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Talent Beyond Words: Unveiling Spatial, Expressive, Kinesthetic, and Musical Talent in Young Children

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Abstract

Talent Beyond Words was developed to identify and serve children with potential talent in the performing arts, especially dance and percussion music. Participants in the program included elementary-aged students attending two inner city schools. All pupils at targeted grade levels received instruction over several weeks in order to provide rich opportunities for dynamic assessment by teams of professional artists, arts educators, and specially trained teachers from participating sites. Students identified as a result of the audition processes took part in demanding after school curricula over the course of 3 years. The students' proficiency levels in their respective performing arts were impressive, as was the esteem they gained from teachers, classmates, parents, and from their own disciplined efforts.

Introduction

The fourth floor of PS 130 is unseasonably hot, and bright sunlight pours in from old-fashioned auditorium windows. Fourteen sixth graders who form the Talent Beyond Words (TBW) jazz percussion group have been practicing for over an hour. There are no signs of restlessness or boredom. Complete concentration and nervous excitement will carry them through two more hours of a demanding rehearsal agenda.

Interspersed among the students are adult performers from the New School for Social Research. David Pleasant, professional musician and conductor of the TBW group, ensures that his instrumentalists provide rhythmic support for other group members and coaxes them to personalize the music with improvisation. Several youngsters with prodigious musical talent have emerged from this mélange of ages, talents, and instruments. Equally as important, the entire student ensemble has been provided with the rare opportunity to exercise disciplined study and practice in a valuable cultural endeavor.

Program Description

Background of the Project

The nonprofit organization that sponsored and created the TBW project has been offering arts programs to adults and children for the past 14 years. The offices and studios, currently housed in the former High School of Performing Arts building immortalized by "Fame," offers classes, consultations, and professional development to individuals, corporations, and schools. The staff for this program consists of arts administrators, pro-

fessional dancers, musicians, and other performing artists who have a special interest in sharing their talents and skills.

The staff and administration of ArtsConnection, led by Steve Tennen and Barry Oreck, developed and modified an identification process for artistic talent ripe for testing in the most challenging of educational environments. In cooperation with PS 130 and PS 27 in Brooklyn, New York's Community School District 15, and with educational consultants Susan Baum, Edith DeChiara, and Jane Remer, Oreck developed TBW supported by a United States Department of Education Javits Grant. Dance and music were the performing arts selected for the project because those areas are usually absent from the skill repertoire of regular classroom teachers and because they matched well with the expertise available at ArtsConnection.

The TBW plan was designed "to help build a nationwide capability in elementary and secondary schools to identify students who are potentially artistically gifted and talented in dance and music, and to meet their underserved educational needs" (Oreck, 1993, p. 2), especially in underrepresented populations. A second goal was to provide third and fourth graders with services related to musical arts and dance arts. Third and fourth grades were selected as the intervention point for the Javits project for the following reasons: (a) the experience would prepare the students to compete successfully for places in special secondary arts programs; (b) rigorous music and dance performance training traditionally begins at these early ages; (c) the stigma associated with boys' involvement with dance would not yet be overwhelming; and (d) music and dance skills would help develop coordination and poise in children entering adolescence. PS 130 and PS 27 offered a large population with special educational needs, including bilingual and low-income students, that could test TBW identification procedures and program design.

The specific objectives designed to achieve the goals of TBW included:

- preparing all children in Grades 3 through 5 for participation in the talent identification and audition process by providing extended exposure to music or dance art forms;
- collecting and contributing empirical evidence to the growing body of knowledge about the identification, selection, and education of the artistically gifted by expanding upon the Gardner, Renzulli, and other models, including instruments and techniques developed by ArtsConnection;
- arriving at new, functional, and operational definitions

of giftedness and talent in dance and music useful to educators as well as experts;

- providing artistically talented students with in depth opportunities to work with professionals in the field.

The young performers that stood before us on the stage had been judged by a team that included their classroom teachers, professional artists, and arts educators at the beginning of the TBW project (3 years earlier) to have untrained talent for musical performance. The creative force emitted from the performers and spilling off the small stage energized the entire auditorium. The data collected for the present report helped explain the magic that engaged our senses.

