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AUTHOR Grayson, J. Paul; Hall, Michael H.
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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the findings of a survey that asked 1,048 Ontario residents whether special enrichment classes should be provided to bright students at any cost, whether bright students should be provided with special enrichment classes only if resources are not taken away from classes of average students, or if bright students should not be provided with special enrichment classes at all. Results found: (1) the majority (63 percent) of participants gave only qualified support for special gifted education, 19 percent gave no support, and only 13 percent gave full support to education for the gifted; (2) those aged 60 or older were more inclined than others to give no support to special education for the gifted; (3) no differences were found between public and separate school supporters; (4) the lower the education of the participant, the greater the tendency not to support special education for the gifted; and (5) the higher the income the smaller the percentage giving no support to education for the gifted. (Contains 8 figures and 14 references.) (CR)

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Public Attitudes Toward Education for the 'Gifted' in Ontario

J. Paul Grayson, Ph.D.
Michael H. Hall, Ph.D.

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York University
4700 Keele Street, North York, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3

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Foreword

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The following is a general interest article for non-specialist readers.

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Summary

For several years programs for the "gifted" have been offered in Ontario's schools; however, in some respects, little is known of them. For example, in a recent survey of school board officials the majority stated that they would like to know how the public and teachers regard programs for the gifted. An even larger number stated that it would be important to know how much the programs cost school boards.

Information collected in one of the Institute for Social Research's biannual Opinions Ontario surveys sheds some light on the first of these concerns. Overall, very few Ontarians give unqualified support to special education for the gifted. A slightly larger number are completely opposed to these programs. The vast majority of Ontarians give only qualified support to special programs for the gifted and feel that they should be offered only if they do not take resources away from classes of average students.

1

Introduction

In their introduction to a series of articles on "giftedness", psychologists Sternberg and Davidson (1986:3) argue that, "giftedness is something we invent, it is not something we discover." More concretely, what passes as giftedness in one society may not necessarily qualify in another (being a skilled plains hunter will not further a career in the metropolis). From a sociological perspective it can be added that what is accepted as giftedness in one class or group in society may not be shared by all. This line of thinking is consistent with analyses of multiple intelligences and the ways in which particular societies foster their development (Gardner, 1984, 1985; Sternberg 1990).

Usually, the dominant view of giftedness is one that is articulated and propagated by those who enjoy a differential amount of power in certain institutions. In contemporary Western societies institutions that contribute to both dominant definitions of giftedness and, in some instances, offer alternative conceptualizations include churches, political parties, schools, colleges, universities, government ministries, and special interest groups such as the Association for Bright Children in Ontario.

Like the "Emperor's new clothes" in the once popular children's fairy tale, giftedness is "socially constructed"; however, the process of construction is not

always clear. (For an examination of the process in a number of societies see Heller and Feldhusen, 1986). For some the social construction process is based on the belief that giftedness is an individual property. As a result, it is necessary to identify those with such properties so that they can be placed in the appropriate programs. For others environmental circumstances lead to behaviours that may be defined as gifted. For these individuals, it is necessary to provide environments suitable to the emergence of giftedness. In contrast to each of these positions Foster (1986) prefers one that considers the interactive effect of both personal and environmental factors.

In Ontario, Bill 82, an amendment to the Education Act of 1974 (Smyth, 1984:145), defined the gifted as students who display:

> an unusually advanced degree of general intellectual ability that requires differentiated learning experiences of a depth and breadth beyond those normally provided in the regular program to satisfy the level of potential indicated.

In specifying this definition the Bill sidesteps the concerns regarding the causes of giftedness noted above. Instead, it takes an observed "advanced degree of general intellectual ability" as a starting point. Whether the observed intellectual ability is an individual property that would have developed even under adverse conditions, or whether the ability is a result of favourable environmental contexts, is not addressed (nor could it be). Had the issue been addressed, and had it been recognized that individual properties go only so far in explaining an "advanced degree of general intellectual ability," the implications of the recognition would have gone well beyond the Education Act.

Consistent with the underlying conception of giftedness, within the broad legislative framework established by Bill 82, individual school boards are given the freedom to establish processes that will have the net effect of yielding individuals deemed as gifted. In accordance with the regulations accompanying Bill 82, the first step in constructing giftedness, nomination, can be taken by teachers, parents, individuals in the community, or the student him/herself: each can make a claim for the giftedness of the student under consideration. The rationale for such assertions can vary from a high I.Q. score to the belief on the part of a student's parents that their child is not realizing his/her full potential in traditional learning situations.

