

The Johns Hopkins program for verbally gifted youth

William Durden

To cite this article: William Durden (1979) The Johns Hopkins program for verbally gifted youth, *Roeper Review*, 2:3, 34-37, DOI: [10.1080/02783198009552460](https://doi.org/10.1080/02783198009552460)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02783198009552460>



Published online: 06 Jun 2012.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 6



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 3 View citing articles [↗](#)

Gifted Programs

The Johns Hopkins Program for Verbally Gifted Youth

William Durden

Responsible approaches to the education of our nation's verbally gifted youth have long been needed to provide challenges comparable to those already offered to mathematically gifted youth. The ultimate consequences of this negligence have now become an issue of national concern. Magazines, newspapers, and professional educational journals record the rapid decline in the effective use of verbal skills in a majority of our nation's youth. A. Bartlett Giamatti, President of Yale University, speaking of proficiency in standard written English, states that "today's college students — the former grammar and high school students of the late 1960s and early '70s — have lost touch with language . . ." Giamatti attributes their inability to handle the English language, particularly as it is written, to the "sentimentality" of the sixties which resulted in the stressing of "personal development" rather than achievement because "creativity" was considered the highest goal and often completely divorced from one of its essential components: discipline. Former Senator William Fulbright recently cited America's equally poor track record in foreign languages: "Our linguistic and cultural myopia and the casualness with which we take cognizance — when we do — of the developed tastes, mannerisms, mores, and languages of other countries, are losing us friends, business and respect in the world."²

What is symptomatic for the nation becomes more acute when one realizes that even our most verbally talented youth are often ignorant of the dimensions and complexities of the English language. The Johns Hopkins Program for Verbally Gifted Youth (PVGY), begun in the fall of 1978, was established in part to rectify this difficult state of affairs. First-year results are encouraging, and not only suggest possible strategies for the education of verbally gifted youth that could be duplicated across the country, but also point to the need for a radical revitalization of the humanities in America, beginning at the secondary level, if not earlier.

Formation of the program

Three Hopkins Departments participated in the formation of PVGY — The Writing Seminars, Classics and German. Since it was initially decided that the primary pedagogical



At the Summer Humanities Institute, Stephen Goldschmidt learns that good writing demands vigorous use of the eraser.

aim would be to offer verbally gifted youngsters of the junior high school level an opportunity to perfect their writing skills in a university framework, courses were selected which directly supported this orientation — Writing Skills, Latin and Greek in Current Use (Mythology in the second semester), and beginning German. Each course is equivalent to a course available to regular Johns Hopkins students, and the PVGY's students' performance is measured by college criteria. Since Latin and Greek in Current Use and German were also designed to help students develop their writing ability, classes were scheduled in such a way that participants in the program might elect Writing and one other course. Classes met throughout the academic year on Saturdays — Writing

Skills in the morning, and Latin and Greek in Current Use and German in the afternoon. Class periods were two hours in length. Because of the demand for Writing Skills, two sections were offered. To augment its academic-year program, PVGY conducted a special Summer Humanities Institute in cooperation with St. Paul's School, Brooklandville, Maryland. The purpose of this program is to whet the students' appetites for the humanities. The youths attended course work in either Writing Skills or Latin and Greek in Current Use. The academic schedule was complemented with recreational possibilities as well as literary readings by local poets and writers. The Summer Humanities Institute was five weeks in length, and met from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Selection process

In order to qualify for the program, students must participate in the Hopkins Talent Search, presently administered by the university's newly created Office of Talent Identification and Development (OTID),³ and demonstrate exceptional verbal ability on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), as well as high performance on the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE). These tests are taken during a student's seventh-grade year; a score of 430 or better on SAT-V and 35 or better on TSWE are the minimum acceptable criteria. The age range of those who are accepted is from 12 to 14. Students come from Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia. Next year New Jersey will be included in the search. Only participants identified via the Talent Search, or independently tested through the SAT examination are eligible for PVGY courses.

