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Counseling gifted and talented students

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Abstract

This paper is subdivided into three sections. The first section provides a series of definitions of giftedness, level of cognition and frustration, and criteria of gifted students. Whereas the second section includes literature reviews covering counseling the gifted student, commencing with developmental issues and concluding with issues related to learning disabled gifted and talented students. The final section of this paper is divided into an overview of concepts, recommendations, and future expectations for the counselor working with gifted and talented students.

COUNSELING GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS

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Karen S. Robertson

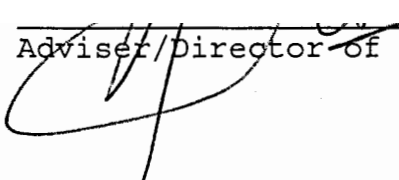
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Counseling Gifted and Talented Students

The term giftedness provokes images of individuals with magnified abilities and potentials in intellect, creative ability, leadership skills, and visual or performing arts. Individuals such as Leonardo da Vinci, Helen Keller, and Albert Einstein are synonymous with gifted adults and books touted the magnificent works of these individuals and sometimes even reviewed the tribulation each gifted adults experienced and the coping mechanisms they used to overcome their difficulties. Today, when the discussion turns to talented and gifted young people, it is sometimes challenging individuals to understand or even instruct these youth. Furthermore, it is sometimes even difficult to define giftedness. Milgram (1991) documented this principle for the United States Gifted and Talented Children's Act of 1978. The definition developed for gifted and talented learners was:

Whenever applicable, youth - who are identified at the preschool, elementary, or secondary level as possessing demonstrated or potential abilities that give evidence of high performance capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, specific academic, or leadership ability, or in the performing and visual arts, and who by reason thereof,

require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school (p. 23).

Milgram continued stating gifted learners are "exceptional, that is, children whose physical, intellectual, or socio-emotional development differs significantly from the norm" (p. 23).

Coleman and Cross (2001) expand this premise by asking how are these characteristics documented, why is it important to understand the cognitive, creative, and social/emotional development of giftedness, and how personal values influenced the decision process (p. 25).

This paper is subdivided into three sections. The first section provides a series of definitions of giftedness, level of cognition and frustration, and criteria of gifted students. Whereas the second section includes literature reviews covering counseling the gifted student, commencing with developmental issues and concluding with issues related to learning disabled gifted and talented students. The final section of this paper is divided into an overview of concepts, recommendations, and future expectations for the counselor working with gifted and talented students.

Identifying Gifted Students

Definition

It was not until the 1970s that the United States was able to articulate how to service the gifted students in our schools. Subsequently, the *Maryland Report* of 1972 established a new definition of giftedness.

Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated education programs and services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society (VanTassel-Baska, 1998, p. 8).

Characteristics

Coleman and Cross (2001) added to this definition - diverse and extensive best describe giftedness of students in the United States. Regardless of the socio-economic, familial, racial, physical, or behavioral makeup of the learner, there are general characteristics of all gifted children. Gifted learners characteristically enjoy learning, reading, asking questions, are curious and active, and tend to be younger than their peers. Genshaft, Bireley, and Hollinger (1995, p. 218) reported giftedness is not a matter of who has it and who does not,

"rather, it is a matter of degree and type". As with the special education students, Genshaft et al., advocated for identification and programming procedures in schools to assist gifted students with their edification. Using similar labels as for special education designations, Genshaft, et al., identified the ranges of giftedness categorizes as follows:

115-129 IQ	Mildly gifted	(+1-2 SD)
130-144 IQ	Moderately gifted	(+2-3 SD)
145-159 IQ	Highly gifted	(+3-4 SD)
160+ IQ	Extraordinarily gifted	(>+4 SD)

O'Brien (2002, p. 47) concurred and added "there are many indicators of giftedness, and many areas of talent. Just as there is an entire spectrum of disabilities, there is an equally large and diverse spectrum of exceptional ability." Giftedness indicators, O'Brien wrote, include several qualities including advanced language skills, intense curiosity, a sense of humor, accelerated learning, heightened sensitivity, self-awareness, vivid imagination, and an intuitive sensitivity to spirituality, and/or leadership qualities. When gifted learners face problems, they have the endurance to complete a task along with the desire to excel in their interest area.

