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GIFTED CHILDREN

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AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES AND THE NEEDS OF THE GIFTED SCHOOL CHILDREN

If one were to explore the literature on the changing roles of the American university during the past 30 years, one would be struck by the tremendous enlargement of the scope of programs in institutions of higher education.

Clark Kerr (1972) in his book, *The Uses of the University*, described the expanded uses and responsibilities of American universities and depicted changes which have occurred which are dramatic and sweeping. A multi-functional university now serves a general student public with rather open admission doors, giving students a chance to prove themselves, whereas 15 years ago there were admission standards in most colleges. Ethnic/minority and lower socio-economic status students have available to them a wide array of grants, "scholarships" and loans which make the possibility of going to college or the university a reality. Consequently, the composition of student bodies has changed dramatically. A high percentage of entering freshmen have problems with basic skills, reading, composition and arithmetic, which creates severe problems for university professors who must cope with intermediate level skills among many of their students. Added to this is the problem of a high rate of attrition of students. In many American universities, one out of every two does not complete the four year program, rather drops out along the way.

So, various types of basic skills programs are being instituted, even in such prestigious institutions as Berkeley and U.C.L.A. These programs provide opportunities for remediation and their objective is to prevent such a high rate of student turnover, particularly at a time when enrolments are lower and students are at a premium.

The overall picture is not all this dismal, however, as most universities across the country continue to attract some truly talented, able and gifted students into the arts, sciences and professional schools. This careful attention to the selection of the nation's best minds into higher education has always been one of the traditional hallmarks of American higher education. In the United States of America, 30 years ago, those who had completed college or an advanced degree were a very tiny minority of the population. Today this is not the case, yet a tiny minority still do emerge from among the thousands at our colleges and universities, having achieved excellence and having exhibited high levels of talent as students, and continue on to higher degrees and research activities and eventual public service.

So why bring all this up about the changing role of the university if we are concerned with a discussion of the gifted and talented? The reason is this: future generations of teachers for public and

private elementary and secondary schools are trained in American universities. The position being taken here is that the *prime responsibility of the university for creating an optimal atmosphere for the gifted and talented is to improve the quality of all of the teachers that it graduates*. But — in an era of declining student enrolment, particularly in education which has an oversupply in many academic areas, it will be difficult for institutions to take a hard line stand and raise standards both for entering students and for those who are graduating. For too long universities in this country have put the blame on public high schools and elementary schools. Universities and colleges of education, which are the suppliers of the nation's teachers, have been too lax in their admission, continuation and graduation standards. Too many marginal teachers have been allowed to enter the profession, and too many semi-literate teachers now "educate" our children.

The second position taken here is that *among the thousands of average students in the schools and universities are gifted and talented students who are not being challenged*, who are often bored and who as a national human resource are being wasted, turned off, and deprived of the excitement of intellectual pursuits and the pride that comes with high achievement.

How can we help this group? The assertion being made here is that *gifted and talented students, the very bright, need gifted and able teachers*. These teachers must be of a mental set to work for mastery, for creative learning.

QUALIFICATIONS OF TEACHERS OF THE GIFTED

A selected review of programs which prepare teachers for gifted children during the past 20 years was made. There has been a shift in training emphasis and in defining who a teacher of the gifted should be. In 1963 a publication, *Educating the Academically Able*, listed teacher characteristics necessary to work with the gifted. These included, having self-confidence, having experience and being resourceful, being concerned with individual differences, being flexible, secure, creative and motivated to teach gifted children. Aside from the very last on this list, these descriptors could relate to desirable professional characteristics for *any* classroom teacher.

Gowan and Torrance (1971) in their book, *Educating the Ablest: A Book of Readings on the Education of Gifted Children*, present a central theme, that teachers of the gifted should be broadly and well prepared in subject matter and have many of the qualities enumerated by Crow above. It is interesting to note that scholarship and excellence are not featured, rather the teacher characteristic of keeping students on task is highlighted. It may be well here to refer the reader to an excellent book put out by the National Institute of Education, Washington D.C. called *A Time to Learn* (NIE, 1980), which relates results of research of teacher characteristics to student achievement. Certainly this compilation of studies will become touchstones for the development of programs for all children, but particularly for the gifted.

