DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 431 EC 231 551

AUTHOR Howley, Craig
TITLE Anti-Intellectualism in Programs for Able Students (Beware of Gifts): An Application.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (120)
JOURNAL CIT Social Epistemology; v1 n2 p175-81 1987

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academically Gifted; *Anti Intellectualism; Attitudes; Educational Practices; Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Emotional Problems; *Gifted; Grouping (Instructional Purposes); Literacy; *Progressive Education

ABSTRACT

This article reviews the history of impediments to excellence in the education of the intellectually gifted in the United States. It discusses literacy rate trends, but before and after the 19th century, and describes the Progressive education movement, with its legacy of child-centered pedagogy, ability grouping, vocational training, and emphasis on problem-solving and higher-level thinking skills. As did their predecessors, the Progressives succeeded in their more modest proposals, but failed in their larger aspirations. Other topics discussed are the emotional health of gifted students, the question of real giftedness vs. test-taking ability, and whether the truly gifted child is truly likely to become an eminent adult. (PB)

SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY, 1987, VOL. 1, NO. 2, 175–181

Anti-intellectualism in programs for able students (beware of gifts): an application

CRAIG HOWLEY*

The public schools in the USA are not especially hospitable to able students, as James Coleman observed in 1961. This application is an attempt to account historically for the reasons that provisions for those students identified by the schools as most able ignore the intellectual substance of scholastic aptitude. US public schools identify their most able students as 'gifted'. The discussion that follows is based on the axiom that literacy and reason constitute the intellectual substance of scholastic aptitude.[1] Strange to say, this axiom is not accepted by all educators interested in the pedagogy of gifted students.

George Counts (1934. 237) was aware that discussions about gifted students were based on 'appeals to prejudice and even a certain blindness to facts'. Counts apparently supported special programs for the gifted, but was wary of the use to which society would put the result. He recognized that, whatever the origin of academic talent, 'in many societies that talent has been devoted to predatory purposes'.

The failure to nurture academic talent and the predatory purposes to which talent is put are the two influences most detrimental to special programs for gifted students. These influences begin historically with the sudden increase in literacy in the nineteenth century and end with the actual, rather than the intended, effects of the Progressive education movement of the early twentieth century.

1 *Literacy, reason, and the Progressive legacy*

The literacy rate, in all likelihood, remained well under 1% until after the start of the nineteenth century.[2] By 1870, however, literacy was more commonplace. In that year the literacy rate in the US was 80% for whites and 12% for blacks (Cipolla 1969). Rapidly growing literacy meant that the tools of reason had become more accessible to citizens outside the ruling elite. Growing literacy, in fact, tended to promote a distinction between rational thought and the elite. In this context, John Dewey began to elaborate the ideals of Progressive education, particularly the now debunked notion of social reconstruction through the schools (Bowles and Gintis 1976, Jencks *et al.* 1972).

The Progressive education movement was vigorous, and diversity of opinion among its theorists was great. William James was the inspiration behind a liberal faction, while the English Social Darwinist Herbert Spencer was the inspiration for a more conservative faction. The familiar contest between environment and heredity influenced notions about the ways in which schools should or could be changed[3] James, Dewey, and Counts stressed the social context, the plasticity of the human

* *Author*: Craig Howley, Appalachian Educational Laboratory, Charleston, WV 25235, USA

mind, and principles of acquired habit (i.e., environmental conditions). Spencer, through his influence on Hall, and Hall on Terman, bequeathed the scientism of Social Darwinism to the conservatives. Hall taught that school programs should address the biologically innate individual differences among students.

Though Progressivism is still associated with Dewey's championship of social reconstruction, even Dewey's contemporaries often claimed that the term 'Progressive' had no political or social implications, but reflected only the progress of *thinking* in psychology or pedagogy (Cremin 1961). The official organization of the Progressives, the Progressive Education Association, was, according to Cremin, a much less effective influence on reform than either the NEA or the AFT.

The Progressive movement resulted in a concord between an ideology of objective fact (education as science) and an ideology of impartially-administered schools (education as instrument of democracy). Like value-free positivist science, a value-free ideology of schools suits exploitative capitalism in the absence of a social critique (Bowen 1981).