The Experimental School Sites

The experimental schools are located in two Brooklyn, New York, neighborhoods. PS 130 has a diverse socioeconomic population of students including students requiring bilingual services. The students are mainly from the Spanish- and French-speaking Caribbean and from the former Soviet Union. During the first year of the grant project (1990), 201 students were included in the music audition process. The core talent group selected from these two grades included 45 students: 18 Black, 16 Latino/a, and 11 White. Among these 45 were 3 special education students. Slightly more boys than girls were identified for services.

PS 27 is located in a much lower income neighborhood than the other experimental site. The student body tends to come from local public housing projects, and is less socioeconomically and ethnically diverse. From the 195 students in the third and fourth grades in 1990, 51 were chosen as the core group for dance instruction. Twenty-nine of the core group members were Black, 21 Latino/a, and 1 White. Three were also from special education classes. The percentage of students identified for dance services favored girls.

The Identification Model

The identification model was derived from the work of Gardner, Renzulli, and ongoing research conducted by the TBW team. Gardner provided the conceptual framework for recognizing music, kinesthetics, and spatial reasoning as full-fledged areas of human intelligence worthy of encouragement in school children. Gardner's multiple intelligence theory (1983) supports the notion of individual talent that can be developed in young children in each of those areas.

Renzulli's three-ring conception of giftedness (1986) provided a rationale for the work derived empirically by the TBW research. Above average intelligence from the Renzulli three-ring concept was modified to represent *physical and cognitive skills* in music and dance. *Motivation* was operationalized as persistence and was particularly noticeable if a child remained actively enthusiastic beyond the first three to four audition sessions, when the novelty of breaking school routine might be exhausted. *Creativity* was translated into individual expression and cooperative problem solving in music or dance. The specific criteria adapted from the three ring model are summarized below:

Figure 1
Talent Identification Criteria for Dance and Music
 From Baum, Owen, & Oreck (1993).
 Adapted by permission.

| Dance | Music |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| SKILLS | |
| physical control | rhythm |
| coordination and agility | perception of sound |
| spatial awareness | coordination |
| observation and recall | |
| rhythm | |
| MOTIVATION | |
| ability to focus | enthusiasm |
| perseverance | ability to focus |
| | perseverance |
| CREATIVITY | |
| expressiveness | expressiveness |
| movement qualities | composition and improvisation |
| improvisation | |

Process of Identification

Through a series of workshops held during summers, week ends, after school, and at lunchtime, teachers were trained by professional artists and art educators to serve as judges of dance or music auditions. All children in the third and fourth grades at the two schools were provided with seven lessons based on essential skills in dance or music taught by professionals in varied ethnic contexts and artistic styles. The objectives of this extended audition process were to expose all students to the art forms' initial skills and to provide a series of informed practice sessions from which student responses could be categorized according to mastery of the criteria listed in Figure 1. Each week, each student was rated on his or her response to the lesson, so that each student was given seven trials in seven contexts to demonstrate his or her potential. The classroom teachers and TBW personnel associated with each school site served as judges over the course of the seven sessions, and visiting experts ensured that ratings were unbiased by earlier student auditions.

How TBW Fits into the Existing Paradigm for Educating Artistically Talented Children

A coherent program of instruction in the arts is one that addresses "the issue of general learning essential for all students and special learning for particular students who choose them" (Reimer, 1992, p. 45). There is a way of thinking and knowing unavailable except by being (or acting as) an artist. All students need to share this cognition for the sake of knowing what it uniquely allows one to know. . . . The special learning segment of the arts curriculum is, on the other hand, essentially selective and intensive (Reimer, 1992, pp. 46-47)

Two levels of art programs are needed in the schools: one for all children and one serving the artistically talented (Wakefield, 1992). Yet most elementary schools choose to spend whatever limited resources are available responding to the first level by offering minimal exposure to selected art forms to all students, leaving the development of the artistically talented to secondary schools or families utilizing outside resources. Although expertise in some disciplines (e.g., dance, music) must begin at an early age, public programs for artistically talented students at the elementary level are virtually nonexistent, leaving two critical gaps in artistic/aesthetic education in the public domain.

