Counseling gifted youth : problems and procedures

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Counseling Gifted Youth: Problems and Procedures

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Abstract

Gifted youth in the United States are a special and often misunderstood population. The purpose of this study is to share research done on this group. The research reviewed gives both general knowledge on the gifted population and how they interact throughout the counseling process. Specifically, the paper discusses characteristics of gifted children, common issues faced by the gifted population, including in the classroom, with peers, and within families. The paper also discusses counseling agendas for gifted youngsters, counseling assets of the gifted child, and effective interventions used for gifted youngsters.
Counseling Gifted Youth: Problems and Procedures

There are exceptional students in every elementary, middle, and high school in the United States. These are the students who seem to breeze through some or all of their classes with little or no effort. They catch on to new concepts more quickly than other students; they perform better on tests than other students, and they often seem bored with material that their peers are struggling to learn. Like any other special population, gifted children have specific needs, both inside and outside of the classroom. While they may excel academically, these children often pay the price for their academic advancement in their relationships, both with peers and with their families. While these children are present in every school in the nation, not all school and mental health personnel are giving sufficient attention to the special concerns and needs of these children. Many counselors are not aware of the special problems affecting these children, and that lack of awareness leads to a lack of change.

This paper will explore those needs that are unique to the gifted population, what specific traits help to identify a “gifted” child, what issues these children often face in and out of the counseling session, and what counselors can do to support and empower these young people.

In the U.S., there are over 1.3 million children ages 3-18 that meet their state’s current guidelines for giftedness. This large number goes quite unnoticed in the counseling research; little has been done to explore how to better serve these future leaders in the counseling setting. There are a
few hypotheses as to why there is little counseling research on this population. One possibility is that gifted children are quite well adjusted, or at the very least appear to be well adjusted, and therefore are not in need of counseling. Another reason is that each individual state, and sometimes, the districts within that state decide on requirements establishing giftedness in youngsters. This leaves wide disparity among the states as to what exactly constitutes giftedness. Because of this disparity, researching this population becomes difficult, as the defining characteristics of this population change from state to state. Another is that gifted children's specific needs are not well known in the counseling community; counselors might assume that their needs are similar to that of the general population. Though many gifted children have experiences similar to those of their peers, there are distinct differences between gifted students and the rest of the populace that must be explored further.

Definitions of giftedness

Before exploring these differences, it is important to discern what traits are present in gifted children that make them unique. Though various sources differ as to their definition of giftedness, the federal government recognizes the following current definition, which is located in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act:
"Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities."

This definition leaves much room for interpretation, which is why states are allowed by the federal government to create their own standards of giftedness. Consequently, there is wide disparity between states as to what constitutes giftedness. For the purposes of this paper, the state of Iowa’s definition of giftedness will be presented and any reference to gifted students will take the assumption that the student possesses said qualities and/or abilities.

In the state of Iowa, giftedness is generally defined by the state government as children who have demonstrated achievement or potential ability, or both, in any one or more of the following areas: "1) general intellectual ability; 2) creative thinking; 3) leadership ability; 4) visual and performing arts ability; and 5) specific ability aptitude" (Iowa Code section 256.11). While the state has a general definition of giftedness, it is left up by each individual district to decide what specific requirements must be met in order to be considered “gifted” and participate in
specialized gifted and talented programming within that school: “Each school district shall implement multiple selection criteria for identifying gifted and talented students from the total student population” (Iowa Code section 256.11). This obviously leaves huge inconsistencies among talented and gifted requirements throughout the country. This is a possible reason as to why research on counseling gifted children is somewhat of a rarity.

Problems experienced by Gifted Youth

With a general definition of giftedness, the needs of this special population can begin to be explored. There is no hesitation among researchers on the notion that gifted students have special needs. In fact Morelock (1992) states that “the uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching, and counseling for them to develop optimally.” One study surveying over 300 parents, school personnel, and counselors found that all three of these groups were in agreement that gifted children do have specific developmental needs that can be best met through counseling services (Moon, Kelly, and Feldhusen, 1997).

