

# The Use of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone to Discuss Identity Development With Gifted Adolescents

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This article examines the process of identity development in gifted adolescents and provides a theoretical and research-based explanation of its importance for influencing achievement and quality of life in adulthood. Teachers, counselors, and parents can use *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997) as a springboard into discussion of identity issues with adolescents, helping them to understand and successfully negotiate the challenges of this phase of life. The article describes the theoretical rationale for such an approach, outlines some practical issues involved, and closes with a sample lesson plan of a session suitable for gifted middle school students.

"So," said Dumbledore, slipping off the desk to sit on the floor with Harry, "you, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised."

"I didn't know it was called that, sir."

"But I expect you've realized now what it does?"

"It—well—it shows me my family—"

"And it showed your friend Ron himself as head boy."

"How did you know—?"

"I don't need a cloak to become invisible," said Dumbledore gently. "Now, can you think of what the Mirror of Erised shows us all?"

Harry shook his head.

"Let me explain. The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is. Does that help?"

Harry thought. He said slowly, "It shows us what we want . . . whatever we want . . ."

"Yes and no," said Dumbledore quietly. "It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts" (Rowling, 1997, p. 213).

**T**here is no crystal ball or magic mirror for adolescents to look into to show them who they are. Although most children find the passage from childhood to adulthood to be stressful and sometimes difficult, gifted adolescents may face unique challenges with few resources. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997) contains a great deal of content that can be valuable to teachers, counselors, and parents of gifted children and adolescents. It can be used as a springboard into discussion of many of the issues that challenge the lives of gifted adolescents, such as perfectionism, friendship, isolation, the meaning of giftedness, expectations of others, and identity development.

Harry Potter is a misunderstood and maltreated orphan boy. Upon his 11th birthday, the truth about Harry's parents and his own destiny are revealed to him when he is mysteriously invited to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry is informed that he is a famous wizard because, as an infant, he survived a magical attack that killed his parents and severely injured his attacker, an evil wizard known as Lord Voldemort. At Hogwarts, Harry encounters flying brooms, mountain trolls, unicorns, potions, and, most importantly, other children like himself. Harry makes friends with Hermione and Ron, who are the first friends Harry has

ever had. Hermione is an intelligent, determined, and somewhat bossy girl who is often criticized for her academic intensity. Ron is insecure about his poverty and following in the footsteps of his successful brothers. Harry, Ron, and Hermione grow throughout the book, and they learn the importance of friendship and bravery.

The focus of this article is on identity development. Harry looks in the mirror and is surprised to see his deceased parents. Because Harry does not yet know who he is, he desperately desires to learn about his past. Everything that he knows about himself is secondhand knowledge. Similarly, gifted adolescents beginning the process of identity development must learn to deal with the varying and sometimes conflicting messages about identity from many sources: parents, teachers, coaches, community and religious leaders, the media, and peers (Glaeser, 2003). They are eager to begin the process of deciding just who they are and what they want to become.

## Identity Development

Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development describes identity development as the primary task of adolescence. Identity development involves deciding who one is and what one is going to be for the rest of one's life. The challenge for youngsters in this stage is to separate themselves from the family psychologically and to establish their own independent identities. Unfortunately, adolescents cannot look into the Mirror of Erised to see who they are and what they want. They must decide for themselves who they will be through a process of exploration, which can cause conflict with parents and other authority figures. Some of the "big questions" of life will be answered during this stage. Adolescents must try to build philosophical frameworks to guide their lives, but this is difficult given that they do not have much life experience from which to base their decisions (Buescher, 1985).

Erikson (1968) believed that psychosocial development proceeds through a series of stages, each defined by a particular crisis. For example, the primary developmental stage of adolescence is known as "identity vs. identity confusion." Rebelliousness and doubt define this crisis period (Wires & Barocas, 1994). If adolescents are successful in defining themselves, they will have a solid base from which to address later developmental challenges. If adolescents are not successful, they will not have a clear understanding of who they are and will experience ambivalence, discomfort, and confusion when making important life decisions. The degree to which people successfully move through the developmental stages is determined in part by how thoroughly they completed previous stages. Thus, failure is cumulative (Erikson). The adolescent crisis involves the conflict between identity and identity confu-

sion. A successful resolution of this crisis will leave the adolescent with a firm sense of self and lasting personal identity, but failing to resolve it will lead adolescents to experience lasting confusion about themselves and their places in society (Erikson; Zuo & Tao, 2001).

