
Predictable Crises of the Gifted Student

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The authors address the qualitatively different social and emotional experiences of the gifted student. Using a developmental focus, they identify and examine predictable crises. By anticipating these predictable crises, counselors can assist gifted students in developing the coping skills necessary for mastering each successive emotional and social passage.

In response to national "back-to-basics" issues, the recent emphasis of newly created programs for gifted students has been on a curriculum of accelerated cognitive development. The report, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), alerted educators that "over half of the population of gifted students do not match their tested ability with comparable achievement in school" (p. 8). Although this report dispelled the rumor that most gifted students excel academically on their own, the myth still persists that healthy emotional development among the gifted is automatic. The assumption that bright individuals can solve almost any social and emotional problem and find their way without help has been based partly on Terman and Oden's (1925, 1947, 1959) longitudinal research, which indicated that gifted children have fewer emotional problems than do other children. The generalization and oversimplification of these studies and the observation that gifted children often do not exhibit recognizable symptoms of emotional needs have resulted in low priorities for the special emotional and social needs of gifted students (Gallagher, 1980; Leaverton & Herzog, 1979; Thompson & Rudolph, 1983; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982).

According to Leaverton and Herzog (1979), gifted students are not, as many interpret from Terman's research, necessarily better adjusted than are children with average abilities. The gifted child has a more intense interaction with the environment, which creates additional conflict (Strang, 1960). Although gifted students have basic guidance needs similar to those of all students, they often must pursue these concerns at a more advanced level (Culross, 1982; Perrone & Male, 1980). To manage their gifts and talents and develop the human relations and leadership skills necessary to use their talents, they require guidance that may vary significantly from that required by other students.

In most guidance and counseling textbooks and in approaches and programs of gifted education, counseling is described as a remedial activity for students who have already exhibited problems. Developmental, preventive guidance is not a priority. The current emphasis of guidance for gifted education is on problems of underachievement and inadequate emotional adjustment rather than on preventing the evolution of these problems (Whitmore, 1980). If counselors simply intervene when crises occur in the lives of gifted students instead of being concerned with the continuing affective development of these students, the mental health needs of bright children will remain unmet (Culross, 1982; Dinkmeyer & Caldwell, 1970; Nelson, 1972).

Counselors understand that strong, healthy emotions, positive self-concepts, good communication skills, adequate coping strategies, and abilities to understand and accept others are essential attributes of a productive adult. Without the development of these characteristics, the creative, intellectual, and leadership potential of the gifted child will be wasted. It becomes the counselor's responsibility to communicate to educators the necessity of building strong affective bases for the intellectual and cognitive pursuits of gifted students (Colangelo & Zaffrann, 1979; Gowan & Demos, 1964; Jordan & Keith, 1965; Webb et al., 1982; Perrone & Male, 1980).

CRISIS: A SIGNAL

A review of the available literature concerning the needs of gifted persons reveals a rather predictable series of developmental crises experienced by most gifted students. Each crisis is a signal that a higher-order concept or skill is necessary to master successfully the next developmental challenge. These crises can become opportunities for future advancement. Rather than waiting for the crises of gifted students to manifest themselves through later serious problems, counselors can address the ongoing, predictable concerns of young people trying to manage their gifts and talents.

Five predictable developmental crises related to academic and eventual occupational success of gifted students are identified below. Awareness by educators, counselors, and parents of the expected obstacles can smooth the transitional crises of gifted children.

DEVELOPMENTAL IMMATURITY

The first predictable crisis tends to affect gifted boys at the onset of their formal education. Boys of primary school age are more likely than are girls to experience developmental lags that interfere with the ability to succeed in the tasks required in a traditional educational atmosphere (Cotter, 1967). Although the self-initiating, eager, curious, creative mind of the gifted boy is working overtime, his visual motor development may be delayed because of developmental lags or specific learning disabilities (Crippner & Hareld, 1964). Often, he lacks verbal-auditory discrimination practice (Treffinger, 1980). Whereas the preschool experiences and activities of girls are conducive to the primary verbal tasks of the classroom, verbal expressions of the rowdy, physical play activities of boys are often limited to "vroom-vrooms" of trucks and star wars. The result is often a confused, frustrated male student who is punished for his immature behavior and his inability to please the teacher by remaining calm and still during unfamiliar verbal activities.

Furthermore, the boy's enthusiasm for school often diminishes when he experiences difficulty in screening excessive stimulation and reacts with hyperactive and highly distracting behavior. Although supersensitivity of the nervous system is part of intellectual giftedness and later allows individuals to assimilate extraordinary amounts of sensory input, this supersensi-

tivity initially causes the gifted boy to pick up too many verbal and nonverbal messages (Cruickshank, 1963). Reinforced practice in screening out irrelevant stimuli and focusing on pertinent data helps in overcoming this delay in sensory discrimination and results in calmer classroom behavior.

