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COUNSELING THE BACKWARD CHILD (The Under Achiever)

INTRODUCTION

There is a world-wide need to identify, by scientific methods, the gifted child, in order to plan systematically a program designed to educate these children in school atmosphere which will stimulate them to function to the maximum of their potentialities. This need for specialized educational programs for the gifted, is particularly essential and vital to the present and future progress of rapidly developing countries such as Puerto Rico. For from the ranks of the gifted will come the future leaders in every aspect of our culture. In the fields of Education, Science, Industry, Medicine, Fine Arts and others — each and all will progress and develop only to the extent of the efficacy of judicious leadership.

These axiomatic statements certainly are not new to any of you, or to any person related to education or its allied fields. Yet, few countries in the world have put in effect a nation-wide program especially dedicated to the gifted child. Those countries which have made some attempt to meet this situation have usu-

ally limited their efforts to identifying the gifted child. Once these children are properly identified, educators have then been faced with the equally serious problem of getting these gifted children to function at a level of school achievement commensurate with their intellectual capacities. It has been estimated that, in the USA, at least half of all gifted children will fail to realize their educational potentialities. This constitutes a serious loss to these children themselves, and to their country: a loss which no nation can afford.

Thus, the question arises: why do children, endowed with exceptional mental capacities, blessed with unusual talents, and favored with vast potentialities, so often fail to work up to expectation in the classroom? It is imperative that we know the cause, or causes of these children's failure so that we may effectively plan a preventive and remedial program, and by so doing we shall help enrich the lives of both the gifted, and other members of the society which they are a part.

Unfortunately, psychologists in their attempt to construct more precise instruments for the identification of the gifted, and educators in their desire to provide these children with special curricula, have tended to neglect this important aspect of the problem. Here awaits a rich and practically unexplored field for the research-minded counselor, as there is a dearth of published material which might throw light on this question.

Thus many of the suggestions that I shall offer are not based on findings published from any study, but rather, certain ideas which are supported by psychological theories, and which I have gathered through my own actual experience with deviate or exceptional children.

Definition of Terms

My first suggestion would be, that we define clearly the operative word used in our topic of discussion — that is, "talentoso". Just exactly what do we mean when we refer to a child as "Un niño talentoso"?¹ Is this synonymous with "Niño do-

1 Talent child

tado",² "Niño brillante", "Genio"? On referring to "niño talentoso" one may rightly ask: talent in what? I am sure we would all agree that talent is a broad concept. For, there exist the talented artist, musician, athlete and other. There are those who are talented in the manipulation of people, ideas or things. Still others are talented in amassing wealth, in making discoveries, or in just being able to get along with their fellowmen. Indeed almost all human beings are talented to a greater or lesser degree in some area, although many of these talents may be in a latent stage waiting to be developed. But, far too often, man's talents remain undiscovered and are left to become atrophied and sterile. For talent is simply a natural gift, capacity or ability which demands constant stimulation if it is to flourish and bear the desired fruits.

In this discussion however we shall limit our definition of talent to include only the intellectually talented, bearing in mind that talent has many aspects, may be manifested in highly different areas, and is associated but not synonymous with intelligence. For, although most talented children tend to be of above average intelligence, their talents are only one of the many factors or abilities which comprise this intelligence. I am inclined to believe, however, that when we speak of "niño talentoso" in our public schools, we are usually referring to children of high average or superior intelligence. These children's IQ's as measured by a good intelligence test, e. g. Stanford-Binet, would range from 110 to 115 or 120, which would place them in the 75th or 85th percentiles. Gifted children have IQ's arbitrarily set at 130 upwards and thus would fall on or about the 97th + percentile. Such person comprise about 38% of the total population and would not be so numerous as to cause a serious problem in our public schools. However, the problem of backwardness or underachievement whether found among high average, superior or gifted children is essentially the same, and techniques used in dealing with it, are applicable to all children once the causes have been determined.

² Gifted child

On using the term intelligence we have introduced a new concept which also requires some clarification. That is, just exactly what is intelligence? What is its relationship to academic achievement, and how best can we measure it?

