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Educational Problems of Gifted Children in South-East Asia

by

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PREAMBLE

The countries with which this paper is concerned are Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and South Vietnam. Much of the information on which it is based has been gleaned through observations made on visits to the countries concerned in March and April of 1964 (Indonesia excepted) and through the use of a questionnaire sent out in July this year to Education authorities, University departments of education, colleges of education and principals of a sample of primary and secondary schools in each country.

The response to the simple questionnaire is disheartening for two reasons:

(1) Of 109 forms sent, only 51 were returned; Laos and Cambodia did not respond;

(2) The returned questionnaires highlight, in general, a vast area of lack. For, although 52.9% of these did refer to a special programme for the gifted, 21.6% were positive replies from the Philippines; 60% of the replies from the remaining countries indicated no special programme for the gifted.

This paper is necessarily subjective since the sample of replies is too small for firm generalisations to be made and there is but little data from research or experimentation of consequence in the area on which one could draw. Heavy reliance is therefore placed on the observations during personal visits.

WHO ARE THE GIFTED?

Anticipating that the term "gifted" may have varying connotations in different countries, the first question in the form sent out specified possible definitions for the term. Excluding the Philippines, where the Government and educational institutions have begun, in one form or another, to consider seriously the specific needs of the gifted, 37.5% of the responses from the remaining countries favoured the definition, "a child who is in the top

ten per cent of his age group in one or more areas of study in school." 42.5% favoured alternative (d) viz., "a child exceptionally endowed with talent, e.g. poetic, musical, artistic or mechanical talent". The rest of the opinion was divided between a combination of (c) and (d), 7.5% definition (a), 7.5% and definition (b), 5%.

Of the responses relating to 1(d), 33.3% indicated that there was a special programme for the gifted. Yet on comparing these responses with those for Question Four, Six and Seven on the same forms, it was noticed that the usual criteria of selection through examination was followed in the identification of the gifted; that these were then put in accelerated classes or top streams in schools and treated to a specially intensified programme with extra topics given to them for study. In other words, while there was an awareness that gifts varied, the educational systems which admitted the importance for the nurture of these gifts, did not necessarily cater to these gifts severally except in a very small way within the normal class-group structure. Perhaps the absence of a coherently organised programme for the gifted as defined by 1(d) accounts for the nil returns to Questions Four, Six and Seven in the rest of the forms subscribing to this definition (67%).

It is also interesting to note here that the majority of the 1(d) replies and all the combination 1(c)-1(d) replies, excepting those from the Philippines, came from Malaya, a country where the 11+ Secondary Selection Examination has only recently been abolished and Comprehensive Education introduced at the Junior Secondary School level. One of the expressed aims of the new education is to cater to the individual needs and capabilities of pupils. How this is to be done, however, has yet to be substantiated in practice. Grouping and streaming of pupils on the overall results of a battery of teacher-made, non-standardised achievement tests continues to be adopted. Each child, after the initial classification, remains in a group kept rigidly together in a lock-step process.

The acceptance of a particular definition of "giftedness" seems very closely related to the educational system which obtains in a particular country. In Malaya, where a change has occurred in the status quo and a slow transition is being made from an examination-dominated system to one admitting of the need to cater to individual differences, the gifted child is viewed by some in terms of definition 1(c), hitherto the orthodox view, or in terms of 1(d), a more liberal view in keeping with the new aims, or in terms of both. Replies from Thailand, Sarawak, Sabah, Burma and South Vietnam where examination and elimination continue to be twin practices in the control of school cohorts, all favoured 1(c) without a single exception. One respondent added the definition, "a child in the top 30 per cent in the main areas of study." 46.7% of the 1(c) responses, however, indicated that the educational system did not cater to the gifted child.

Similarly, in the Philippines, in which the system of education is less organised as a governmental effort, where more flexibility of organisation

within each institution is permitted, and where the pattern of education is rather closely associated with that of the United States, the respondents have tended to favour both 1(b) and 1(d) and have fanned out over the whole range of the choice of alternatives to Question Six. Methods of work with the gifted too cover most of the measures set out in Question 7 with the strongest emphases on 7(b), 7(d) and 7(h), items significantly lacking in returns from respondents in other countries.