Justification of selection criterion

The choice of the Verbal SAT for a selection criterion is not arbitrary. Professor Julian C. Stanley, founder and director of the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth at Johns Hopkins (SMPY), strongly advocates the use of SAT testing for identifying those mathematically gifted youth who might successfully participate in fast-paced instruction, and further suggests that SAT-V could serve a similar function for verbally talented youngsters:

The SAT has improved the prediction of success in college. It has also had a decidedly democratizing effect on certain kinds of selective colleges that, before the advent of SAT, tended to rely heavily for their students on high-status private schools and the most academically prestigious public schools. However, relatively little use has been made of SAT below the 11th grade. *The value of the SAT for finding mathematically and verbally talented youths in junior high school or the lower grades of senior high had not been explored until recently.* The SAT is one of the best means that people working with gifted children have for determining which youths are indeed able enough to move ahead fast as well.⁴

Stanley identifies three characteristics required by the SAT which are most important for success in the type of educationally accelerative procedures that SMPY employs: the need for fast response, good reading ability, and efficient performance under stress. Good reading ability is, of course, also essential for success in courses designed for verbally gifted youngsters, but the need for fast response and efficient performance under stress is not so readily apparent. It has been our experience at PVGY, however, that in a fast-paced verbal environment these latter two abilities are essential for good performance. Although the conditions in which they are required differed from those in mathematical instruction, quick response and the ability to perform well under stress are needed in all fast-paced verbal instruction.

Students in PVGY must not only be capable of meeting a demanding assignment schedule, but also be able to deal with a variety of situations which are potentially stressful. An integral part of the writing skills course is, for example, the open critique of each student's writing by both peers and instructors, a situation which some may find stressful. For many youths, PVGY is the first educational setting in which their papers receive the least bit of criticism, and the shock can be devastating to students, who have not developed enough self-confidence to deal with anxiety.

Goals of PVGY

The Hopkins Program for Verbally Gifted Youth does *not* attempt to teach creativity. While imagination and individualized thought are indeed encouraged, PVGY's five main goals are practical. The program seeks to provide the individual student with a verbal environment stimulating enough to elicit innate verbal abilities; to give the verbally talented student a sound foundation in the mechanics of the English language; to nurture the development of all varieties of verbal talent; to give the verbally gifted child the opportunity to become familiar with a linguistic tradition through the treatment of etymology, mythology, foreign languages, and literatures; and to allow a qualified young student access to college-level coursework. These goals are not restricted merely to an audience of future writers and poets, but also appeal to any youth wishing to develop precision and accuracy in communicative skills for his or her personal and professional life.

Education philosophy of PVGY

The educational philosophy underlining these aims involves two factors — a grounding of instrumentation and nurturing of infrastructure. There is the conviction that verbal talent at an early age can be beneficially guided by a disciplined and systematic exposure to the basic tools of written communication. Gifted youths at the junior high level are given those fundamental instruments which when later complemented by maturity and experience, should enable them to use their native language with precision and confidence. Students are firmly encouraged to develop an expository style which is at once accurate and imaginative. Since such a style requires both a knowledge of the syntactical possibilities of English and a naturalness of diction that can only come from practice, students not only discuss grammar and stylistic options open to expository writers, but also develop a facility with the semantic, structural and rhetorical resources of the English language. Complementing this exposure to the intricacies of English is an introduction to basic library skills in a university setting (the Milton S. Eisenhower Library at Johns Hopkins). Through this procedure students learn to use a university research library.

The definition of infrastructure is essentially the bringing to bear of related disciplines upon the English language. The language is treated not as an insular subject, but rather as a complex of related disciplines all combining to inform the student of the tradition, limitations and possibilities of English. The course Latin and Greek in Current Use, for example, acquaints students with the Latin and Greek contributions to the English vocabulary. Students analyze Latin and Greek loan words in English texts from the 16th century to present-day American English. Since German shares a common heritage with English, the study of German makes the student of English more aware of the structured patterns in English and how they function.

Enrichment versus acceleration

PVGY maintains a middle position between enrichment and acceleration. It is at this juncture that the model developed to aid mathematically gifted youth (strongly advocating acceleration) proves insufficient for providing a working model for verbally gifted youth. The differences in orientation is in part explicable through the qualitatively different nature of verbal giftedness from mathematical giftedness, as well as by the two programs' distinctive relationships to their respective secondary-level curriculum.

