Individualizing Science Curricula for the Gifted

Reported are methods of accelerating and individualizing science and mathematics curricula for extremely gifted junior high school students as developed by the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY) and the Intellectually Gifted Child Study Group. Given are examples of acceleration such as allowing the student to take more advanced courses in the standard sequence, taking advanced placement courses, taking special out of class college level courses, or receiving tutoring through the Oxford-Cambridge Tutorial Preceptory System of SMPY. A question is raised regarding the amount of laboratory work that is necessary for highly gifted science students. Sources of further information are provided. (DB)
The argument that individuals experience different rates of intellectual development has been well established in the 20th century. Recently, Keating (1976) has shown that... "Brightness as measured by psychometric testing implies developmental precocity in reasoning." "Students... selected for high scores on psychometric tests... are indeed precocious in cognitive development, and not just good 'test-takers.'"

He adds: "Since, according to Piaget, cognitive development proceeds as an interaction of the organism and the environment, the brighter individual would be at an advantage moving through the successive stages more quickly."

In addition, Keating's work (pp. 97-98) suggests that such acceleration should occur within developmental stages, such as concrete operations or formal operations, rather than across stages.¹

¹ Project associate, Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY), The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland 21218. Presented at the annual meeting of the National Association for Gifted Children in Kansas City, Missouri, on 17 October 1976.
It is only within the last few years, however, that interest among educational planners in individuals of high ability has reached the point of garnering financial support for research and development of programs aimed at meeting the educational needs of this segment of the school population.

The diversity of programs, especially in science and mathematics, that have been developed since the scientific consciousness of the American public was raised abruptly by the Russian launching of the Sputnik satellite in the late '50's can be split into essentially two broad categories: enrichment programs versus programs of an accelerative nature.

Enrichment, on the one hand, insures that the status of the traditional lock-step, age-in-grade passage of individuals through the school system remains unchanged. Stanley (1976) argues, however, that enrichment programs designed to meet the educational needs of the gifted are more likely to be "busy work" or simply to postpone boredom in school work to a later and potentially more crucial point in an intellectually gifted child's academic development, than to provide stimulating curricula that in fact allow for the full development of this individual's extraordinary abilities.

In planning enrichment programs, educators tend to bypass
THE RECOGNITION OF DEVELOPMENTAL PRECOCITY
AS A COMPONENT OF THE PROCESSES OF IDENTIFYING AND NURTURING GIFTEDNESS.

PROGRAMS THAT ARE STRUCTURED, ON THE OTHER HAND, TO ALLOW FOR A MORE RAPID TRANSIT THROUGH THE PROCESS OF ACADEMIC CERTIFICATION CAN ACCOMPLISH MUCH THE SAME BREADTH OF EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AS ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS, WHILE PROVIDING FOR GREATER FLEXIBILITY AND ALLOWING FOR MORE PRIME CREATIVE TIME DURING WHICH THESE INDIVIDUALS CAN LATER FUNCTION AS PRODUCTIVE SCIENTISTS AND MATHEMATICIANS.

THE EDUCATIONAL MODELS DEVELOPED FOR MATHEMATICS INSTRUCTION BY THE STUDY OF MATHEMATICALLY PRECOCIOUS YOUTH (SMPY) AND THE INTELLECTUALLY GIFTED CHILD STUDY GROUP (IGCSG) BOTH AT THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY ARE BASED SQUARELY IN ACCELERATION AS A MEANS OF PROVIDING THE FOLLOWING THREE THINGS: FIRST, STIMULATING AND RELEVANT EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES FOR THE GIFTED; SECOND, APPROPRIATELY FLEXIBLE AND RAPID TRANSIT THROUGH THE ACADEMIC CERTIFICATION PROCESS; AND THIRD, EDUCATIONAL CREDIT FOR WORK ACCOMPLISHED, WHETHER DONE AT THE TYPICAL AGE LEVEL OR NOT. SINCE, EVEN AMONG THE SUBPOPULATION OF STUDENTS IDENTIFIED AS GIFTED, THERE IS A BROAD DISTRIBUTION OF LEVELS OF ABILITY, AS WELL AS TYPES OF ABILITY (VERBAL REASONING, NON-VERBAL REASONING, MATH-REASONING, ETC.), EACH MODEL HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO MEET THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF INDIVIDUALS WITHIN THESE VARIOUS LEVELS AND TYPES OF GIFTEDNESS. SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES TO THE TRADITIONAL LOCK-STEP RANGE FROM
SUBJECT MATTER ACCELERATION TO INDIVIDUAL TUTORIAL PROGRAMS.
Although these models were proposed and tested for mathematics
instruction, their probable applicability to instruction in
the sciences is clear.

