that are important for both academic performance and performance in a variety of work situations. What is especially significant

about this instrument is 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.

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, and for this reason it is necessary to develop identification strategies that 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 we do not require the disadvantaged child to "write down" all of his responses. Tape recorders or human recorders can serve a very useful function in uncovering higher forms of thinking that 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, we should replace efforts to make long-range predictions with frequent assessments of a variety of talents. These assessments should be followed by carefully designed classroom activities that are specifically constructed to enhance those talents which have been identified.

## Developing the Talent Potential of the Disadvantaged

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 programming in this area. Two major factors in the development of outstanding abilities are (1) the characteristics of the teacher, and (2) the relevancy of the curriculum.

From among the vast amount of recent literature dealing with programming for the disadvantaged, one major generalization about teacher characteristics stands out. "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 thirty-two programs reporting substantial improvements in the achievement of low-income students. Thus, careful teacher selection appears to be a major consideration in programming for the disadvantaged, and in situations where talent development is a primary goal, it is especially important to select teachers who are both committed to the task of working with disadvantaged youngsters and knowledgeable about specific strategies for developing a variety of talents. Teachers without such knowledge are likely to approach talent development in a piecemeal and haphazard fashion.

Although space does not permit a detailed discussion of the several approaches to talent development that can be found in the literature (see for example, Williams and Eberle, 1968; Parnes and Harding, 1962; Gregory, 1967), two general suggestions are offered as necessary first steps for systematic programming 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 purposefully designed to nurture specific talents. If teachers are unaware of the behavioral characteristics and dimensions of various types

of abilities, it seems quite unlikely that they will be able to plan purposeful activities that promote the development of these abilities. (A somewhat overworked but nevertheless useful analogy is the doctor who attempts to treat a disease before he becomes knowledgeable about the symptoms of the ailment.)

A second suggestion relates to knowedge 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. As is always the case, 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 her effectiveness by the number of chapters or units that she covers during a given marking period, will probably never find time in working with disadvantaged youngsters to develop abilities other than the so-called basic skills.

Let us now turn our attention to some general curricular considerations in talent development among the disadvantaged. Although remediation in the basic skill areas quite obviously must be an important goal of compensatory education, it should not be the **only** objective of programs that serve disadvantaged youth. Activities for talent development can be built into all 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 that are taking place all around them, in their neighborhoods and in the society at large. Thus, it is little wonder that they get "turned off" by a curriculum that 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 which promote decision-making and social leadership skills. Exercises that 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) call attention to the importance of curricular relevancy by listing the following objective 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 that 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 must certainly 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 an extremely fertile ground for the development of a wide range of talents.

By way of summary, an attempt has been made to point out strategies for the identification and development of talent potential among disadvantaged youngsters. The realization of this potential can only be achieved when teachers of the disadvantaged improve their knowledge of the characteristics of specific types of talent and their skills in cultivating these talents.

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