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ABSTRACT

The University of Houston's Center for Gifted and Talented Education (Texas) conducts summer workshops for teachers and gifted/talented children in a program called HELP (Helping Exceptional Learners Progress). The children learn more about their abilities, interact with other gifted children, and solve some of the problems they face because of their giftedness. The program involves creation of a special student project, field trips on the university campus and to points of interest in the city, and the testing of learning styles and intelligence. The projects of five students, ages 8-14, are described. On field trips, students visited a superconductivity laboratory, learned about newspaper production, and participated in city council activities. Students were administered the Brain Preference Indicator Test, a self-scoring intelligence test, and the Learning Styles Inventory. The teachers/mentors are graduate students majoring in gifted and talented education. The HELP Program maintains contact with HELP graduates through a telephone hotline--students who have problems or just need to talk are encouraged to call the Center for Gifted and Talented Education any time of the day, every day of the year. (11 references) (JDD)

HELP! A Summer Program for the Gifted and Talented

by Theresa Monaco and Jane Goodner

Finally, school is out! Where do you want to go? Disneyland, Astroworld, the beach at Galveston, or the University of Houston? The last doesn't sound particularly exciting for energetic children, but it is the first choice for many Houston area gifted and talented children.

Each summer the University of Houston's Center for Gifted and Talented Education conducts a workshop for teachers and gifted and talented children. Children from all over the Houston area attend the HELP (Helping Exceptional Learners Progress) Program to learn more about their abilities, interact with other gifted children and solve some of the problems they face because of their giftedness.

During the summer of 1989 highly motivated, highly intelligent children attended the many-faceted HELP Program. It included the creation of a special student project, field trips on the university campus and points of interest in the city and the testing of learning styles and intelligence.

Student Projects

The students were encouraged to develop a project of their own choice during the two week session. The students first plans for their projects were video taped in order to solicit a commitment and to document their progress. Several students were

not sure what project they wanted to complete, but they knew what they wanted to learn more about. Serving as mentors, graduate students/teachers in the program worked with the gifted students. Often the mentor helped translate the student's desire for knowledge into creative plans for a useable product (Mitchell and Wilkens, 1981; Torrance, 1982). The teachers encouraged and assisted the students with their projects using the video commitments as an anchor point. Later, the students were intrigued as they watched their own video. The projects developed were of a high caliber and reflected the gifted child's ability to learn through process and product development.

Richard

Richard, 9, programmed a computer disk containing mathematics lessons to help him with 7th and 8th grade math during his 4th and 5th grades. After completing a pretest to evaluate the math concepts he already knew, Richard explained his knowledge of BASIC programming. His mentor taught him how to write computer program on ProDOS and found pretests in several math books for Richard's program. He wrote three programs covering units in the math curriculum: 1) percents, 2) exponents, and 3) square roots. Richard's programs included variables which afforded him the opportunity to input integers, fractions or decimals. He ran the program to verify the formula he was using. After several practice runs, Richard learned to make hard copies of his programs, copy and format disks, save,

retrieve and delete programs on a file disk. He wrote an instruction sheet to use later with his own ProDOS disk. Next year Richard can work at his own individualized pace through the program he created himself (Walling, 1989).

Victoria

Victoria, 8, developed a research paper focusing on cerebral brain tumors. Her mentor took Victoria to the Baylor School of Medicine where she saw different views of the brain and the nervous system. Victoria learned that brain tumors in children tend to be astrocytomas and medulloblastoma and that most tumors are located in the back of the brain (Levy, 1989). The teacher gathered materials for her use, including a computer program on biology and several books and magazines on children's illnesses. The teacher also helped Victoria arrange her research in a workable form.

