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Expectations of Gifted Children in the Primary-Secondary Transition

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From the large body of evidence regarding the personality and ability characteristics of creative adults and children, a stereotype emerges of the high creative as a somewhat bohemian person who flaunts convention (Mackinnon, 1962), works erratically by insight, is intuitive and emotional (Barron, 1963; Cross, Cattell and Butcher, 1967). Such a person, because of his high but idiosyncratic standards for his products, suffers neither fools nor mediocrities with any great patience. Taft (1971) has refined the concept of creativity operating within a person as involving both "hot" creativity (insight, intuition, expanded states of consciousness) and "cold" creativity which is more concerned with controlled problem-solving, seeing an idea through to production, care in finish, and so on.

Bachtold's (1974) study further modified the image of the high creative adolescent as distinctively rebellious when she found that the subjects in her study rated "health", "consideration for others", "sense of humour", "does work on time", "never bored" above qualities such as "independent thinking", "intuitive", "adventurous" and "self sufficient".

Despite the comprehensiveness of the creativity literature, there are few studies that deal directly with the perceptions of creative children in their everyday concerns. This absence of information is partly due to its "non-scientific" nature, as non-formal, open-ended questionnaires yield data that are difficult to codify and validate. Increasingly, however, educators are turning to ethnomethodology as providing wider and more appropriate knowledge for their purposes.

The La Trobe Longitudinal Study on Creativity included formal test batteries, questionnaires and inventories as well as idiographic profiles and non-structured tasks such as the present.

Subjects were selected from one thousand Victorian metropolitan sixth-graders from state and independent schools on the basis of performance on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (1966). Approximately the top four percent were selected for longitudinal study, and were tested over a four-year period both at the University, at school and at home. In this case, all selected subjects were asked to document their expectations of secondary school prior to Form 1 entry; at the end of Form 1 they were asked to evaluate their school experiences. As there were no pre-set categories, the students' replies are reported according to qualitative grouping and frequency of response where applicable.

Sixth-Graders' Expectations of High School

The first evident group of responses portrayed a concern with ambition, the value of discipline and hard work. To the sixth-grader, the academic level demanded by the secondary school was the central issue, referred to by seventy-five percent of the students: there would be harder work and more of it than they had experienced in primary school; not only would the volume of homework and study be greater, but there would now be formal exams with which to contend.

Far from being daunted by this prospect, most looked forward to the difficulty of secondary school, expecting, in varying degrees, to enjoy the experience with "more interesting homework, better subjects and different teachers". Encountering new subjects in a more structured system was viewed as a challenge, in some cases, with its own rewards: "Although (it) will be a lot harder in the way of more work and study, I feel it will all be worth while later on in life".

Despite a general confidence and optimism, some did feel diffident and apprehensive about their ability to cope academically: "I don't think my marks will be as good as I have been getting since there will be more subjects to study and learn". A few expected minor transitional problems, particularly with the timetable, more classrooms and more teachers to get used to.

The status of the teacher provoked wide comment from the students. There was an expectation that the relationship between the teacher and the individual pupil would change: teachers would treat their charges with respect and understanding: "I expect firstly to be treated as a young adult, to have a student-teacher relationship, not one trying to out-fox the other".

Apart from this question of the personal relationship between teacher and student, the wider, traditional function of the teacher as pedagogue was considered. The conduct of each class, and the degree and enforcement of discipline were the issues most frequently discussed. The students who expressed any opinion about having a different teacher for each class were unanimously in favour of it. This was a change that seemed to increase the mystique of the secondary school teacher and one boy even said: "The teachers will be fun and they will speak different". Nine students felt that teachers would not be highly demanding and that school life would be more restrictive: "I think the teachers will be more stricter and therefore there will be more rules".

None of those who anticipated a teacher-student relationship based on mutual respect and trust adverted to the question of discipline. Perhaps with students now behaving responsibly and teachers equitably, the traditionally oppressive relationship would be unnecessary, not to say inconsistent. Such a division in response may indicate a wider split in the way that individuals regard relationships to authority.

The students differed widely in their purpose for undertaking a higher level of education, leaving aside for the moment that schooling is com-

pulsory until the age of fifteen. (Not one participant, incidentally, said that he was continuing at school because the law says that he must, or that he would leave as soon as it was legally possible.) An insight into the respondents' desire for more schooling can be obtained by examining their attitudes to the specialised instruction they would be receiving in specific fields (such as sheetmetal work, graphic communication or needlework) and to their expectations of results from the knowledge gained.