A mathematically gifted student can achieve, by an essentially linear progression through various mathematical disciplines, a maximum professional proficiency without the necessity of personal maturity. Verbal giftedness, however, advanced through an essentially geometric progression in the humanities, is only brought to fruition when it can benefit from the lessons of life, experience, and maturity. Dr. Stanley underscores the need for maturity in some areas of verbal exploration in *The New York Times*



Jeannette Ford's calm expression would seem to show that she has mastered her assignment in Latin and Greek in Current Use.

(Gene Maeroff, May 22, 1979): "There may be subjects that these kids aren't ready for, regardless of how smart they are . . . They are young and self-centered and lack the kind of critical thinking needed in social sciences. Nor do they have the deep experience for subjects like philosophy; they just haven't lived and loved enough to empathize."

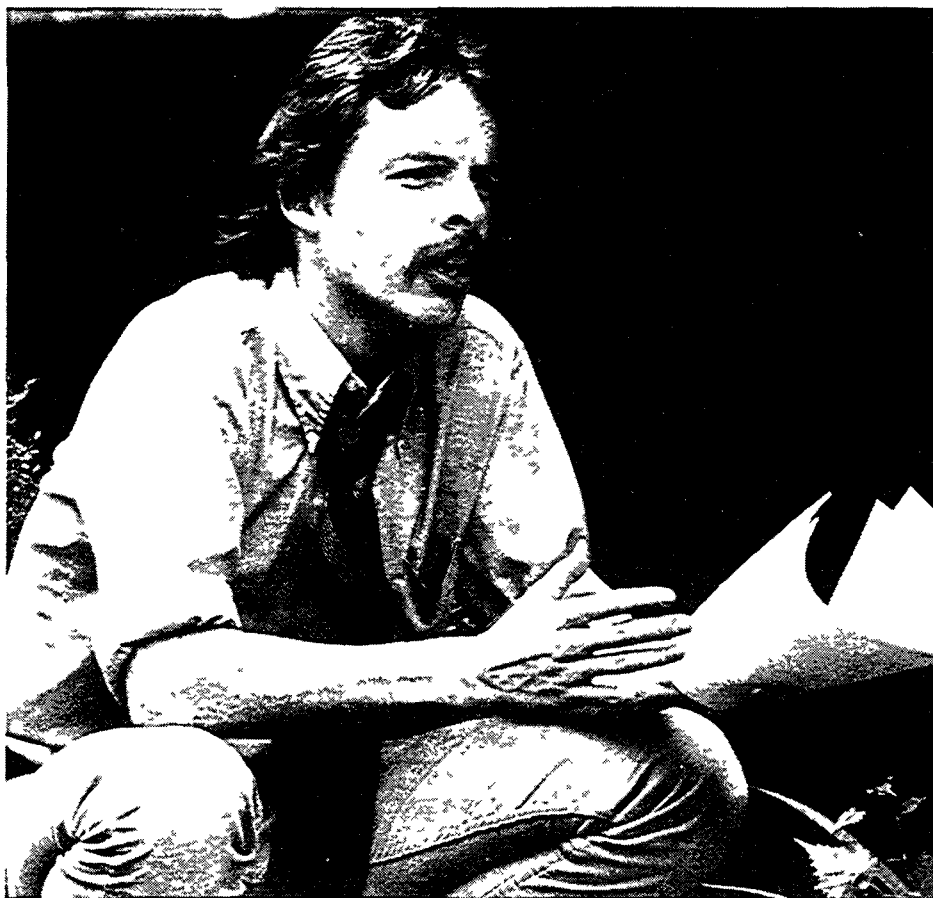
One should not conclude from these observations that attention to verbally gifted youth can only begin once they have achieved young adulthood. At PVGY, we have found that while verbally gifted youth do not work well in the framework of interpretative thinking, they are very receptive to college-level work rigorously stressing mechanics (such as writing skills) and linguistic formulas (such as foreign languages, English grammar and etymology). The introduction of a verbally gifted student to these more practical subjects at a young age prepares a rich foundation upon which to build their later experiences, and compensates for a marked neglect of this type of fundamental preparation in most school systems.