Let's look for a moment at a program that might be
appropriate for a relatively gifted youngster, who, for example,
at age 12 in the 7th grade scored at least 500 on the mathematics
section of the College Entrance Examination Board's Scholastic
Aptitude Test (SAT-M) and at least 440 on SAT-Verbal. His scores
in both areas exceed those of the average college-bound
high-school senior. Should this youngster be required to
take the typical eighth grade (and in some cases 9th grade)
science courses -- designed to ease the student into the
process of scientific inquiry? Considering Keating's findings
mentioned earlier, we are safe in assuming that this student
has entered the developmental stage of formal operations;
that is, he or she has developed the reasoning structures
necessary for the comprehension of scientific abstraction.
In cases where only one or two such students attend a
particular school system, simply allowing them to enter the
highest ability classes of the natural science sequence is
more desirable than holding them in age-in-grade place.
These students would finish the science sequence one or two
years early. They could then take Advanced Placement courses,
achieve a grade of 3, 4, or 5 on the APP exam, and garner very
ECONOMICAL COLLEGE CREDITS WHILE STILL IN HIGH SCHOOL.
(The cost of the APP Exam is $32.00 as compared with the
cost of a two-semester college science course, which can be
more than $1000.00 at some private universities.) Another
alternative would be for such students to take college courses
in science during released time from school or at night at a
local college.

In some particularly talent-rich school systems, special
fast-paced accelerated classes in the sciences could be created
along the same lines as the mathematics classes already discussed
by Mr. George. The feasibility of applying the SMPY’s fast-
paced, accelerated mathematics class model to science classes
was tested in a pilot study conducted at a private school
near Baltimore, Maryland, under the auspices of the Intellectually
Gifted Child Study Group during the 1974-1975 academic season.
(Cohn 1975, 1976)

Students entering the 7th and 8th grades were screened
simultaneously for inclusion in a combined Algebra I/Algebra II
class, as well as a Physical Principles class. Performance
on the Academic Promise Test, Verbal and Numerical sections, and
on the STEP Science Series II General Science test served as
the basis for an invitation to participate in the special science
class. Both sets of tests provided sufficiently high ceiling.
Cut-off scores at least at the 95th percentiles on both the
verbal and numerical aptitude tests and at least at the 50th
percentile on the STEP Science test served as selection criteria.
Each student who achieved at or above these criteria received
A LETTER OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE FAST-PACED, ACCELERATED PHYSICS CLASS. STUDENTS WERE ENCOURAGED TO MAKE THEIR OWN DECISIONS REGARDING SUCH PARTICIPATION. PARENTS WERE ALSO COUNSELED TO RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO PRESSURE THEIR CHILDREN INTO PARTICIPATING IN IT. FIVE STUDENTS CHOSE TO JOIN THE SPECIAL SCIENCE CLASS.


