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The Potential for Creativity Among Minority Groups

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It seems probable that our society actually 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 socio-economic levels, and particularly among the approximately twenty 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 the neglected source of talent; however, intensified efforts to overcome this failure are unquestionably 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 plainly evident in the form of unprecedented urban turmoil, unemployment and under-employment, rising crime and delinquency rates, and most important of all, in the human despair that always accompanies thwarted expression and creativity.

The Nature and Scope of the Great 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 society's economic levels. With respect to family background, Terman's (Terman, 1925–1959) monumental study of gifted children showed that, in actual numbers, the non-professional segment of the general population contains more that twice as many gifted children as the professional group. With respect to racial and ethnic origin, Miles (1954) reported that many high I.Q. Negro children can be found when looked for in Negro communities. Studies by Jenkins (1948) and Witty and Jenkins (1934) indicate that race *per se* is not a limiting factor in intellectual development; that Negro children with high I.Q.'s come from a variety of backgrounds; and that educational achievement of highly able Negro children resembles that of other gifted youngsters. In more recent years, the works of J. McVicar Hunt (1961) 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 these studies that are concerned mainly with the older or more traditional definition of giftedness (i.e., giftedness in terms of I.Q.), a rapidly expanding body of literature that deals 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 talent at all levels of society has caused leading philosophers and educator to focus their attention on this problem. In an article entitled, "Is America Neglecting Her Creative Minority," Arnold Toynbee comments:

> 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 capital asset, and the only one with which only man has been endowed. (Toynbee, 1964, p. 4)

In a discussion of the role of creative talents in history, Toynbee was asked if the suppression or non-recognition of creative minorities inevitably leads to weaknesses in the structure of society. His dramatic reply calls attention to the crucial nature of the problem:

> It leads to explosions, doesn't it? Why did Christianity secede from Judaism? I suppose because the Jewish establishment of the day didn't handle this awkward situation wisely. Why did St. Francis and his followers not become heretics, but became a new, vital, and creative element in the life of the western Christian church of the day. Because Innocent III and Cardinal Ugolino had the sympathetic imagination to handle them right. I think that attempting to suppress a creative minority is a very dangerous thing to do, because the fact that a dissenting minority arises—and a creative minority is always a dissenting one to begin with—should lead the establishment to self-criticism, not just to blind opposition. I think the result of the latter is always disastrous. (Toynbee, 1967, p. 17)

Educational Realities Among Minority Groups

In spite of the existence of this vast source of untapped talent, and in full recognition of the benefits that society stands to gain through a systematic investment in talent development, major inequalities of opportunity are *still* painting a sad picture as we approach the decade of the 1970's. The facts speak for themselves. Although fifteen years have passed since the Supreme Court held that separate schools are inherently unequal, almost 80 percent of white students attend schools that are almost all white; and 65 precent of black students attend schools that are more than 90 percent black (Campbell, 1969). The inferiority of existing schools for low income and minority group children has been clearly indicated by studies which show that the longer these children stay in school the further behind they become in achievement, and the wider the gap between what they should know and what they actually can do (Coleman et al., 1966; Sexton, 1961). Average drops in measured intelligence of as much as twenty points have been recorded as Negro children progress (or perhaps I should say *re*gress) through the grades (Passow, Goldberg, & Tannenbaum, 1967). Little wonder that the dropout rate for these youngsters is more than twice that of the general population and that the unemployment rate for Negro males is more than twice that of white males (Passow et al., 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, 1966; Mathis, 1969; Williams & Byars, 1968). Under circumstances such as these, even the most highly able and well motivated students from minority groups must surely lose faith in a system where the probability of *non*-success 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. Thus, the decade of the 1960's may very well be remembered as a period in our history when the education establishment began to pay *serous* attention to the detrimental effects that result from the inferior education opportunities that exist for a large proportion of our population. Millions, and perhaps billions, of words have been written and spoken in the interests of education among the disadvantaged; and books such as *How Children Fail* (Holt, 1966), *Death at an Early Age* (Kozol, 1967), and *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968) have literally shocked us into the reality of the situation. If we look upon the activities and pronouncements of the sixties as only the first step in a direct frontal attack upon the problem of educational equality, then the heightened interest of this decade certainly can be viewed with optimism. But our view should not be blurred by such optimism, for a large gap exists between words and action; and the 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-by-day school experience is nothing short of an educational and psychological disaster. If, on the other hand, the ground work laid during this decade has not been a false start, then action to correct the well recognized and certainly most crucial problem in our schools remains the challenge and the task of the 1970s.

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