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Finding the Stars in a Multi-Colored Sky

WHEN TEACHERS WITNESS A YOUNG CHILD BENDING A PAPER CLIP INTO ODD SHAPES, refusing to take no for an answer, or pushing classmates into engaging in some questionable activity, they may well see signs of trouble that need to be suppressed. These are often the children who do not succeed in school. FPG senior scientist Mary Ruth Coleman wants teachers to consider another possibility—that this child is a natural scientist whose talents need to be encouraged.

Acting on the recommendations of FPG's survey on African American Children's School Success, Coleman has developed a program called U-STARS (which stands for Using Science Talents and Abilities to Recognize Students) designed to both identify and nurture the talents of children at a young age, especially those considered at-risk for school failure.

"Teachers tend to look at these kids with an at-risk mind set and ask, 'how can we discipline them?' " Coleman says. "But instead of discouraging this behavior, we want teachers to look at enrichment activities that take *advantage* of this curiosity, this tenacity and consider these kids 'at-potential.' The field that values these traits is science."

U-STARS has three components: an observation scale used to identify students with potential in science, a family intervention component designed to engender understanding and support from the students' families, and science and literature materials designed for use in elementary school classes. Coleman has designed these components so that any one component can be used independently from the others. "Replication of the entire project takes a high level of commitment by the entire school," she says. "Therefore, we've designed it so individual teachers can use just parts of it even if their school does not choose to adopt the model."

For the observation component, teachers are given 180 hours of preparation in how to recognize gifted behavior in children. U-STARS has developed an observation form through which teachers can note behaviors, such as "asks unusual, provocative questions" or "is able to lose self in something of interest" that indicate curiosity and creativity or strong interests.

The science and literature materials have been developed by U-STARS in a way that allows science to be incorporated into everyday literacy activities. Sherri Wells, a second grade teacher at Spring Hope Elementary School in Spring Hope, North Carolina, offers an example. "We just finished an animal module in

which we read a story about animals in winter and what habitats they need to survive,” Wells says. “I had the children cut out a picture of an animal from a magazine and come up with their own habitat—shelter, food.

“Children thrive on it,” Wells adds. “Those who may struggle with reading or paying attention enjoy the scientific thought process much more than having you sit there and read to them.”

Alice Freeman teaches first grade at Johnson Elementary School in Rocky Mount. She says U-STARS training gave her a new focus and excitement about science. “U-STARS was a great experience,” Freeman says. “I realized we didn’t reach all of our children by teaching just reading and math. When we did science, you’d see real excitement, particularly in some of the lower performing children.”

All U-STARS materials are tied to the standard course of study for grades K-3, as well as to national science standards and national literature standards. “Other approaches to identifying bright children who have been underrepresented have required teachers to add in pieces from outside the curriculum,” Coleman says. “That pulled students and teachers away from the core classes and took away precious teaching time.”

U-STARS evolved out of a project run in the mid-1990s with schools in two eastern North Carolina counties—Johnston and Northampton. The goal of this project was early identification of children with potential. Researchers developed the observation form and taught teachers how to do screening of young children.

Having laid the seed for the program, FPG then sought a grant to develop the science and literature model for teachers and a family support component. The project was to be run in three northeastern North Carolina counties (Nash-Rocky Mount, Edgecombe, and Northampton) that have high percentages of minorities. The first year of the project, Hurricane Floyd hit eastern North Carolina and destroyed or closed many of the schools. Despite this setback, 40 teachers received 180 hours of training, virtually all of whom have stayed with the project.

With a grant from the Jacob Javits Foundation, U-STARS is now being expanded nationwide. More than 35 school districts in North Carolina are officially signed onto the project. The State of Louisiana has committed to U-STARS, as have school districts in Colorado, and the cities of



Albuquerque and Baltimore. The grant provides for a random comparison of schools employing U-STARS with non-participating schools. The latter will be folded into the project after two years. These schools have committed release

time for their teachers and in-kind support for training.

“It’s a big commitment,” says Coleman. “The schools will help us with data collection across the district vis-à-vis opportunities and access to advanced learning for K-12 students.”

U-STARS PLUS, the latest version of the program, is developing a leadership cadre in participating school districts to help sustain the model. Teachers who are trained under the program can act (be hired) as consultants.

Coleman and colleagues have done some preliminary data collection validating the observation form. “Our observation of and teachers’ identification of talented kids was a one-to-one match,” Coleman says. “What teachers really like about the project is that it helps them relate to the students differently. The observation tool becomes a new set of lenses. The teachers might only do individual observations for three-to-six kids per class, but once they start, it changes the way they view all of their kids.”

And the program is spiking teacher interest as well. “I’ve been teaching for ten years and was getting tired of teaching the same-old same-old,” Wells says. “U-STARS was an opportunity for me to learn something new. I enjoy science and now, for the first time, I feel comfortable teaching it.”

