

**Descriptions of a Quality Gifted School and
Recommendations to Parents Today**

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A Backwards Glance at Gifted Education

The monumental, groundbreaking 1975 public law 94-142 requires that students with special needs receive *a free and appropriate education*. The goal was and is still today *an equal educational opportunity for all learners*. Powerful parent advocates exerted unrelenting pressure on legislators demanding special services for their children. Subsequent laws have been enacted making provisions for an appropriate education for other age groups of children. Unfortunately, no laws have been enacted to protect those students lost in the shuffle and essentially being *left behind*, gifted and slow learners.

Even today, the gifted population is sorely neglected and some educators believe these students do not have special needs. Ignorance still prevails. However, across the states, there are gifted programs that are quality programs meeting the diverse needs of the gifted population.

In the early 1980's, several states mandated public school gifted educational programs accompanied with state funding. Gertrude Hildreth, both author and researcher, was a notably, nationally known forerunner to advocacy of these mandated programs.

Discussion of Hildreth's Study

Hildreth was greatly concerned with the role of the gifted in a democracy, the present waste of talent in the United States, certain means of identification

of the gifted as well as some of the issues with respect to their education. In her book, Dr. Hildreth discovered the best way to explore gifted children was in the educational setting. She believed that textbooks usually tell what should be done for various gifted students, yet she believed in observing gifted children in classrooms. Her research at Hunter College Elementary School provided educators with practical suggestions to be employed in gifted classrooms. Hildreth believed the best way to get a new program off of the ground was by seeking out apparent successful programs and observing their strengths and weaknesses.

Hunter College Elementary School, a center of experimentation in the education of gifted children served as a center of information about gifted individuals, a training ground for teachers of gifted individuals, and consultant to other like-institutions. Obviously successful in their goals, Hunter College made great strides in educating elementary age children who demonstrated promising and precocious traits.

Hunter College Elementary recognized that gifted children showed a wide array of interests, not only in academic school work, yet also in normal life activities. Hildreth pointed out that gifted individuals usually display such abilities at a young age. Appropriate special training (classes) is needed in order for the gifted to achieve their potential.

In her book, Hildreth discusses each aspect of the school with great clarity. The following will include Hildreth's recommendations for building and implementing a quality school for gifted children.

- 1) *Curriculum Goals* – These goals seem to be ‘ideal’ not only for gifted youngsters, but for non-gifted children as well. Stressing citizenship and sound social interactions are perhaps more necessary for gifted children; they need to learn that most people are not as smart as themselves. Of course teachers must guide these children away from unjust superiority feelings; however, the gifted child needs to know how to, as the saying goes, “suffer fools gladly.” This, it seems, would aid in good mental health. If the child does not learn to deal with other “normal people” patiently, personality maladjustment, according to Hildreth could occur.
- 2) *Basic Skills* – Because one is gifted, this does not exclude him from needing a firm foundation of the basic skills that everyone has to know. Before one can operate on a higher level, he must be able to perform basic beginning operations to a satisfactory, if not high degree of competency. Hildreth believed it is therefore essential that there be no considerable gaps in the gifted child’s education. If there were gaps in learning, Hunter College Elementary School obviously worked diligently to fill those gaps. After the basics, gifted children in the school were fully allowed to be creative, focusing and working in the arts.
- 3) *Atmosphere of the Classroom* – The way a classroom runs is normally dependent upon the teachers’ attitudes toward learning and efficiency (management). According to Hildreth, Hunter College, classrooms operated somewhat informally, assuming that children need to be responsible and self-disciplined. The old adage and learning theory,

“Children learn best by doing” is carried out as much as possible. Many sources (media) were used providing children the means to learn on their own and *learn how to learn*. Responsibility training never ends in gifted programs; it is a goal in itself.

