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## Unique career development problems of gifted high school students

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## Unique career development problems of gifted high school students

### Abstract

One of the most important tasks of counselors is to assist in the career development of students (Fredrickson, 1979; Herr & Wantabee, 1979). Career planning and the choices that come from that planning will have more impact on an individual's life than almost any other decisions that a person makes (Fredrickson, 1979).

UNIQUE CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROBLEMS  
OF GIFTED HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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One of the most important tasks of counselors is to assist in the career development of students (Fredrickson, 1979; Herr & Wantabee, 1979). Career planning and the choices that come from that planning will have more impact on an individual's life than almost any other decisions that a person makes (Fredrickson, 1979).

Why is it, ask Fredrickson (1979) and Zaffrann & Colangelo (1977), if occupational choice is of such significance in a person's life, our schools spend so little time and effort helping gifted adolescents in their career development? Much research has been done regarding the gifted, but career development of this population still remains a subtopic (Delisle, 1982).

Career educators agree that in order for a counselor to be effective in helping gifted students with career development, s/he must first understand general career development theory. At the same time, s/he must be aware of the unique career development problems of the gifted (Delisle, 1982; Hoyt & Hebler, 1974; Jepsen, 1981; Kerr, 1981; Safter & Burch, 1981; Zaffrann & Colangelo, 1977; Walker, 1982).

The purpose of this paper is to review literature from the last two decades regarding the career development problems encountered by gifted high school students. The paper will treat the following major areas: multipotentiality, expectations,

investment, and specific career development problems of gifted women.

By bringing together available empirical research and descriptive writings, this paper could increase counselor understanding of unique career development problems faced by gifted students. In turn, counselors could more effectively meet the career needs of this population.

Gifted students are not being excluded from career programs, but often their special needs are going unrecognized (Delisle, 1982; Fredrickson, 1979; Fox & Richmond, 1979; Herr & Wantanabe, 1979; Jepsen, 1981; Miller, 1981; Zaffrann & Colangelo, 1977). An evaluation survey by Colson (1980) of a community-based career education program for gifted adolescents supports the claim that career development needs of gifted students are not being met. None of Colson's respondents rated their school counseling as preparing them for post-graduation career choices. It is stated by Delisle (1982), a gifted and talented person, "Only recently upon reflection did I discover that my career choice was a matter of personal stamina and luck rather than conscious direction laid down by a significant mentor or guide" (p. 8).

It is important to note that the needs of the gifted are essentially similar to the career development needs of all adolescents (Kerr, 1981; Miller, 1981; Rodenstein, Pflieger, & Colangelo, 1977; Sanborn, 1979). While some concerns are not unique

to the gifted, they appear consistently, are more apparent and often occur in debilitating combinations which present unique career development problems (Kerr, 1981; Perrone, Karshner, & Male, 1979; Rodenstein, et al., 1977; Sanborn, 1979).

Herr and Wantanabe (1979) ask, "Can career education or career guidance refrain from becoming another form of pressure on the gifted to fulfill societal voids rather than their own needs?" (p. 261). Other issues that need further attention, according to Post-Kammer and Perrone (1983), include comparing the career development of the academically talented with average achieving students, heightening counselor awareness of career development needs of the gifted, and the career concerns of gifted females and other sub-populations such as handicapped and minorities.

#### Unique Career Development Problems of the Gifted

A number of authorities have specified problems they consider unique to the gifted. For example, Rodenstein, et al. (1977) reported four problems gifted students often experience in career development: multipotentiality, pressure of expectations, career as a life style, and career investment. Sanborn (1979) presented three problems that he defined as unique to gifted students in career development: multipotentiality, expectations, and investment. Based on these and other literature, the following four career development problems of gifted students will be

discussed here: multipotentiality, expectations, investment and the career problems experienced by gifted females. These problems are consistently noted in most literature and are frequently used as headings under which other career development problems are listed. For example, career as a lifestyle, which was listed by Rodenstein, et al. (1977), will not be included because it is infrequently listed by writers.

### Multipotentiality

Multipotentiality, defined by Fredrickson and Rothney (1972) as the ability to select and develop any number of competencies at a high level, is the most frequently observed characteristic of the gifted which is related to their problems in career development (Fox, Tobin & Brody, 1981; Herr, 1976; Kerr, 1981; Kerr, 1981; Sanborn, 1979). Although some gifted students show both ability and interest concentrated in a single area, the majority are identified as multipotential (Fredrickson, 1979; Hoyt & Hebler, 1974).