2 *Failure of the progressive promise in American education*

The Progressives, whose reputation as reformers now overshadows that of Horace Mann's generation, acknowledged the same basic precepts as their predecessors and, like their predecessors, they thought they could create institutions to forestall social evils (Cremin 1961, Katz 1968). Both groups failed dramatically in their larger aspirations, but succeeded very well in their more modest proposals.

Their failure constitutes their success, and the quality of the relationship is of prime importance to gifted education. Like so many of the accepted folkways of education, special programs for the gifted were promoted by Progressive educators (e.g., George Counts, Leta Hollingworth, and Lewis Terman).

Despite the failure of the Progressive movement, the pedagogical idealism of the Progressives persisted in US universities and teacher-training institutions. In its revised ('value-free') form, Progressive education received incentive from Cold War propaganda following what seemed an unambiguous Soviet space triumph (Conant 1959). In 1959 the National Academy of Sciences, in concert with the Carnegie Corporation, the National Science Foundation, the US Office of Education, the Air Force, and the RAND Corporation, sponsored the Woods Hole Conference to see what could be done to promote scientific learning generally, and cultivate scientific talent specifically.

Out of the conference's discussions ensued the 'new' mathematics and science curricula of the 1960s: the Yale, Illinois, and Maryland mathematics series; the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study Group's biology texts; and the Physical Science Study Committee's physics program (Bruner 1960). These curricula were intended, not to reconstruct society, but to help develop a reservoir of technical knowledge for future defense programs (Shaffer 1977).

Less dramatic, but more influential in the pedagogy of gifted students, are certain notions propagated by the Progressives (e.g., child-centered pedagogy, problem-solving and higher-level thinking skills, social studies, ability grouping, and vocational training). In their 'value-free' forms these notions are part of the ideology of public schooling, even if they are not practiced as Dewey and Counts might have intended them to be. A brief examination of them, as applied in gifted programs, follows.

Child-centered pedagogy. Child-centered pedagogy has a complex meaning in the education of exceptional students generally. First, it pertains to the process of adapting instruction to a particular child's characteristics. Second, it very often involves, on the basis of assessment of such characteristics, categorization of the child with similar children. Third, in doing these things, it bases its actions on a purported understanding of child development generally, and in particular of developmental patterns characteristic of each exceptionality.

These purposes are in theory accomplished and rationalized by an informing consensus of positivist ('progressive') science and technology. Scientific techniques include IQ testing, the gathering of base-line behavioral data, application of the 'least restrictive alternative' principle, and recommendation of such instructional methods as (for the gifted) enrichment or acceleration.[4]

Unfortunately, for gifted education the implications of child-centered pedagogy can be particularly insidious. Like any component of the public school ideology, it can be exploited for purposes contrary to its intent. For example, teachers and administrators often oppose acceleration because it will remove a child from other children of the same age. Such a 'progressive' argument usually conceals a more urgent sense of the havoc acceleration may cause administratively. A gifted program which confines itself to enrichment is mostly a product of such administration-centered thinking. Curiously, acceleration is *very effective* in promoting academic growth, while enrichment is apparently not (James and Kulik 1984).

There is also some danger in letting gifted children determine their own curriculum on the basis of interest. (Constructing a curriculum to interest the child was a fundamental concern of Progressives [James 1915].) According to Cremin (1961. 234), in the 1920s Dewey began to criticize the Progressives for the tendency not to provide direction or formal structure to students' learning. With uncharacteristic vitriol he called this tendency 'really stupid'.

Problem-solving. Another legacy of Progressive thinking is 'problem-solving'. In fact, 'problem-solving' is Dewey's term for 'thinking'. 'Problem-solving', however, sounds more specific than 'thinking'. One educationist, in fact, offers some standardized procedures and forms through which children (presumably gifted children) can record their problem-solving (i.e., thinking) activities (Williams 1970, 1972). Williams' notion and procedures limit the scope and intent of thinking to defined problems and prospective resolutions, usually problems of living rather than intellectual problems. This version of *thought* relates succinctly to positivist intent and metnodology. It helps bend intellect to narrow purposes.

Progressives intended that problem-solving be used in the new subject of 'social studies'. The idea of *social study* implicates the Progressive pedagogue's holistic sense of history and community. Today, guidance and 'good' citizenship (both promoted by James Conant during the late 1950s and early 1960s) are among the few traces left of the sense of community, of wholeness, which Dewey sought to promote, and Counts sought vainly to bring to life in PEA activism. The content of guidance and good citizenship is conformity.