AT THE END OF THE COURSE WORK, STUDENTS WERE TESTED ON THE COOPERATIVE SCIENCE PHYSICS TEST. IN ORDER TO PROVIDE A COMPARISON GROUP, STUDENTS IN THE MOST SELECTIVE SECTION OF THE REGULAR PHYSICS COURSE WERE ALSO TESTED WITH IT. ON THIS STANDARDIZED MEASURE THE FIVE ACCELERATED STUDENTS PERFORMED AS WELL AS OR BETTER THAN THE "A" STUDENTS IN THE REGULAR CLASS, EVEN THOUGH THE FORMER WERE ONE TO TWO YEARS YOUNGER.

Applied to science instruction for the gifted. That most of the abstract principles in physics and chemistry are representable in mathematical form lends logical consistency to this finding. An excellent mathematics reasoner should do well in a physics course. In fact, one superb mathematical reasoner in the SMPY study (who incidentally scored 780 on the SAT-M and 620 on the SAT-V while in the 3rd grade at age 13) took the College Board physics test without having taken a physics course and achieved a score of 800 (in fact, it could be extrapolated to the equivalent of 830).

The major difference between mathematics classes and science classes lies in the necessity for laboratory experience in the sciences. Labs take time. The theoretical subject matter can be covered rapidly, but some provisions must be made to allow the student to see how the theories evolve out of experimentation within the context of the scientific method. One Maryland private school has approached this problem by treating the science laboratories as experiential libraries. The head of the science department's time is scheduled such that he or she is available to supervise students who wish to do lab work during their free time. In other situations science teachers have allowed a few students to work in the lab during their study halls while the teacher was instructing another class. Thus, although lab work represents the time limiting factor in accelerating science education, the real question remains: How much of the lab time, as labs are usually conducted, is unnecessary for highly able students?
Let's now turn to the case of a student of amazing ability at mathematical reasoning. Such a student might score a 660 on the SAT-M at age 13. For the sake of illustration let's call her Ellen. This score is better than that achieved by 98 out of 100 college-bound seniors in high school. Her score on the SAT-Verbal test is similarly high. She attends a school in a small essentially rural county. There is no teacher available to work with her individually. Even placing her in the typical high-school mathematics sequence is inappropriate, since, if properly guided she can learn the equivalent of a year-long mathematics course in a matter of a few months at the longest. Having heard of the Hopkins studies, her parents call SMPY for guidance. SMPY has developed a tutorial strategy modeled on the Oxford-Cambridge (Ox-Bridge) tutorial preceptor system. A tutor is assigned to work with Ellen. Saturday meetings are scheduled, or if the distance is too great the tutorial is conducted by mail except for occasional meetings for stimulation and testing. The tutor is a member of the SMPY staff of tutors, who are also mathematically brilliant youths (typically, college students who have completed at least Calculus III and honors linear algebra).

The procedure is relatively simple. Since Ellen has not yet taken an Algebra I course, she is given the Cooperative Mathematics Algebra I Achievement Test. She scores 38 out of 40 on Form A. The test booklet, not the answer sheet however, is returned to her, and she is informed which problems she missed. Ellen can take as much time as she needs to re-solve these two
9. PROBLEMS. She solves both of them correctly. She is then administered the Cooperative Mathematics Algebra II test. She gets 25 out of 40 correct on Form A. Once again she is given the booklet and allowed as much time as necessary to work on the problems she missed. She gets 5 more correct. The 10 problems she still cannot solve are referenced in the Cooperative Mathematics Test Manual according to a typical Algebra I course syllabus. Ellen's tutor then carefully instructs her in these specific problem areas. When she has mastered these concepts, she is administered Form B of the Algebra II Achievement Test. She earns a perfect score. This procedure is repeated for the entire standard mathematics sequence. Letters are sent by the SMPY staff to Ellen's school administrators, informing them of her mastery of each course in mathematics that she covered and encouraging her counselors to avoid having her placed in inappropriate mathematics classes, as well as to plan ways for her to earn college credits for upper level courses.

The application and trial testing of the Ox-Bridge tutorial strategy for instruction in science is currently under consideration by the staff of the SMPY.

