

The Beginning of a New Educational System: *How Roeper Came to be a School for the Gifted*



The mission of The Roeper School is to educate and inspire gifted students to think as individuals and to engage as a community with compassion for each other and this world. While the focus on gifted students seems synonymous with a Roeper education, it was not until 1956 that the Roepers

first adopted this concentration.

From the founding of the school, the Roepers believed that a well-balanced emotional life was the basis for every other adjustment of life. In a 1940s brochure they pointed out the elements in their school that helped achieve this:

- creating and maintaining a basic emotional security in the child;
- providing an educational program that makes learning happy, constructive, and stimulating;
- including art and physical activity for a fuller expression of the total personality; and
- establishing a democratic environment to prepare them for a successful life as an individual and as a member of groups.

In the mid-1950s, George began following the growing interest in the country in gifted children. Articles began to appear like this 1956 one in *The New York Times* arguing that ...

... to help the gifted achieve their full potential, more facilities are needed for early identification; more guidance centers; more funds for research; more specialized teacher training; state legislation and Federal support enabling and encouraging more experimental classes; more community cooperation and understanding.

Parents spoke up as well, reporting the same problems as they share today. In a 1956 letter to the editor in *The New York Times*, parents talked about feeling lonely and lost, unable to find help to support the needs of their gifted children.

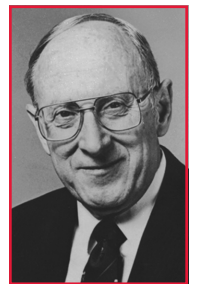
As George read more extensively about gifted children, his interest grew. Making the world a better place was a core motivation for George and he recognized that gifted children had unique abilities to contribute to that challenge. He and Annemarie also realized that a significant number of their students were gifted, and that they were particularly fascinating children.

"We always felt that what we wanted to do was serve those who needed help," said Annemarie in a 1993 interview. "Also, we just began to be very excited about these children who offered so much and who were so very verbal and were educating us."

In 1956, George and Annemarie formed the Gifted Child Project. The goal was to work out the best approach for educating gifted children, check its validity with research, and then share this with other school systems, in order to improve the education of gifted children everywhere.

George approached Dr. A. Harry Passow of Columbia University, one of the leading authorities on gifted child education. Harry, like George, shared a deep concern about equity in education. Passow agreed to bring a group of experts in gifted education to Michigan in June 1956 to write a curriculum for a gifted school.

The experts embraced the opportunity to apply their academic ideas to the real world. There weren't many opportunities to do so — George and Annemarie's school would be one of only two elementary schools in the country dedicated exclusively to gifted child education.



Dr. Harry Passow

At a gala dinner in June 1956 to launch the project, George spoke about their vision:

This day in a way marks the end of fifteen years of work which was devoted to the development of the potentialities in the child, regardless whether the child was especially gifted or talented. There were many gifted and talented ones among these children, but we never thought of them as a national resource. We thought it is fine if these children were able to produce their gifts for the personal benefit and personal enrichment.

Today we know we need these children. We have to go out and try to find them. There are more than 5000 children in the Metropolitan area of Detroit who are gifted and very superior children, who are capable of work three to four years ahead of their grade level. Many of them are not identified as gifted children at all, many do not get adequate education because of lack of provisions, some become maladjusted because they are bored and seek other outlets. We need these children today, and tomorrow we will not be able to do without them. It is for this reason that we depart from the policy of developing potentialities in general, and embark on the specific task of reaching and educating gifted children where we can find them, regardless of creed, race or socioeconomic status.... I hope that you can all say one day, "I witnessed the beginning of a new educational system which helped provide the Nation with indispensable talent."

The experts who came to the Gifted Child Institute, as the meeting chaired by Harry Passow came to be called, found that the Roepers' approach was consistent with their ideas of what gifted children needed. As Passow described it in a 1993 interview, "The curriculum was essentially what George and



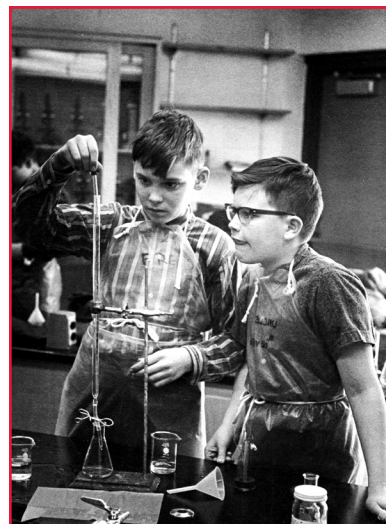
Annemarie believed in. We just put a little patina on it." The school was already providing intellectually stimulating classes with an emphasis on critical thinking; an interdisciplinary approach; a rich arts program; a keen understanding of child development and psychology; warm and respectful relationships between the adults and students; an international focus; and an integrated student body and faculty.