Finite time and resources, coupled with course offerings limited to the traditionally Western European fine arts, has prompted many community-based organizations to collaborate with schools in providing experiences in the "heritage arts" or other popular art forms (Mitchell, Wolf, & Philip, 1993). The formats of these programs, however, tend to be (a) one-time exposure of a cultural art form to an entire student body (assemblies), (b) integration of the arts into the regular classroom curriculum through a thematic approach (Beckwith, Garfield, Holley, Jones, & Porter, 1992), or (c) artists-in-residence type enrichment (including heritage artists) offered at the secondary level (Mitchell et al., 1993). Following the elimination of arts education positions in many schools (especially in city systems), a program such as TBW that provides all three approaches at the elementary level is unique. Differing slightly from other exemplary arts-in-education programs (such as the Lincoln Center Institute and its sister programs), TBW emphasizes long term, in-depth curriculum modification for artistically talented students once they are identified.

The identification of artistically talented students has been historically problematic (Carroll, 1987; Kay, 1982). Assessment has been based on products or performance that depict developed skills, a procedure appropriate for secondary students who have the requisite interest and training (or, at least, practice). A method for assessing raw potential talent has not previously been available. TBW offers a novel approach in that its identification framework introduces a baseline of skills in a particular art form to all students. From this point, a set of criteria (not based on developed skills) is employed by a panel of experts to identify potential artistic talent in music or dance. Researchers in gifted education have suggested this type of identification procedure (Renzulli, 1986; Tannenbaum, 1983), especially with regard to the artistically talented, yet schools consistently identify students whose creative products reveal obvious past experience with the talent area (Mitchell et al., 1993). The TBW project has provided a model worthy of review, reflection, critical analysis, and further exploration, especially by those currently involved with national assessment standards for arts education.

Data Collection and Summary

The qualitative data that provide the basis for this report were collected from two on-site visitations, a review of pro-

gram documents, and the draft evaluation document submitted by the external evaluator of the grant. The on-site visits included opportunities for observation as well as interviews with teaching faculty, guidance counselors, parents, administrators, and students directly involved with the program at PS 130 and PS 27, and with Barry Oreck, the TBW co-director.

The interview questions were designed to elicit an overall context for viewing program components. Teachers and counselors learned from professional artists and art educators how to conduct an audition and were extremely enthusiastic about acquiring this new evaluation skill. They were particularly comfortable with a process that gave every child an opportunity to be identified. The parents of TBW identified students described the new poise and confidence demonstrated by their children and their renewed interest in school attendance. The administrators were delighted with the excellent public relations gained by their schools and the pride of the entire student body in the accomplishments of their talented classmates. Students voiced a feeling of mastery acquired from working as respected peers with adult performers. Finally, the director expressed his satisfaction in establishing and testing a long-dreamed-of educational project.

Programmatic Outcomes

Four outcomes of the program were identified by TBW staff and validated both by grant-funded evaluators and by the present observers:

Established a model process to identify youngsters with potential talent for dance and music. The identification method designed for the TBW project has been adopted and used successfully by the staff of two public schools in collaboration with professional artists and arts educators. The staff expressed confidence that students selected using this process benefited from the rigorous training component of the program based on increased school attendance, enthusiasm for the arts, and invitations to perform for a wide array of public audiences. The process is inclusive, in that every third- and fourth-grade child in each school was auditioned and given every opportunity to demonstrate musical or dance talent. The screening process extended over a 7-week period and included various judges, further ensuring equal opportunity of discovery.

An integral part of the assessment method was the participation of classroom teachers. Mean interreliability estimates among the professional artists for student audition ratings were .79 for music and .81 for dance. After 6 weeks of staff development, including observation, and extensive discussion and guidance on the part of professional musicians and dancers, interrater reliability of student audition ratings between teachers and professional experts was .63 in music and .71 in dance (Oreck, 1993).

Expanded classroom teachers' ability to see a wider range of talents among their students and to value the importance of full integration of the arts into elementary education. Teachers are traditionally focused on the cognitive

talents of their students, particularly in terms of mastering the basic skills of reading and mathematics. In the two schools combined, 62% of the identified students were reading below the 50th percentile; 26% were reading below the 25th percentile. At PS 27, 82% were below the 50th percentile, and 38% were below the 25th percentile. In mathematics, the combined mean scores for identified students in both schools was 34% below grade level, with 6% in the lowest quartile.

Teachers reported that before TBW they were inclined to see most of their students as having learning difficulties. However, witnessing the replication of complicated dance patterns after a single demonstration revealed to these teachers the children's previously hidden capacity for memory and sequencing. Grace and poise replaced teachers' impressions of lack of control and restlessness. According to the participating teachers, although there were no direct effects on academic outcomes, classroom ambience changed with the new respect accorded to core group students by teachers and peers. For example, one fourth grade teacher stated: "This program gave them a purpose. They began to have that 'I belong-type gleaming.' If they can feel good about themselves, they can do anything." Another teacher at PS 27 who served as program director expressed delight in observing children change from "poorly disciplined fighters with low self-esteem, to ladies and gentlemen in the dance context."

