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ABSTRACT

Rural gifted students are often characterized in the literature as sharing many of the needs and problems of other culturally diverse groups. They are viewed as having problems related to self-esteem, level of aspiration, and frustration with an instructional program which often fails to provide for learning relevant to the students' interests and environment. On the plus side, these same youngsters have identified strengths in logical thinking, problem-solving, sensitivity to injustice, and interest in people and their activities. Instructional strategies involving decision making skills are viewed as a viable approach to addressing both the needs and abilities of rural gifted youth. Specific guidelines in decision making training which teachers can use are to: provide a means for student responses, oral or written, which establishes the individual student's decision and the basis for the decision; prepare exercises which are real-life situations that assist students in defining their own sense of purpose and identity; and choose incidents or issues that will engage the students' interests and emotions. Such strategies can provide students with opportunities to practice skills in areas of their strengths and in the context of a curriculum focusing on relevant, real-life situations of interest to a particular group of students. (Author/NQA)

Decision Making: An Instructional Strategy for the Rural Gifted Student

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Abstract

Rural gifted students are often characterized in the literature as sharing many of the needs and problems of other culturally diverse groups. They are viewed as having problems related to self-esteem, level of aspiration, and frustration with an instructional program which often fails to provide for learning which is relevant to the interests and environment of the students. On the plus side, these same youngsters have identified strengths in logical thinking, problem-solving, sensitivity to injustice, and interest in people and their activities. Instructional strategies which involve decision making skills are viewed as a viable approach to addressing both the needs and abilities of rural gifted youth. Specific guidelines in decision making training can be used by teachers to integrate the development of knowledge about a topic or issue with student interest in problems related to the topic. Such strategies can provide students with opportunities to practice skills in areas of their strengths and in the context of a curriculum which focuses on relevant, real-life situations of interest to a particular group of students.

Decision Making: An Instructional Strategy

for the Rural Gifted Student

This presentation is based on three primary assumptions: 1) that there are identifiable skills in the decision making process; 2) that training/practice enhances decision making skills; and 3) that training in decision making represents an instructional strategy which addresses documented needs/characteristics of rural gifted youngsters. Each of these assumptions will be explored in the perspective of available literature, with particular focus on a model of decision making defined in Calvin Taylor's multiple talent approach to teaching. Finally, some practical aspects of implementing training for decision making with rural gifted youth will be presented.

Models of Decision Making

Numerous models defining cognitive proces es have been well-repre - sented in the literature in gifted education, and most of these models include some definition of evaluative or decision making skills. Both Bloom (1956) and Guilford (1967) identified specific skills in evaluation in their models of the cognitive domain. Creative problem-solving models, e.g., Parnes, Noller & Biondi (1977), also specify steps involved in reaching a decision.

While much of the early writing on evaluation skills appeared in psychological research, more recent models which define decision making skills can be found in literature which focuses on the application of these skills to curriculum development and instruction (Weiss, 1980; Hamrick, Anspaugh, & Smith, 1980; and Janis & Mann, 1977). The decision making talent identified by Calvin Taylor (1967) and operationally

defined in the Talents Unlimited developer-demonstration project is a specific example of instructional models of decision making. In the multiple talent model decision making is defined by four observable student behaviors: 1) identify many, different alternatives for solving a problem; 2) use criteria to evaluate each of the choices; 3) select the best alternative; and 4) state many, different reasons for the final choice. While the specific delineation of decision making skills may vary from one model to another, the message is clear: choosing is not decision making. Smaby & Tamminen (1978) noted, "To choose is an act, but to consider possible choices is decision making" (p. 106). Learning to make decisions involves understanding of self, acquiring of information, and developing strategies for dealing with problem situations.

Effects of Training in Decision Making

Statistical reports on the effects of training in decision making skills are perhaps best represented in the research on the Talents Unlimited project (Chissom & McLean, 1980). Elementary students (grades 1-6) involved in this experimental project, which incorporated systematic training in decision making as well as in five other talent clusters, represented a wide range of intellectual ability and achievement; rural and other minority populations were included in the study.

In a technical report on the research findings of the three-year implementation of the Talents Unlimited program, Chissom and McLean reported that 32 of the 40 tests assessing student progress in all talent areas, including decision making, were significant in favor of the experimental groups (those students receiving talent training). Only eight of the 40 talent tests were nonsignificant and all of these leaned

in favor of the experimental groups.

