

" THE AVERAGE CHILD & OUTSTANDING CHILD "

I do not believe any child is an "average" child. In fact the term "average" itself should be treated with caution. You must have heard about the man who took the average depth of a pond to be 4 feet, but stepped in and got drowned!

Let us consider the "outstanding" or the term commonly used by the Educational Psychologists - "The Gifted" child.

Throughout history, different societies have held various views as to the appropriate education of the most able and how it may best be accomplished. In Greece, over 2000 years ago, Plato distinguished the 'man of gold' with superior intellects from those of 'silver' and 'iron or brass'. As children they should be instructed in such subjects as philosophy, metaphysics and science which would be beyond the ability of those who were destined to become soldiers or artisans.

Until well into the nineteenth century, there was little problem since so few children were educated anyway. Even until World War II in several countries including ours only the upper and middle class children and a few of the able working class could advance to college and university education. As more democratic ideals began to spread, education became the objective of the Government; and in that process the most suffered group in my view has been the gifted whose special needs have been little cared for.

There is a real difficulty in finding and agreeing on suitable criteria for determining who are the gifted children. When we turn to literature on the subject we find that different authors have provided checklists of criteria which should indicate giftedness. These cover the period of birth, infancy, childhood and adolescence. Even factors such as age at which the child was first able to sit up, the age at which he articulated his first recognizable word (recognizable by someone other than his fond mother!), the age at which the child could first dress himself, the age of learning to walk, may appear on the list. Unfortunately these lists are sometimes so long and extensive as to cover the vast majority of children thereby leading to one of two conclusions: Either the vast majority of children have some of the characteristics of the so called "gifted" and so the term "gifted children" loses its meaning; or there is a considerable variety in the characteristics and growth rates of gifted children.

Fifty years ago it was generally assumed by psychologists and educationists that intelligence was the basic innate capacity of the individual to learn, comprehend and reason. They saw that since this quality was genetically determined it developed with age irrespective of the environment; that it reached its maximum by around 15 years and accurately by individually administered tests such as Stanford - Binet and hence the IQ obtained in childhood gave a reliable indication of the educational and vocational level that the person could be expected to attain in his later school career and in adult life.

However by 1920's and 30's there was mounting evidence that IQs were considerably affected by environmental differences from the Army Alpha Tests-evidence gathered for example from gypsy children and other rural children who were adopted and reared in superior foster homes. We need not dwell here on the question of the unending controversy over "Heredity or Environment" but assume that both play a part in what we term as "Intelligence"

Essentially, three parametas have been employed to identify the gifted: general intelligence, special abilities and creativity, although there is some disagreement on the relative independence of these criteria. Performance on one or more tests of general intelligence has been the most widely used criterion of giftedness in both research and selection. Where only this criterion is used, the cut off point which distinguishes the gifted from the non-gifted becomes an important issue. There is some consensus that IQ 140 (top .38 percent) - used by Terman in his monumental followup study of Gifted California children - should be this cut off. But measured intelligence has many components and it is not easy to stay constant until senility set in; that it could be measured fairly



to identify them. Guilford's "the three faces of intellect" based on the identification of factors in highly selected groups whereby ability factors are grouped according to three dimensions: operations, contents and products. For example, one of the five mental operations or psychological process is cognition which might involve discovery, awareness, recognition, comprehension or understanding; its contents could be figural, symbolic, semantic or behavioural and the form it produces can be classified in six ways. This three dimensional classification then will yield 120 possible different abilities. However there remain many differences of opinion among psychologists as to the structure of human ability. Perhaps the best at present is by Butcher who summarises his findings that 'There is a general factor of intelligence which is common to all intellectual tasks, but there also exist supplementary common factors such as verbal ability or spatial ability'.

The recent dissatisfaction with criteria of ability implicit in the usual intelligence tests has led to many attempts to identify creativity as a factor which is relatively independent of intelligence. Getzels & Jackson (1962) "Creativity and Intelligence" report on pupils of IQ 132 described two experimental groups - one consisting of the highly intelligent children with low creativity test scores and the other consisting of relatively less intelligent children who scored highly on tests of creativity. The highly creative appeared to have a high sense of humour, to come from less academic families to hold less conformist values and to over-achieve in terms of their IQ. Hudson's (1966) research on 'convergent' and 'divergent' thinking among the grammar and public school boys revealed that the different cognitive styles were related to personality characteristics and that there was a tendency for 'convergent' thinkers to favour specialization in the sciences and divergent thinkers to favour specialization in the arts.

