

3-31-1984

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Recommended Citation

Galdon, S.J. (1984) "The Fifth World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*: Vol. 32: No. 1, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13185/2244-1638.1531>

Available at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/phstudies/vol32/iss1/6>

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philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

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Philippine Studies vol. 32, no. 1 (1984) 107–111

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Notes and Comments

The Fifth World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children

JOSEPH A. GALDON, S. J.

Several hundred experts from all over the world gathered at the Manila Hotel, 2-6 August 1983, for the Fifth World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children, sponsored by the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children, under the auspices of the Reading Education Foundation of the Philippines and in cooperation with the Philippine Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports. As is often the case in such World Conferences, there was a bewildering array of topics. In addition to the plenary sessions, there were over one hundred papers presented in the workshops. There were experts from a number of disciplines – education, psychology, mathematics, computer science, political and social sciences, humanities, medicine, law, as well as the arts, cinema, sports, business and industry, parent groups and government – indicating the vast array of expertise brought to bear in the modern world on the problems of gifted and talented children. The convention was efficiently managed by Dr. Aurora Roldan of the Reading Education Foundation of the Philippines, who was elected to the Executive Committee of the World Council of Gifted and Talented Children during the convention.

THIRD WORLD PROBLEMS

It was inevitable, given the venue of the conference and the mixture of delegates from both developed and developing countries, that the social problems of education for the gifted emerged early in the conference and continued to dominate much of the

discussions, if not the papers that were presented. Dr. James J. Gallagher had hinted at the problems in his keynote address at the opening session, and Dr. Leticia Ramos-Shahani had stressed the differences in the role of the gifted in the developed and developing countries. Speaking of the gifted in the Third World Nations, she said: "Where will their lives be spent? Toward what purpose and in what cultural context will their talents be used? . . . When their gifts have been developed, are they prepared to make the act of giving a special part of their having what has been given?" In the general discussion during the plenary sessions of the first afternoon, the question was asked explicitly by a Philippine participant: "Why train the gifted and spend so much on their education when so many children are not even in school?"

The problem of elitism emerged in various other discussions during the conference. One Canadian delegate, with a touch of humor, summarized the criticism as: "Teach the best and shoot the rest." But under the humor was a critical point, to which, it must be confessed, the response of the delegates was disappointing. Most of the participants agreed that the gifted "must be exposed to a different curriculum that satisfies the canons of intellectual challenge, emotional stability and moral responsibility." As Dr. Juliana Gensley of the American National Association for Gifted Children said: "To get the best for our society, we should nurture our gifted."

Standing almost alone in opposition was the paper of Mrs. A.S. Zachariassen of Denmark, where educational policy is against programs for elite groups, such as the gifted, although talent in art, music, dance and sports is recognized and supported. Instead Denmark has established, besides the regular educational institutions, programs in special schools for *all* Denmark's youth and adults to develop their skills. It is felt that labelling and segregation of the gifted may arouse negative feelings and discouragement among the common majority, and that it may hinder the personality development, human and moral attitudes, inner harmony and character of the gifted themselves. The arguments of Mrs. Zachariassen are a good summary of those proposed a number of years ago by E. Paul Torrance (*Gifted Children In the Classroom* [New York: Macmillan, 1965], pp. 19-22) and others.

The most disturbing arguments for segregation of the gifted were outlined in the paper of Dr. Eliezer Shmueli, the Director

General of the Ministry of Education and Culture of Israel. Dr. Shmueli is a gifted and talented speaker and he made a telling case for the demands of national unity in education. Screening tests in Israel have indicated that 8 percent of the children of Afro-Asian-Jewish background are gifted, while 40-45 percent of the children of Western-Jewish background are gifted. The main reason for the discrepancy, Dr. Shmueli indicated, was due to what he called "non functioning families" among the poorer, lower class Afro-Asian-Jewish families. Because of the pragmatic need of leaders from the Asian-Oriental Jewish community, the gifted children are assigned to boarding schools on the secondary level. Some 30 percent of all Israeli high school students are in boarding schools of this nature, where parents are allowed to visit once a month and a "house mother" is created to serve as a mother figure for the adolescents. Although Dr. Shmueli's stress on the family indicated his awareness of the problems in this system, not a single question or comment from the floor challenged the Israeli system and its choice of priorities — education of the gifted and national development over the family.