Gallagher (1975) adds additional teacher characteristics to those already mentioned, particularly physiological traits and effective personality traits. Importantly, that is from this writer's strong bias, he stresses the need for unusual proficiency in teaching subjects and knowledge of learning theories.

Finally, a publication, *The Gifted and Talented: Programs That Work*, published by the National School Public Relations Association (1979), supports among others the development of programs for teachers which emphasise skill areas, subject matter expertise, and special training in regard to the unique characteristics of gifted children.

Certainly one of the major roles the university will play will be to provide special training programs for teachers of the gifted. With the vast array of information on achievement in classrooms, and a return in this country to the basics, it seems apparent that research will begin to emerge which relates to how best to motivate, activate, stimulate and provide challenge for gifted students.

One of the large problems dealing with the gifted, who are defined in various ways, including being socially adept, possessing unusual psychomotor skills and demonstrating high academic achievement,

is to know which children or young adults in our classes are gifted, and how to relate to them effectively. Among children from lower socio-economic groups (disadvantaged) and from among ethnic groups, the identification process becomes even more acute because middle class white teachers have a hard time recognising giftedness, however defined, among young people who bring lifestyles, dress and speech patterns which are not mainstream! Bruch (1975) summarised these problems and pointed out specific areas of difficulty in identification of the disadvantaged. These were problems of: acculturation, language difference, the middle class teacher's ethnocentricity, and lack of sensitivity of school personnel for gifted who are of different ethnic backgrounds.

UNIVERSITIES' ROLES TO ENHANCE THE TEACHING OF THE GIFTED

Two central ideas have been suggested; that is that universities must work to revise and improve teacher education programs generally and provide specific training for teachers of the gifted. A second point of view expressed is that the selection process for teachers of the gifted should stress academic excellence and talent among the teachers themselves.

Listed below are various ways universities are becoming more responsible for the education of the gifted as evidenced by the descriptive literature. Many states have developed "Exemplary Program Descriptors" related to the gifted and talented. A particularly exemplary set of materials from the Texas Education Agency, which can be obtained by writing to the agency in Austin, include "Comprehensive Style Plan for Gifted/Talented Education in the Eighties", "Evaluation Report of the State Gifted and Talented Program 1980", and "Gifted/Talented Exemplary Program Descriptors 1981". These means are the beginning of what is apparently a significant movement toward responsible program design building and evaluation.

IMPROVING PUBLIC SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY INTEGRATION REGARDING GIFTED AND TALENTED PROGRAMS

1. Universities are working to improve their overall teacher education programs and produce quality teachers. Additionally, they must expand special training programs for teachers, (pre- and in-service) in the teaching of the gifted and talented.
2. Universities are becoming clearing houses for data dissemination and collection, regarding model programs, E.R.I.C. information, etc.
3. Universities are providing physical facilities for actual instruction, on campus, of the talented and gifted, and use these for research, evaluation, and clinical learning bases for teacher improvement.
4. Universities are providing programs to educate and train public school teachers in their subject areas and multiply their effect through the return of improved course materials and techniques to the public schools (with or without college credit for students).
5. Universities are broadening their evaluation and research capabilities to help public agencies to monitor, evaluate and staff model programs.
6. Universities are providing expertise and consultations to help public agencies to write grant proposals for the gifted and talented.
7. Universities are providing enrichment programs for public school children during on-campus summer programs, workshops, or individual study approaches.
8. Universities have excellent communication networks to industry, science, international programs, agriculture, business, and others. Gifted youth working on projects which require information about one of these areas could benefit greatly by having advice and direction provided by one or another university program.
9. Universities are continuing to help public schools to define talentedness and giftedness through testing, evaluation and data sharing.
10. Universities are establishing centres for gifted students which have research, teaching, extension

and public relations functions for all of the above.

11. University physical plants and facilities are becoming a rich resource for all school students. Theatres, music halls, arboretums, cattle breeding experimental projects; all are rich areas for exploitation and projects.
12. Universities should continue to honor and sponsor brilliant students, recruit them and provide an atmosphere which is stimulating and rewarding; the concept of "scholarship" should once again be re-examined and more and better scholarships made available to attract the gifted and talented.

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