“So many youngsters and teachers have lost their passion for learning,” says Susan Lamar, U-STARS board member and former director of Gifted Education programs at the Nash-Rocky Mount Schools. “Science is the hook for bringing the excitement back. Even children that might be discipline problems turn around and learn. These lessons enable their talents to shine.” |ed|

To Learn More
Project U-STARS
www.fpg.unc.edu/~ustars/

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From Different Worlds

The challenge to understand the diverse social environments of children

ETHNICITY, RACE, AND CULTURE continue to be among the most difficult and pressing issues we face as a society. This is true for several reasons. North Carolina, like many other states in the nation, is undergoing dramatic transformation as waves of immigrants are absorbed into communities which must accommodate the language, mores and behavioral patterns of the new arrivals. For native North Carolinians the difficulty of this challenge applies as much to the hordes of Yankees pouring in from the north as it does to Mexican immigrants from the south. These dramatic population shifts are coming just at a time when the black/white achievement gap and the stubbornly high poverty rates among African- and Native American children remind us how far we still must go to realize the promise of racial equality in education and employment.

The research projects described in this issue of *Early Developments* broaden our understanding of the problems we must confront to address the needs of diverse populations. This work is a testament to the importance of the ethnicity and culture to early child care and education.

FPG is making an important contribution in its positive focus on competence and finding solutions. A preponderance of national research involving ethnicity and culture gravitates toward the negative pole of risk and failure. Researchers at FPG have responded to the call to understand the conditions that contribute to the success, competence, and resilience of children of color and their families. Even more work is needed. In pursuing this line of research, we will likely realize that factors that contribute to competence in one group may not do the same for another group. Why? Because their life conditions and social histories differ. For example, the advantages high socio-economic status (SES) offers to whites for academic achievement do not accrue in equal measure to African Americans.

Pervasive economic inequities and continuing racial inequalities have influenced who attends college and in this way created an imbalance in the pool of teachers and scholars who are ethnic minorities. Two projects focus on increasing the number of African American and Latino teachers and scholars in the early childhood field and enhancing their skills in working with diverse populations. Another project demonstrates that cross ethnic prejudice and suspicion can be modified through person to person contact. Together they represent efforts to create school environments more responsive to ethnically diverse children by developing scholars and teachers who reflect the diversity of



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...we must not only understand more fully how economic, ethnic and cultural diversity gives rise to culturally diverse behaviors, beliefs, priorities and problem-solving preferences but also how to transform that knowledge into practices which reach across the economic and social divide.

the children and by creating a corps of educators who engage respectfully with those who are different.

Because families exercise extraordinary influence over development, the success of education and other social interventions may ultimately depend on how well such programs are articulated with and reinforced by socialization practices that occur in the family and neighborhood, as well as in schools or child care programs. *The Familial and Social Environments Study* which I lead explores the social context of a diverse group of children enrolled in public sponsored pre-kindergarten programs. This project points to several findings. Children of different ethnic and cultural groups are growing up in somewhat different worlds, developing somewhat distinct world views, aspirations and sense of their place in the world outside of their ethnic or racial communities. This is not only reflected in language, customs and mores. It permeates the very nature of family life and shapes day-to-day experiences which differ considerably across socio-economic, ethnic, racial, and cultural lines. Some children grow up in households with two biological parents and children; others in extended multi-generational households. Some children grow up in families with parents who have stable and satisfying employment which offers predictable wages, personal autonomy and flexible work schedules. Others live in homes where jobs are regimented, lack meaning and offer little security. Even these simple differences in household composition and work life have tremendous implications on how parents socialize, monitor and respond in children's lives. Some children have all of their needs met and many of their wants indulged. Others go to bed hungry, make do with second-hand clothing or toys and endure illness and injuries without appropriate medical care. Level of English proficiency, cultural beliefs, values, and problem-solving styles also influence the diversity of

children's experiences. This breach between those who are materially advantaged and those who suffer hardship, and between ethnic groups who have been marginalized and treated as dispensable and those who have occupied positions of

privilege in American society was first recognized by the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorder. These differences come to a head in school, where great effort and good will must be invoked to connect children who arrive from such different places and environments.

This work is important because of the challenge we face in reducing disparities that now exist in educational outcomes for children of color. Our ability to make the dream of educational equity a reality will rest in part on our ability to understand the child's social and familial environment and to apply that knowledge in building a bridge between school and to the child's world outside of the school. To be successful, we must not only understand more fully how economic, ethnic and cultural diversity gives rise to culturally diverse behaviors, beliefs, priorities and problem-solving preferences but also how to transform that knowledge into practices which reach across the economic and social divide.

The challenge we face is to understand the implications of these differences for the developmental needs of children and the educational goals we wish them to achieve. Ultimately, our challenge is not only to understand but also to respect, to value, and to work with this diversity. And if that was not difficult enough, there is one final test. Can we understand and embrace diversity without invoking ethnocentrism, inciting racism, and undermining our sense of unity as a nation? The answer is simple. We must! |ed|

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