Gifted children experience similar needs as other children, but often at different points in their life. Because gifted children often show an increased speed of development, they may experience problems at a
different rate than other children (Webb, 1994; Roedell, 1990). Gifted children may also experience additional problems because of the characteristics that cause them to be identified as being gifted. These problems can arise because of qualities that are usually identified as "strengths". For instance, a gifted child who acquires and retains information more quickly than other children may become impatient with those who do not learn as quickly as they do. Another example can be a child who has a large facile vocabulary may use words to manipulate and become bored speaking to people of his/her own age group (Webb, 1994). Other problems experienced by gifted children may include feelings of inadequacy, lack of understanding from others, difficulty accepting criticism, and resistance to authority (VanTassel-Baska, 1990, p.17).

These unique traits and trials experienced by gifted children can often lead to a myriad of problems, both within the gifted child, and with his/her relationships. These problems often lead to a gifted child being seen by a counselor, should he/she choose to reach out to an adult for help. When these children come in for counseling, the counselor might find the child to have experienced some of the following:
Problems in peer relations

Gifted children often tend to be highly organized and efficient. Because of this heightened level of organization, gifted children tend to want to establish defined "rules" for behavior for both him/herself and other people. This often leads to the child being resented by his/her peers (Webb, 1994; Robinson, 1996). Along with this resentment felt by the gifted child is a feeling of isolation. Gifted children often experience feelings of isolation because of the marked difference between his/her development level and those of his/her peers. Like all children, gifted children yearn for stability, loyalty, and intimacy in relationships. Unfortunately, their peers are often incapable of returning the level of intimacy that gifted children are capable of (Gross, 2002). Gifted children have left age-appropriate behaviors behind, causing them to struggle fitting in with their peers. In general, the children who are the most advanced are at the greatest risk of experiencing this feeling of isolation (Robinson, 1996).

Perfectionism

Most gifted children are used to having new concepts come easily to them. As a result, many of these youngsters expect themselves to perform at a level far above that of their peers, or even above that of what is expected from their teachers and parents. In general, higher levels of
perfectionism in gifted students are associated with lower levels of self-worth (Robinson, 1996). The higher their expectations are of themselves, the more disappointed they are when they fail to reach those expectations. In order to avoid feeling disappointed, many gifted children will resort to underachieving.

Underachievement

Underachievement can be defined as "a discrepancy between a child's school performance and some ability index such as an IQ score" (Delisle & Berger, 1990). Underachievement is tied closely to a child's self-concept. A child who focuses on his/her failures rather than successes begin to place limits on his/her potential for success (Delisle & Berger, 1990). Gifted children may also begin to fear failure because of their heightened ability to complete tasks well. This fear of failure can be crippling, often children will cope with it by underachieving. Children will often underachieve rather than make an honest effort and fail.

Multipotentiality

Many gifted children excel in more than one area or subject matter, for instance some students are gifted in both math and art, or some are gifted in reading, writing and athletics. This "natural ability" that is present in them often leaks through many different subject tasks in the school environment. However, children with multiple talents are at a risk
for becoming “fence sitters” who never try to do anything to the best of their ability for a long period of time (Robinson, 1996; Webb, 1994). They are happy “just getting by”, and therefore do not put a great deal of effort into any of the tasks set out before them.

Family Difficulties

Results of research studies involving attitudes of families toward gifted students differ greatly. Some research reports that in families where one child has been deemed “gifted”, the family generally reports a positive attitude toward the gifted member. Unfortunately, the gifted member often seems less certain of the positive feelings from parents and siblings regarding his/her giftedness (Colangelo and Brower, 2000). Other studies indicate that parents often struggle with having a gifted youngster and may even harbor feelings of resentment toward the gifted child (Keirouz, 1990). Gifted students may have a myriad of experiences within the family setting, from experiencing jealousy from siblings and parents, to being ostracized for their uniqueness, to being viewed as a “mini-adult” because of their heightened reasoning ability and vocabulary.