The findings of another study by Wallach and Kogan's (1965) classified into four combinations are summarised below:

- i) High creativity - High intelligence: These children exercise within themselves both control and freedom, both adult-like and child-like kinds of behaviour.
- ii) High creativity - Low intelligence: These children are in angry conflict with themselves and with their school environment and are beset by feelings of worthiness and inadequacy. In a stress-free context, however, they can blossom forth cognitively.
- iii) Low creativity - High intelligence: These children can be described as "addicted" to school achievement. Academic failure would be conceived by them as catastrophic, so that they must continually strive for academic excellence to avoid the possibility of pain.
- iv) Low creativity - Low intelligence: Basically bewildered, these children engage in various defensive, manoeuvres ranging from useful adaptations such as intensive social activity to regressions such as passivity or psychosomatic symptoms.

Clearly the phenomenon of creativity is central to any thinking about the sort of education which a gifted child should receive and tests of creativity may play their part in the process of discovering the nature of creativity; but creativity cannot be turned on to order in a test situation because of the open-ended nature of these tests. Because of the absence of any single measure of giftedness, American programmes for the gifted child tend to rely upon a variety of selective devices.

German's investigation has been the most ambitious longitudinal study of the gifted reported so far and his findings have been generally supported by other studies conducted from 1936 to 1966:

- i) There is considerable consistency between early and late performance profiles.



- ii) Intelligence tests predict school performance more successfully than development in personal traits and other growth characteristics.
- iii) A high IQ above does not guarantee success; ambition to do well, drive to achieve and a determination to succeed are also important.
- iv) Family background appears to be a determining factor in how well a bright child realizes his early promise.
- v) Gifted children of equal ability as measured by tests show wide divergence in personality, interests and achievements as they mature.
- vi) Regression to the mean is to be expected from repeated intelligence tests of exceptional individuals.
- vii) Although there are no sex differences in general intelligence in the early years, in the teens and beyond, girls regress more rapidly than boys. This may be due to social factors.

#### The education of the Gifted:

Special provision for the gifted varies according to the ideological and structural characteristics of different societies. Generally speaking, European societies have had elite secondary schools which have been academically and socially selective. But with the process of transformation of their secondary education into comprehensive ones, problems have arisen regarding the gifted. However differentiation of some kind or another occurs at certain stages in their systems. In the German gymnasium between the ages of 13 and 16 and in the French Lycee between 11 and 15 years. In Russia, though the basic system of education is common and comprehensive, by end of Grade Eight (15-16 years) there are variations of pattern to cater for the gifted. There are four university boarding schools in Moscow, Kiev, Leningrad and Novosibirsk which cater for the gifted children from rural areas only. Recruitment is through academic olympiads with written and oral tests.

Owing to the decentralized character of American education, solutions to the problem of the education of the gifted have a highly varied character. The American practices can be classified under three major headings: Grouping, acceleration and enrichment.

Apart from grouping the gifted in special classes for part of their teaching; there are a number of techniques in use which provide for the gifted child in the regular classroom through the individualization of assignments, materials and activities. Also extra curricular activities through clubs and summer programmes are made to supplement class teachings. This is very similar to the procedure adopted in some of the good schools in our country.

Acceleration involves skipping of a standard what we call in our situation 'double promotion' to give the child a challenge in the higher class. The disadvantages of that are mainly associated with the social adjustment.

Enrichment relates to any technique whereby gifted children can study certain areas in greater depth or study additional subjects and topics to a greater breadth.

In Britain approach to the gifted has been through streaming at one stage or another so that the children can proceed at their own pace in their respective groups and also by special classes for the gifted organised in certain centres. Both these are commonly adopted in a number of our Schools.

In our country, there have been no specific large scale efforts to identify the gifted. There are no Intelligence Tests standardized on the whole population, even though isolated efforts on small groups have been made from time to time by individuals working for their higher degrees. For most purposes, examination marks are the only yardstick -



it is the basis for selection into higher academic or vocational or technical course and also the basis on which recruitment to various jobs is made. As stated before some of the good schools resort to streaming according to ability (again measured by achievement tests!) and the children in the 'best' stream are given advanced curricula in Mathematics and Science. The N.C.E.R.T.'s Science Talent Search Scheme Examination (after Standards XI and XII) and the Merit Scholarship Examination (after Standard X) have been successful to some extent in identifying the gifted children atleast in areas of Mathematics and Science - inspite of the criticisms levelled against them that recently appeared in the newspapers.

A lot more research should be done on identifying and educating the gifted in our country. Advocates of socialization of education must realise that 'levelling down' of education, not going to help any nation in its efforts to progress. They may do well to take note of the following remarks of late Sir Cyril Burt:

" In spite of popular prejudice, there is or there should be no insuperable conflict between equality as a principle of justice and inequality as a fact of genetics. In education, equal opportunity means equal opportunity to make the most of differences that are innate. The ideal is a free and fair chance for each peculiar gifts and virtues with which he is endowed - high ability if he possesses it, if not, whatever qualities of body, mind and character are latent within him. In this way, and in this way along, can we be sure of realising to the full our untapped resources of talent....."

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