The report by Chissom and McLean also recorded positive evidence of training in decision making from replication studies of the Talents Unlimited model. The Arkadelphia, Arkansas School District No. 1 implemented the model with gifted and talented secondary students, grades 8-12. Statistically significant gains were found on tests of all six talent clusters, including decision making. Similar results were reported for a replication study of decision making training for fourth- and fifth-grade students in Livonia, Michigan.

Reports of the positive effects of training students to use creative and evaluative thinking processes also can be found in the work of Gilbert Stevenson (1971) and Beverly Lloyd (1972). In addition, a study by Richter & Tjosvold (1980) reported the effects of student participation in classroom decision making on attitudes, peer interaction, motivation, and learning. Elementary students were randomly assigned to two classroom conditions: 1) a student participation condition in which students decided the topic and major learning activities with the teacher; and 2) the teacher planned condition in which the teacher announced the topic and activities and urged students to become involved. "Results indicate that students who participated in classroom decisions developed more favorable attitudes toward school and subject, interacted more positively with peers, worked more consistently without supervision, and learned more than students whose teacher made decisions" (p. 74). The authors concluded that "participation in making decisions may integrate students into school life and develop their commitment to learning" (p. 74).

Needs of Rural Gifted Students Addressed by Decision Making Training

The choice of an instructional strategy for use with students should be based on what we know about the characteristics and needs of a particular population of students. In much of the literature on the culturally diverse/disadvantaged, terms which are often defined to include rural populations (Baldwin, Gear, & Lucito, 1978), discussions of program needs refer to the importance of instructional experiences which give students a sense of identity and of control over their lives. A special emphasis in many program designs for these youngsters is career education and a focus on decision making and problem solving skills (Moore, 1979).

Among the educational needs of the culturally diverse gifted child identified in Gallagher's (1974) conference report, Talent Delayed - Talent Denied, were these two: 1) a need for learning experiences relevant to the lives and environment of the youngsters; and 2) a need for balance between cognitive and affective modes of learning in the instructional program. These needs reflected the concern of the committee for the low self-esteem and a built-in expectation of failure often evident in minority children.

Frasier (1979) identified counseling needs of culturally diverse gifted children as focusing on four major problems, two of which are related to decision making skills: 1) difficulty in making academic and vocational decisions; and 2) problems in facing and resolving their interpersonal conflicts. Again, as in the Gallagher report, these needs suggest attention to skills in both cognitive and affective areas.

Other writers refer to descriptors of characteristics of minority/

culturally diverse groups of gifted students which suggest the need for an instructional approach that includes opportunity for problem solving in real-life situations. Hilliard (1976) listed, among other descriptors of minority children, a preference for a focus on people and their activities rather than things and a keen sense of justice and quickness to analyze and perceive injustice. Baldwin (1978) also pointed to logical reasoning and pragmatic problem solving abilities of culturally diverse students. In addition, she noted a strength in social intelligence and feeling of responsibility for the community with a rebelliousness regarding inequities. Further, Frasier (1974) identified special problems of extremely high or low levels of aspiration, external locus of control, and short-ranged goals. In an effort to address these problems of disadvantaged adolescents, Frasier described a counseling technique, Decision Making Skills for Life Planning (DLP), to assist these students in acquiring effective strategies for making decisions.

The literature, then, offers a profile of culturally different gifted children as having both strengths and weaknesses in skills related to problem solving and decision making. On the one hand, these youngsters demonstrate a sensitivity to injustice and inequity and a capacity for logical reasonsing and the practical resolution of problems of personal significance. On the other hand, the potential of these same youngsters may be short-circuited by low self-esteem and a sense of failure and by school programs which lack balance in opportunities to practice problem solving skills in relevant, real-life situations and which fail to emphasize the role of affective skills in problem solving. While training in decision making does not address all the needs of

rural gifted youth, it is one alternative for helping such youngsters gain control of their lives and begin to develop a sense of personal identity.

Using Decision Making As An Instructional Strategy

Proponents of decision making training in instructional programs agree that the application of these models requires attention to three factors: 1) knowledge, factual information in the traditional sense and/or experience relating to a topic or issue; 2) affect, interest in and/or strong attitudes and feelings about a situation or topic; and 3) skill, an understanding of and practice in the use of decision making processes. Some procedures to guide teachers in the integration of these three factors are suggested by Victory (1979). These procedures will be described and illustrated with examples of decision making training activities used in the Talents Unlimited project. The activities were implemented in classrooms which included rural students.

Choosing Topics of Interest to Students

A major guideline in teaching decision making is to choose incidents or issues that will engage the students' interests and emotions. An example of a teacher's application of this guideline can serve as an illustration.