Unfortunately, before the young gifted boy becomes developmentally ready for the traditional educational system, he may already have been labeled as difficult, immature, slow, or hyperactive (Whitmore, 1980). As a result, he may develop a poor self-image as a learner, leaving large amounts of highly charged creative energy to be channeled into nonacademic pursuits and possibly into destructive, counterproductive activities.

UNDERACHIEVEMENT: A LEARNED BEHAVIOR

A second predictable crisis affects both boys and girls in approximately the fourth and fifth grades as a tendency to underachieve or even to not achieve emerges through a counterproductive learned reaction to inadequate curriculum and emphasis on conformity. It has been reported that about half of the gifted students who score in the top 5% on individualized intelligence tests do not match their ability with comparable school achievement (Gallagher, 1975; Gowan, 1955; Terman & Oden, 1947).

Several reasons have been proposed for the failure of gifted elementary grade students to achieve their potential. One possibility is that underachievement stems from basic personality and social problems that have been present from a very early age. Many gifted students are especially sensitive to perceived personal shortcomings and discrepancies in their abilities (Strang, 1951). Underachievers have been found to differ widely from achievers in the development of traits such as self-confidence, persistence in accomplishment of goals, likability, and cooperation (Gallagher, 1975; Pirozzo, 1981; Terman & Oden, 1947).

Other investigators have found that gifted underachievers display negative, antisocial, self-defeating attitudes. Lacking a sense of internal control and personal power and projecting their troubles and faults onto others or fate, they often overlook opportunities to act in their own behalf to improve their situation. Many consider their world to be an unfriendly, unsympathetic place and feel unaccepted by family members and schoolmates (Cruickshank, 1963; Goldberg, 1965; Walsh, 1956).

Another source of underachievement or unachievement may be related to the pressures to conform placed on the gifted independent, divergent thinker. Gifted and talented students often initiate their own creative learning and seek the challenge of personally meaningful problems. Often this divergent thinking is misunderstood and creates problems for all concerned (Webb et al., 1982). Gifted students are not content merely to complete the exercises or activities included in most school curricula (Treffinger, 1980). Traditional teachers and school officials tend to emphasize convergent thinking and rote memory (Pirozzo, 1981). Consequently, bright students must often repress their curiosities and creative thoughts. Rather than conform, they may reject school programs. This apathy and unachievement can lead to social withdrawal, antisocial behavior, delinquency, and mental illness (Torrance, 1970).

Some gifted students resist these repressive, "busy-work" tactics less obviously. They sacrifice their curiosity, hide their talents, and blend into the average group, therefore avoiding the unrewarding extra work associated with finishing first. Failure to identify these gifted underachievers may result in their boredom with school and contribute to the large dropout rate in high school (Ming & Gould, 1973).

Unfortunately, an attempt to challenge the gifted student of elementary school age may result in further underachievement. An unrelenting focus on competition builds unrealistic, impossible standards for the brightest students. Gifted perfectionists

define success and being "best" as synonymous and therefore perceive any performance less than perfect or first place as a failure. Being supersensitive to criticism from self and others further exaggerates the pain of being second or third. For the gifted person in this highly competitive society, nonparticipation is preferable to losing. Therefore, many gifted students will choose the attention received from being rebellious or will withdraw and alienate themselves to avoid appearing imperfect (Delisle, 1982; Strang, 1951).

ADOLESCENCE: FEMALE FEAR OF SUCCESS

Fortunately, many gifted students will sail through the first two potential crises without a snag, coping and adjusting to the various demands of themselves and others. By adolescence, these bright students have established a standard of successfulness, appropriateness, and rational thinking. Regardless of these previously expected behaviors, the confusing effects of adolescence can become the third crisis for gifted students. Irrational mood swings, inconsistent behavior patterns, and tension about biological changes confuse the gifted student, who was previously skilled in rational problem solving. Gifted adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to the trials of adolescence as their social and physical development begin to take precedence over their intellectual and academic pursuits (Shaw & McCuen, 1960).

As a result of reinforced cultural stereotypes, the gifted adolescent girl is faced with conflicting social messages about success. Throughout their early school years, all gifted students are encouraged to achieve and compete for grades, and they are rewarded for accomplishments. Whereas adolescent boys continue to receive these messages, adolescent girls begin to receive encouragement to pursue popularity. Values such as marriageability, femininity, physical beauty and poise, modesty, dependence, unselfishness, and flexibility are stressed, whereas competition, especially against boys, receives less encouragement (Bruch, 1969; Gowan & Demos, 1964; Hyde & Rosenberg, 1980; Matthews, 1972).

These new social messages, which conflict diametrically with previous directions, often affect the desire to achieve among gifted adolescent girls. Approval of others, popularity, and marriage may come to constitute their concept of success, and they may be forced to choose between achievement and femininity. Many researchers believe that for gifted young women, academic and career achievement is a negative, painful, rejecting, isolating experience. This syndrome has been labeled *fear of success* (Horner, 1969).