The second step in the construction of giftedness involves a Special Education Identification Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) that may include a Principal, Supervisory Officer, and Medical Practitioner. On the basis of what the school board in question deems relevant evidence the Committee may or may not designate the nominated student as gifted. In the event that a student is defined as

gifted, he or she has the option of participating in various special "enriched" programs. Should there be dissatisfaction with the decision of the IPRC, the Bill provides for an appeal process. It might be noted that a student who emerges as gifted through the process in one school board may not so emerge in another board. Moreover, boards are free to set numerical limits on the number of gifted in their schools. For example, some boards may consider that no more than 5% of students can be considered gifted; other boards may have a limit of 3%. (For a general discussion of the process in Ontario see: Government of Ontario, 1990; Hodder, 1984; Keeton, 1983; Smyth, 1984.)

As noted by Hodder (1984:49), the Ministry of Education has made some funds available to school boards to help cover costs associated with providing special programs for the gifted; however, given the ways in which school boards organize their budgets, it is not possible to gain a true picture of all costs associated with the provision of such programs. Any complete assessment of overall costs, among other measures, would have to include costs of hiring additional teachers with special education training; the costs associated with determining giftedness; the provision of in many instances additional classroom space; the provision of additional learning materials, supplies, and field trips for the gifted; transportation (because not every school has a program for the gifted); and so on.

Opposition to programs for the gifted comes from at least two sources. First, many who oppose special programs for the gifted point to what they regard as a selection process that is biased in favour of children from privileged families. Second, some critics feel that the resources required to sustain programs for the gifted could be put to better use in meeting the common needs of all students.

While there is no hard evidence with regard to the first of these concerns as they relate to education for the gifted in Ontario, it has long been known that, for example, scores on I.Q. tests are as much a measure of family income as anything else (Sternberg, 1985; Sternberg and Wagner, 1986). Moreover, it is obvious in many school boards that schools located in affluent areas yield more gifted students than schools in relatively poor areas. With respect to the second concern, it is accepted by many educators that some school boards have increasing difficulty in meeting needs shared by all students.

In view of these realities it is important to gauge the perceptions of educators and the general public with regard to education for the gifted. The remainder of this article will focus on this topic.

2

Educators' Perceptions

In an attempt to determine, among other things, the extent to which research into concerns raised above were shared by educators in Ontario, the Institute for Social Research at York University, in 1991, surveyed all Chairs of Boards, Directors of Education, Associate Directors of Education, Superintendents, and Research Directors, for both the public and separate systems. The response rate for the survey was approximately 70%. Respondents were asked to indicate how important they felt it would be for their Board to obtain information regarding how the public sees programs for the gifted; how teachers regard programs for the gifted; and how much money it costs the Board to deliver programs for particular groups of students such as the gifted.

Survey returns indicate that 51% of those surveyed believe that it would be important for their Board to know how the public regards programs for the gifted; 52% stated that it would be helpful to know how teachers felt; a greater number, 60%, felt that it would be important for their Board to know how much programs, such as those for the gifted, cost the Board. In short, among educators there is a general feeling that it would be important to have more information on matters pertaining to education for the gifted.

3

The Public's Perceptions

In one of its biannual 1991 Opinions Ontario surveys the Institute for Social Research was able to provide province wide information on one of the issues identified as important by educators: how the public regards programs for the gifted. In total, 1048 residents of Ontario were asked the question:

In the schools there are a variety of students who receive special attention. I would like to ask you some questions about some of these students, namely those who are considered to be "bright" and those who are physically handicapped.

First of all, do you think the bright students:

i. *Should be provided with special enriched classes at any cost;*

ii. *Should be provided with special enriched classes only if this does not take resources away from classes of average students;*

iii. *Should not be provided with special enriched classes?*

The word "bright" rather than "gifted" was used because the former is more easily understood by the general population. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time the residents of Ontario have been surveyed regarding their opinions

on special education for the gifted.

For ease of analysis, those who gave answer i. to the above question can be viewed as giving full support to education for the gifted. Individuals who chose ii. can be seen as giving qualified support. Men and women who chose option iii. can be defined as giving no support.