There are probably as many definitions of intelligence as there are persons who write or speak about it. All these definitions merely describe intelligence or intelligent behavior in a given situation. None of them explains just what intelligence is, of what it is made, or exactly how it functions. Although psychologists may differ as to definition, they almost unanimously agree that there are various kinds of intelligence. For example, some psychologists speak of general intelligence and specific intelligence, or what they call intelligence A and intelligence B, for example, is the innate, immeasurable energy, underlying all intellectual activities. It is ultimately determined by our genetic constitution, and is therefore, an innate quality. On the other hand, intelligence B is the manifestation of this energy, the intelligence we observe in our students behavior when faced with problem-solving situations, and the one we try to measure with our psychometric tests. Intelligence A is genetic potential while intelligence B indicates present intellectual efficiency. Intelligence A *cannot* be readily altered but Intelligence B is greatly affected by environmental stimulation. It is said that Intelligence B is composed of 47 known factors or abilities, many of which are not closely related to the abilities necessary for doing school work. Intelligence tests usually purport to measure, at most, only seven of these abilities or factors. These are: *Word Fluency, Verbal Ability, Numerical Ability, Memory, Perception, Spatial Ability, and Reasoning* (Inductive and Deductive). A group test like the Inter-American Test of General Ability seems to measure verbal and numerical abilities through a visuo-perceptual medium. But results on this test are also greatly influenced by a Speed factor, test sophistication, and an ability to listen to and carry out certain instructions, correctly. These factors may or may not be closely related to the academic subjects. Furthermore, the examiner's skill in eliciting

and maintaining the examiner's maximal effort may also affect test scores, either in a negative or positive direction.

Now, there is undoubtedly some relation or correlation between intelligence and school grades, but this relationship is far from perfect. As you all know a perfect correlation between intelligence and achievement would be 1.00. The approximated correlations between the most widely used individual intelligence test—the Stanford-Binet—and the following academic subjects have been found to be: Geography .48; Spelling .46; History .59; and Biology .54. These correlations at most are only substantial, certainly not high. This suggests an obvious but too often forgotten fact: I. e. that many qualities other than intelligence are necessary for doing academic work; e. g. interests, ambition, emotional stability, and others. Such qualities cannot be measured by present intelligence tests, and these tests *should not be used for such a purpose*. Since the correlation between intelligence and school achievement is only moderately high, we can rightfully expect to find a discrepancy between a child's IQ or Percentile and his grades, thus making the child appear backward or an underachiever. For backwardness is merely the discrepancy or distance between a child's grades and his test scores usually expressed in IQ or percentile. As shown this difference can be a spurious one and consequently not a true criterion for classifying a child as educationally backward. This is especially true when the test used to measure mental capacity is given by untrained examiners, and/or has not been standardized on the population being tested.

Some Causes and Treatment of Backwardness

Thus, the first cause of apparent backwardness in an intelligent child may be due to inherent weaknesses and limitations in the instruments used for determining our criterion for classifying a student as intellectually talented or educationally backward. At this juncture, I might point out that the reliability and validity of the "Pruebas Cooperativas Interamericanas de Habilidad General: Nivel Primario y Secundario, Formas AS y BS" have only recently been reported to have been determined. Nevertheless, this battery of tests has long been used in the

Puerto Rican Public Schools to measure intelligence, and children are usually classified as intellectually talented according to their results on this test. Furthermore, this test, as we mentioned, measures only a few of the factors comprising intelligence, and these may correlate poorly with academic subjects. Therefore, we must use criteria other than results on this, or any one test if we wish to obtain an accurate and complete picture of the child's whole personality. For it is the manner in which the child's total personality reacts to environment stimuli (along with his inherited capacities) which will determine whether he will or will not function to his full potential. Therefore, we must also obtain some information about our students' inner life, their feelings, interests, drives, spiritual values and home background as well as knowledge of his mental functioning. Acting in this manner, we shall be in a better position to plan a preventive or remedial program for the backward intellectually talented student.

Contrary to much current practice, such a program of prevention should begin in the elementary rather than in the high school. For the present cause or causes of a talented child's backwardness in the high school may have had its roots in the primary grades. At this level, many intelligent children are not stimulated to put forth their best efforts, as they are forced to compete with children of average or below average intelligence. Poor study habits and negative attitudes towards school may become so deeply ingrained as to form part of the child's personality. Thus, the potentially talented child in the elementary school is converted into the underachiever or backward student in the high school. Therefore, counselors should try to identify potentially talented students, who show possible signs of becoming underachievers, as soon as these children reach high school. This can be done by examining in-coming children's school records in which should appear their academic index along with other data. In the case of the talented student his percentile on the General Ability Test would appear in his record, and it is usually stated whether he is, or has been a scholarship student. Backward students who at some time in the past have shown

promise of high academic achievement should be oriented as to good study habits and instructed in how to usefully employ their in and out-of-school time. "Distribution of Time Sheets" can be of great value to students in making a balanced program between study and other activities. Orientation might also include the many benefits to be gained by obtaining and maintaining a high academic index.