The I.Q. definition has not been favoured except by respondents in the Philippines, because, perhaps, of the lack or absence of standardised I.Q. tests suitable for use in the region.

EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF THE GIFTED FOR SPECIAL ATTENTION

Every one of the respondents, except for two, agreed that early identification of the gifted for special attention was necessary. The two who dissented gave respectively the following reasons:

(1) We may find children who seem to be gifted at an early age but turn out later not to be so. Hence it is better to wait a year or two for this.

(2) Early identification is psychologically unwise; it is unnecessary. The geniuses of history were not identified for special attention. They developed despite society and environment.

The first reason against early identification came from an Elementary School principal in Malaya. In this country, children of parents of middle income groups who are relatively well-off are sent at the age of four or five to private Kindergarten schools (Government does not organise pre-school education). Many of these schools incorporate in their curriculum both play and the traditional study of the three R's. Thus children who finish Kindergarten and enter the first year of Elementary School are well ahead of their less fortunate peers who have not had the same opportunities. Because they are more articulate in their speech, more facile in their use of vocabulary, and more advanced in number skills, teachers tend to regard them as "gifted". Such children are generally diverted between the ages of seven and nine to "express" or "accelerated" classes where they do three years' work in two. Their academic superiority is not always maintained as the dissenting reason given above has already implied.

The lack of distinction between pure academic advantage, gained through a better cultural and material environment, and true giftedness may have accounted for the replies from the rest of the Malayan Elementary School principals who responded to this questionnaire positively in respect of Question 3 and elaborated by checking off Item 6(a). At any rate their responses to Item 7 do not bear out the presence of a programme for the gifted.

Associated with the second reason may be the typically Eastern concept of learning. The scholar seeks continually the truth and meaning of life

through a philosophical approach to the environment. Historically, the gifted of the East was first and foremost a wise man who could apply his wisdom to the fruitful use of his gift or gifts. These were regarded as similarly available to all men in varying degrees. But the gifted was essentially he who nurtured his gifts; others lost them through neglect. Thus in Chinese history and folk-lore, tales of boy prodigies abound – prodigies who themselves were gifts to men. The gods were no respecters of persons; many of these prodigies were born into the most ordinary of ordinary homes. Among them were young cowherds and slave children. One, for example, was described as studying the logistics of war with the stones he gathered from the wayside; another read by the light of glow-worms. All had great powers for reflection.

From among the scholars of Buddhist temple schools in Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam were those of the past gifted in leadership and in the arts of government and peace. Tradition dies hard. This humanistic view of giftedness as potential quite beyond the reach of environmental influence to mar or make good still persists even though most of the South-East Asian territories have been through a period of colonial rule. Its influence persists in the conduct of teaching in the classroom and in the general organisation of activities. He who applies himself to learning will in the end prove his gift-worthiness. Hence the great respect for textbooks and for the teacher's words. The idea of the original remains but the substance has given way to the shadow in practice. For a technological age, this view of giftedness seems inadequate.

It is, however, encouraging to note that all who supported the early identification of gifted children for special attention also agreed that there was no adequate programme for the nurture of the gifted and made suggestions as follows:

(1) Research must be undertaken to study proper motivational devices to help the gifted to respond to their work positively;

(2) Pertinent criteria and instruments for the identification of the gifted should be established;

(3) Existing school curricula should be examined so that special provision may be made to meet specific talents; or

(4) Special schools should be set up for such talents/gifts as mentioned in Item 1(d);

(5) More flexibility in school administration should be allowed; (To appreciate this suggestion, it must be understood that most of the school systems in the newly emergent territories in South-East Asia are Government-determined. In some places schools are not allowed to deviate either from the pattern of organisation imposed or from the given syllabi for the subjects to be taught in the curriculum).

(6) Relaxation of age requirements should be permitted.

(7) Specialist teachers should be trained to identify and meet the needs of gifted children. In general, the standards of teacher-training could well be raised.

(8) A system of scholarships should be instituted to cater to the needs of the gifted poor.

(9) Good guidance and counselling should be made available to the gifted.