Cultivating conformity among able students is important because, as several writers have noted, gifted children tend often to diverge from strictly conventional behavior. Leta Hollingworth (1942) referred to this tendency as 'heterodoxy'. James Gallagher (1975), perhaps the major proponent of special programs for the gifted, discusses it in the context of creativity. He refers to it as 'risk-taking'

Gallagher's analysis is particularly interesting because it views risk-taking primarily

as an affective, rather than an intellective, attribute. This view conceives thought (intellect) as a value-free activity, while emotion is both non-cognitive and value-laden. Risk in this view is an emotional threat, and therefore a non-cognitive venture. The concept of *intellectual risk*, as opposed to social or emotional risk, is made to seem an alien, incomprehensible notion. In this view the risk act is permissible, but not the risk thought.

Gallagher is himself aware of the dichotomy and he notes that society needs problem-finders more than problem-solvers. Problem-finders (i.e., risk thinkers) are, unfortunately, more commonly referred to as trouble-makers. The role of intellectual perception as social deviance lies in the conflict of active reason and the unexamined assumptions of conformity. Schooling, especially as exemplified by the social studies of guidance, good citizenship, career education, and leadership training functions to reinforce conventional assumptions, rather than to subject them to examination by reason.

Ability grouping: By the end of the 1970s, litigation was successful in establishing that rigid ability grouping violated some students' rights. But for highly deviant groups, ability grouping has been affirmed by litigation and legislation. Special programs for the gifted are a form of ability grouping. These programs owe their very existence to the progressive support of ability grouping.

The basic class message of gifted education is, however, apparent more in the *content* than the form of ability grouping (Drowatzky 1981). Despite all the rhetoric about the whole child and 'good' citizenship, manual training, industrial or agricultural (another progressive legacy), has never been promoted for the gifted.[5] 'Learning through doing' nonetheless remains a familiar Progressive slogan used to validate mentorship arrangements for the gifted. Mentorships for the gifted are seldom, if ever, placements with blue-collar workers. They are placements in the offices of doctors, lawyers, architects, and executives.

The above discussion represents only a sample of progressive innovations which bear on the practice of gifted education. The theoretical issues are more complex, but they are perhaps of more significance to the consensus of opinion on gifted education, and to the development of the field. These theoretical issues include creativity, intellect and measurement, the social utility of persons, hereditarianism, equality of educational opportunity, and anti-intellectualism. However, the relation of these broader issues to Progressivism should at this point be apparent to the reader. They are related to the destruction of able children by school, discussion of which fo' vs.

3 *The destruction of able students in schools*

Considering how reasonable it sounds to speak of the whole child, and how much of the educational literature would address ostensible service to 'the whole child', the historical trend of division of labor and specialization in schools is a strange way to approach that wholeness. Specialization, however, came into being to promote efficiency, not wholeness; and the division of labor has been criticized for more than a century for the strain it imposes on wholeness. 'Fragmentation and repetition can be seen in school organization' according to one writer on the pedagogy of the gifted (Clark 1983). In fact, specialization and the division of labor are *characteristic* of school organization, including instruction, as well as of the culture in general.

In general, industrial organization does not require whole human beings. Michael

Katz recounts the sense of loss among teachers who witnessed the rise of capitalism in the US. They saw damaging effects in the growth of industry and cities, they felt that moral and spiritual qualities suffered most. Theirs was the same program put forward by Progressives and by some contemporaries in gifted education, better schooling, a different kind of schooling, in fact, spiritual schooling. 'Heart culture', wrote the superintendent of schools in a model industrial town of 1865, 'should be paramount to brain culture, moral culture to intellectual culture' (Katz 1968: 108).

The destruction of able students begins with the schools' attempt to foster 'the whole child', especially with the wholeness of the child's emotional life. Certainly, children need to be seen as whole human beings. Unfortunately, they are much more likely to be whole human beings at the outset of their school careers than at the conclusion of their school careers.

The way pedagogy addresses emotional life leads to an emotional myopia which treats, primarily, behaviors associated with 'social skills' even in the case of the gifted. Teachers agree in detail about what constitutes basic 'social' skills at a very minimal level – toileting, dressing, grooming, and so forth. It is sensible to teach these skills to very retarded persons, for example. But the notion of teaching 'social skills' ought to seem odd when applied casually, as it usually is, to gifted children.