It is my opinion that few intelligent students are backward in all subjects, but only in the ones in which they are interested. Therefore the counselor should explore the child's true interests. There are various ways in which this can be accomplished. For example, the counselor may use a direct sentence completion method in which the student merely completes the phrase; "The subject I most enjoy studying is _____"; or "To me the most important school subject is _____", or "If I had my choice I would like to be a _____ when I grow up." The counselor can also use the indirect sentence completion method. Here, the child is asked to complete the statement, "When Juanito grows up he wants to be a _____". In this method the child projects his interests, unconsciously. A talk with the parents might also reveal the child's interests. The counselor might inquire, "Has Juanito expressed interest in a particular subject (or career)"? If the answer is in the affirmative the counselor then asks; "Which one?" The interest Inventory of the Department of Education can be very helpful in this area.

It must be remembered that the counselor cannot and should not expect a child to be only interested in academic subjects. Unless directed towards anti-social ends, children's personal interests must be respected, although these might be in conflict with what the counselor, teacher or even the parent may wish for the child. We must realize that these interests are influenced by various factors, among them the child's personality type, which is largely determined by heredity. For example, the introverted and the extroverted child differ greatly as to interests. The introverted child tends to prefer passive activities, which can be carried out alone, while the extroverted is more expan-

sive, and tends to prefer more active, group activities. Interests also spring from spiritual values. Therefore, to know the whole child we must know his values as these values activate his behavior and determine into which channels he will direct his energies and talents. This is specially significant when counseling high school adolescents. You will recall the six dominant values of man and their corresponding types. (1) *Theoretical* or *Scientific* value which motivates the scientific or academic minded student, (2) *Aesthetic* value, as manifested in love of beauty (fine arts student), (3) *Utilitarian* value, which motivates economic or business minded, money conscious persons, (4) *Social value*, motivating love of people, (5) *Political value*, manifested in a love of power, reactionary, and (6) *Religious value*, motivating missionaries, priests, etc. Therefore, the talented child whose dominant values is aesthetic, who loves form, grace and beauty, might become completely bored in a chemistry class, receive poor grades and therefore appear backward in this subject. In this case the student must be led to realize the importance of values in fields other than his own, and in which he might be required to obtain some degree of competency, in order to achieve his goal in his chosen field.

Social pressures and the desire for group acceptance can greatly influence a child's school performance. Intelligent children are known to become backward on purpose, and intentionally obtain low grades so they will be accepted by their less endowed class mates. For example, a child may be reluctant to excel in English for fear of being called "Americanito" by his friends and ostracized from the group.

The child's sex-role or self-image as these are influenced by cultural pressures that can also affect his classroom performance in a general, or in a particular subject. Male students in Puerto Rico are often reluctant to excel in music, art, poetry or languages as they might not be considered masculine by their friends or parents. The intelligent girl may hold back in the classroom for fear of losing favor with her less gifted male friends. The counselor might well investigate the image or opinion students have of intelligent scholars and when possible or

desirable, try to promote a positive image of the talented child. Real life examples or biographies of well known outstanding persons can often impress children, and motivate them to pattern their lives on the images of their heroes.

Parental attitudes toward school success or failure greatly influence the child's classroom performance. Intelligent children reared in an un-stimulating home environment are often not encouraged to strive for high academic attainments, and consequently fail to develop their cognitive abilities. Therefore, parents of talented children should be oriented as to the advantages to be gained by both them and their children if the latter obtain and maintain a high academic index. This is especially true in the case of the talented child from a low socio-economic background. It should be stressed that scholarships are generally awarded on the basis of academic index, and students' high school grades are of great importance when seeking admission to the University.

Another major cause of backwardness of intellectually talented students is the present school policy of having children of a wide range of abilities in the same class. Unless special techniques are used the talented children in a heterogeneous class often becomes completely bored and expend their energies in activities other than school work. The bright extroverted student may become a discipline problem, as his creative mind, seeking some outlet, may lead him to behave in an anti-social manner. The introverted child may resort to day dreaming, and consequently, while in a world of fantasy, miss much valuable material, such as a necessary step in math, a formula in chemistry, or a rule in English, etc. and thus fall behind in a particular subject. Low grades are frequently given for poor conduct, and for this reason the academic index of many talented children is not in keeping with their mental capacities. The solution to the problem of the fast learner in a heterogeneous class, is obviously the reorganization of the school, so that children would be grouped according to their abilities. Unfortunately, this may be outside of the province of the counselor. However, when meeting with principals and teachers, counselors could call their at-