There are so many possible career options to pursue that gifted students may become confused and frustrated when they see no way to compromise or to combine diverse abilities and interests (Kerr, 1981). Jepsen (1979) presented three consequences of having multiple talents and interests: (a) the availability of a wide range of conventional options, (b) a high potential for cross-disciplinary options, e.g. law and medicine or business



and engineering, and (c) likelihood of many new and unforeseen career options in occupations entered.

The problem of career choice is not confined to identifying interests and relating them to occupational opportunities, but also to evaluating these multiple interests and ranking them in order of preference (Herr & Wantanabe, 1979). Multitalented students may place equal and immediate importance on all their interests and abilities (Marshall, 1981). Since most careers are capable of meeting only some of their multiple interests, it is necessary to differentiate between interests to be pursued in a career and interests for which outlets in avocational or other pursuits are to be found (Herr & Wantanabe, 1979). Faced with these pressures, a student may come to view his/her multiple talents and interests not as a positive, but as a negative characteristic.

Problems experienced by multitalented and gifted students can be multiplied by career education inventories, activities, and tests insensitive to discriminating between very strong interests and very high abilities (Culbertson, 1985; Kerr, 1981; Marshall, 1981; Miller, 1981; Sanborn, 1979; Willings, 1981). Hoping for a solution to their indecisiveness and confusion in making a career choice, such students find that, to their frustration, inventory profiles reveal they have at least average ability in nearly every category (Kerr, 1981).

Career educators can add to a multipotentially gifted student's career uncertainty by not responding to multipotentiality as a real problem. Such students need help to narrow lists of options, yet career educators frequently continue to expand on the lists without helping them discriminate more precisely their interests, levels of abilities, goals, and lifestyles (Jepsen, 1981). Lack of focus, encouraged in this way, may lead to avoidance of career decision-making or may compound indecisiveness, frustration and disillusionment with the career development process (Jepsen, 1981; Kerr, 1981; Marshall, 1981).

The "anything is possible" attitude on the part of counselors and other adults may leave gifted students with the idea that anything they aspire toward is attainable. Gifted students with this thought often reject or ignore any evidence of personal limitations when choosing a career path to follow (Perrone, et al., 1979). Often the gifted individual who had so many promising possibilities and dreams may end up in a career determined by financial need alone (Kerr, 1981; Kerr, 1981). Counselors, parents, and teachers, puzzled by the disappointing choice of career, fail to realize that multipotentiality is at the root of the problem (Kerr, 1981).

### Expectations

The career development process involves compromise between expectations and realities of the work world. That compromise

may be hard to accept for gifted students who have been led to believe they are destined to achieve power and wealth and to be great contributors to society (Kerr, 1981).

Possessing what others may see as unlimited potential, gifted students are vulnerable to pressures from parents, peers, teachers, and society to behave in certain ways or to perform certain roles (Herr & Wantanabe, 1979). Whitmore (1980) calls the unrealistic expectations of significant others "The greatest danger to the mental health of the gifted student" (p. 150). Such students are often in conflict between personal goals and societal expectations (Herr & Wantanbee, 1979; Perrone, et al., 1979; Sanborn, 1979).

The gifted often expect a career to be more than a job. A career frequently becomes a means of self-expression, a primary consumer of his/her time and energy, and an implementation of a philosophy of life (Culbertson, 1985). Whatever career path such a student chooses to follow brings the likelihood that someone will comment, "You could have done more," and this sense of disappointing others may transform into, "I could have been more" (Delisle, 1982, p. 9).

In addition to the conflict in reaching a career choice per se, pressures to conform to the wishes of others can cause gifted students to fear the future. This is grounded in feelings of being unable to meet success criteria set by others, being unable

to find roles compatible with their own values, or being unable to free themselves from the obligation to use their talents in the service of others or of society (Culbertson, 1985; Herr & Wantanabe, 1979).

Students being pressured by significant others may perceive their expectations as being unrealistically high and, as a result, develop a fear of failure or an avoidance of success behavior patterns (Herr & Wantanabe, 1979; Kerr, 1981; Perrone, et al., 1979). Frequently failure is perceived as unacceptable and such students may become paralyzed perfectionists, unwilling to pursue new or potential interests unless success is guaranteed (Whitmore, 1980). Willings (1981) refers to this fear of failure as fear motivation. In an attempt to escape the anxiety associated with failure, some will achieve considerable success. However, they receive in place of satisfaction of succeeding, only the satisfaction of not failing.

Parental expectations are usually the strongest influences for the gifted, who may become status symbols. Any youth can become a status symbol, but a gifted student is especially vulnerable and may be seen as a second chance for the parents to achieve something they themselves have not been successful at achieving (Bridges, 1973; Willings, 1981).

In summary, faced with high expectations from significant others and by society, the gifted are often overwhelmed. Instead

of helping the gifted student to choose the right career, set acceptable goals, and to have a satisfying life, often these high expectations cause the student to live out the fantasies or value sets of others in an unsatisfying and/or underachieving career.