Earlier it was noted that in some Boards greater numbers of the gifted hail from schools in privileged areas than from poor parts of the Board. It might therefore be expected that privileged individuals would be more likely to give full support to gifted education than others. While this possibility will be examined, to begin, attention will focus on other matters.

4

General Indices

A number of dimensions along which support for education for the gifted can be examined are summarized in Figures 1 through 4. Although Smyth believed that by 1984, in terms of numbers, "support [for gifted education in Ontario] has turned around" (1984:146), the survey conducted in 1991 provides no support for this position. As can be seen from Figure 1, the vast majority of the Ontario population, 63%, give only qualified support for special gifted education. A further 19% give no support. In turn, a mere 13% give full support to education for the gifted.

This general pattern is evident when the data are examined in other ways. For example, as can been seen from Figure 2, virtually identical percentages of men and women, 13% and 15%, give full support to gifted education; however, the vast majority give only qualified support. Slightly more men, 23%, than women, 16%, give no support. Although differences in terms of gender are statistically significant, they have little social significance: the preferences of men and women are more or less the same.

With one exception, as shown in Figure 3, the same is true for age. For all age groups, the majority give only qualified support. A small minority give full support. With respect to no support, however, those aged 60 or more are much more inclined than others to give no support to special education for the gifted. This

Figure 1
Overall Support
for Gifted Education

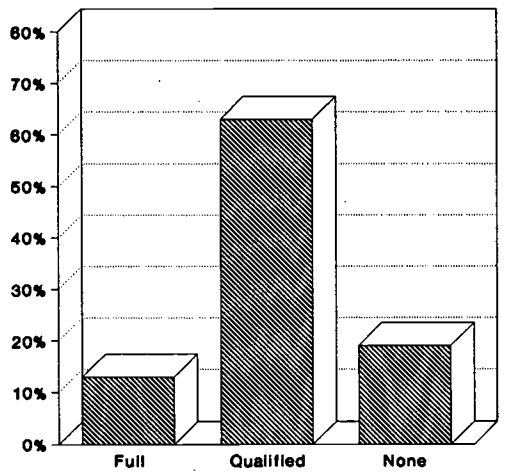
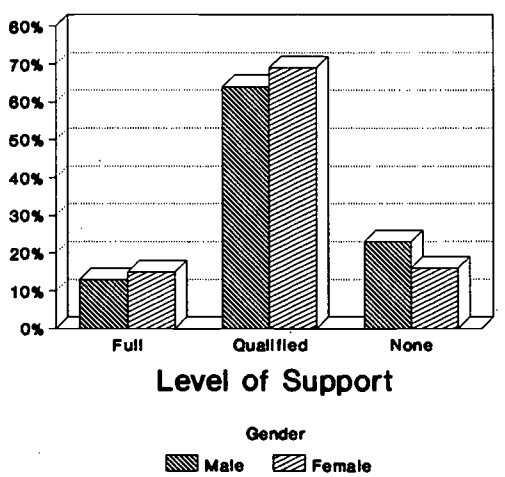
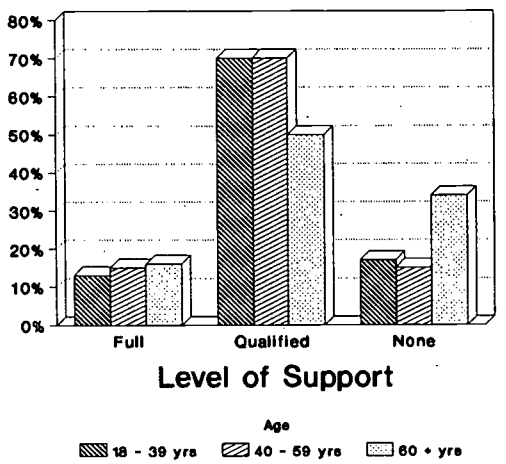