In a second-grade classroom, students were engaged in a math unit which focused on the use of simple graphs (e.g., picture graphs). As part of their exploration of this topic, these second graders had taken some simple surveys on the school grounds. In one survey they counted and recorded with a simple tally the number of different kinds of trees in the area of the campus playground. Later, the teacher helped the

youngsters translate the tally figures into a picture graph, and the students discussed how a graph can provide many pieces of information in a quick and interesting way.

Near the end of this unit, about two weeks later, the teacher was preparing to conduct a culminating experience suggested in the teacher's edition of the math text. The assignment was to have each student survey the number and kinds of pets in his/her neighborhood. As the teacher visualized the lesson plan, it occurred to her that the use of the decision making process could provide for greater student involvement and interest in this learning activity than the original design. So, instead of assigning one topic for a survey the teacher involved the second graders in generating many, different possible things they might like to survey in their own neighborhoods; they listed more than 40 ideas about topics they would be interested in! Then, the teacher assisted the students in the process of raising criteria questions which could help them think more carefully about the alternatives (e.g., How long would it take to survey this topic? Can I do this survey by myself? Would I find these things in my neighborhood? Am I interested in this subject?). After a period of discussion and reflection, each student was asked to record the one best topic for his/her survey and to give reasons for the choice.

The next day the teacher had abundant evidence of the success of this spproach to capturing the interests of students. Every second grader excitedly shared the results of an individual survey. The topics represented great diversity, from the kinds of cars in the neighborhood to "the number of red, yellow, or green traffic lights I saw as my

school bus came to each intersection on the way home"!

A teacher of older youngsters made a similar use of the decision making strategy when students expressed interest in NASA's choice of momentos to be left on the moon by the first astronauts who landed there. To capitalize on the high emotional tone of the students' discussions about the best items to represent our culture, the teacher directed attention toward the use of time capsules to capture a period of time or event.

Within a week, students were deeply involved in the process of deciding on the best items for a school time capsule. As the project reached outside this one classroom, students were investing in numerous decisions of significance to their project, e.g., deciding on a container, deciding on a place for burial of the time capsule, deciding on a depository for the letter explaining the capsule (and deciding on a date in the future for its opening), deciding on the kind of ceremony for the burial of the capsule, etc., etc., etc. The involvement of parents and other community members attested to the impact of this projct built on students' interest in a slice of their own culture.

Patton (1980) applauds the use of problems at the school, community, state, and even national levels to engage student interest in problem solving. He illustrates the richness of a problem area, such as ecology, for practice in decision making with charts of possible topics.

Show transparency of table from Patton reference, p. 256

Focusing on Real-life Situations

A second guideline in teaching for decision making is to prepare exercises which are real-life situations that assist students in defining their own sense of purpose and identity. One approach which a teacher used to help students deal with the potential personal conflicts involved in taking mental and emotional risks is described below.

In a study of man in space, elementary youngsters encountered the law of gravity. As the teacher shared information on the discovery of this law by Sir Isaac Newton, students became aware of the ridicule that Newton suffered from many people around him. The students learned that Newton became so sensitive to criticism that it required frequent pleading from his friends to get him to publish his most valuable discoveries. Recognizing a similar problem her gifted students faced in a world which values convergent thinking more than divergent thinking, the teacher posed this problem for decision making: "Put yourself in Newton's shoes and tell what you think he should have done when he received so much criticism of his new ideas." After students offered different alternatives (e.g., give up and not share his ideas, fight anybody who ridiculed his ideas, hold special classes to teach about his ideas, publish his ideas under a different name), the teacher encouraged students to weigh the alternatives by getting them to pose questions that would help them think through the varied alternatives. Some questions raised were: Are my ideas important? Will others understand my ideas? How much do I care what others think of me? As youngsters made their own choices in this simulated experience, they were asked to defend their decisions with a variety of reasons stemming from their examination of

the criteria questions. An important aspect of this decision making exercise was the youngsters' grappling with the values expressed in many of the potential solutions, not unlike the thinking and feeling processes needed in the resolution of real conflicts in their own lives as they dared to be different from their peers.

The same group of bright youngsters involved in the decision making activity described above soon presented their teacher with a source of material that stimulated a heated discussion and some subsequent decision making action. One morning, David came rushing into class waving a section of the local newspaper and telling anyone who would listen, "It doesn't make sense; it's a stupid answer!"