Coleman and Cross added from an ethical and leadership perspective, gifted learners were "truthful, conscientious, sympathetic, and somewhat generous" (p. 32). Gifted students tended to be recognized by their peers as perceptive, well

liked, and unpretentious as leaders. O'Brien called these leaders "the movers and groovers of the student body" (p. 48).

Genshaft et al. extended the "movers and groovers" theme to recognize the complex and vulnerable makeup of a gifted individual.

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 (p. 18).

Gardner's Multiple Intelligences

Identifying and understanding gifted students would not be complete without inclusion of Gardner's work on Multiple Intelligences. In 1983, Gardner Multiple Intelligences Theory (MI) proclaimed a gifted person is not only gifted in mathematical and linguistic fields, but possibly in five other areas not documented on an intelligence test. Gardner included these five intelligence areas: spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal and in 1993 he added naturalist (Fasko 2000, p. 126).

Gardner believed educators overlooked the MI categories because most students lacked IQs above 130. Gardner recognized

the unique strengths of those without IQs above 130 and documented their giftedness using combinations of alternative methods such as observations and portfolios capitalizing on the students' talents (Dunn, Denig, and Lovelace, 2001).

The World of Giftedness

Early Childhood

It is important to give a brief overview of the early childhood development of a gifted individual in order to understand the gifted student. Genshaft, et al. reported it was common for infants to display advanced cognition, stubbornness overexcitability, self-esteem issues, perfectionism, and sensitivity. "Many parents of gifted children report that, almost from birth, their youngsters exhibited greater intensity and awareness" (p. 18) of self and the world around them. Advanced cognition documentation ranged from babies smiling and recognizing caregivers earlier, susceptibility to colic, to reacting with greater intensity to noises, stimulation and frustration. In early childhood, age mates are still in reward and punishment stage whereas the gifted preschooler has developed the ability to bargain with others. Self-esteem tends to be lower in the gifted child not due to home environment but due to the feedback the child receives from the outside world due to their feeling of estrangement from age mates and not fitting in.

Overexcitability is magnified by the gifted preschooler's ability to concentrate, carry on conversations with children older than their level, their curiosity, enthusiasm, sensitivity, and/or inhibition. Henceforth, it is common for parents of gifted preschools to think they are "too young" to be able to do what they actually can do. Frustrated gifted preschoolers can become stubborn, perfectionist, or emotionally sensitive. Genshaft et al. reported when parents of gifted children used positive reframing parenting techniques (acknowledging the gifted preschooler's skills) the gifted preschooler tended to reduce negative behaviors.

Elementary School

The gifted learner's asynchrony does not lessen by the time he/she enters elementary school, but enables the gifted learner to adapt and be recognized for their mental abilities, leadership abilities, and a propensity to be popular with students and teachers alike. Unfortunately, it is not always this way. Highly sensitive and displaying leadership attributes, Silverman (1993, p. 304) reported gifted girls became labeled as "bossy" and gifted boys labeled as "overly sensitive." Many times gifted students curb their innate personalities to fit in and make friends, thus resulting in a lack of initiative and self-confidence. Continuing, the gifted

learner can become puzzled by the unwritten social rules of elementary school and realize the "right" behavior and conformity are very important to the average elementary school child. Cognitively and developmentally elementary students see things as black and white and the gifted child that understands that unwritten rule is able to adapt and accepted socially. Often though, gifted children learn to play the "social game at an early age, but many struggle for years to be socially savvy" (Genshaft et al., p. 25). However, when the gifted child is able to overlook the unwritten rules of elementary school and does look for friendships with similar intellect, they "give and look for trust and open sharing, and often when they find a similar companion, make a friend for life" (p. 25). Finally making the progression through elementary school, now the real struggle begins for the gifted student - middle school.