attention to the importance of this problem and offer orientation as to how it can be mitigated by skillful planning and using teaching techniques especially designed for dealing with bright children in a heterogeneous class. Such techniques might include: (1) encouraging and permitting the bright student to use materials of a higher grade instead of or along with those assigned to their actual class level, (2) permitting bright students to attend certain classes at a higher level, (3) advancing the talented student to a higher grade, (4) offering them a wider range of materials, which are difficult but interesting and challenging and (5) encouraging them to assist in leading discussions, planning activities, etc. These are only part solutions and may not be feasible in many high schools. Therefore, I feel that counselors should repeatedly emphasize the following points to teachers of intellectually superior children: (1) that superior intelligence is only one aspect of the child's total complex personality, and (2) that these children also have many other talents which should be explored and exploited, to name but a few creative ability, musical talent, motor skills, sports, leadership and others. In short, teachers if possible should include in their lesson plans means for assisting the superior child, by enriching his intellectual, creative and spiritual life, while at the same time facilitating his acceptance by other members of the group.

Any one of the factors forementioned in this discussion may cause an intelligent child to fall behind in a specific academic subject. However, I believe that the main contributing causative factor of all — round backwardness among intelligent students is emotional maladjustment, immaturity or instability. Anxiety, tensions and frustrations can depress creativity and prevent the most intelligent scholar from working up to his full capacity. Signs of emotional instability should be diagnosed and dealt with as soon as possible. Counselors could orient teachers in recognizing those signs which might indicate present or future emotional problems. Persistent destruction of property, fights, continuous biting of finger nails, outbursts of crying, frequent desire to go to the toilet, day dreaming, recurring head or stomach aches, are but a few of the signs which can be indicative of

future emotional maladjustment, and which can be readily observed by the teacher. The Personality Test of the Department of Education can be useful in pin-pointing emotional problems in high school children. Counselors with the cooperation of teachers and parents can greatly help children with surface or superficial behavior problems. Supportive, indirect or re-education therapy, or just kind understanding can help in many of these mild cases; the more serious cases should be referred to other agencies. Needless to say all counselors should have readily available the names of persons or agencies to whom emotionally disturbed children may be referred.

Conclusions

The other causes of backwardness among talented children are similar to those found among children at all levels of intelligence, and would include, health, high absenteeism, physical disability and others. We must not forget however that the difference between superior, average and subnormal children is in most instances one of degree and not of kind, and the problem of backwardness is shared by all children regardless of their intellectual capacity. Fortunately, backwardness is an acquired trait, and therefore it can be remedied if treated adequately, and at the most propitious time.

Before planning remedial or preventive treatment for the backward talented student, I feel, counselors might be well advised to consider these challenging questions whose answers will involve the consideration of individual rights and a respect for individual differences. These are: (1) should all children be oriented towards becoming academic scholars without any regard for their individual personality, without consideration for their particular likes or dislikes, interests, values; without respect for their motor skills or manual abilities or other non-intellectual talents? Should academic success be prized above athletic process? Should high grades be the only goal or aim for the intellectually talented or are there other goals in life as equally worthy or praise? Is the student with a high academic index, but creatively sterile to be valued higher than the one who paints

a beautiful picture or composes a lovely song, but who has no desire to excel in math or history? Do we want uniformity in our society, or should we encourage individuality and permit each person to develop his own talents, even at the risk of his becoming an underachiever or failure in the academic subjects? The ultimate answer to these questions will be determined by the image we form of, and the role to be played by the talented child in our society. Regardless of personal opinions, it is our duty as educators and counselors to assist and encourage each child to put forth his maximal effort in every task that he might endeavor, whether this child be of superior, average or inferior intelligence. For though there may be 47 factors which comprise intelligence, there is only one factor that is found in all men who have achieved success regardless of the field in which their success was obtained. *This factor is the willingness to work hard and to work long hours.*

Summary

We have seen that the causes of backwardness are many. Those which especially affect the intelligent talented student either directly or indirectly are: (1) the limitations of the instruments used for measuring intelligence and the other aspects of human behavior (2) the self-image of the child, and the attitude of his environment toward the academically successful, (3) interests, talents, values, and special skills unrelated to or not necessary for achieving success in the academic subjects, (4) the home environment, (5) non-stimulating teaching methods and lack of a specialized program in the school, and (6) emotional instability.

If counselors find that after exhausting their efforts to remedy and remove the causes of backwardness, there still remains an undetermined number of highly intelligent children who persist in obtaining low grades in academic subjects, they may find some consolation and hope in the fact that Newton, Darwin, Watts, Churchill, and other outstanding men were also hopelessly backward while in school.

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