Emotional education (called 'affective education' in contemporary schools) normally avoids questions of a truly rich emotional nature, that is, of aesthetic life, of situational versus absolute ethics, of love-hate relationships, and of sexuality. Such topics are judged, often quite wisely, to be too dangerous for discussion in public school. Making narrowly-defined social and emotional concerns an *important* part of programs for the gifted tends thus to alienate emotional and intellectual perceptions further from one another. The ideology of the whole child permits educators to deceive themselves while at the same time preparing students to accept their adult fates.

If one believes with the nineteenth century critics that 'heart culture' has been neglected by the schools, then one may conclude that academic and intellectual matters have been over-emphasized. Gertrude Hildreth, at one time principal of Hunter Elementary School, advanced this argument in the 1950s, and it is still quite influential in gifted education.

The self-concept of gifted children has also been cited as an affective problem in need of specific attention (Clark 1983). Self-concept seems generally to be a problem in industrial societies, specialization, alienation, efficiency, competition, and deteriorating kinship structures may account for this common phenomenon more than elevated IQ in a selected population. If specialization, alienation, efficiency, and competition are features of schooling, the schooling itself will contribute to any child's poor self-concept.

Special programs for gifted students are good examples of how non-cognitive training takes precedence over cognitive training in public schools.[6] They are good examples because gifted students are cognitively able. The non-cognitive content of the programs for such students is the tell-tale heart of public pedagogy.

Academic aptitude is not the most valuable, the best rewarded, nor necessarily the most significant of the talents of any population, even the population of schoolchildren. Literacy and reason themselves continue to perform undeniably irrational functions in the material world. Societies want them to continue to perform these functions, at all costs. For these reasons non-cognitive training takes precedence over cognitive training in the schools (Bowles and Gintis 1976).

Norbert Wiener (1950. 157) noted that 'the youngster of exceptional abilities

generally is either ignored or else is treated as an offender who breaks up the smooth trend of American democratic school life'. Perhaps if the gifted assume the affect of conformity they will learn to keep their expectations of themselves, of their peers, and of their society to themselves. These are not goals that could be overly articulated for the gifted, yet they are a major, if nearly invisible, component of special programs for very able students.

4 *Real giftedness*

Is a particular child *really* gifted, or is that child just good at taking tests? The question of *real* giftedness is a question of social utility, are very able children *really* likely to become eminent adults?

They are not, though some educationists seem to think that gifted children will stand a better chance if they are given something called 'leadership training'. It is fortunate, however, that adult eminence cannot be predicted, because one could expect that of proto-eminent (excuse the neologism) children could be surely located in advance of the emergence of their creative work, then they would perhaps be exploited by venture capital in the manner of the futures market (Hersey 1960).

The issue of the social utility of the gifted really concerns the economic returns anticipated from the education of the gifted. That is, what careers will the gifted pursue, and how much money will they make? Much hyperbole in gifted education – in all education, actually – suggests that there is or ought to be a direct relation between the school ability and career success. The hyperbole is hypocritical in gifted education: we know that affluent children do better than destitute children in school, the affluent are more likely to rear children identified as gifted; many gifted children will become affluent. So what?

Though it is widely assumed that giftedness is rewarded through the occupational structure, a number of lines of argument contest this assumption. First, the strongest correlation between schooling and earnings is not that between childhood IQ and earnings, but that between years in school and earnings (Jencks *et al.* 1972). Second, there is evidence that within occupations, the correlation between earnings and IQ is quite low (McClelland 1980). Third, the differential probability of attaining economic success for individuals of equal levels of education and social class background but differing levels of IQ is slim; on the other hand, for individuals of equal adult IQ but differing levels of education, the differential probability of attaining economic success is much greater (Bowles and Gintis 1973).

The significance of these findings is that cognitive ability is a social construct which formalizes cultural values, including various sorts of social inequality (Calhoun 1973). Reason, intellect, and other cognitive qualities (e.g., academic aptitude, intelligence, scholastic achievement) are cultural traditions, however imperfect. They are valuable in themselves, not for the money they make. They are *our* traditions. Talent in them *ought* to constitute our culture-bound sense of academic ability ('giftedness').