### Investment

For a number of reasons, including restrictions on choice by significant others and by society, gifted students are more likely than are less able students to be involved in extended training and to pursue highly professional roles (Rodenstein, et al., 1977). In their pursuit of "acceptable" careers, the gifted must make long-term investments of time and financial resources, as well as have a willingness to defer gratification (Culbertson, 1985; Kerr, 1981; Miller, 1981). This long-term training often calls for heavy commitment, postponed marriage, financial dependency, indebtedness and educational pressures (Culbertson, 1985; Delisle, 1982; Sanborn, 1979).

Although the benefits to be obtained from long professional training may compensate for high investment costs, it may look like an eternity to a seventeen-year-old who must be prepared for extended training (Delisle, 1982). The extent of time needed to prepare for entry into his/her career increases the likelihood that changes in the chosen occupation and in the individual will occur before the point of occupational entry (Perrone, et al., 1979).

The expenditure of considerable time and financial resources also make it increasingly difficult to change career directions (Herr & Wantanabe, 1979; Hoyt & Hebler, 1974). The career choice of many gifted students turns from that of commitment to one of fear of default and increasing irreversibility (Culbertson, 1985; Herr & Wantanabe, 1979; Sanborn, 1979).

Research has documented that often the emotional development of the gifted does not keep pace with their intellectual development (Marshall, 1981; Miller, 1981). Gifted students are at least as emotionally mature as others of their age, but they encounter difficulty in making career decisions because of the kind of decisions they need to make.

Such decisions as long-term investments of time, for example, require adult competencies such as the ability to assess long-range consequences of actions and the ability to defer gratification (Kerr, 1981). Attainment of adult goals may conflict with meeting adolescent needs. A gifted student may pass up a chance to go to a better school so that s/he can be with friends. These students are being normal, responding to the emotional and social needs of all adolescents. Yet, meeting an adolescent's needs may conflict with the attainment of adult goals (Kerr, 1981).

Early occupational foreclosure is a response that may be related to emotional maturity. Occupational foreclosure takes

place when individuals make what they believe are irreversible occupational decisions without an adequate period of preparation (Kerr, 1981; Miller, 1981). Often the career chosen is one in which the gifted student has received considerable success and recognition (Perrone, et al., 1979). These students, upon deciding on an occupation, devote all their time and abilities to the pursuit of this one occupation. They may insist on taking only subjects related to the chosen field, constantly narrowing their focus of education and furthering their feelings of irreversibility (Kerr, 1981; Marshall, 1981).

Preoccupation with one interest does not solve the dilemma of career decision-making, but often shuts out opportunities for well-rounded career development. When students carry their independent activities to excess, they become, as described by Marshall (1981), "social isolates who are unable to communicate comfortably with the outside world" (p. 307). This isolation from others reduces opportunities to explore careers that might be developed as leisure options or later career options (Kerr, 1981). Marshall (1981) concluded, "Social development and effective communication are important aspects of vocational development" (p. 309).

In summary, the gifted are likely to incur high investment cost in their pursuit of a career. While the investment is usually considerable, it is not insurmountable as is frequently

thought by gifted students. Such students need to be encouraged to plan satisfying long-term instead of short-term goals.

### Gifted Females

Wolfe (1979) established the potential difference between gifted females, gifted males, and less able females that can lead to different career development processes. The findings of differences between gifted females and males is supported by Gowan & Demos (1964) and by Rodenstein, et al. (1977). It must be noted that similarities between these groups also exist. It is incorrect to infer that gifted females do not have career development problems and needs in common with other students. In fact, they share many common characteristics of gifted males and have much in common with other females. Still, there are unique problems that arise when combining giftedness with being a female.

Some examples of differences between gifted females and other females that create unique career development problems are given by Wolfe (1979). They include higher cognitive abilities, more dominant career orientation, less traditional sex-role orientation and a greater need to achieve in academic and occupational areas.

Gifted females often experience a marriage/career conflict that is more intense than those experienced by other females because of the high regard both they and others hold for their having a career (Miller, 1981; Rodenstein & Glickhauf-Hughes,



1979; Wolleat, 1979). Some gifted women may want to begin a career, but feel pressure from others to get married and have a family. Other gifted women want to start a family, but feel intense external pressure to pursue a career because of their giftedness (Zaffrann & Colangelo, 1977). Many gifted women view marriage and career as mutually exclusive (Marshall, 1982; Perrone et al., 1979; Sanborn, 1979). The result of this view is that often promising females forego careers completely, make unnecessary compromises, or opt for only part-time careers (Kerr, 1981). Women need to view their lives as a whole, not as segments (Zaffrann & Colangelo, 1977).