Gifted Children in the Counseling Setting

Just like other children, gifted children with emotional problems generally achieve less well than gifted children who are not experiencing emotional problems (Freeman, 2000). Research demonstrates that gifted
youth tend to exhibit sturdy mental health and self-esteem up through middle childhood and again at college age. The years of early and middle adolescence tend to be rockier for gifted children (Robinson & Noble, 1991; Colangelo, 2002). Gifted children are frequently uncomfortable with themselves and could possibly need more life experience to develop both an increased understanding and acceptance of oneself (Betts, 1986). In gifted adolescents, feelings of hopefulness and encouragement increase as gifted boys mature. Unfortunately, for gifted girls the opposite is true, their feelings of self-confidence tend to decrease during adolescence. (Bland, Sowa, & Callahan, 1994). Also, adolescent girls tend to be more perfectionistic and vulnerable to others' perceptions of them (Bland, Sowa, & Callahan, 1994).

Counseling gifted youth is by no means a menial task. Given their advanced development and high abstract reasoning ability, counseling gifted students and their families can be among the most challenging and rewarding tasks a counselor undertakes (Colangelo, 2002). Counselors would serve well to educate themselves on this population as they might any other special population they work with.

Counseling Assets

While gifted children come to the counseling setting with their own unique set of problems and frustrations, they also bring with them a
number of strengths that are unique to their age group. Most noticeable is the gifted students advanced ability to reason abstractly. Advanced development in the gifted child often serves to his/her benefit in the counseling setting. Along with the ability to conceptualize alternative solutions because of the heightened abstract reasoning ability, the gifted child often has a greater vocabulary from whence to describe his/her thoughts, emotions, and wants. (May, 2000)

While counselors may find the need to aid young clients in determining solutions to his/her own problems, the professional may find that quite the opposite is true when working with gifted clients. Gifted children have a greater ability to solve his/her own problems (May, 2000). Therefore, the counselor may take a less direct role, acting as a "mirror" and using more subtlety and reflective interventions when working with these clients. Along with the strengths mentioned, gifted students are also advanced at making connections throughout the counseling process (May, 2000).

**Counseling Interventions**

Studies show that gifted children can benefit from participating in individual, group, and family counseling (Robinson, Reis, Neihart, & Moon, 2002). Group counseling can help gifted youngsters when they are choosing a career or which college to attend. Psychoeducational groups
may also serve to benefit the gifted child; topics such as stress management and time management are relevant to most young people (Robinson et al., 2002). Groups allow young gifted students a chance to be together, an experience that will not only help them in activities and classes, but also give them a chance to develop emotionally and socially (Betts, 1986).

Any number of counseling interventions used normally with individuals or families can also be used when working with gifted children. All of these specific interventions are of course too numerous and lengthy in description to mention here, but a few interventions found particularly helpful in working with gifted children are mentioned.

Counselors cannot be expected to know every facet of the gifted youngster’s mind, and so must work with the child how they are accustomed to working with other children. Potentially beneficial interventions with gifted children include taking a multigenerational perspective through using a genogram (May, 2000). Giftedness can be both inherited and taught within families so this sort of approach will allow the child to explore the system in which she grew up and draw conclusions about who she is apart from what she has been taught by society (May, 2000).
Another important piece involves educating the client’s family on giftedness: what it means to be gifted, what the gifted person may experience because of her giftedness, and how the gifted child may feel within the family system. Parents and siblings of gifted children can serve to promote the youngster’s well being by learning as much as possible about the youngster. Teaching boundaries within families that allow all members to feel important and encouraged can be beneficial (May, 2000). Another educational piece involves teaching parents to have “respect for the gifted child’s uniqueness, respect for their opinions, and respect for their dreams” (Silverman, 1992). Research shows that parents who take the time to explain requests to children tend to get more cooperation than authoritarian parents. When gifted children are spoken and listened to with consideration and respect, they tend to respond with the same (Silverman, 1992).

Gifted youth are a unique population; they have particular needs and struggles in both their school and family situations. Perfectionism, problems in peer relations, underachievement, and competition with siblings are among a few of the struggles faced by gifted children. While society places great hope in the eventual successes of this intellectually advanced group; it also comes up short in providing the group with the services and support they need in order to achieve that success.
Great strides have been made in identifying the specific needs of gifted children in the counseling setting, but much can still be done in terms of researching this population. Current research could serve to prove the need for further funding of services for gifted children by the government. In order to compete in the realm of education with the rest of the world, these children need support, not only educational support, but social, emotional, and familial support as well. That support is manifested through education, educating gifted students about themselves, educating parents about their children, and educating teachers and counselors how to better serve these children.
References