Middle School

Foremost for all middle school students is survival. Akos (2003, p. 15) stated that many students are fearful and intimidated by the transition from elementary school to middle school. Going from the oldest students on campus to the youngest makes for a complex bag of emotions and thoughts of trying to fit in and not noticed. Add to the mix intellectual ability, middle school can prove to be most vexing, boys are

accepted for their giftedness, but girls are looked down upon for their giftedness.

Silverman (1993, p. 303) reported findings from a 1988 study of 3,000 students indicated a substantial loss in self-concept and achievement in gifted girls compared to their male counterpart. Three factors were found to be pervasive in the beliefs of gifted girls. First, gifted adolescent girls believed gifted means "achieving good grades effortlessly" and the "mere exertion of effort calls ability into question" (Silverman, p.304). They have had little experience with having to extend their thinking and when they were not able to quickly come up with the answers, the gifted girls began to question themselves intellectually resulting in lower self-esteem. Second, educators around gifted students to start using terms such as underachievers to label males and overachievers as females. Silverman (p. 304) continued by stating "the meaning of 'underachiever' is clear - a person who does not achieve to his or her level of ability. How can anyone achieve more than she is capable of achieving?" Third, teacher perception of capability and effort are used as labels for gifted students. Successful boys are referred to as working to their best capability and successful girls are referred to as giving their best effort. Again, word play and impression of meaning results

in gifted girls with lower self-confidence and Genshaft et al. (p. 26) reported gifted middle school girls begin "degifting" to fit in and be accepted.

Adding to this confusing and perplexing blend, gifted adolescent boys and girls tend to have been reading on an adult level for many years. Gifted middle school students can become frustrated, confused, bewildered by what they experienced in school and in what they have learned in books. Confused and stressed gifted middle school students can become depressed and hesitant to leave the "caring intimacy of their families" (p. 26). It sounds as if middle school is all doom and gloom for gifted students, but as Genshaft et al. (p. 26) stated, the gifted adolescent is "generally" more aware of the causes and effects of their actions and are able to reason appropriately, but the gifted student cannot do it all alone. Peer support or adult mentors who are willing to listen and debate on an adult level would be priceless in the development of the gifted middle school adolescent.

High School

At the elementary school level popularity and recognition are at their pinnacle, whereas in high school gifted students are at their lowest. Coleman and Cross attributed this quality to the tendency of secondary gifted students to be more

interested in learning than in socializing which caused them to become more of a subgroup of the population than inclusive in the total population. The same is true for the overlooked gifted student, the "nonmodal gifted" as Coleman and Cross (p. 67) labeled them. This population includes the underachiever, the physically, learning, or behavioral handicapped student, or the student from a rural or underprivileged background, or the minority student. The frustration for these students is the same for the identified gifted student when adults, teachers, and peers do not function or understand at their level of cognition. These students are overlooked and under-identified because they do not "fit the typical" mold for a gifted learner. How can the counselor help gifted students at all three academic levels and provide guidance in directing gifted students to challenge themselves?

Identifying Issues and Concerns

As documented in the identification of gifted students, it is not uncommon for gifted students to become frustrated when other students and even teachers cannot understand at their level of cognition. What are some specific developmental, socio-economical, underachieving, and learning disabilities issues facing the intellectually advanced student?

Developmental Issues

A big obstacle for any student, including the gifted learner, to overcome is the sense of belonging, being able to fit in, and being understood. Dent and Craig (2001) believed anxiety and alienation affect gifted students when they do not have a sense of belonging. The authors used the analogy of a gifted student and a plant to demonstrate the significance of having "unconditional positive regard" (Nugent, 1994, p. 85) for the gifted student client. Plants are to gifted students as "proper light, suitable soil, water, nutrients, and ...kind words" are to nourishing the "whole person, not only the intellect" (Dent and Craig, 2001, p. 22). In other words, meeting gifted students' cognitive needs reduces self-concept and underachievement issues and often resulted in meeting "their social-emotional needs" (Colangelo, 2002, p. 1) and subsequently assisted in reducing perfectionism, stress, and burnout in the intellectually advanced student (National Association for Gifted Children, 2003, p. 1).

