

Gifted Children Have Special Classes

By Wally Trabing

Gifted Children's Class

It started like this.

Barbara Giffen opened the class with a brief review of Kepler's three laws of astronomy, and then introduced the day's subject—Bodes' mathematical formula for the various distances of the planets from the sun.

I sat in on this class Wednesday, but not at a desk. They were far too small and as for the students you could carry one under each arm and sit one on your knee.

They are fourth, fifth and sixth graders at Branciforte elementary school. They were squirming, immature kids like any you know of this age — with one difference — their IQ's.

Branciforte and Gault elementaries are quietly entering the third year of a pilot program for gifted children.

These are children of 10, 11 and 12 years of age, who, through testing, have had their intelligence quotient established at from 130 to 140. They are not getting a better "deal" than other children. Rather they are being turned loose academically.

Discovering that a child has an exceptionally high IQ is not a reason for parents to gloat or display snobbish pride," explained Rita Mattei, principal at Branciforte. "Sometimes it can be quite frightening and I have seen a mother's face go white when she was told. Being parents to a gifted boy or girl greatly increases the parents' responsibilities."

"A brilliant mind can be a sensitive one and it can be channeled in the wrong direction," she said.

Miss Giffen confronts 14 youngsters in her class. They represent a broad racial, economic and interest background.

One factor you couldn't help catching right away was their eager attentiveness toward the subject matter. Where, in a regular class, most students found my presence more curious than the study of Junipero Serra, my fumbling for a seat in the gifted class caused not the slightest stir or a crane of the neck. Their minds were far out into space.

Miss Giffen was explaining Bodes' law of astronomical units

based on the 93,000,000, the distance in miles between the earth and the sun. On the blackboard she wrote Mercury equals .4AU; Venus .4 plus 3 equals .7AU, etc.

To one tow-headed student in the front row, the figure 93,000,000 miles became a challenge.

"How far would that be," he wondered aloud, "in feet?"

Miss Giffen's expression indicated she was used to such side issue probing. "Well, there's 5280 feet to the mile," she said, and several pencils flicked the figures in corners of pages.

While she talked some figured furiously and soon a yell of triumph interrupted the proceedings. Fabulously long figures were shouted to one another across the room.

Miss Giffen, now picked up the enthusiasm of this hunger for knowing and multiplied it out on the blackboard. It came to 491,040,000,000 feet.

Several youngsters danced from their seats, "I got it, I got it!" Some pouts reflected a mathematical flaw and small groups formed to find the errors.

These children meet twice a week. At Gault elementary Mrs. Elsie Chalmers maintains a class of 11 students 20 minutes a day. She teaches conversational German and music appreciation of great German composers such as Bach, Beethoven and Wagner.