In a calmer moment, David explained that he disagreed vehemently with the advice given in a syndicated column by a psychologist who answered questions sent in by teenagers. As he shared both question and answer, David sparked a discussion among the entire group about the effectiveness of the psychologist's answer to the teenager. With little effort, but much foresight, the teacher was able to focus student interest by asking if they would like to so something about the advice and their reactions to it. Further discussion led to the generation and evaluation of what the students felt were more appropriate responses to the teenage writer's question. The results of the problem solving session were sent to the columnist. This experience served further as a stimulus to several students who began their own advice column for teenagers in the school newspaper.

Smith, Hamrick, and Anspaugh (1981) describe an approach for integrating real-life decision making skills in health education for

adolescents. This approach makes use of a "decision story" which is defined as "an open-ended, brief scenario describing a health problem in a real-life context" (p. 637). The story involves a situation which is troublesome to adolescents and which involves the values, attitudes, opinions, and information base of youngsters. Subjects of stories may include drugs, stress, nutrition, parent-teenager relationships, sexuality, peer pressure, and interpersonal relationships. Major features of the decision story are its open-endedness, suggesting the possibility for different decisions, and the use of a focus question to introduce and identify the central issue. Asking what "should" be done is considered by the authors to be the most effective focus statement because it encourages students to get involved by taking a stand.

A commercial program which makes use of similar decision-making stories but which emphasizes spontaneous role-playing for resolution of conflict is Can of Squirms (1973). Packages prepared for primary, intermediate, and high school groups contain a variety of situation cards and a discussion guide with possible questions for focusing the follow-up discussion to role playing.

Two other commercially available programs which focus on real-life decision making are: 1) Trade Offs (1978), developed by Agency for Instructional Television, Joint Council of Economics Education and the Canadian Foundation for Economics Education; and 2) Decision Tree (Remy, Kies, LaRaus, & Chiarelott, 1978). Trade Offs is a television film series designed for elementary and junior high school students. It emphasizes the application of economics to real-life personal and social problems and the learning of decision making skills.

Providing for Individual Decision Making and Feedback

A third guideline in using decision making models is to provide a means for student responses, oral or written, which establishes the individual student's decision, and the basis for the decision (a reflection of the knowledge aboutthe topic or sit ation, as well as the values on which the decision was based). The idea here is that the decision making process used in small group or class settings need not be limited to decisions based on group consensus. Many decision making situations can be developed that encourage different individual decisions which can then be used as the basis for discussion. Further, the articulation of individual decisions by students, in written or oral form, provides a mean for formalizing the cognitive and affective processes involved in generating alternatives, evaluating possibilities according to criterion satisfaction, reaching a decision, and defending that decision. This articulation process can aid the teacher and student in evaluating student skill in the various processes involved in decision making. In addition, an oral or wtitten record of a decision which will be implemented in order to accomplish some task gives direction to planning. It also serves as a basis for follow-up evaluation of the decision (i.e., asking "Was that a good decision for me?").

As an illustration of this third guideline, recall the earlier story of the second graders who made their own decisions about a subject to survey. After students had brainstormed more than 40 ideas, the teacher reviewed the list on the board and asked each student to draw or write on a sheet of paper the four or five subjects he/she was most interested in surveying. Then, using the list of criteria questions

generated by the group with the help of the teacher, each student was asked to draw a circle around the best choice for him/her. The actual "circling" activity is considered an important ingredient in helping a student make a commitment, take a stand. Finally, students were given an opportunity to draw, write, or tell the reasons for a choice.

On the following day, when students brought their completed surveys and graphs to share in class, they were asked to evaluate their choice of subject from the perspective of implementation putting the decision into action. Some youngsters were confident that their choices had been good ones "because I got it done", "because it was fun", "because no one else surveyed the same thing I did". Other students, even some with completed graphs, indicated that if they had it to do again, they would make different choices "because it got dark before I finished" (survey of cars in neighborhood which required that users of cars have returned from work, school, etc.) and "because some people thought I was just joking when I asked them questions about the TV shows they watched on Monday night". In the discussion which followed, the teacher was able to help students identify other criteria questions which might be important in making decisions. This kind of consideration of consequences is not too dissimilar from the "Monday morning quarterbacking" engaged in by many adults! And, it is this follow-through evaluation which can help youngsters to better understand the process of decision making and to improve their skills based on experience.

Summary

Rural gifted students are often characterized in the literature as sharing many of the needs and problems of other culturally diverse

groups. They are viewed as having problems related to self-esteem, level of aspiration, and frustration with an instructional program which often fails to provide for learning which is relevant to the interests and environment of the students. On the plus side, these same youngsters have identified strengths in logical thinking, problem solving, sensitivity to injustice, and interest in people and their activities.

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