Naturally following from these comments on the differences between verbal and mathematical giftedness is the dissimilarity between SMPY's position towards their respective school curriculum and PVGY's stance. SMPY finds in most schools an adequate number of course offerings in mathematics. They maintain, however, that these courses often advance at a pace too slow for the student highly gifted in mathematics. PVGY, in contrast, discovers that many of the disciplines it treats are either lacking at the secondary level, for example, Latin and German, or, as in the case of writing, skills and grammar are introduced rigorously too late in verbally gifted students' intellectual development.

Testing and evaluation

To measure concretely the academic success or failure of the initial year of the Johns Hopkins Program for Verbally Gifted Youth (PVGY), students were given College Board Testing, when available, at the end of the second semester.

The twenty students in the two sections of Writing Skills were given the College Level Examination (CLEP) General Examination in English Composition (multiple choice) and an essay question designed by the instructors. The essays were subjectively scored by the instructors and were measured against the level expected of a Johns Hopkins sophomore student completing the Contemporary American Letters course — the Writing Seminar's basic writing/reading course required of all majors before they can continue to upper level coursework. Measured against a scale of 1-10 (10 the maximum), with 5 being a "competent" score, 12 of the 20 students scored above 5 (ranging from 6 to 8), 3 of the students scored below 5 (lowest 4 and 2 at 4.5), and 4 students scored 5. In the CLEP examination, scores ranged from a high of 647 to a low of 448. Of the 20 students, 6 scored between 448 and 500 (50th percentile of college sophomores taking test), 7 scored between 500 and 600 (86th percentile of college sophomores), and 7 scored between 601



MANNER OF TEACHING #1: Ben Reynolds uses an outdoor environment to concoct his blend of gifted pedagogy in the Writing Skills class.

and 647 (93rd percentile of college sophomores).

Students taking the German course were given the College Placement Test (CPT) in German Reading. Their preparation for this exam was merely the equivalent of the Hopkins course in Elementary German, tailored, however, to meet their intellectual flexibility and pace. The scores, computed to express College Board scores (200-800) were in most cases encouraging. Of the 8 students taking the test, 5 received scores of 430 or above (540, 530, 500, 470, 430). The remaining students obtained scores of 390, 370, and 280.

Since there exists no appropriate College Board testing for Latin and Greek in Current Use and Mythology, students were given examinations designed by the individual instructor and measured against the Hopkins' academic criteria. Nine students enrolled in the one-semester Latin and Greek in Current Use in September, 1978. The course and material are based on a one-year offering provided to matriculating freshmen at the University. Test results in December were 5 As, 3 Bs, and 1 C.

Students continuing into the second year of PVGY take the appropriate College Board Achievement Tests in December and the Advanced Placement Tests in May, 1980. In this way those students who achieve a sufficiently high score on these tests can begin accruing college credit at a significantly earlier age than they normally would. By spreading out the college experience in this manner,

students can save themselves and their parents a substantial amount of money, or at least reduce the impact of a four-year concentrated financial burden. College Board Testing in PVGY is complemented by a letter of evaluation addressed to the students and brought by them to an appropriate teacher or administrator in their local school or district. Although the courses at PVGY are at present non-credit, students can negotiate for credit at the high-school level.

Breakthroughs

The initial year of PVGY was essentially an experimentation stage in which the validity of the idea of such a program was tested. The experiment yielded positive results in a variety of ways. It revealed, first, that there is a pronounced need for greater attention to verbally gifted youth in America. PVGY has also taught us some of the things we must know to train teachers for this special kind of instruction.

The program has had another positive effect. Because of their good experience with 12- and 13-year-olds, the program's instructors, who normally would pursue successful college teaching careers have readjusted their career goals because of having realized the satisfaction which teaching gifted students at the secondary level can bring. Lastly, and perhaps most important, PVGY offers an opportunity to bridge the separation between the secondary and university experience. Serving as a free forum in which schools and

universities can discuss strategies for the continuous and systematic education of a youngster, PVGY can encourage the type of exchange needed to strengthen the total educational continuum.