Just as an aside, because this is a question that always comes up, any student already in the school was allowed to stay after September

1956. All new students had to be gifted, but any current student was welcome to stay. Not surprisingly, given the appeal of the school to highly educated and progressive parents, 60% of the already-enrolled students tested as gifted. George was pleased to note that the school remained a strong community with no discernible factions among the students.

The fundamental philosophy of the school — to help children fulfill their potential — didn't change. As George said at the end of the first year of gifted child education,

I told parents already last year even before this project started operation that there would not be any radical changes. The philosophy of the school will remain the same. We still try to see in every child the human being first as we always did. Personality education and the emphasis on human values still has priority above



everything else because we know that also in gifted child education the adjustment to the realities of life itself is a greater determining factor for success than the talent or intelligence itself.

The psychological understanding of children, gaining insight of the motivation of their behavior is still paramount in our approach.

Over the years, though, their understanding of giftedness did change. The school's original definition of giftedness was based on IQ scores, and the members of the Institute organized their thinking around cognitive abilities. As described in the notes from the 1956 meeting,

(A)ttention was focused on the ability of gifted children to solve problems, to enter into experiences, to engage in deep and advanced thought, to study intensively specific problems, to generalize, to explore widely among divergent problems, to observe processes at work, and to produce creative results.

The expectation was that the students would learn skills in an accelerated way (learn to read to a high level, advance through math skills quickly), and they would move on at a young age to using those skills in complex learning.

As George and Annemarie worked with gifted children, they quickly realized that gifted children often do not learn skills quickly; that many are global thinkers who need to understand concepts before they can understand skills. George also became interested in creativity and its relationship to intelligence, and



how to identify the creative person. His dream was to develop a "CQ" — creativity quotient — test.

In particular, they became aware of the profoundly different emotional nature of gifted children. A striking sense of humor

was one of the first things they noted. In 1962, George described how the gifted child "likes to notice the bizarre, to express the absurd, joke about the nonsensical, describe the preposterous, and detect the paradoxical."

By 1982, in an article called "How the Gifted Cope with Their Emotions," Annemarie summarized their decades of observations:

The gifted child's emotions and intellect are different from those of other children his age; they are not ahead or advanced. And they can only be understood if they are examined as a unit, for giftedness cannot be defined in separate categories, such as intellectual giftedness, creative giftedness, or physical giftedness. These categories always act upon each other, although some may be more apparent in individuals than others. In short, giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and to transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences.

Given their original premise that "a well-adjusted personality is the basis for every adjustment," it made perfect sense that they recognized these emotional characteristics and made them the foundation of their understanding of giftedness and how to educate gifted children. After retiring from Roeper in 1980, Annemarie went

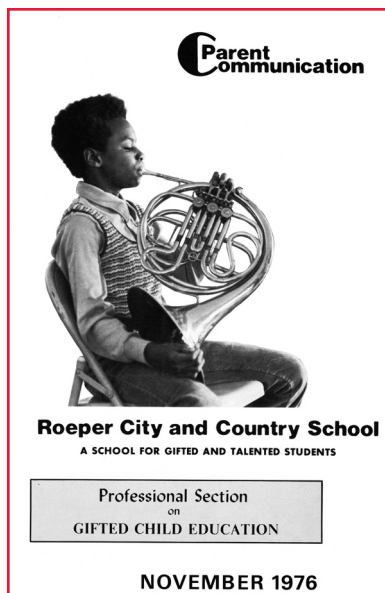


on to develop her own *Qualitative Assessment Method* as a way to recognize the emotional complexity that is at the core of a gifted child, in addition to the cognitive skills captured by IQ tests.

Annemarie's definition of giftedness became a standard in the field. In particular, it influenced the Columbus Group's concept of Asynchronous Development, first published in 1991:

Giftedness is Asynchronous Development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.

Another important contribution the Roepers made to the field was to establish a peer-reviewed journal of gifted education, the *Roeper Review*. The school's internal newsletter contained articles about gifted children as well as poetry and reports on field trips. Outside educators were so starved for practical information about gifted education that they began asking to be on the mailing list. In 1976, the school added a "Professional Section" to the newsletter to accommodate the interest, and



in 1978 spun the section off into an independent journal that is still published by the school today.

George's words from 1957 remain at the heart of the Roeper approach to gifted child education: "We still try to see in every child the human being first as we always did." Each individual is a whole, unique, and specific human being, and those who are gifted will have that quality with them throughout their lives. As Annemarie pointed out in 1980:

People don't stop being gifted when they graduate, they don't stop being gifted when they fall in love, when they pick a job, when they have children. They don't stop being gifted when they are confronted with the problems of the world, with the possibilities of war, or whether they will register for the draft. Whatever they are being confronted with, their giftedness is part of that confrontation.



One of the core tenets of the Roeper Philosophy is to be willing to allow children to participate in the shaping of their own destiny and to consciously prepare them for it. George and Annemarie's genius was to realize that, for gifted children, shaping their own

destiny and fulfilling their unique potential requires them to come to understand how their giftedness interacts with all the other intricate and individual pieces of their humanity. ♦