(10) A special fund should be set up for the specific purpose of enabling gifted children in schools to develop to the fullest extent of their promise.

(11) More facilities and materials for the improvement of teaching should be made available to schools.

WHY SHOULD THE GIFTED BE IDENTIFIED?

The reasons given for the need to identify the gifted early were generally the following in the order of frequency:

(1) They have to be identified early so that their special talents may be allowed to develop;

(2) The gifted progress much faster than others in the same class. It is not fair to hold them back in the same lock-step process. They should be identified in order to be put in special classes with special programmes;

(3) The gifted should be identified for special attention; guidance and counselling could be given to them to enable them to develop to their fullest potential;

(4) They should be identified lest a non-challenging and unsuitable programme should cause undue frustration on their part so that they become maladjusted beings who do not eventually make effective contribution to society;

(5) They should be singled out for special treatment; this is particularly desired in respect of children from rural areas who not only lack environmental and cultural support but may, for lack of money, be lost to society.

Only five out of the forty-nine respondents, who felt the gifted should be identified early, stressed the need of the country and society for the gifted. Their reasons may be summarised as follows:

(1) The gifted are a country's asset, particularly the developing country's greatest asset. The state with limited resources should give special attention to those who have most to contribute to the welfare and progress of the state and its people;

(2) The gifted should be trained for leadership in the educational, cultural, administrative and scientific fields;

(3) Guidance and help for the gifted will result in the maximum exploitation of their gifts and society will be repaid by being brought closer to the goal for good living.

AGE RELAXATION FOR THE GIFTED

In respect of this the institutions fall into two categories, Government and Private Institutions. In Government-established schools and Universities there is no relaxation in the age requirements for the various levels of education. For Malaya, however, the age requirement is relaxed at Primary level as already explained. Even then there is no fixed policy and not all elementary schools have "express" streams. In order to expedite the education of science and medical scholars at the University of Malaya those who have obtained their Higher School Certificate with appropriate subjects at advanced level may seek direct entry into the second year of the University course. Whether these direct entries can be considered among the gifted depends on the definition accepted. They are certainly those in the top 10% of their age group.

In private institutions, particularly those of the Philippines, the age requirement is waived at one or more levels of school though not at the University.

Respondents generally associated the ages at which the gifted are identified with those at which pupils sit the various selection examinations in the school system.

RESEARCH

No research on gifted children is currently carried out in any South-East Asian country except in the Philippines. In Malaya, a four-year follow-up study of student progress, begun in 1964 and using both the 1964, and 1965 cohorts, examines the relationship between high achievement in school examinations and final success at the University. A derived problem for study is the extent to which high achievement may be accepted as an indication of giftedness.

Studies in the Philippines are being conducted under the auspices of the newly established National Coordinating Center for the Study of Filipino Children and Youth. This institution is charged with conducting and encouraging research among public and private institutions with a view to making a scientific and thorough study of the needs of Filipino children.

At the Philippine Women's University a study is currently conducted on the background of Gifted Children. A particular sample of students in Maquiling School was given the WISC, the Philippine Mental Ability Test (Form III) and the Zafran Culture-Free Test in an attempt to find out the particular needs of these children and to suggest special educational provisions for the gifted. There are limited studies too for the setting up of developmental norms. On the whole what research is being carried out on gifted children in South-East Asia is still meagre, barely informative and hardly worth citing.

The responses to the questionnaire as a whole have given some indication of the highly selective and competitive process which governs the opportunities for education within the South-East Asian region. Giftedness tends to be identified with high achievement in the school. There is a lack of clear and coherent thinking on the needs of gifted children although there is certainly a kind of inarticulate feeling for them. There is the impression too that more organised effort could be made to meet their needs, that officially at any rate, Governments lack an appreciation of the importance of the contribution which the gifted can make to society.

It rests with research not only to indicate how talents may be identified but also how they may be properly developed. In the context of South-East Asia these are crucial problems and difficult to solve. To see them in perspective it is necessary to appreciate the social conditions which seem to militate against rather than nurture the gifted.