Continuing Erikson's work on identity, Marcia (1966, 1980) created a classification system for describing the developing identity. He described four possible identity statuses, defined by the intensity of exploration of possible identities and commitment to a particular identity. Individuals who are in *identity achievement* have successfully negotiated the crises. They have engaged in an adequate amount of exploration or "trying on" of possibilities and have successfully made a commitment to a unique identity. Individuals in *identity moratorium* are still in the process of trying on possible identities and are not yet prepared to make a commitment. Individuals in *identity foreclosure* have made a commitment to an identity, usually one that is expected by others, without having engaged in enough exploration to make an informed decision. Finally, individuals in *identity diffusion* have not engaged in exploration or commitment. It is questionable whether those in identity diffusion have really begun the process of identity formation.

Some evidence suggests that adult emotional well-being and achievement may be powerfully influenced by the degree to which the identity crises were successfully completed in adolescence. Zuo and Tao (2001) analyzed case study and interview data collected from Terman's (1925) sample of gifted children and looked for evidence of identity exploration and commitment. Based on this data, they classified the sample into Marcia's four identity statuses. The results of their analysis indicated that conformity was seen most often in the identity foreclosure group, while those in the identity diffusion category showed higher levels of inferiority and lower levels of self-confidence, persistence, and purposefulness.

Furthermore, Zuo and Cramond's (2001) analysis of Terman's (1925) data indicated that the highest achieving subsample of Terman's participants was predominantly comprised of identity achievers, while identity diffusers dominated the lowest achieving group. Interestingly, there was no significant difference in IQ between the two groups, so the achievement differential appears to have been caused by nonintellective factors (Terman & Oden, 1959; Simonton, 1997).

A strong sense of self seems to offer protection from psychological stressors (Hébert, 1996). Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that adolescents who have not yet reached the stage of identity achievement and therefore do not have a solid sense of who they are experience enhanced vulnerability to psychological and social stressors. If the crisis is successfully negotiated, adolescents will emerge with a firm knowledge of who they are and what they want and will be equipped to work hard, make reasonable sacrifices for their goals, and intensely

focus their energies on chosen life tasks. Failure to resolve the crisis successfully can leave adolescents in a sea of confusion regarding who they are and what they want. They may not be able to complete later developmental tasks until the question of identity is resolved (Erikson, 1968).

### Unique Qualities of Identity Development in the Gifted

The gifted may experience unique difficulties associated with identity development. First, the gifted may begin the process of identity development sooner than their nongifted peers. Silverman (1997) highlighted three points relevant to this discussion regarding the unique qualities of psychological development in the gifted populations. First, she argued that gifted children might experience the developmental timetable at an accelerated rate. If this is true, gifted adolescents might begin the process of identity development at an earlier age than other children. Second, the gifted may experience heightened sensitivity, so the usual emotional turmoil and vulnerability associated with this process may be exacerbated. Finally, because giftedness or intellectualism is often not valued or accepted in adolescent culture, gifted children may have to choose between fulfilling their social needs and fulfilling their intellectual needs.

Why might gifted children experience an advanced developmental timetable? Zuo and Tao (2001) suggested that formal operational thinking is a necessary prerequisite for the process of identity formation. Morelock (1996) and Silverman (1993) argued for a resurrection of the interpretation of IQ scores as an index of "mental age," which they argue is more descriptive of the likely level of cognitive development than chronological age. Thus, an 8-year-old with an IQ of 150 would have a mental age of 12 and would therefore be likely to have entered Piaget's formal operations stage. Silverman's observations on the difficulties posed by asynchronous development are salient. Given that identity exploration requires a level of autonomy more often associated with the teenage years, young children who begin the process of identity formation early are not likely to be able to realize identity achievement successfully until this autonomy is granted.

Another facet of giftedness that may complicate identity development is heightened emotional and moral sensitivity. Many researchers and theorists in gifted education have noted the presence of heightened sensitivity in gifted populations (Gross, 1993; Hollingworth, 1942; Lovecky, 1994; Morelock, 1995; Roeper, 1995; Silverman, 1994). Silverman (1993) pointed out that "gifted children not only *think* differently, they also *feel* differently" (p. 3). This heightened intensity of affect and increased moral sensitivity can create a unique vul-

nerability in this population. Clearly, any increase in emotional sensitivity would intensify the already intense feelings of confusion and angst that accompany the process of identity development.

