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## Developing Defensible Programs for the Gifted and Talented\*

*What is (or should be) different 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

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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.

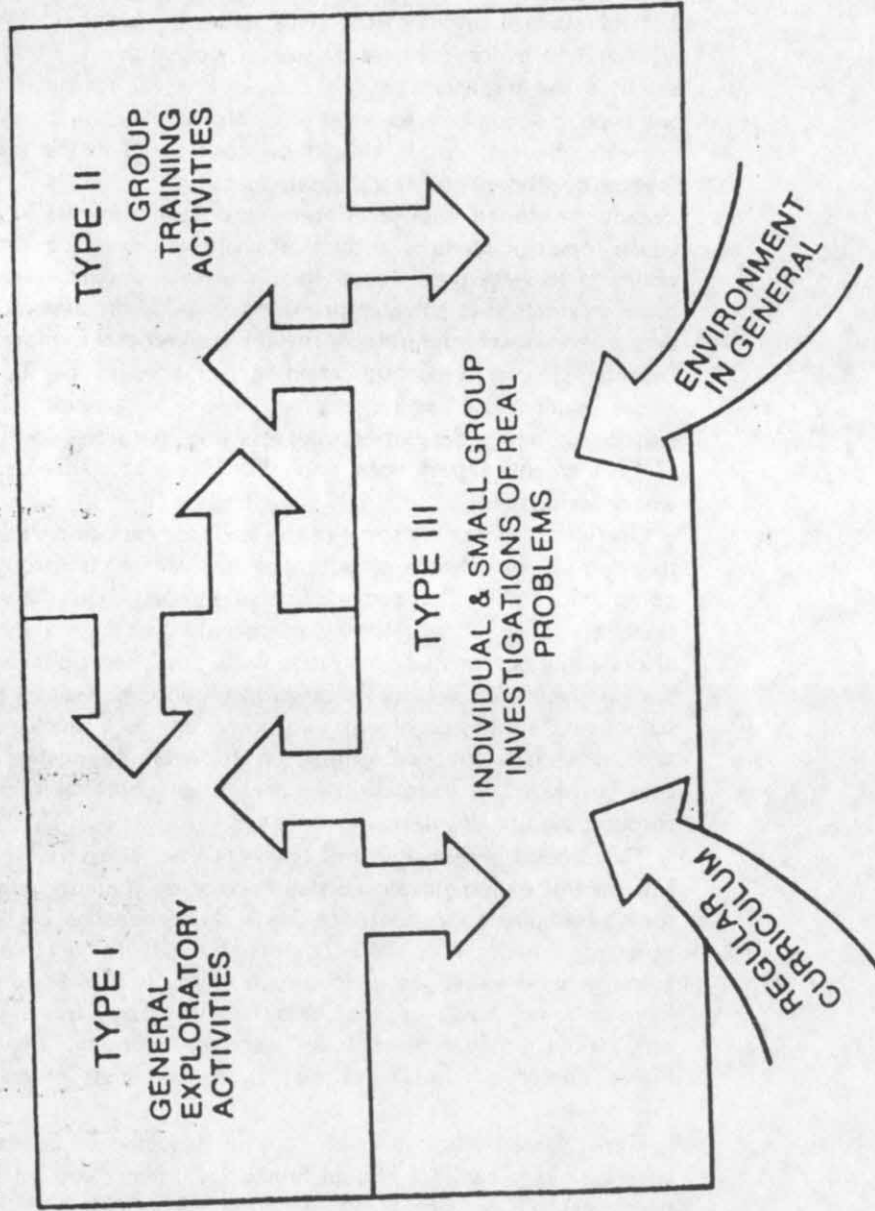
Although gifted students should have an opportunity to participate in a variety of such exploratory experiences and activities, an important part of all programs for the gifted should be the systematic development of the cognitive and affective processes which brought these youngsters to our attention 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 of the same encyclopedias or library books used in the regular school program. The focus 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 of 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

FIGURE 1 The enrichment triad model.



*Type II  
Enrichment  
Group Training  
Activities*

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 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

pedias, 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 III 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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