A study by Fox, Tobin, and Brody (1981) of very gifted females found that while 94 percent of the females surveyed wanted a career, 71 percent expected that they would work part-time or not at all when their children were young. Leland (cited in Fox, Tobin & Brody, 1981) surveyed the career goals of 3000 college students at six northeastern universities. An overwhelming majority of both males and females believed mothers should not work at all or only part-time until their children were five years old. While it is unthinkable for a gifted male not to pursue a career, it is normal for a gifted female not to be career oriented.

Expectations of the gifted are usually high, but possibly more tragic are low societal expectations. This is especially

prevalent in gifted females where often stereotyped attitudes are internalized (Kerr, 1981). Fox (1977) stated that gifted females make up the largest group for whom society has low expectations. These expectations often cause gifted females not to be identified as gifted by educators, counselors, and/or parents. As a result, instead of being told they can do anything they want, they are often overlooked. This can lead to underachievement and lowered career goals because such students may become convinced they have nothing to offer society (Gallagher, 1975; Kerr, 1981).

Morse & Bruch (1970) listed obstacles that can be barriers to career eminence for gifted females in childbearing years: lack of mobility, less specialization and getting a late start. Career goals are often put on hold until questions such as "Whom will I marry?," "Where will I live?" and "What kind of income will we have?" are answered (Wolleat, 1979, p. 336). If a gifted woman tries to combine a career and the traditional family role by leaving her job when raising children, she may find she has lost training opportunities and tenure (Kerr, 1981). Card, Steele and Abeles (1980) state that if she leaves for child rearing, she will not earn or achieve as much as men her age and will probably be playing catch-up with them the rest of her working life.

Another possible problem faced by gifted females is in marriage patterns in the United States. According to Wolleat

(1979), women marry men who are of equal educational level or of higher career status. Rarely do wives have a higher educational level or higher career status than do their husbands. Thus the possible number of compatible spouses for the gifted female is much smaller than for her non-gifted peers. The result of this is that many gifted females may delay making career choices until they have found partners (Wolleat, 1979). Wolleat & Rodenstein (cited in Sanborn, 1978) suggested that lack of specificity in the career planning process may lead to career pursuits characterized by low-level specialization and high levels of mobility.

A gifted female is often expected to succeed in the traditional masculine careers such as math and medicine, but at the same time to fit the traditional stereotypic feminine role. As a gifted student she is expected to be active, exploring, and assertive in her demands, to develop her talents and to be selfless in her energy use. As a female she is expected to be passive and dependent in her demands, and selfless, nurturing, and giving (Rodenstein, et al. 1977; Wolleat & Rodenstein, cited in Sanborn, 1976). Wolleat (1979) stated it best: "The female is placed in the position of being a healthy member of her sex (and an unhealthy adult) or a healthy adult (and an unhealthy female)" (p. 334).

As suggested by Wolleat and Rodenstein (cited in Sanborn, 1976), because achievement in high academic and professional

situations requires personal qualities erroneously labeled as masculine, the gifted female who chooses to pursue these paths may have doubts about her femininity. Also, research has shown she may be less confident of her abilities, particularly in fields which are considered masculine (Cassery, 1979; Wolleat, 1979; Wolleat & Rodenstein, cited in Sanborn, 1976). As noted by Meece, Parsons, Kaczaler, Goff and Fulterman (cited in Hollinger & Felming, 1984), females may choose to avoid achievement in math so as to protect their feminine images. Either poor performance in mathematics and science or avoidance of advanced course work in those areas may serve to block gifted females from various career choices. Underachievement in high school, while certainly not exclusive of gifted females, may predetermine later "underachievement" in career pursuits (Hollinger & Fleming (1984).

The multiple talents of gifted young women, along with pressure to conform to sex-role stereotypes can make the career development process very complex and difficult for them. Because of this, there is a clear need for development of career education program models and counseling strategies that address the special career development needs of gifted women (Fox, Tobin & Brody, 1981).

### Conclusion

In summary, this study examined career development problems unique to gifted students. A review of available literature

found that: 1) while the gifted share many career development problems with other students, they do encounter unique and debilitating combinations that are different, 2) their main problems are in the areas of multipotentiality, expectations, and investment, 3) gifted women have career development problems in addition to those of their female counterparts and of gifted males.

In working with the gifted in career development, the counselor needs to be aware of differences between the gifted and their less able peers and to adjust his/her approach accordingly. It is incorrect to assume that by virtue of their title gifted students are in control of their futures, since the opposite is frequently true. Because they are gifted, these students often have more career development conflicts and experience those conflicts more intensely than do other students.

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