Adolescents are painfully aware of their differences from others, and many act to minimize these differences. Due to the anti-intellectualism of contemporary U.S. society, it comes as no surprise that giftedness is often not valued in the adolescent peer group. As a result, gifted children are often victims of social sanctioning. Gross (1989) described the "forced-choice dilemma" that many gifted adolescents must face. If gifted children decide to fulfill their intellectual needs, especially if they choose to do so in school contexts, they risk losing intimacy with their peers due to misunderstanding or resentment. If gifted children choose to fulfill their intimacy needs, this sometimes means that they must adopt a mask to conceal their intellectual interests.

### Guided Reading and Guided Viewing

There are ways for teachers, counselors, and parents to help adolescents cope with the difficulties of identity formation. The term *bibliotherapy* refers to any process of using written material to foster social, emotional, or psychological growth (Halstead, 2002). The most common type of bibliotherapy is clinical and involves the use of self-help books to augment psychotherapy or counseling. Another type of bibliotherapy, more aptly referred to as *developmental bibliotherapy*, uses fiction to address normative social and developmental concerns of people at all levels of development. Such an approach is suitable for classroom teachers, parents, or counselors to address the developmental needs of gifted students.

In the process of developmental bibliotherapy, readers create connections between the characters and events in the book with events and people in their own lives. The information and understanding engendered by this interaction may then be used to cope more effectively with difficult situations or emotions. Guided reading allows students to vicariously gather the life experience that is crucial to the exploration of identity formation.

Shrodes (1949) identified four stages of this process. In the first stage, *identification*, readers recognize the similarities between themselves and the characters in the book. The second stage, *catharsis*, occurs when readers vicariously experience the emotions of the characters in the book. *Insight*, the third stage, is reached when readers reflect on the identification they feel with the characters and situations in the book. The final stage, *universalization*, occurs when readers apply their new understanding to similar situations in their own lives.

For instance, a gifted female student whose relationship

with her peers is suffering due to her intellectual interests may begin to notice similarities between her own experiences and the experiences of Hermione, a bright female character in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997). The student might experience the emotions of Hermione when she is rejected by Ron, another character in the book. The student might feel comforted in knowing that she is not alone in her experience. Her reflection on Hermione's successful resolution of the conflict between her giftedness and her desire to fit in might lead the student to experiment with new ways of dealing with her peers that allows her to fit in without sacrificing her intellectual interests.

A closely related concept is the idea of *guided viewing of film*, a term coined by Hébert and Spiers Neumeister (2001), which consists of developmental bibliotherapy using films instead of books. Newton (1995) and Milne and Reis (2000) provided a theoretical rationale for the use of film with gifted students. Shrodes' (1949) stages seem to be just as applicable to film as they are to books. The use of guided viewing may appeal more to visual learners since they involve multiple senses, and adolescents may be more receptive to discussing sensitive issues through film because film occupies such a central place in popular culture (Newton, 1995). Students with visual learning styles may gain more from viewing a film than they would from reading a book. Another key advantage to using guided viewing is the ease of administration. Teachers will appreciate knowing that all the students in the class are familiar with the material instead of hoping that all of the students actually read the book. A possible disadvantage to the use of guided viewing is that books may invite more intense levels of identification and catharsis for some students. Additionally, since reading a book generally takes longer than watching a movie, the issues presented in the book may occupy the students' minds for a longer period of time, allowing more time for insight to occur. Introverted students may prefer to experience the book in private and may connect more intensely to the material in this way, while extraverts may find the group experience more enjoyable.

It is clear that both approaches have advantages and disadvantages. With *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997), which is available in both written and video formats, teachers will not have to choose one approach over the other. Both formats will allow students to experience vicariously the conflict and emotions of the characters, and both will allow students to apply this knowledge to their own lives.