Eighteen students stated that either they wanted to improve in a particular subject or that experiencing the new subjects which would be available at secondary level in both the humanities and the technical fields was an exciting prospect. Some gave general answers such as: "I expect (it) to be a very important part of my life because I will be learning new and more interesting subjects". Others selected particular subjects as a focus: "I expect to improve . . . mainly in Maths". Of these students, six gave specific long-term reasons why they wanted to improve in or learn about various subjects. Each was related to his or her proposed vocation or skills in later life. "I hope to improve my debating enough to become a public speaker later in life". Many others (twenty-seven) felt that secondary schooling in general should prepare them for careers or further study at tertiary level. They would now be taught things "useful at an older age"; such as "how to become a horse breeder". There is a common expectation that it is in secondary school that one learns the specific "things" that may be needed to begin a particular trade or profession. "I expect to learn enough from secondary school education to obtain my ambition to become a pilot, doctor, or phys. ed. teacher. I expect to learn a trade or profession to carry me through life". Actually, twenty-one different careers were referred to, for which it was assumed that secondary school would be the training ground. Knowledge was usually seen as instrumental to a better life, rather than as an end in itself.

For many, the rise to secondary level did have immediate relevance in terms of the social education they expected. New friends would be met, and there would be associations with a range of people who were experienced in diverse areas. Some wanted to learn how to interact socially and to "behave" properly, to become popular, to become good mixers. The general feeling of optimism extended to the details of secondary school life: many students expected to enjoy the extra facilities which would now be available, such as tools for art, woodwork, and sheetmetal, gymnasiums for physical education, better equipped libraries, and well stocked canteens. It was anticipated by about thirty-three percent of students that sport would now be more enjoyable. The facilities were expected to be superior and many expressed desires to become more proficient in a wider range of sports.

In summary, the most frequently mentioned item was that relating to the expectation of hard work leading to high achievement, on which thirty-five comments were made. The trend towards achievement themes is supported by the next most frequently mentioned item, the school

as an opportunity for professional vocational development, reported by twenty-two students. The third most important cluster was fifteen students who mentioned the chance to play diverse sports, fourteen who looked forward to the variety of subjects in the curriculum, and thirteen who hoped to make new friends. Again, it should be emphasised that the great majority of comments are positive, indicating an independent movement towards a set of new and somewhat exciting challenges, with a marked sense of optimism about the likely achievement of these hopes. There is no apparent sense of worry or apprehension in the expectations at all. On the other hand, the goals are distinctly middle-class, convergent and success oriented.

Students' Appraisal Post First Form

A curriculum which had variety, and had new and practical subjects was, as we saw, widely anticipated by the students before they entered secondary school. After having completed the year there were more statements assessing the variety, quality, and usefulness of the subjects than in any other single area. For convenience, the subjects have been subdivided into three categories: technical subjects, arts and languages, and science/maths.

Of the nine who commented on the range of subjects and activities offered, six were satisfied, and three complained of a limited choice. The students usually restricted their comments to subjects about which they felt strongly — either enjoyed or disliked — for one reason or another. It was rare to find a full analysis of their subjects. Naturally their feelings about the teacher and the teaching methods were intertwined with their feelings about the syllabus. "In sheetmetal and woodwork when we asked for help about the models . . . all we got from the teachers was sort it out yourself". "Social English is pretty good. Mr. Jones asked us to do assignments on different subjects like the environment". As usual, Maths was a subject of great controversy, the maths teacher being assailed for being incompetent or unfair, and in one case the subject was referred to as being "very stupid and easy".

As would be expected, many students expressed qualitative thoughts about the secondary schools both generally and juxtaposed with their previous experiences in primary school. "My first year has been a lot harder than grade six . . . I have enjoyed the year's work". "My first year wasn't what I thought it would be . . . and I wasn't very impressed with it". Broadly speaking, many more (nineteen) found the new experience a generally enjoyable one, than did not (eight). Only four expressed outright disappointment or complained of unfulfilled expectations. Transitional problems of a non-academic nature were encountered by only a few: three found difficulty adjusting to the rules and two were confused about the timetable and which classrooms were to be used.

It is apparent that the question of academic progress is of paramount importance to a majority of students and yet only three offered any comments on the methods of criteria used to assess progress. "I feel

that reports should also be taken on how the boy has reacted to the teachers and to the other boys in the class". The strong concern with academic progress, with discipline and with achievement does not completely fit the profile established in other research which established the highly creative person as highly autonomous, flexible and unconcerned with social restraints or expectations. There appeared to be very little inclination to rebel; on the contrary, a wide acceptance of imposed standards and expectations was evidenced.