Figure 2
Support for Gifted
Education by Gender



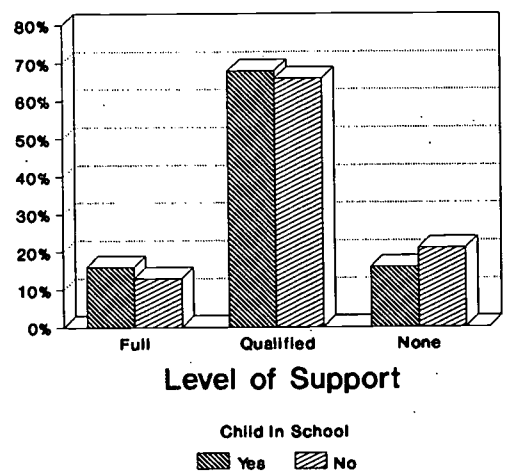
Chi Sq.=8.62 DF=2 Sig.=0.013

Figure 3
Support for Gifted Education by Age



Chi Sq.=29.67 DF=4 Sig.=0.000

Figure 4
Support for Gifted Education by Child in School



Chi Sq.=3.85 DF=2 Sig.=0.146

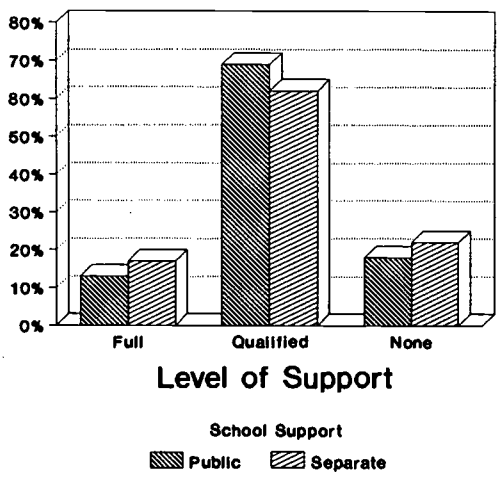
finding may reflect the fact that when individuals of this age acquired their education relatively few options were available to most students.

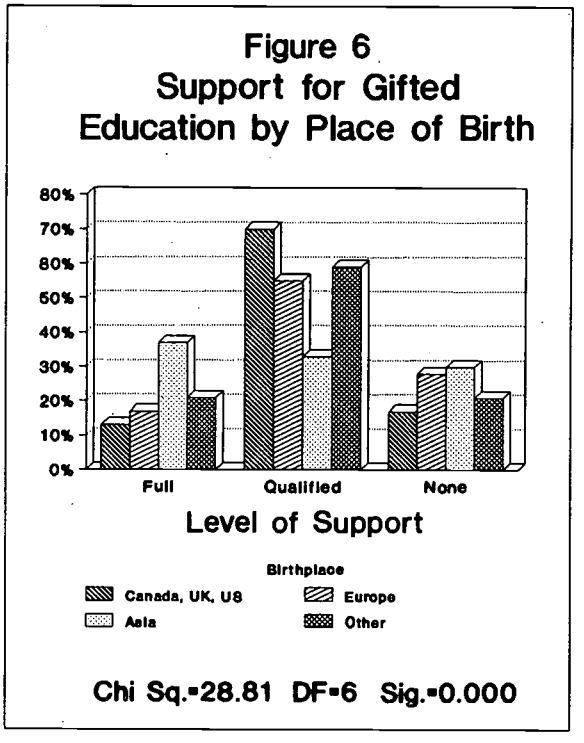
The pattern, as indicated in Figure 4, is repeated when individuals who have a child enrolled in primary or secondary school are compared to those who have no children in school. No statistically significant differences exist between the parents who have and do not have children in school. In addition, for both groups, the vast majority only give qualified support for gifted education. Full support is only offered by 16% of those with at least one child in school and by 13% of individuals with no child in school.

The data in Figure 5 also indicate that there are no differences between public and separate school supporters. In both cases a minority, 13% of public supporters and 17% of separate supporters, give full support. At the other end of the continuum, 18% and 22% of public and separate school supporters respectively give no support to special education for the gifted. The vast majority of supporters for each system give only qualified support.

Birthplace, as shown in Figure 6, is a little different from the general pattern. Those born in Canada, the UK, and the US, overall, tend to give only qualified support to special education for the gifted. A minority of individuals born in these

Figure 5
Support for Gifted Education by School Support





countries give full support and no support—13% and 17% respectively. By way of comparison, while they do not differ much from the Canadian, UK, and US born with regard to full support for education for the gifted, the European born are more inclined to give no support than the former group. More interesting still is the pattern for the Asian born. In contrast to all of the groups a plurality of the Asian born, 37%, give full support to special education for the gifted. At the same time, 30% of the Asian born give no support. This is the highest percentage of no support of any group. If those born in "other" places are examined it can be seen that a majority give qualified support; equal percentages, 21%, give either full or no support to special education for the gifted. The high degree of full support given by the Asian born to education for the gifted may be consistent with their high rates of achievement in the school system (Cheng et al., 1989). The high percentage of Asians who give no support is more difficult to explain.