The appeal of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997) for gifted students has already been noted in the literature (Gross, 2002). This story should be particularly interesting to educators of gifted students for several reasons. First, the "Harry Potter phenomenon" is very powerful in youth popular culture. Millions of children have already read the books, seen the

movies, or both. Second, Harry Potter deals with issues of identity development. Over the course of the books, readers get to see Harry, Ron, and Hermione learn who they are and what is important to them. In this way, the characters provide role models (albeit fictional ones) of people successfully negotiating the challenges of identity formation. Third, one can view the "magic" aspect of Harry Potter as a powerful metaphor for giftedness. Fourth, Hermione, one of the characters in the book, is clearly academically gifted. The audience gets to see Hermione resolve her issues related to giftedness and belonging. Finally, gifted children seem to be attracted to science fiction and fantasy. They enjoy learning about new worlds that do not follow the same rules as ours. The expression of fantastic elements such as mythical characters or settings is an aspect of creativity that is considered on the Figural version of the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking to be an indicator of creativity (Torrance, Ball, & Safer, 1992). Dabrowski's (1967) theory of positive disintegration describes the tendency for gifted individuals to possess active imaginations, love poetic language and imagery, and enjoy fairy tales and magic (Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984). For these reasons, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is an excellent book or film to use in a guided reading or guided viewing session with gifted students.

### Facilitating Discussions on Identity Development: The Details

Teachers, parents, or counselors who wish to use developmental bibliotherapy or guided viewing of film with adolescents should consider Hébert and Spiers Neumeister's (2001) guidelines for facilitating a guided viewing session with gifted children. Although the guidelines they proposed were specifically applicable to film, the same guidelines could apply to guided reading.

Before sharing a film or a book with students, educators must be aware of its content and how it might be perceived by the children. Facilitators should introduce the content by referencing any naturally occurring situation that has inspired them to select the film or book. For example, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997) would be an ideal selection to use when teachers or counselors notice that many bright girls in the class are masking their intelligence in order to fit in with their peers. For guided viewing, this could take place prior to the viewing session; for guided reading, it could take place either prior to assigning the book or prior to the discussion. The facilitator must assist the students in reaching identification, catharsis, and insight by connecting the experiences of the characters in the book or film to the experiences of the students in the classroom. Furthermore, the guided reading or guided viewing session can be used to inspire frank and hon-

est classroom discussions in which gifted students can talk about the salient developmental issues in their lives and learn that they are not alone in these experiences.

As Hébert and Furner (1997) wrote, "To simply read a good book with an entire class is not bibliotherapy" (p. 172). Proper discussion and follow-up activities are required if the activity is to have the desired impact on the students. The facilitator should prepare an insightful, sensitive menu of questions for discussion that will allow the participants to comfortably, yet meaningfully, explore the presented issues. The early questions should be nonthreatening in order to establish a comfort level (a sample set of discussion prompts and activities can be found in the Appendix to this article). For example, in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997), the first-year students are sorted into one of four dormitories or "houses" based on their personalities. This is accomplished by letting each child try on a magical "sorting hat" that examines the child's personality and decides where he or she belongs. A good beginning discussion question could ask students to imagine that they have been given a chance to try on the sorting hat and to consider the qualities and strengths it might find notable.

Later questions may address more sensitive issues (Hébert & Spiers Neumeister, 2001). Facilitators must help their students maintain an appropriate level of self-disclosure. If a student begins to excessively self-disclose personal information that could create issues with peers or parents, facilitators must be prepared to "cap" the discussion by skillfully and smoothly changing the subject to take the attention off the student (Halstead, 2002).

Facilitators should also provide follow-up activities to enable children to process the issues in the film or book. It is certainly possible for either the content presented or the discussion following to create strong emotional responses in the students. Therefore, follow-up experiences must be crafted to help students deal with and process their emotions and insights. A well-designed follow-up consists of hands-on activities that allow students to process their feelings about the experience. It should allow the conversations to continue and should encourage the students to support each other. It is enjoyable for the students, and it will help them reflect on the connections between the content and their own lives. This will allow them to apply more effectively their new insights to daily living.

## Conclusion

Adolescence is often a difficult time. The process of identity development can be challenging for all students, and giftedness can exacerbate these difficulties and introduce new ones. Those who successfully complete the identity development

stage will be well prepared to address subsequent life challenges (Erickson, 1968; Zuo & Cramond, 2001). Developmental bibliotherapy and guided viewing of film are strategies that teachers, parents, and counselors can use to help students progress through this stage (Hébert & Furner, 1997; Hébert & Spiers Neumeister, 2001). *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997) is a powerful story that lends itself well to these approaches. It is popular with students, humorous, honest, and engaging. With guidance, students can apply the lessons learned by Harry and his friends to their own lives.

