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Yes, Some Theory Is Necessary

Teachers tend to feel the contempt for researchers that the general population reserves for teachers. Both are misplaced. Even the most observant and reflective of teachers cannot watch the happenings in the classroom in the way open to a researcher - just as the researcher cannot experience the classroom in the way the teacher does. The student's experience is, of course, another dimension again.

The dialogue which results from shared responses will lead to learning for all of us. I believe that it is necessary for practising teachers to interpret research with their knowledge of the classroom in mind; to be willing to trial new ideas based on sound theory; and to return then to the research literature able to add to and enrich the ideas presented there. We can all benefit from a cooperative approach.

The first part of this book presents, then, the theory I found vital in establishing a program. Whether gifted children ought to be identified and how this is to be done were the issues I grappled with at the outset - with my friends and family as much as with my colleagues at school. Grouping quickly takes centre stage as an emotional as much as a practical concern; it is an issue about which everyone has a view, albeit often uninformed. The problems posed by the underachieving gifted child are linked with both identification and management procedures, and it is important that the needs of these children be understood before any program is developed.

In this part I hope to provide an adequate, although not exhaustive, grounding for those who are beginning to cater for gifted and talented children. The reference list and appendices at the end of the book list many useful texts for further study.

Special adjustments to the education for the gifted should not be regarded as something abnormal, but part of the courtesy and grace due to every child

(The Hon. Kim Beazley at the opening of the first Australian national conference on the education of gifted and talented children, Melbourne 1983.)

Why cater for the gifted?

I had not been teaching many weeks before David came to my attention. He was in my year 11 English class, and as a first year teacher I was determined to set firm and clear standards of behaviour from the outset. Rules were laid down about punctuality, width of margins, legibility, correct use of punctuation, the desirability of formal language in essays, manners in the classroom and all those "discipline things" that teaching rounds make us fear. Penalty for the infringement of these rules was to be loss of marks.

I felt pleased with my beginning. I heard reports of myself in the way teachers do - the raised eyebrows, the half-stifled groan, the overheard scrap of conversation in the corridor. I was seen as demanding, strict, but "probably fair", and the general consensus seemed to be that "at least it'll make me work".

But not David. When I asked him why assignment after assignment was submitted late and shoddily if it was submitted at all, he shrugged and said that school was boring. When I pointed out that he was lessening his chances of achieving high grades, or even a pass, he responded by saying that, frankly, he didn't care in the slightest (or words to that effect!) about marks and that all he wanted to do was leave.

Yet in class discussion on *Macbeth*, a text which most of the "conscientious, reliable and mature" students (I quote from their reports) found tedious, difficult and irrelevant, I saw in his eyes that gleam that makes experienced

teachers continue in the classroom in spite of the day-to-day frustrations, failures and low self-esteem that so often beset members of our profession. And not only that. His comments and questions, offered first in the guise of the class clown, then in a mixture of hostility and shyness, and finally, openly, as the outcome of total absorption in the text, made me see sections of a play I thought I knew in an entirely different way.

This is not a fairy story and, as far as David's secondary education was concerned, there was no happy ending. The excitement that was undoubtedly there in discussion did not transfer to the kind of writing by which we determine a student's progress. As the year went on, he showed me pieces of his private writing in which there was certainly promise, but he lacked the determination to act on the comments I offered, on his request, to make his work suitable for publication. He left school before the final examinations of year 11, and to my knowledge has never returned. He came from a home where books were valued, where learning was seen as something to be treasured, where dinner table discussion was of politics, economics and human rights and to which many intelligent, articulate and well known people came. He was not reacting against this; he said himself - probably accurately - that there was nothing he was learning at school that he could not learn more effectively at home. But in today's world the piece of paper that details qualifications is highly valued, and I still firmly believe that we failed David.

One of the major misconceptions about gifted and talented children is that they can teach themselves; that they will succeed in any case and therefore it is a waste of funds to make special provision for them. Before programs for these children can gain general acceptance, it must be understood that this is simply not the case.

A report presented to the Subcommittee on Education of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, U.S. Senate (March 1972), more commonly referred to as the Marland Report, has influenced much subsequent writing about education for the gifted in the decades since. Some of its arguments are worth quoting, because they illustrate many of the common and mistaken assumptions made by people uninformed in the field.

There is an enormous individual and social cost when talent among the Nation's children and youth goes undiscovered and undeveloped. These students cannot ordinarily excel without assistance. (Marland, 1972, p. 8)

“Gifted and talented children are, in fact, deprived and can suffer psychological damage and permanent impairment of their abilities to function well which is equal to or greater than the similar deprivation suffered by any other population with special needs served by the Office of Education.” (Marland, 1972, p. 9)

Services provided to gifted and talented children can and do provide significant and measurable outcomes. (Marland, 1972, p. 9)