- 4) *Integration of Subject Matter* – This school for gifted children tended to look at objectives as a whole rather than broken down into little fragments. Much attention was given to those skills that aid in daily living such as oral and written communication. Other subjects such as history, geography, and civics were combined and were taught as themes. Special subjects such as music, art, and physical education were related in class projects when possible.
- 5) *Democratic Setting* - Based on the assumption children are intelligent and can accept a reasonable amount of responsibility, Hunter College allowed selected students to be a part of the school’s governing body. Decision-making was stressed in student council meetings. Students participated in every aspect of school, sharing both the load and privileges. Everyone became a member of the “total group” responsible for their cooperation in the education setting.
- 6) *Cooperation and Community* – According to Hildreth, one major problem in American schools is the lack of cooperation on the part of parents. When parents display a care-less attitude, this often results in a same attitude mirrored in their children. Thus, education became a cooperative effort between the children, parents, educators, and

community of Hunter College. Hildreth maintained that any less effort reduced the effectiveness of teaching. At Hunter College, parents supported and assisted the program for gifted children through the parents association. Parents also worked actively in the classrooms, donating not only time but needed funds for educational resources. Teacher-parent conferences were regularly scheduled to foster communication and a better understanding of their gifted children.

7) *Adjustment of Students* – Most of these children at Hunter College seemed to be well-adjusted as a whole, portraying a wholesome outlook on life in general. This was no doubt due to the curricular objectives of instilling healthy values into each child. The belief was, a child who handles responsibility has a certain amount of self-discipline. A child who is self-disciplined is an achiever. An achiever is happy. Most gifted children at Hunter College were extremely well-adjusted because they were given responsibility they could handle reasonably well.

8) *Adjustment of Teachers* – teachers at Hunter College showed personal/professional adjustment and satisfaction. They enjoyed their jobs and were especially eager to participate in outside educational services which educated others toward the vital and much-needed understanding gifted children. These well-prepared teachers were extremely helpful in acting as a cooperative teacher for student teachers of teacher-training programs of the gifted.

An Analysis of Hildreth's Research

The observational research Hildreth presented in her 1970 publication includes excellent and practical recommendations for not just the gifted population, *yet classrooms with non-gifted students*. Her observations are sound and solid recommendations for all classrooms and all children.

Many of Hildreth's observations in the decade of the 1970's are now unfolding one by one in public schools 30 to 46 years later after Hildreth's research. Notably, curriculum goals of citizenship, creating a class community of learning, integrating of multiple subjects, and parent partnerships are all research-based, current and hot topics today in the field of education. Also, Hildreth strongly believed that when teachers believe in what they are doing with children, they are contented teachers!

However, the author of the book also brought up *issues that are controversial* in American schools today. The writer of this article will discuss three of these issues.

- 1) *The Identification Process* – What children are truly gifted? How do we define giftedness? Some schools still lack an operational definition which defines exactly whom they consider truly talented or gifted, resulting in qualifying for special programs.
- 2) *Should those who have been identified as gifted be provided an individualized education program?* Although Individualized education Programs (commonly known as IEP's) are used today in American schools, some educators, as well as parents believe that special

provisions for gifted children are undemocratic and totally unnecessary due to the erroneous belief that the gifted can do well and make it on their own.

3) *In what ways should gifted youngsters be served in order to achieve their full potential?* Three basic plans are optional with many variations in each category: enrichment, acceleration, and special classes. Methods on how to work with the gifted population have been and are still controversial today.

These same three issues, as well as others, are still as prevalent today as they were in Hildreth's days of monumental research. Hildreth recommended that there be more research conducted in educating the gifted so that these individuals can make their "fullest contribution to the advancement of knowledge and culture."

Hildreth's book can still be purchased and located in some universities and online bookstores. For those educators interested in the field of gifted education, "Educating Gifted Children at Hunter College Elementary School" is still on recommended lists for quality historical reading.

Recommendations to Parents of Gifted Children Today

Parents of gifted children are often concerned about the provisions that their community public schools can offer their children. Parents often do and should ask many questions?

- Will the gifted programs be appropriate to the students' individual needs or will they merely add more "fluff" (supposed "enrichment") to the curriculum?
- Will teachers assign gifted children more repetitive work of the same concepts already mastered?
- Will the gifted children be truly accelerated and advanced in higher levels of thought with greater expectations of academic and/or aesthetic achievement?
- Should these parents stay with the local schools or should they look for private schools with a greater specifically designed gifted program? Some parents automatically believe that a private school may be better for their child; yet, this is not always necessarily the case.

The gifted child needs a special environment (in and/or out of the regular classroom), as would any special needs student with an I.E.P would require. Following Hildreth's checklist for locating a quality gifted education program is still today a timely and helpful criteria for choosing a solid and worthwhile gifted program for gifted youngsters who may very well become America's leaders of tomorrow!

Hildreth, G. H. (1970). *Educating gifted children at Hunter College Elementary School*. Westport, CN. Greenwood Press