Evidence of this predictable crisis for the gifted adolescent girl was reported by Terman and Oden (1925, 1947, 1959), who followed the progress of 1,000 gifted children into adulthood and found no difference in the incidence of giftedness (based on high IQ scores) among boys and girls. Although gifted adult women were generally found to be undistinguished professionally, high IQ scores showed reasonably close correlation with professional accomplishments among men. Most gifted women fail to develop their abilities to the maximum professional attainment as they respond to the pressures to conform to specific sex roles and fear success as an isolating factor (Angelino, 1979; Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Horner, 1969).

MULTIPOTENTIALITY: OVERCHOICE

Decisions indigenous to middle and late adolescence trigger a fourth predictable crisis, a problem disguised as a "world of opportunity." Making career and personal choices can be overwhelming to the gifted individual who experiences multiple interests and abilities. Most gifted individuals have interests in an array of possible occupations and the potential for success

in any one of them (Delisle, 1982). Hoyt and Hebler (1974) described the overchoice dilemma for gifted adolescents: "Nothing is so simple for me that I can do a perfect job without effort, but nothing is so hard that I cannot do it. This is why I find it so difficult to decide my place in the future" (p. 74).

As gifted adolescents attempt to live up to their potentials, they often experience many problems. Reacting to peer pressure and expectations of parents and teachers, some attempt to achieve all aspirations and goals. They fear that they will miss something or disappoint a mentor if they choose not to excel in a particular area. Because these students attempt to succeed at everything, their energy becomes so diffused that they are less likely to perform to their potential in any area. Being excessively self-critical, gifted individuals rarely respect their own mediocre performance. Ironically, those who learn to focus their energy and achieve in a particular area of interest often fail to feel the rewards of accomplishment. Instead, they may worry and feel guilty about the other areas of interest they did not pursue and the talents they did not develop (Khatena, 1982; Perrone, Karshner, & Male, 1979).

At this stage, stress can become a debilitating factor that affects the self-esteem and subsequent success of many gifted individuals. If gifted students are to understand the complexity of the vocational choices that confront them, it is important that they recognize that multipotentiality is a mixed blessing (Delisle, 1982).

NONSUCCESS: A NEW, DEVASTATING EXPERIENCE

The fifth crisis represents a predictable experience rather than an age. This obstacle may occur after gifted students have successfully mastered earlier crises, believing that they can handle anything. They graduate from their hometown high schools representing the upper level of intelligence, ability, talent, and leadership. Up to this point, they have managed to choose selectively and participate only in successful experiences. Self-assured, they approach the new environment—college, graduate school, or the job market—thinking that they are best at everything they do.

In the face of stronger competition and higher goals, success becomes more expensive. The experience of being average or even of failing is incomprehensible to the gifted student. Having had only the self-image of perfection, they are often devastated by not performing at the top. They may become "paralyzed perfectionists," unwilling to pursue any new experience unless success can be guaranteed (Whitmore, 1980).

Whereas individuals of average to low ability expect to make mistakes and may have learned early in life to accept defeat as a learning experience, gifted individuals may have no previous experience with nonsuccess. Lacking the flexibility of younger years to bounce back and the personal understanding of the valuable lessons to be derived from mistakes or failures, they are slow to recover and are frequently blinded to the positive challenges of these obstacles. Tragically, they may never see that opportunities are often disguised as crises or failures.

CRISES AS OPPORTUNITIES: DEVELOPMENTAL COUNSELING GOALS

If these students are to survive the crises of growing up gifted, they must have the support and skills needed to convert each predictable obstacle into a challenge. A developmental approach to providing guidance is essential to meet the additional social and emotional needs of gifted and talented students. The inclusion of such a guidance program can be the determining factor of a successful academic curriculum designed for these students. The following are goals for building strong affective bases for the intellectual and cognitive pursuits of gifted students:

- Healthy, realistic self-esteem based on a clear understanding of strengths and weaknesses
- A healthy sense of responsibility for development not contingent on fate or actions of others
- Internal motivation and evaluation through deemphasis on competition with others and encouragement of personal goal setting and self-evaluation
- Concept of self as a continual process rather than a finished product
- Understanding of the needs and motivations of themselves as well as others and use of empathy and identification skills to develop cooperative rather than competitive spirit
- A sense of acceptance of mistakes, resulting in pride in learning from errors and reduction in fear of failure
- Brainstorming and problem-solving skills to enhance naturally divergent creative thinking
- Assertive behaviors in communicating with others about differences and concerns without being aggressive and obnoxious
- Methods of using frustration and stress in creative ways to avoid burnout
- Ability to accept help as well as give it to learn something from all persons, regardless of their level of intelligence, talent, or skill
- A sense of humor about themselves and the events outside their control, allowing them not to take everything so seriously as to be debilitating and self-defeating

The gifts and talents of bright young people are the greatest natural resources available. Without the skills to cope with their gifts, they may echo the words of the sage philosopher, Charlie Brown: "There is no heavier burden than a great potential." With guidance and nurturing, these students will become the leaders of the future, capable of solving with insight, creativity, and sound judgment their problems and challenges.

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