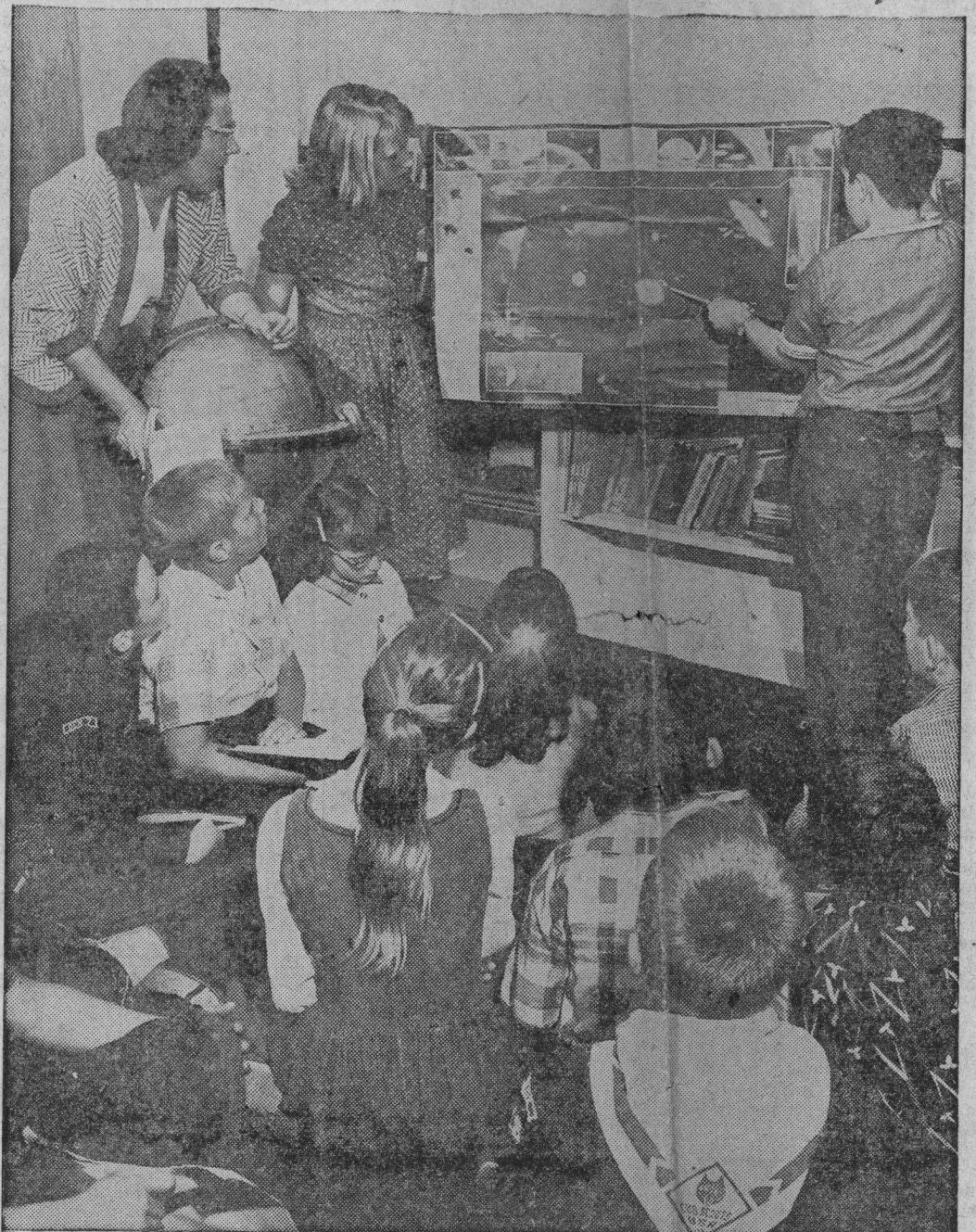
The subject matter, according to Miss Mattei is not of supreme importance. The Gault children are studying German, because it happens to be Mrs. Chalmers' major in college. The Branciforte children are studying astronomy because Miss Giffen took a special course in it when the students decided on the subject last year.

"The idea is to develop within these children the incentive to accept challenges and acquaint them with research.

"In astronomy, for example, one study may lead to related fields such as space medicine, science, etc.

Back to the class again, Miss Giffen was continuing her formula explanations down the list of the planets.

Someone interrupted with: "How about the asteroids?" The instructor had not intended to get that technical, but since they were brought up, she asked for



Barbara Giffen, instructor in the special gifted children's class at Branciforte elementary

guides her pupils through some problems in astronomy. Twice a week they are turned loose to research and go as far as they

desire in this subject. IQ minimum is 130 for "membership" in this group.

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hands on "Well, what are asteroids?"

A brown-haired girl's hand shot up. "Well, one theory is that they are planets that got broken up and trailed along in the orbit in small pieces." Right.

The class then fell to contributing various bits of knowledge picked up in research concerning carbon dioxide and frozen gases.

Despite the almost continuous rumbling of heavy trucks laboring up the Water street hill and the clatter of a gas-motored lawn mower below, the students seemed affixed to their lesson.

Suddenly a new seizure of mental ambition hit the front row. How far is it to the sun in

tive to let statements stand without challenge.

"This guy Bodes may mean something to mathematicians," cracked one youngster, "but to me he's crazy." Miss Giffen had to explain that it would be many years before they had the mathematical background to analyze these laws and theories, so "please wouldn't they accept what she was giving them for now!"

For part of the period she read to the class Fred Whipple's article in the Saturday Evening Post on astronomy.

Miss Mattei agreed that there were still many bugs to be ironed out of the gifted children program.

these are being worked out. For example, in the elementary grades readers are being grouped into slow, middle and fast readers in some schools.

There are hundreds of "non-gifted" students who will graduate with straight "A's and other academic honors and go on to universities and colleges and on to a happy life.

The "gifted" child is being given a little more free reins in order that he may exercise his special God-given potential.

And now, let's see, the distance to the sun in inches. I worked it out on the office machine.

It comes to 5,892,480,000,000

menes? Shy as it may seem on the surface, it appeared to be a vital goal of some of these youngsters.

On one desk was a paper-backed book on astronomy. On another was a typewritten report, single spaced. (I later found out that the youngster had hunt and pecked it out himself.)

On another desk was an astronomical chart.

Miss Giffen is sometimes placed in the peculiar position of having to plead ignorant to certain questions. Questions come flying from minds too inquisi-

Some educators advocate complete homogeneous groupings — that is class of youngsters grouped according to their IQ or special abilities. This extreme is, of course, drawing opposition. Less (socially) painful ways of doing

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