Marvin Gold (1965: 364), a writer on gifted pedagogy, notes with great insight that 'the gifted student faces a range of career possibilities much more limited than that implied in the blithe assumption that he can do anything'. We might even hope that a fair number of gifted students will suffer immunity to ordinary occupational blandishments. Perhaps the most legitimate social function to be anticipated in able

students should be their ability to make unwise, but principled, investments of their 'human capital'.

Notes

1. Literacy is familiarity with the written word. In addition to denoting the ability to read, it also connotes a sense of form and content in the expression and apprehension of ideas. Reason is a way of thinking that emphasizes the abstraction of general laws from experience. It relies not on a framework of fate or deity, but on a framework of purely human autonomy. Sense-data and empirical methods are, in this sense, tools of reason, not reason itself.
2. Literacy was a much rarer phenomenon than the phenomenon US educators identify as uncommon academic talent. Schools define gifted students as possessing a degree of aptitude common to 3% of the population.
3. See Katz (1968, 207–211) for a discussion of the same issues in the 1840s and 1850s. heredity was hardly a new issue in 1900. When liberal reform efforts fail, heredity is always proposed as the cause, according to Katz.
4. Enrichment usually refers to assignment of a different, but not more advanced, sort of work, such as puzzles, inductive exercises, or games. Acceleration usually refers to advanced placements of various sorts.
5. Counts (1934, 244) is the one notable exception I have discovered. Counts wrote, 'If our desire is to create in this country a docile, servile, obedient proletariat . . . we can do no better than to remove from the ranks of the less favored all individuals of superior gifts.'
6. An excellent report on how some recent programs function is given by Weiler (1978).

References

BOWEN, J. *A History of Western Education*, vol. 3, St Martin's Press, London (1981).

BOWLES, S. and GINTIS, H. 'IQ in the US class structure', *Social Policy*, (1972 [Nov–Dec], 1973 [Jan–Feb]), pp. 65–96.

BOWLES, S. and GINTIS, H. *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Basic Books, New York (1976).

BRUNER, J. *The Process of Education*, Vintage, New York (1960).

CALHOUN, D. *The intelligence of a people*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ (1973).

CIPOLLA, C. *Literacy and Development in the West*, Penguin, Harmondsworth (1969).

CLARK, B. *Growing Up Gifted*, 2nd edn., Merrill, Columbus, OH (1983).

CONANT, J. *The American High School Today*, McGraw-Hill, New York (1959).

COLEMAN, J. S. *The Adolescent Society*, Free Press, New York (1961).

COUNTS, G. 'The social purpose of the education of the gifted child', *Educational Review*, 64, (1934), pp 237, 244.

CREMIN, L. *The Transformation of the School*, Vintage, New York (1961).

DROWATZKY. 'Tracking and ability grouping in education', *Journal of Education and Law*, 10 (1981), pp 43–59

GALLAGHER, J. *Teaching the Gifted Child*, Allyn & Bacon, Boston (1975).

GOLD, M. *Education of the Intellectually Gifted*, Merrill, Columbus, OH (1965).

HERSEY, J. *The Child Buyer*, Knopf, New York (1960).

HOLLINGWORTH. *Children above IQ 180*, World Book Company, Yonkers-on-Hudson, NY (1942)

JAMES, W. *Talks to Teachers*, Harper, New York (1915).

JAMES, J., and KULIK, C. 'Effects of accelerated instruction on students', *Review of Educational Research*, 54, (1984), pp. 409–425.

JENCKS, C., SMITH, M., ACLAND, H., BANE, M. J., COHEN, D., GINTIS, H., HEYNS, B., and MICHELSON, S. *Inequality*, Harper, New York (1972).

KATZ, M. *The Irony of Early School Reform*, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (1968).

MCCLELLAND, D. 'Testing for competence rather than for "intelligence" ', in *Evaluation of Exceptional Children*, Special Learning Corp., Guildford, CT (1980), pp. 183–194.

SHAFFER, L. The golden fleece. anti-intellectualism and social science, *American Psychologist*, 32, (1977), pp. 814–823.

WEILER, D. 'The alpha children. California's brave new world for the gifted', *Phi Delta Kappa*, 60, (1978), pp. 185–187.

WIENER, N. *The Human Use of Human Beings*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston (1950).

WILLIAMS, F. *Classroom Ideas For Encouraging Thinking and Feeling*, DOK Publishers, New York (1970).

WILLIAMS, F. *A Total Creativity Program*, Educational Technology Publications, Englewood Cliffs, NJ (1972)