In essence, while there are some minor fluctuations, with the exception of differences related to birthplace, Ontarians tend to give only qualified support to special education for the gifted independent of gender, age, having children in school, and being public or separate school supporters.

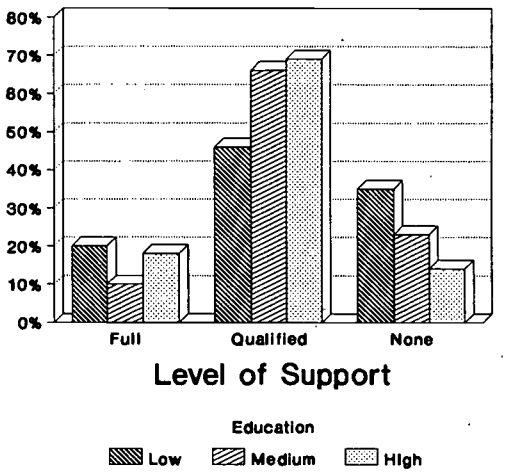
5

Indices Of Privilege

The two main indices of privilege used in this study were education and income. The impact of each is shown in Figures 7 and 8. The data in Figure 7 suggest that the lower the education the greater the tendency not to support special education for the gifted. For example, 35% of those with low education express no support; the comparable figure for those with high education is 14%. In addition, although the pattern is less dramatic, education is closely associated with unqualified support: of men and women with low education only 46% give qualified support; 69% of those with high education give qualified support. When it comes to full support, though, the pattern is not consistent. Of those with the lowest education 20% give full support; however, this figure is higher than that for individuals with either medium or high education—10% and 18% respectively.

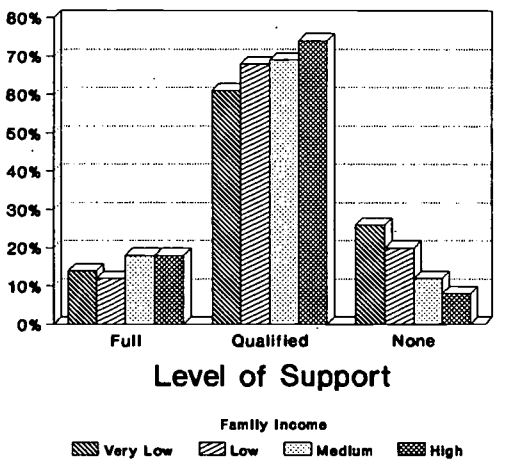
A somewhat similar overall pattern is observed when family income is examined as in Figure 8. The higher the income the smaller the percentage giving no support to education for the gifted: for example, of those with very low incomes 26% give no support; of those with high incomes only 8% fall in the same category. Similarly, of those with very low incomes only 61% are inclined to give qualified support to education for the gifted. The figure for individuals with high incomes is 74% (those

Figure 7
Support for Gifted Education by Education



Chi Sq.=29.70 DF=4 Sig.=0.000

Figure 8
Support for Gifted Education by Family Income



Chi Sq.=26.45 DF=6 Sig.=0.000

with low or medium incomes are more or less the same with 68% and 69% giving qualified support). In addition, with the exception of an anomalous low income group, there is a very slight tendency for those with high incomes, 18%, to give full support than those with very low incomes, 14%.

Despite inconsistencies, the figures for both education and family income indicate that the lower the standing on each, the greater the likelihood of giving no support to special education for the gifted. Although the pattern is less clear, it can also be said that in general the higher the standing on each the greater the unqualified support. With full support there is no similar consistent pattern.

6

Conclusions

Overall, there are three major conclusions that can be drawn from the data analyzed in this article:

1. Educators would benefit from more information on how the public and teachers regard programs for the gifted and the costs associated with the delivery of such programs.

2. Consistent with the need for educators to have more information on how the public regards programs for the gifted, it was found that in Ontario there is very little full support for special education for the gifted. The vast majority of the population support special education for the gifted *only if it does not result in resources being taken away from classes of average students*. Moreover, more Ontarians oppose special education for the gifted than give full support to it.

3. In general, the less privileged are more opposed to special education for the gifted than are the more privileged. This finding may reflect the fact that the children of the less affluent may be unlikely to end up in programs for the gifted.