Matt

Matt, 14, was unsure of his product, but he was interested in learning more about Spanish and computers. Fortunately, one of the HELP mentors was an interactive video Spanish teacher. In the Houston area, the interactive video program serves students of Spanish in the school districts through television lessons. The mentor and the computer teacher worked with Matt and suggested that he write computer programs for teaching and practicing the use of irregular Spanish verbs. Matt, who is a beginning Spanish student himself, was able to produce a

workable, useful Spanish program which will be used in the interactive video program in HISD next year. Matt's program, after being patented, will be sent to 95 school districts (Oakes, 1989).

Chris

Chris, 9, was interested in pediatrics and constructed a two-part product including a scrapbook and an animated three-dimensional diorama. His scrapbook contained medical computer graphics, a variety of pamphlets from Texas Children's Hospital, statistics concerning pediatrics from research and a bibliography of books he had read from the Houston Public Library. Chris intends to make this scrapbook an ongoing project, engaging in additional research on his own. He also made an animated three-dimensional scene of a doctor's office using kichard Scary's animal figures of Dr. Dog, Nurse Kitty and Dr. Bone. Through these characters, Chris explained the role and daily routine of a pediatrician. By interviewing two pediatricians at Texas Children's Hospital, Chris was able to add relevant details and information to his presentation. The mentor assisted Chris by transporting him and meeting with his parents each day. The skills that were enforced were organization, the enjoyment of learning new things, increased reading and pride in his talents (Wolf, 1989; Hunt, 1989).

Wenbi

Wenbi, 10, wrote a newspaper about the heart and circulatory

system. She researched the heart and used a special computer program to write the newspaper, The Oxygen Express. Wenbi' newspaper contained nine articles and numerous illustrations ranging from descriptions of the heart and its functions to articles on the different parts of a heart. Wenbi's illustrations and captions showed her charming sense of humor. Wenbi's mentor provided college level textbooks and computer programs designed for the tenth grade level. The teacher also taught Wenbi how to find the definitions of the difficult terminology found in medical texts (Heath, 1989).

On the last day of the HELP workshop, parents and friends were invited to see a presentation of the students' projects. This presentation of the projects was also taped. The experience was rewarding to the students because it affirmed their ideas, their ability to execute a plan and pride in their product.

Field Trips

The children in the HELP Program visited the colleges in the University of Houston for a glimpse of life in this setting. In each college, a professor spoke to the children about the requirements for that course of study and the special aptitudes necessary for entering the field. A popular feature of the HELP program was a trip to see Dr. Chu, who explained and demonstrated his dramatic experiments in superconductivity. This year, Dr. Chu's young assistant made this experience fun for the children. He surprised the children by throwing liquid nitrogen, which

exploded in a cloud of smoke at their feet. The children were able to touch the ceramic superconductor material which is so brittle that it cracked into hundreds of pieces. The assistant showed the children how to produce a magnetic field. They were able to touch and feel everything in the lab. This hands-on experience is particularly well suited to the highly inquisitive gifted student.

Another popular event was the trip to the school newspaper, The Daily Cougar, in the College of Communication. The editor showed the children how a newspaper is written and printed by writing an article about them. Each child was "interviewed" and quoted in an article, "VIPs visit Cougar Newsroom, Learn Newspaper Production." The students watched as the editor wrote the article and printed this special edition. Each proud student was given a copy of the paper with his/her article on the front page! Looking forward to the university experience is extremely helpful to the young gifted learner. It provides a focus and a goal which is so often lacking in the early years. Students are able to see past the routine of the school day to the marvelous opportunities open to them at the other end of the educational continuum.

This year the students visited a Houston City Council Meeting and met Mayor Kathy Whitmire. Mayor Whitmire spoke with the children, and each child met the city council member from his/her own district. The council members asked the children for

suggestions for needed city improvements. The students were surprised at the diversity of open forum of the council and the variety of citizens who spoke there. Participation in a civic organization helped expand the children's view of their world. Having being involved first hand in the governmental process, they became more attuned to current affairs. Hopefully, this interest will continue.

