FPG Snapshot

Rejecting the "At-Risk" Stereotype

Project U-STARS~PLUS Helps Kids "At-Potential"

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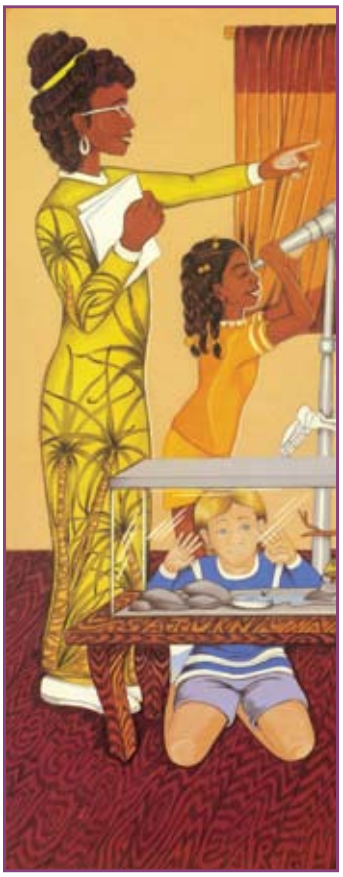
THE PERSISTENCE OF THE EDUCATIONAL "HAVES" AND "HAVE-NOTS" is reflected in the achievement gap between children of poverty and their more affluent peers, as well as between children of color and their white peers. Every day, schools and communities across the U.S. identify millions of young children as "at risk"—especially those with a minority background, who live in poor neighborhoods or are learning English as a second language. FPG's Project U-STARS~PLUS (Using Science, Talents, and Abilities to Recognize Students ~ Promoting Learning for Under-Represented Students) has turned the "at-risk" stereotype on its head. Rather than assuming children are at-risk, U-STARS~PLUS assumes "at-potential."



Project U-STARS~PLUS works with school districts to support elementary teachers in the early recognition and nurturing of outstanding potential in children from economically disadvantaged and/or culturally and linguistically diverse families and children with disabilities in order to improve academic achievement in science. The philosophy of U-STARS~PLUS is to recognize children's strengths by 1) providing an environment that nurtures students intellectually and emotionally, and 2) observing students systematically. By their nature, young children tend to be interested in how things work, so science provides an excellent means to engage all students. Because it is inquiry-based and focuses on exploration and problem-solving and is not based soley on verbal skills, science gives students the opportunity to demonstrate thinking skills, creativity, and persistence. By using science as a platform, teachers can easily integrate reading, math, writing, and art.

Project U-STARS~PLUS is Characterized by Five Components

1. High-end challenging learning opportunities;
2. Systematic observation of students to identify potential to inform instruction;
3. Hands-on, inquiry-based science lessons that focus on exploration, problem solving, higher-level thinking, creativity, and persistence and that can be meaningfully integrated across the curriculum;
4. Parent and family engagement in school and academic areas of interest; and
5. Systemic change through capacity building.

Teachers get support to develop *high-end learning experiences* (see sidebar) for their students and learn new tools for observing students through ongoing professional development provided by U-STARS~PLUS project staff and school site teams. Teachers learn what to look for—especially how outstanding abilities manifest in children from under-served populations—how to structure classrooms with active and appropriately challenging learning so that students can more easily demonstrate their potential. Teachers employ a number of activities and techniques to best serve

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children's diverse learning needs in the regular classroom, including independent and small group work, learning centers, and questioning techniques for higher order thinking. Through recognizing and nurturing strengths, all young children have the opportunity to reach their potential.

Professional development for teachers, however, is only half of the equation. Project U-STARS~PLUS also actively involves families, by helping schools hold orientation sessions, conferences, and workshops that meet the needs of families. Families receive packets of science learning activities designed to support what is being studied in the classroom. These packets include detailed steps that actively and easily involve parents in their child's learning experience in a meaningful way.

U-STARS~PLUS uses a unique observation approach to identify children at-potential. The project developed a form that focuses on nine categories of student behavior in the classroom: learns easily, shows advanced skills, displays curiousity and creativity, shows advanced reasoning and problem solving, displays spatial abilities, is motivated, shows social perceptiveness, and displays leadership. Information gleaned from these observations helps teachers recognize children with potential who may have been missed through more traditional gifted screening approaches. Other factors considered include student performance, achievement, and aptitude. These factors are measured both formally and informally.

The potential of many children might have been overlooked without this project. Many teachers involved in the project responded that without this program they would have missed recognizing students who now benefit from advanced educational opportunities and differentiated education services. Data also show that teachers believe students have increased their abilities to "think outside of the box, critically" and have a greater interest in learning. In addition, a major independent evaluation report of North Carolina schools, *Increasing Opportunity to Learn via Access to Rigorous Courses and Programs: One Strategy for Closing the Achievement Gap for at Risk and Ethnic Minority Students,* cited USTARS~PLUS as one of the most promising practices for closing the achievement gap for young children living in poverty.

Although grant funding has ended, U-STARS~PLUS has proved to be a self-sustaining program that continues to expand. It is currently being implemented in 38 school districts and 100 schools. Over 1,000 kindergarten through third grade teachers are involved and more than 21,000 young children have been impacted. The original team at FPG continues to provide contact support to teachers participating in U-STARS~PLUS. Most of the school districts that have implemented the program are located in Colorado, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Ohio. In the summer of 2010, Milwaukee (Wisconsin) Public Schools and several school districts in Illinois will also implement it in their classrooms. ■

What is High-End Learning?

High-end learning means that teachers intentionally provide learning experiences that reach the highest levels of the child's needs. High-end learning involves questions that require students to think, inquiry activities where children must explore and create, open-ended assignments that address ethical issues, and other activities that engage children in learning that goes beyond rote memory. For example, a U-STARS~PLUS teacher resource lesson designed to connect science and literature suggests the teacher start by reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle. Students then have the opportunity to demonstrate several skills as described below:

- **Knowledge:** List things that the caterpillar ate while he was hungry.
- **Comprehension:** Describe each state of the butterfly's life.
- **Application:** Describe what would happen to you if you ate only junk food.
- **Analysis:** Compare and contrast the stages of a butterfly.
- **Synthesis:** Explain the relationship between the caterpillar and the butterfly.
- **Evaluation:** Describe which life stage of the butterfly you like the most and explain why.

Meanwhile, students engage in scientific inquiry by, perhaps, setting up a butterfly garden and recording how long each stage lasts. Or they might research butterflies native to the area and create a museum with visuals of the different butterflies.

To Learn More

Coleman, M. R., & Hughes, C. E. (2009). Meeting the Needs of Gifted Students within an RtI Framework. *Gifted Child Today, 32*(3), 14–17

Project U-STARS~PLUS
http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~USTARS

Increasing Opportunity to Learn via Access to Rigorous Courses and Programs: One Strategy for Closing the Achievement Gap for at Risk and Ethnic Minority Students can be found at www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/ec/development/gifted/increasingopportunities.pdf