In view of these conclusions it is hard to argue, as Smyth (1984:146) did, that in terms of numbers, "support [for gifted education in Ontario] has turned around."

At best, there is qualified support for education for the gifted. Ontarians, it would appear, are concerned with ensuring that the needs of the few are not met at the expense of the many.

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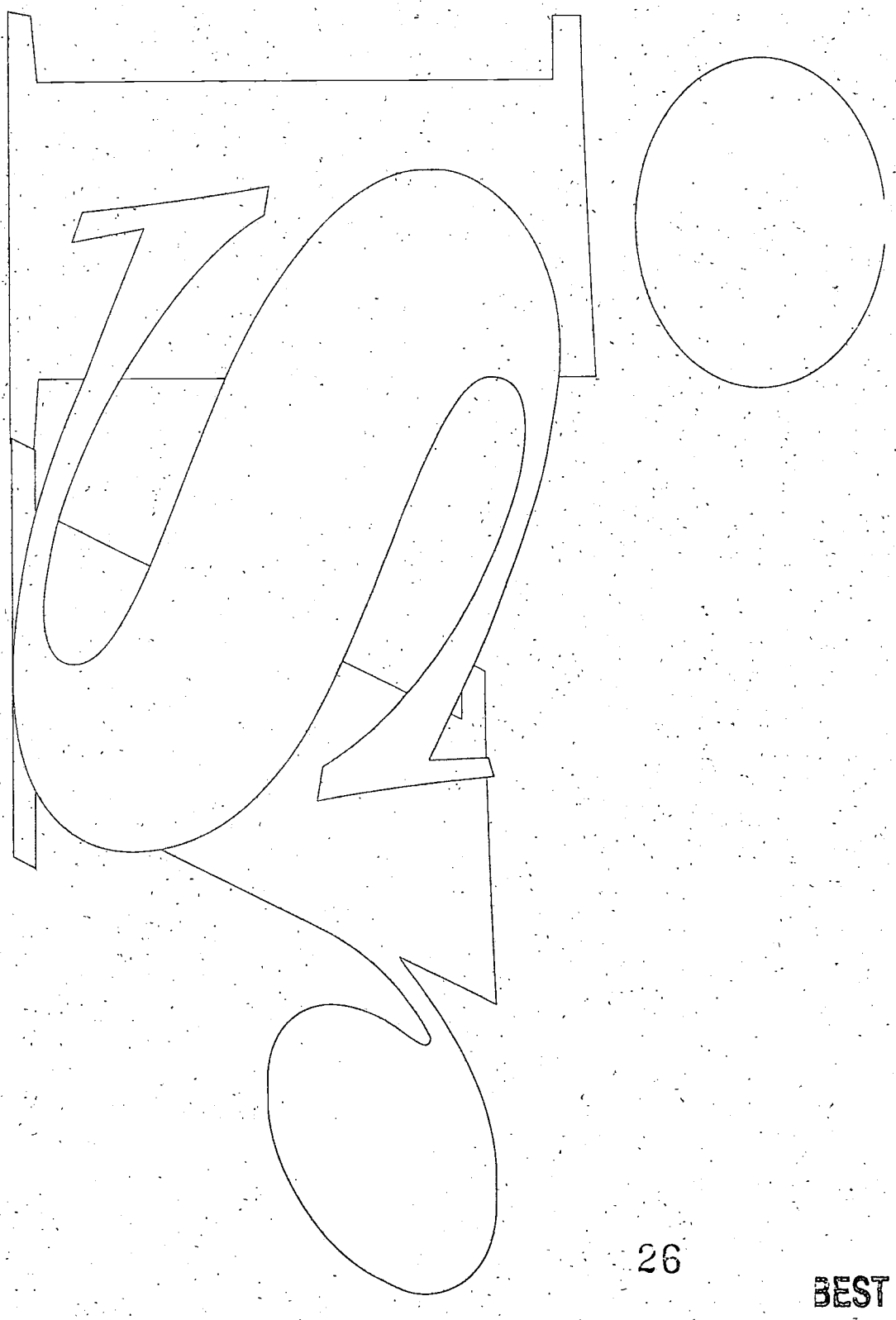

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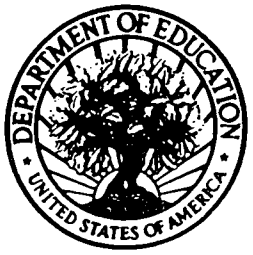

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