The class format was important to a few students. "We have what is known as open class . . .". The experience of having a different teacher for each subject was regarded favourably by those who commented: "One thing good is that you don't have the same teacher for every subject". But within the classroom the most vital consideration, it seems, is the teacher-student relationship. As has been noted in the first essays, student expectations of warm teacher-student relationships were high. After a year the number who felt the teachers had been unhelpful or unfair in their treatment of students roughly paralleled those whose expectations were satisfied. Often the criticism of a particular subject took the form of a rebuke to the teacher, for instance, "I hated history, our teacher didn't teach us anything", or "our maths teacher doesn't explain things very well either". This impatience with the imperfect or inferior is a quality that one might expect from highly creative individuals with high personal standards, but may also be attributable to a more general adolescent idealism.

So far as the relationship with their peer group is concerned, twenty-five percent said they had made new friends and were pleased. One commented on the fair treatment received from older students and one complained of disruptive elements in the classroom.

In the first essays a large number of students obviously felt that secondary education was preparing them for a subsequent career and a few expressed grandiose sentiments on the importance of this part of their lives. The latter essays were devoid of reference to any career, and only one boy conceded that he was being prepared for adult life: "I feel that they are trying to . . . pump in adult ways and methods . . .". A few felt that they had acquired some useful knowledge which may be relevant to future needs, and one said that he now realised any vocational training would not be forthcoming until he reached fifth or sixth form.

In reviewing the year as a whole, four-fifths of the statements were generally favourable, the others expressing disappointment. Although there is an overall sense of satisfaction with the year, the tone of the writing is guarded and rather low-key:

"My first year was quite enjoyable and I learnt a lot about new subjects".

"It has not been spectacular but I have rather enjoyed it".

"I think most of my experiences were favourable".

"I thought my first year as alright".

"There were lots of things I thought would be fun at the beginning of the year but as I advanced through the year I was disappointed".

There is no heady sense of high expectations being met, but a measured, serious minded judgement that things were fairly good. The quality and tone of response is one of sobriety and affirmation of solid values, rather than an expression of unconventional or security-disdaining creative personalities, which is still the prevalent paradigm. The present investigation, therefore, is more in line with Bachtold's (1974) survey of "high creative" adolescents as rather timorous, work-oriented, eager for approval and largely conventional.

Finally, one student's second essay is presented in full so that the flavour of the original responses may be appreciated. The response is atypical of the others in that it is longer and more articulate than most. But it is typical in some of its concerns: in its optimism and sense of coping, in the student's drive to be at work on something in which he is interested, in its impatience with students who do not want to work and with teachers who have no proper professionalism. At the same time as there is a condemnation of the teacher who does not discipline the class adequately, there is a delight in democratic procedures of discussing the work and in being in an "open" classroom, a situation in which most of the subjects of this study did not find themselves. The seriousness of purpose evidenced in this reply seems to be characteristic of our high scorers on the Torrance Tests; perhaps the two do correlate highly, since the Torrance Tests are quite demanding of the concentration of a sixth grader.

My First Year At Secondary School

I think I experienced a great deal of change when I first started school this year from the type of routine I experienced in primary school. I think most of my experiences were favourable.

The main thing, which I feel impressed me most, was the comparative freedom of work, and the teacher-student relationship. I also feel that this is especially important in Secondary school, in our school especially, the numbers in each class are rather low, I think this is a good idea, because it gives the teacher an opportunity to have a closer relationship between the student. This is especially important because if the student is having troubles, the teacher can help him personally whereas, when there is a large class the teacher cannot afford to devote their attention to one particular student.

Also in our school we have what is known as open class. This is a session in which a student can work on their own topic undisturbed. I feel that this is an extremely good idea, because it gives the student time to work on something that he is interested in, and he can research into the topic any way he likes.

I also like the way in which our subjects were chosen (electives as we call them). Each student had a time table and they were given a list of

different electives that were available at that time. And the electives were changed every six weeks so as the students wouldn't get fed up with the same thing. But the only flaw I found in this system was that a student was made to choose a minimum of three electives. Students who wanted to miss out on work could easily do so. And if there was a popular elective and the limit of students was exceeded, each student was given a number and a person picked the number of students over the limit, and they were dropped from the elective.

I also found that teachers tended to be a little too lenient, often when a teacher enters a class it took them half of the session to establish any order in the class, and I feel that this was due to the teacher and their failure to establish any discipline earlier on in the year. But generally, the discipline problem is not that bad.

I feel quite satisfied with my work this year, and it has turned out very much how I thought it would. I think I have covered a wide range of interesting topics this year, and I feel that we could have gained an even better understanding of the topics had more homework been set.

I feel that this year has lived up to my expectations and I also was impressed by the way the subjects were presented. Instead of the teacher writing everything on the board, the lesson was discussed so that everyone knew what the lesson was about. I honestly think that this is a much better way of taking a lesson.

I also feel that teachers don't always know the subject which they are teaching well and I feel that a teacher should know the subject which they are teaching.

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