As the work of SMPY and IGCSG continues, it becomes increasingly clear that effective educational facilitation for the gifted does not necessitate hugely expensive enrichment programs. With a little ingenuity and by breaking down the unjustified prejudice of educators toward acceleration, many appropriately flexible alternatives become available to help...
GIFTED STUDENTS MEET THEIR EDUCATIONAL NEEDS. SIMPLE SUBJECT MATTER ACCELERATION PROVIDES SUCH AN ALTERNATIVE FOR RELATIVELY GIFTED YOUNGSTERS. IN PARTICULARLY TALENT-RICH SCHOOL SYSTEMS SPECIAL FAST-PACED ACCELERATED CLASSES CAN BE FORMED. FOR EXAMPLE, EIGHT OUT OF THE 22 MEMBERS (MOSTLY SEVENTH GRADERS) IN SUCH A CLASS COVERED 4 1/2 YEARS OF PRECALCULUS MATHEMATICS IN 60 TWO-HOUR WEEKLY SESSIONS. AND FOR TRULY AMAZINGLY TALENTED YOUNGSTERS, THE OX-BRIDGE TUTORIAL MODEL OFFERS STIMULATING AND RAPID-ENOUGH TRANSIT THROUGH BASIC AND COMPLEX SUBJECT MATTER.

IT IS IMPORTANT NOTE THAT NONE OF THE ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES MENTIONED INVOLVES SELF-PACING. THE TEACHER OR TUTOR IN EACH CASE PROVIDES THE RAPID PACING NECESSARY TO COVER THE MATERIAL FASTER THAN WOULD BE THE CASE IN A REGULAR CLASS.

PACKAGES THAT DESCRIBE IN ELABORATE DETAIL THE ALTERNATIVE MODELS TO FACILITATE THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED YOUNGSTERS ARE CURRENTLY BEING PREPARED FOR DISSEMINATION BY THE STAFF OF SMPY UNDER A GRANT FROM THE ROBERT STERLING CLARK FOUNDATION.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN MORE DETAILED INFORMATION REGARDING THE MODELS PRESENTED HERE, INCLUDING THE ADVANTAGES OF SUBJECT MATTER ACCELERATION, THE CREATION OF FAST-PACED, ACCELERATED CLASSES, AND THE OX-BRIDGE TUTORIAL MODEL, I’D LIKE TO DIRECT YOUR ATTENTION TO SEVERAL SOURCES:

FIRST, A BOOK ENTITLED MATHEMATICAL TALENT: DISCOVERY, DESCRIPTION AND DEVELOPMENT, EDITED BY STANLEY, KEATING, AND FOX, ESPECIALLY CHAPTERS 3 AND 6;

SECOND, A BOOK ENTITLED INTELLECTUAL TALENT: RESEARCH
AND DEVELOPMENT EDITTED BY KEATING, ESPECIALLY CHAPTERS 3, 6, AND 7;

THIRD, A MANUSCRIPT COMPLETED IN SEPTEMBER 1976, ENTITLED THE GIFTED AND TALENTED: FIFTY-YEAR PERSPECTIVE EDITTED BY STANLEY, GEORGE, AND SOLANO, ESPECIALLY THE CHAPTER BY JULIAN C. STANLEY ENTITLED "RATIONALE OF THE STUDY OF MATHEMATICALLY PRECOCIOUS YOUTH (SMPY) DURING ITS FIRST SEVEN YEARS OF PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL ACCELERATION;" AND,

FOURTH, AN ARTICLE ENTITLED "THE CASE FOR EXTREME EDUCATIONAL ACCELERATION OF INTELLECTUALLY BRILLIANT YOUTHS" BY JULIAN C. STANLEY PUBLISHED IN THE GIFTED CHILD QUARTERLY IN 1976 VOLUME 20(1), PP. 66-75 AND 41.
REFERENCES


FOOTNOTES