Reflecting their inadequate preparation for arts instruction, teachers stated that before the onset of TBW they infrequently used the principles and skills derived from those disciplines in the classroom. Because of their growth in confidence as well as training in the arts, these classroom teachers felt comfortable integrating the arts to some degree into the school day for all of their students. One special education teacher, for example, described how creative movement now helps her students move in an orderly fashion through the halls.

Integrate parents into the process of nurturing and identifying talent. As reported by school staff, parents were rarely involved in school activities prior to the arrival of the TBW project. By the end of the third year, parents were far more visible in the school—assisting at rehearsal, attending performances, participating in parent workshops, and offering support to one another.

Provide an opportunity to experience disciplined and rigorous effort toward accomplishing a valuable cultural goal. Most regular elementary school programs focus inordinate energy on basic skills. Because traditional gifted programs tend to serve students who readily master basic academic skills, those programs often provide exposure to topics beyond the regular curriculum. Opportunities for multiple year immersion in a discipline are rarely offered (Subotnik, Kassan, Summers, & Wasser, 1993). The experience of mastering the first hurdles of physical awkwardness and new vocabulary require long hours of concentrated effort. Only a small minority of children are involved in such endeavors, either in sports or in classical music, and, typically, such endeavors are arranged by parents.

The TBW project integrated hard work with musical and dance talent, resulting in a powerful experience for participating students within and beyond the confines of the school.

Areas for Further Exploration

Interviews with parents, students, administrators, support personnel, and teachers at PS 27 and PS 130 revealed two general attitudes that remain essential to further work in gifted education. First and foremost, there was little sense of elitism associated with the TBW weekly pull-out program of advanced study or with the participants in the core group. This model provided exposure to basic artistic skills for all students, and selected from that experience students for intensive talent development. The reduced perception of elitism may have been enhanced by the program's focus on the arts rather than on academics. Furthermore, the general public tends to find it far more palatable to support specific talent rather than global intellectual giftedness. The question remains: Would the general perception of appropriate education for academically gifted students be supported if programs paralleled the TBW method by addressing specific abilities in mathematics, science, and humanities? In a climate in which the national trend is to eliminate academic programs, this question is worthy of exploration.

The second perception that prevailed throughout our interviews is one of intense commitment to the basic importance of art in the school curriculum. One homeless child had been identified for the core group. Although the daily life of her parent was preoccupied with basic survival, the mother saw to it that her child participated in the extended rehearsal hours and performances that were required in this program. The pride felt by the entire family during a performance warranted the extra effort.

Another intriguing discovery was reported by Barry Oreck in the course of discussion about the identification process. He noted that the TBW staff ascertained that children who came into the program with strengths in the creativity criteria could rather easily be taught to meet the skill criteria. On the other hand, those children who came in meeting the skill criteria had far more difficulty developing their creativity.

David Pleasant, professional musician and music instructor for the TBW project, indicated that all the students were challenged by expressing themselves in the arts. However, in the course of developing their expertise, students varied as to when and how much challenge they were interested in pursuing. Integral to his teaching style, Pleasant provided options so that choosing a more difficult task was left up to the motivation of the students. When a student requested a challenge, it was provided. These observations are supported in research on the nature of expertise in the arts (Kay, in press) and in research indicating that the organization of instruction for high-ability students must involve an elevated level of discovery oriented structure in the learning environment (Snow, 1993).

The 3-hour rehearsal is over. It is May 13th, and the school

year is coming to an end, particularly for sixth graders in a K-6 school. The next day, the percussion jazz ensemble from PS 130 will perform masterfully at Bryant Park. A large and noisy lunchtime crowd of office workers and managers will collect around the bandshell to enjoy and marvel over the talents of the mixed aged musical group. The musicians still bask in the acclaim they have already received at the Inaugural celebration of President Clinton. All the ensemble members have been invited to study with professional musicians at the New School for Social Research on weekends during the next academic year. One boy has joined the Disney World orchestra, and three girls and three boys will be touring with David Pleasant as part of his professional group. The future seems ripe with possibilities.

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