Future tasks

PVGY's next step is a decisive one: to develop a comprehensive model which could be readily imitated. In order to accomplish this objective, PVGY must explore areas that have so far only been summarily treated. PVGY must first expand its curriculum by integrating into its program of offerings those courses which are presently absent in the secondary curriculum. The history of art, the history of music, the study of historical chronology, aesthetics, and the history of ideas, are subjects for immediate consideration. PVGY must also formalize its teacher training so that effective instructors of verbally gifted youth can be brought into the service of their intended audience. In addition, PVGY must consider the problem of advising verbally talented youngsters, for counselors of verbally gifted youth must not only be aware of all the educational possibilities open to these students, but also, be prepared to deal judiciously with any problem or conflict which might arise in the child's

schooling. Last, but not least, as the Hopkins' Program for Verbally Gifted Youth discovers the varieties of verbal talent through experience, it will have to scrutinize its admission criteria to be certain that they are most fitting.

Conclusion

In the fall of 1979, PVGY began its second year. While beginning courses in German, Writing Skills and Latin and Greek in Current Use were again offered, students chose advanced levels of German and Writing Skills, as well as a new addition on Latin language.

It is evident that PVGY has struck a responsive chord in the American educational scene. Thus far critical reaction around the country as well as internationally, has been overwhelmingly positive. There is obviously a willingness on behalf of many educators to commit themselves to rebuilding America's foundation in verbal skills. It is our hope that the Hopkins' Program for Verbally Gifted Youth will contribute a concrete model for this renewed effort, thereby not only aiding verbally talented students, but also providing standards for all students, for whom accurate communicative skills are essential.

NOTES

¹"The Writing Gap," *Yale Alumni Magazine*, January 1976, pp. 16-19.

²*Newsweek*, July 30, 1979

³Since 1971, the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY) at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, has been concerned with the identification, description, and facilitation of intellectual talent. The remarkable success of SMPY, under the direction of Professor Julian C. Stanley, led Johns Hopkins University President, Steven Muller, to create a new "Office of Talent Identification and Development" (OTID), functioning under William C. George's direction. While SMPY has been particularly interested in the areas of mathematics and the physical sciences, the new OTID includes verbal talent as well. In January, 1980, OTID conducted its first Talent Identification Project (TIP). OTID seeks to identify not only those students who reason well mathematically but also those with great verbal and/or general intellectual ability. TIP's search is confined to seventh-graders, or students of seventh-grade age in higher grades, who attend schools in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, or West Virginia. In addition, the student must have scored in the upper 3% of national age-grade norms on the total mathematical part, or on the total verbal part, or on the total composite score of an in-school test battery such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or the California Achievement Test.

⁴"The Predictive Value of the SAT for Brilliant Seventh- and Eighth-Graders," Julian C. Stanley, reprinted from *The College Board Review*, No. 106, Winter 1977-78.

Project THINK — Innovative Pilot Program for Gifted

Marlene Blair

Project THINK, (Tapping Heuristic Intelligence for New Knowledge), developed by School District No. 12, Adams County, Colorado, was one of thirteen federally funded government projects in Gifted/Talented education in the United States for 1978-79.

The Program utilizes the Gifted Extension Model developed by Carolyn Tennant, Coordinator of Gifted and Talented Programs/Staff Development Trainer for District No. 12.¹ The model includes, among other things, a unique combination of Renzulli's *Enrichment Triad Model* and a cognitive staff development training program.

Description of gifted extension model

The Gifted Extension Model describes how the regular program can be expanded for

gifted and talented students, and is designed to show how a gifted program can be different from the regular program in a number of areas. The various areas that compose a complete, balanced program for the gifted are grouped into four major sections: (1) *Content*, (2) *Process*, (3) *Output*, and (4) *Evaluation*. These sections are not separate and isolated, however, but interact in the learning process of gifted students.

Content

The *Content* section is divided into three parts: (1) knowledge, (2) skills, and (3) attitudes.

The knowledge part of the Regular Program Core should not be skipped for gifted students, as this might result in producing gaps in their basic knowledge acquisition.

They should have attained the major concepts in all subject areas through the thinking skills of forming concepts, differentiating between similar concepts, extending concepts, and making warranted generalizations. Gifted students usually grasp the basic concepts quickly and, therefore, the core knowledge can be telescoped or covered more rapidly. Time is available for knowledge expansion in one or more of the following ways: (1) subject area expansion, (2) supplementary subjects, and (3) activity orientation. A gifted program may be designed to include one or more of these methods for gaining additional knowledge.

"Subject area expansion" is when more input is given in any regular subject area. For example, a potential historian simply has to