Socio-economically Issues

According to VanTassel-Baska (1998, p. 95), historically "the majority of gifted learners came from higher socioeconomic backgrounds." Much of the data used in identification of the gifted learner came from the longitudinal study started in 1921

by Lewis Terman. Terman wanted to scientifically understand giftedness and decided the best way to do the qualitative study was to study 1,528 students. All of these students were approximately 12 years old and identified by an IQ test to have quotients of 140 or above (VanTassel-Baska, 1998, p. 7).

Results of Terman's study exposed many myths associated with giftedness including the idea that a gifted student is socially or emotionally abnormal. In addition, Terman's study, still ongoing, unwittingly, cemented the identification and development of the gifted learner in schools. VanTassel-Baska added that because of the research done by Terman and other researchers up to 1955, people understood that giftedness was not a focus of individuals with specific talents and ideal from a narrow group of individuals, but a non-exclusive initiative including a multitude of individuals from all walks of life. Clearly, schools need to do a better job of identifying the socio-economic deprived gifted learner because they do not have the family support or community awareness to be recognized.

Underachieving Gifted Student Issues

Kerr (1991) reported labeling a gifted student as "underachieving" discounts any positive qualities the gifted student did enjoy and discounted any similar characteristics that compared to achievers. Conversely, Kerr did document the

underachievers were more socially immature, had more emotional problems, participated in more antisocial behaviors, and had lower self-concepts. Underachievers that were socially immature had difficulty making and keeping friends, had difficulty cooperating in groups, were dominant or unassertive in groups, and tended to impede the group's progress. In elementary school the underachiever may have experienced separation issues related to leaving parents during the school day and become "overly dependent on teachers, or behave inappropriately toward adults" (Kerr, p. 54) and when playing games or sports the underachiever may have difficulty with competition becoming a poor sport and not following the rules of the game.

Crying easily, having a quick temper, overly sensitive, or overly aggressive are words used to describe an underachiever that displays emotional problems and on personality tests, common emotional problems revealed are depression or anger. Kerr (p. 55) best describe the scenario for an underachiever with emotional problems as "long-term rather than situational." Kerr also found that gifted underachievers who took personality tests were identified to have antisocial behaviors. The test results looked similar to sociopathic individuals with ill regard for negative consciences, impulsivity, aggressive when angry towards people or things, and a tendency to dupe others. Gifted

underachievers at the elementary level will cheat on tests, steal school property, hurt other students, or destroy other students' belongings. It was found underachieving middle and high school students participated in shoplifting, selling drugs, create computer viruses, or other illegal activities.

Unlike the sociopath who does not care or think about the harm they do to others or the world around them, the underachieving gifted student does want to understand their own behavior, the world around them, and has the need to express their feelings. Low self-concept can develop because of the misplaced, negative energies of the underachieving gifted student. Furthermore, the underachieving gifted student could experience lower grades which could lead to lower expectations on themselves, which could lead to lower performance, which could lead to lower self-concept, which could develop a vicious cycle of down spinning.

Gifted Students with Disabilities Issues

In the beginning of this research paper, Leonardo da Vinci, Helen Keller, and Albert Einstein were mentioned for their giftedness. However, what other commonality do they share? If these geniuses were children today, they possibly would be placed in special needs classes for their disabilities, perhaps overlooking their giftedness. Possibly, Leonardo da Vinci would

have been in a program for the learning disabled, Helen Keller in a program for the blind and/or a program for behavioral disorders, and Albert Einstein in a program for language delay (Genshaft et al., p. 201). The special needs student that is gifted reflects another overlooked and under-recognized gifted group. Today, special needs educators are addressing this issue and are making accommodations.