COUNTRY REPORTS

The address of Dr. A. Harry Passow, of Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, was entitled "A Universal View of Gifted and Talented Programs." It was an excellent survey of world programs for the gifted, highlighting similarities and differences between developed and developing countries as based on an international questionnaire and a review of current literature. One of the most interesting questions Dr. Passow raised, in the light of Dr. Shmueli's comments on Israeli education of the gifted and the numerous comments on elitism throughout the conference, was whether education for the gifted was a political or an educational issue.

After listening to Dr. Passow's international survey, an energetic conference participant would have been able to make a quick survey of education for the gifted child throughout the world by attending a number of workshops that were actually country reports on the state of education of the gifted child. There were papers on South Korea, the Republic of China, the United Kingdom, the United States, Indonesia, Brazil, Mexico, Bulgaria, Canada, Denmark, Polynesia, Australia, South Africa, India and Germany.

THE GIFTED CHILD IN THE PHILIPPINES

Since about half the delegates to the Conference were local participants, a good number of the papers were addressed to local Philippine programs for the gifted child. Although there were glittering exceptions like the Cultural Center of the Philippines programs for the artistically gifted (relatively few) and some interesting papers on programs at the University of the Philippines, De la Salle, Ateneo, the Maria Montessori Cooperative School, and some private programs, the picture of Philippine education for the gifted presented at the Conference was rather dismal.

The two major papers on Philippine education for the gifted child presented at the conference were long on plans and short on implementation. The Honorable Sylvia Montes, Minister of Social Services and Development of the Philippines, delivered a paper entitled: "The Gifted and Talented Filipino Child – A Major Concern of Decade of the Filipino Child." In this paper Minister Montes summarized the aspirations of the Philippine Government at the beginning of the Decade of the Filipino Child in 1977 and indicated the structures erected by the Council for the Welfare of Children to care for the Filipino gifted and talented child, including its plans for every city and municipality to have a structure for identifying the high achievers from whom the gifted and talented children will emerge. But there was little data to support the aspirations, and there seems to have been little progress in the six years since 1977.

The second paper, by Dr. Minda C. Sutaria, Director of the Bureau of Elementary Education of the Philippines, entitled "Gifted Education in Philippine Schools," was described as a status report on gifted education in Philippine schools, an outline of the goals and objectives, and a scenario for the year 2000. Dr. Sutaria's title was deceptive, for her paper dealt only with gifted education in the public school system and ignored the provisions for gifted education in the private schools where the only significant efforts towards education of the gifted are being made. The picture of education for the gifted in the public school system was rather bleak. Dr. Sutaria reported only four public schools for the gifted on the secondary level, all in the Manila area – Philippine, Manila and Quezon City Science High Schools and the Philippine High School for the Arts. Only 20,493 stu-

dents, .18 percent of the public school population at the elementary and secondary levels are enrolled in classes for the gifted/fast learners. She quoted a survey of exceptional school children covering 907,094 students in 1,024 elementary and secondary schools in 118 school divisions that indicated approximately 4.381 percent of the Philippine population in *schools* as gifted or fast learners. If, as Dr. Sutaria's data indicates, 4.381 percent of public school children are gifted and only 18 percent of them are in classes for the gifted, one can easily draw the conclusion that approximately only 4 percent of Philippine gifted school children are being cared for in the public schools. Dr. Sutaria indicated the problems – financial support, lack of trained personnel, lack of incentives for teachers, absence of a strong non-government organization which can influence government provisions for the gifted, and/or supplement government inaction. It is probably true that Dr. Sutaria's report revealed an unnecessarily grim picture, since it was concerned with public schools only and ignored the significant contributions being made by the private schools to the education of the gifted. But at least the Philippine government deserves low marks for its concern with the gifted child.

CONCLUSION

The Philippine situation illustrates the problem that kept emerging throughout the Fifth World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children. In international conferences of this nature, delegates from developed and developing countries are addressing themselves to two completely different contexts. The contrast is made even more obvious when the conference is held in a developing nation. Programs for the gifted in First World countries are numerous, creative and sophisticated, while programs in Third World countries, which are mainly concerned with survival education, are largely insignificant window-dressing. Third World countries, like the Philippines, with limited financial resources and personnel, must make a difficult choice. They must commit all their resources to mass education, or they must divert significant funds and resources to the educational elite, who are the future leaders of the nation. Present policy in the Philippines is not clear, and as a result, both segments of the school population suffer.