PROBLEMS OF THE GIFTED ARISING FROM THE SOCIAL CONDITIONS
OBTAINING IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA1. *Nurture of the gifted is difficult in the context of traditional values held.*

According to traditional thinking, giftedness is a child of "happenstance." Well enough if it grows and manifests itself! It may not even be right to pay overmuch attention to it lest the gods should take the possessor of the gifts away. Thus in families where children, particularly boys, show promise, they are given nicknames such as "Fool" and "Rubbish" so that they may be mistaken for what they are not and thus preserved from the Evil Eye. Among more sophisticated urban peoples of the region there is hardly any of this thinking left and ambitious parents like those in the West push their children hard if there is any indication of ability at all. But only 13% of the population in this region as a whole live in urban areas. A great number are still rural and mentally inhibited by the values and superstitions which have been handed down.

Again in societies which have been mainly feudal, there is an unquestioning acceptance of one's lot. Only education can correct such an attitude and promote social mobility, but for education to work there must first be a rise in the level of aspiration. In the villages of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and South Vietnam, for example, much has still to be done to bring children in to schools. Such conditions are not conducive to the identification of talent. Besides, talents do not flourish in economically underprivileged homes or a culturally impoverished environment.

2. *The too-rapid rate of educational development cannot ensure sound programmes for the gifted.*

With limited means and scant resources some countries in the region can scarce give four years of free compulsory primary education to all children of the correct school age. But when the goal was set at the Karachi Conference of 1959 for all countries in Asia to reach at least a six-year target, the cost became staggering in respect of teachers and teaching facilities. In trying to establish this broad base to the educational pyramid standards are necessarily lowered. Mass education brings its concomitant problems of strained resources and poor teaching. In Malaya, a further effort is added through making available, to all who demand it, a place in secondary school up to the age of 15+ from 1965 onwards. A programme for the gifted which calls for special facilities and specialist teachers can hardly be expected to thrive in these circumstances, unless new measures are sought for the deployment of teachers and the grouping of pupils. New methods may involve the discarding of the staff-pupil ratio idea and the use of mass communication media for instruction.

There has been mention made also of the establishment of schools for the intellectual elite (in Singapore, for example). If the general tone of

education is poor in the average school, the setting up of a special school or schools merely enhances the invidious comparison between the gifted have's and the average have-nots.

3. *The highly selective and competitive system of education causes unnecessary wastage of talent.*

No follow-up studies have been made in any country to establish the validity and the reliability of the selection procedures used at different levels of the schools system. Malaysia has three such selection points – at 15+, 17+, and 19+. Those who go on to the University have to submit to further selection. The attrition rate even at the University level is heavy. The following tables are revealing.

TABLE I

Success of Science Students admitted in 1960/61 & 1961/62

	1960/61	1961/62
No. admitted to first year.	67	86
No. graduate with pass degree after 3 years.	29	22
No. graduated with honours degree after 4 years.	18	14

TABLE II

Success of Science Students admitted by direct entry in to the Second Year in 1960/61 and 1961/62

	1960/61	1961/62
No. admitted to second year.	14	12
No. graduated with pass degree after 2 years.	8	9
No. graduated with honours degree after 3 years.	8	8

Table II gives the numbers of those students who according to the definition of Item 1(c) of the questionnaire may be termed gifted. Yet for both 1960/61 and 1961/62 groups there were those who failed to arrive at the honours degree qualification (six and four respectively) and would never have a second chance at it again. The wastage rate in Table I is quite alarming. Seeing that Science students are much in demand in a developing economy such wastage can scarcely be justified and less so because at each of the previous levels so many have been turned away from completing their progress through the educational system.

In all countries except the Philippines, promotion from one level to the next is determined by a statistic, a practice which assumes that a constant

intellectual quantum exists from year to year. Yet this practice, in view of the limited numbers of places available at each higher level, seems to be necessary. The unimpeded escalation of youngsters through the years of elementary and secondary levels of school in the Philippines does not afford a better solution since the general standard of education, excepting that in certain well-endowed institutions, is too low for the educational output to be of value to society.