Counseling Gifted Students

Recommendations

Depending on the gifted student and their issue, individual or small group counseling are appropriate. Brown (1994) suggested counselors incorporated art, self-portrait drawings, storytelling, music, using puppets, working with clay, guided imagery, or role-play to aid students in small group settings at the elementary and middle school levels. Adolescents could benefit from these techniques and from bibliotherapy to promote self-understanding (Vernon, 1999). Corey (2000) stated that small groups at the middle and high school level were also appropriate due to the nature of adolescences. Adolescents like to share with their peers their conflicting emotions, their self-doubts, and they are relieved when they discover they are not alone. Small groups allow adolescents the freedom and

safety to question and modify behavior, express concerns, be heard, and help each other.

Gilliland and James (1998, p. 8) remind us "that counseling is collaborative" and the interaction of the client and counselor depend on the client's "trust and belief in their therapist." It is most important for the counselor to focus in on what is "right" for the client, not what the counselor feels most comfortable using with the client. Whether the counselor decides to use individual, small group, or classroom guidance approach to counseling gifted students, it is constructive to teach skills important in making positive choices "since they typically have a need to feel a sense of power and participation in decision making" (Vernon, p. 189). Vernon, Dent and Craig added small groups fostered clients the opportunity to interact and brainstorm with others cognitively similar to him/her, realize he/she was not the only one with issues being gifted, develop friendships with individuals with similar interests and abilities, and learn to interact with and accept individuals of different abilities. Furthermore, clients are able to learn how to identify their strengths, weaknesses, and set personal goals for the school year. Specifics were mentioned when working with underachieving gifted students.

Kerr (1991, p. 56) called attention to the importance the counselor and chosen program are to assisting underachievers in modifying their behaviors and "redirect the academic behavior of this population". Continuing, Delisle and Berger (1990, p. 1) stated it is important to label the behaviors, not the students. Labeling the "underachieving behaviors pinpoints those aspects of children's lives which they are most able to alter." If the underachiever is doing poorly in science it is better to label the behavior as "underachieving in science" and in counseling concentrate on the positive attributes the underachiever does possess.

In the school setting, the counselor can use short-term or long-term counseling to assist underachieving students' regain (or discover) that sense of purpose and meaning to their lives. Furthermore, counselors can elicit the assistance of tutors - mentors - that match the underachiever interests and learning style. It is also important for the counselor to consider the underachievers strengths and talents in the long-term to help reverse the negative affects of underachieving gifted behaviors. Kerr (p. 66) noted, when counselors are working with "underachieving students who have personality disorders or behavior disorders above and beyond the realm of boredom and

lack of challenge" it is imperative to refer the gifted client to the appropriate agency for psychotherapy.

Conclusion

Counseling gifted students takes more effort than just understanding the historical significance of gifted learners and knowing why some gifted learners underachieve. Understanding that even as infants, the gifted learner is developmentally different, parents reported advanced cognition from babies smiling and recognizing caregivers earlier, to reacting with greater intensity to noises, stimulation and frustration. By three or four years of age, the average child is still in reward and punishment stage whereas the gifted preschooler has developed the ability to bargain. This is difficult and essential for the gifted preschooler's parents and school counselor to understand. When the preschooler enters school, it is critical for the school counselor to have assisted the educators of gifted learners in directing the gifted learner's education. In addition, Coleman and Cross advised counselors to support the educators in identify their own possible unintentional prejudices towards these gifted students.

Psychosocial, affective, and self-concept issues can have long-range negative affects on the gifted learner if not dealt with positively and unconditionally. Social immaturity,

antisocial behaviors and underachieving are just a few negative consequences of those issues and concerns.

The school counselor can assist the gifted student in understanding and accepting their unique giftedness using individual counseling, small group counseling, and/or classroom guidance. The use of these counseling techniques can advance all students understanding of why gifted students are different and why others do not understand them. As long as there are children born on Earth, there will be children like Albert Einstein, Helen Keller, Leonardo da Vinci, Bill Gates, Michael Jordan, Jennifer Lopez, and Sammy Sosa - all gifted and all needing to be cultivated to be the best they can be in school and as adults. At school, the school counselor can assist to the gifted student, the parents, and the educators.

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