

Special program for gifted children

Several thousand gifted children in British Columbia will be getting special attention in classrooms this autumn as the result of a project, funded by the provincial government, at the University of British Columbia's (UBC) faculty of education.

Professor Stanley Blank is co-ordinating an enrichment program for the children, who have been a "woefully-neglected" segment of the North American school population until recently.

Between now and mid-August, Professor Blank, six graduate students and two consultants will develop a curriculum for gifted children in grades four, five and 12, which will be introduced as a pilot project in several British Columbia school districts in the next school year.

Concurrently, the UBC team will develop a special kit of material designed to train school teachers in the techniques of dealing with the children.

Professor Blank estimates that out of the province's total school population of just over 500,000 pupils more than 50,000 could be described as gifted. "The definition of the term 'gifted' varies widely," he said, "from the narrow 2 per cent who are in the near-genius category up to 12 or 15 per cent who will score high on IQ or academic achievement tests and who also exhibit talents in other areas such as leadership or creative thinking, or in specific areas of achievement such as the performing or creative arts."

The ability of gifted children to synthesize knowledge and evaluate problems is the general characteristic which distinguishes them from others, he believes.

Increase complexity of problems

"In the past," he said, "teachers tended to meet the needs of the gifted child through acceleration, by keeping him occupied through an increased work load. Anything to keep him from getting bored, which leads to behaviour problems and, in many cases, dropping out.

"Allowing the gifted to skip grades was another way of dealing with them. For a very few gifted children, those at the near-genius level, this probably makes sense. But for the majority of the gifted, removal from their peer group can result in some pretty maladjusted kids who are simply not able to cope with the social and emotional environment of an older age group."

It's ill-advised to push the children ahead by a year or two, he said, when the opportunity exists to provide them with greater depth of knowledge using as a basis the curriculum of their peer group.

"Enrichment involves increasing the complexity of the problems presented to the gifted child," he said. Enrichment for a grade five child studying language arts for instance, would mean using grade five curriculum to expand his or her awareness of non-verbal communication — body language, for instance — so he understands that people communicate in a variety of ways.

Professor Blank also believes that gifted children have maximum opportunity to develop their potential when they associate with others like them. "The gifted," he said, "need to be challenged and engaged at their own level, so I'm in favour of enrichment centres in each school district where the gifted can be brought together for so many hours *per week* or for specified periods of time.

"The centres don't have to be schools specifically set aside for the gifted. I think in terms of a mini-school, a school within a school, where the gifted have their own classes, but interact socially with other students."

Vital resource

On a long-range basis, Professor Blank would like to see enrichment programs developed for all school levels from kindergarten to grade 12. "Why shouldn't we have 'think tanks for kids', as well as centres of intellectual challenge in the fine arts, music and drama?" he suggested.

"In the past," he said, "we've tended to treat the gifted as though they were an ordinary group of individuals who had no special needs. In many cases, even the gifted haven't been aware of their own abilities and as a result we've lost them as drop-outs.

"What we've really lost is a vital resource, a resource for future leadership by a group of people who have special talents and abilities. And we need leadership as never before in all spheres of our society, from the obvious ones such as government and education to the performing and creative arts.

"So I'm delighted that the provincial government has decided to fund this project, which could have incalculable benefits for British Columbia. It's especially heartening that they've chosen to do it in the UN Year of the Child, which places emphasis on education."

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Carriages donated to the National Museum



Six horse-drawn carriages made in England between the years 1880 and 1900 have been given to the National Museum of Science and Technology by the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM).

The carriages were donated to the ROM in 1971 by Miss A. Sheila Boyd, whose family were pioneers in the Trent Valley area.

(Above) The Boyd family set out on a camping expedition in the Gull Lake area in Ontario, circa 1898. Mossom M. Boyd, original owner of the carriages, stands at right.