Aggravating the wastage through failure is the practice of retention of which there is high incidence in countries like Burma and South Vietnam. In the former, retentions average about 50% in the first two years of primary education, rising to nearly 70% in the last two years. In the latter, there is an average retention of 40% of the pupils in primary school. The pupil does not necessarily improve through retention since no remedial work is provided and having been put through the course for a second year he often becomes a bored and disinterested "over-ager."

Wastage also occurs through drop-out. This may be due to lack of aspiration, poverty, lack of the necessary home support, or the need to assist in the work in the fields. The drop-out rate can be very heavy. In Cambodia for example, there was a total primary enrolment of 356,100 with 85,000 entering the first year in 1955. At the end of a year, only 66,000 went on to Grade Two, 19,000 having either dropped out or been retained.

According to the figures supplied by the UNESCO publication, *World Survey of Education, 1960*, there were in 1953/54 90.3 % of South-East Asia's total school enrolment at the first level of school, 8.4 % and 1.3% at the second and third levels respectively. The North American continent with a comparable population had 75%, 20.8% and 6.2%, respectively, at the same three levels. A comparison of the two educational pyramids speaks for itself. The South-East Asian case draws attention immediately to the two causes of drastic elimination and heavy drop-out.

CONCLUSION

I have not so much tried to explain the problems of gifted children in South-East Asia as leave them for inference by referring to the conditions which obtain in the region. Much remains to be done. For the academic, the greatest problem in circumstances of need is how to convince the Government that educational research is not a luxury which can easily be dispensed with and that improvement and development are more likely with proper experimentation and evaluation.

QUESTIONNAIRE ON GIFTED CHILDREN

[Gen. Instruction: For each question below, please place a X in the appropriate box]

1. Below are different definitions of a gifted child.

Check the definition/definitions which you feel has/have common usage in your country:

- a. A genius
 b. A child of I.Q. greater than 140
 c. A child who is in the top 10% of his age group in one or more of the areas of study in school
 d. A child exceptionally endowed with talent e.g. poetic, musical, artistic or mechanical talent
 e. Other definition (if not covered by above)
-

2. Should gifted children be identified early for special attention?

YES NO

Why?

3. Does your government/institution* have a special programme for the gifted?

YES NO

*Delete whichever is not applicable.

4. If your answer is YES, check which of the following method/methods is/are adopted for the identification of the gifted.

- a. Selection by Testing
 (i) on results of examination
 (ii) by I.Q. tests
 (iii) by standardised Achievement tests
 (iv) by aptitude tests
 (v) by all of the above
 (vi) other tests (specify)
-

b. Use of Cumulative Records

c. Through observations and interviews

- d. Through the help of: (i) guidance counsellors
 (ii) psychologists
 (iii) teachers as a team

5. At what age are they identified?

Circle one: 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18

6. Check the programme/programmes adopted in your country/institution* for catering to the needs of gifted children after they are identified.

- a. They are placed in express or accelerated classes
- b. They are placed in the top stream on the results of an examination/examinations
- c. They are placed in a special ability group within their class
- d. They are given individual attention
- e. Other programmes, if not covered above: _____

*Delete whichever is not applicable.

7. Which of the following measure/measures is/are taken to ensure the proper nurture of the gifted?
- a. Subject tutoring in area of weakness
 - b. Intensive individual and group counselling
 - c. Discussion of study methods
 - d. Special motivational devices Specify: _____
 - e. Special problems for the child's individual pursuit
 - f. Extra topics are given them for study. These are beyond the normal requirements of the curriculum
 - g. The content of the curriculum is specially diversified
 - h. Special enrichment materials are used Specify: _____
8. Do you consider that your government/institution* has an adequate programme for the nurture of the gifted?
- YES NO

*Delete whichever is not applicable.

9. If NO, specify what else you would wish to be done.
- _____
- _____

10. Are age limitations relaxed for gifted children on entrance to
- a. Primary School YES NO
 - b. Secondary School YES NO
 - c. University YES NO
11. Is any research carried out on gifted children in your country/institution*?
- YES NO

*Delete whichever is not applicable.

12. If YES, please describe briefly.
- _____
- _____
- _____

Also, please include available literature with the return of this questionnaire. Thank you.