Student Assessment

The teachers were instructed in assessment procedures and administered a series of diagnostic tests to the children including:

1) Brain Preference Indicator Test (Munzert, 1977) - This test indicates a general thought style that results in a consistent pattern of behavior in all areas of life. Students learn to recognize and understand the components of the thinking pattern and develop alternative approaches where needed. Students quickly realize that the left-dominant person is more apt to solve problems by following an organized approach, whereas, the right-dominant person places his trust in daydreaming and intuition. They usually agree with the findings of their test and begin to recognize the differences in the thinking pattern of other people.

2) A Self Scoring I.Q. Test - This 60 question test is a general assessment of the ability to think and reason. The score is an indication of how students compare with the majority in the

same group. Teachers stress that these are not official tests, but they do give an indication of ability. The students were fascinated with the reasoning questions and were highly interested in the results. The teachers scored the tests immediately and discussed the implications with the studerts, explaining that the actual score could vary as much as 5 points either way.

3) Learning Styles Inventory (1983) - This test is actually a survey on how, when and where students prefer to learn. On a scale from 1-4 the students rank their preferences. The resulting scores indicate the best situation for their own learning style. Knowing their learning preferences will help students in their classes and with their studies because they can make good educational choices (Dunn and Griggs, 1985).

The Teachers

The mentors of the HELP Program are all graduate students majoring in Gifted and Talented Education working either on a master's or a doctoral degree. A computer expert was called on to help the children who were interested in creating computer programs. The mentors chose the child they worked with according to their knowledge of the student's proposed project. As a result of their interaction with the gifted children in the workshop, the mentors wrote detailed case studies including the background of the child and family, the interests of the child, influences on the child, teacher observations, testing results,

the child's perception of the HELP program and the general conclusion. These case studies were valuable in assessing the identification, the problems and the strengths of the gifted child. Another valuable diagnostic tool is the video study made of teachers interacting with students. Teachers learned how students reacted to their suggestions and how effectively they related to the student's needs. In this program teachers and parents were able to talk in a non-threatening, constructive manner. Mentors often made suggestions or offered feedback to parents who sought direction in helping their gifted child's progress (Hall and Skinner, 1980).

The children did miss some days at the beach or a trip to a theme park, but they gained in self-esteem, self-knowledge and self-confidence. The products created by the children may be the beginning of a new direction, either academically or as a source of personal enjoyment. The connection with the university doesn't end with the summer. The HELP Program maintains contact with HELP graduates through the HELP hotline at the Center for Gifted and Talented. If the students have problems or just need to talk, the hotline is open 24 hours a day, every day of the year. More than 1000 calls are received on this special line each year. Gifted students face many complex problems in learning how to socialize and how to use their talents effectively. This arduous task doesn't have to be faced alone. HELP is always at hand!

The Authors

Theresa Monaco, Ph.D., has served as a teacher trainer at the University of Missouri and at the University of Houston, 1969-1989. In addition to preparing teachers to teach gifted students since 1982, Theresa Monaco has spent a great amount of time working with handicapped students. She has a teaching experience foundation of 12 years in elementary and middle schools. She has been the principle investigator of numerous United States Office of Education (USOE) awards in special education and has served on several committees (1980-1984) to evaluate proposals submitted for funding. In 1982, Theresa Monaco, at the request of the University of Houston College of Education submitted the proposal to the Texas Education for establishing a major in Gifted and Talented Education. In addition to teacher training, direct teaching and fund raising activities, Theresa Monaco, with graduate level support, maintains an active gifted center hot-line for teachers, students and parents who have special concerns. Since 1982 she has written several published works on gifted education, including a Biographical Dictionary of Gifted Education, a current national directory of leaders in the field of gifted education and twelve articles that have appeared in leading journals.

Jane E. Goodner has been teaching high school English for 16 years and has taught at Ross S. Sterling High School, Goose Creek Consolidated Independent School District for the last 10 years.

She began teaching in the gifted English program last year. She is currently working on a Masters of Education degree in Gifted and Talented Education at the University of Houston.