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## Appendix Lesson Plan

### Anticipatory set (Before reading Book or Viewing Movie)

Use the Internet or a dictionary to find out the meaning of the characters' names and then discuss what you would expect the characters to be like as a result of the meaning of their names. 1) Filch, 2) Lucius Malfoy, 3) Voldemort, 4) Fluffy, 5) Madam Pince, 6) Slytherin, 7) Dumbledore, 8) Hagrid. Then, look up your name and write a one-page response on whether the meaning of your name matches your personality and actions.

### Discussion Questions

1. In the story, the first years at Hogwarts are sorted into the four houses by the sorting hat based on their personalities and strengths. Imagine that you are a new student at Hogwarts. What strengths and personality traits do you have that the sorting hat would see? What house do you think it would assign you to? Which one would you want to be in? Are those the same or different? How does the match or mismatch of your desires reflect your identity?
2. Imagine that being a wizard or a witch as presented in the book could be a metaphor for being gifted. What are some of the challenges that the characters face in the story? How do these challenges parallel challenges you face as a gifted individual?
3. Hermione is very clearly a gifted girl. In the book, we see that Hermione's giftedness and perfectionism sometimes cause tension in her friendships. Why do Harry and Ron not enjoy Hermione's company early in the story? What are the benefits of perfectionism for Hermione? Is perfectionism a bad character trait? Can a reasonable amount of perfectionism be healthy? Have you ever felt that your giftedness has had a negative impact on an important personal relationship? What happened and what did you do about it?
4. Aunt Petunia clearly resented her sister for being a witch and getting to go to a special school. How do your siblings and friends feel about your special classes or your

special talents? How does this affect your view of yourself?

5. How could Hermione change her interactions with others in order to be more liked? More importantly, should she? Have you ever had to mask or hide aspects of yourself to gain approval? How was this received by others? How did you feel during and after the process?
6. Harry, Hermione, and Ron each have different gifts and strengths. They use these gifts collectively in order to defeat Voldemort and save the day. How can you use your special gifts to help others? Is it important to do so? What are areas that you may need to rely on other people's gifts to achieve success?
7. Even though Harry and Ron are friends, Ron feels jealous of Harry when he gets chosen to be the Seeker of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Have you ever felt jealous of a friend who got a special opportunity? How did you deal with your jealousy? How did this situation affect your self-concept?
8. Neville Longbottom stands up to Harry, Ron, and Hermione when they sneak out. As a result, Harry and company are forced to paralyze Neville temporarily. At the end of the book, when the points are awarded, Neville's act of bravery wins the cup for Gryffindor. Have you ever had to stand up against your friends? What happened? How did you feel?
9. How do the Dursleys and Draco Malfoy represent intolerance of others? How does their intolerance mirror the intolerance of people in our society? How have you been personally affected by intolerance? Is standing up to intolerance an important trait to you? Why?
10. Quirrell says, "There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it" (p. 291). What does this statement say about Quirrell's morality? Do you agree with the statement? Do you think many people in the world would agree with the statement? Is morality or power more important to you?

### Follow-Up/Extension Activities

1. Make a list of your strengths and gifts. For each one, list a possible way to use that strength to help someone else. Then, explain why you think this is or is not an important part of your identity.
2. Design an advertising campaign to promote the election of the character you most align with by making a poster, a radio or TV commercial, a newspaper ad, a bumper sticker, or a button. Be sure to represent a clear view of the character's identity and traits.
3. Select the character from the story that is most similar to you. Write a short story of how he or she would fit in your shoes or how you would fit in his or her shoes.
4. Create the application that a character you have just read about could write and submit to a college. Use all of the information you know and infer and create the rest. On the application, include name, high school courses taken and grades, extracurricular and personal activities, and work experience. Choose one of the following questions to answer from the character's point of view:
  - a. What experience, event, or person has had a significant impact on your life?
  - b. Discuss a situation where you have made a difference.
  - c. Describe your areas of interest, your personality, and how they relate to why you would like to attend this college.
5. Develop a character crest or coat of arms (characteristics, what defines the character's identity, setting or environment, any notable aspects of life). Be sure to include a motto.
6. Complete each of these ideas with a written response with respect to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and your personal life: This character made me 1) wish that, 2) realize that, 3) decide that, 4) wonder about, 5) believe that, 6) feel that, 7) hope that.
7. Draw a picture of what you would see if you looked in the Mirror of Erised. What does the picture of your desires say about you?

