

Editorial: The Public and Professional Perception of the Emotional Status of Gifted Children

James J. Gallagher

The public perception of the emotional status of gifted children and adults has been transformed several times over the past half century. A similar shift has been true of professional educators as well. This special issue of the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* is devoted to bringing additional information on this topic. This paper is designed to set the stage for the rest of the issue by reviewing the general topic area.

Before any serious attempt at research was available on the emotional status of gifted children there were many different opinions on the topic. One prevailing view was that giftedness might be linked to insanity, an idea proposed by the distinguished criminologist, Lombroso (1891).

Also, since gifted individuals became more prominent and well known to large numbers of people, any personal problems they might have, such as Van Gogh's psychosis, would be magnified in the public's perception. An easy link was drawn between great talent and emotional instability.

Yet there is another factor that may account for why such views are easily accepted. Such views as the link between giftedness and insanity fit into a primitive concept of *equity*. That is, if a person has a great many talents and gifts in one area, it is only "fair" that they should have some disability, as well, to balance it off. This view is represented by the direct challenge that the Supreme Being would not be so unfair as to give a multitude of talents to some individuals and a multitude of deficits to others!

James Gallagher is Kenan Professor of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, 27514.

Journal for the Education of the Gifted. Vol. 13, #3, 1990, pp. 202-211. Copyright © 1990, The Association for the Gifted, Reston, Virginia 22091.

Longitudinal Studies

The work of Terman and his associates (see Terman and Oden, 1947) largely tended to dispel this earlier belief. This longitudinal study tracing the lives of almost 1500 gifted students over a fifty year span was probably the most monumental research effort in the field of the gifted. It is no surprise that the findings from this enormous source of information on the development of gifted individuals largely dominated the professional landscape over the past several decades. Terman set out to identify a population of gifted students through their performance on a test he himself developed, the Stanford-Binet intelligence test (Terman 1916). Those students who scored in the top 1% of the population (with an IQ of 140 plus) were chosen for the sample of gifted students.

Terman and his associates attempted to categorize the emotional status of gifted students through the use of rating scales and self report scales. He concluded that the gifted individuals in his sample were not significantly more emotionally disturbed than the general public. As a matter of fact, on various indicators of social popularity and satisfaction with one's self they tend to be superior to the average student.

Of course whether we are pleased with the result that gifted samples are no more emotionally disturbed than the norm group depends upon how healthy the norm group is! If nearly everyone in the norm group feels under stress and unable to perform effectively then it is small comfort that our group of specially gifted students matches those results.

For nearly three or four decades the results of the Terman study became the new wisdom and gifted students were expected to be more emotionally mature, more socially accepted and have a better self image than the average student. Several studies with the same essential designs tended to confirm the Terman data (Gallagher and Crowder, 1957).

Subotnik, Karp, & Morgan (1989) followed up 156 men and women who had graduated from the first ten classes of Hunter College Elementary School, a school for gifted students in New York City, using some of Terman's original rating scales. Although there were some differences that could be attributed to geography and to time (only 1.2% of the women Hunter graduates were housewives as compared to almost 50% of Terman's group) the findings paralleled Terman's results. The vast majority of the Hunter graduates en-

gaged in professional occupations and generally felt good about their work.

Less than 10% of the Hunter group said they had had difficulty in the area of mental health. Both the Terman and Hunter groups, "evolved into productive professionals with good mental and physical health and stable professional relationships" (p. 76).

Terman had only one reservation to his findings of superior adjustment and that was that students who were extraordinarily high in ability might have special problems adapting or fitting into the general population. Hollingworth (1942) suggested the same problem for students with very high ability in her classic book, *Children Over 180 IQ*. She commented that these students had to learn the difficult lesson of how "to suffer fools gladly."

Design Flaw

However, a closer examination of these research studies has identified a specific flaw in the research design. That is, the vast majority of families in which these gifted children were discovered by these methods were of a high educational attainment and economic success. Many of the breadwinners in the family were successful businessmen, physicians, lawyers, and other high ranking professional and scientific persons in their field.

They, thus, created an environment which would make more likely, although not guaranteed, a positive result in social acceptance and emotional status. As one wag once put it, "Money may not buy happiness but it certainly makes your miseries more comfortable". A much ignored study by Bonsall and Stellfre (1958) in which she controlled her sample for social class, found no essential differences in the emotional and social status of gifted students from the average student. This opened the question as to whether the superiority in these mental health dimensions was due to their more favorable family environment, as opposed to being linked in some way to their intellectual giftedness.

While many of the characteristics attributed to gifted students might seem to be the responsibility of the social class and ethnic groups that they come from, there may be one personality characteristic closely linked to giftedness, that of *perfectionism*. (See Adlerholt-Elliott, 1987) The desire to always be correct no doubt stems, in part, from the track record of excellence that the student has established in school and in the family over many years.

It is expected that there will be a perfect score on the tests, or all As on the report card. After a while the student begins to expect

perfection of themselves, particularly after an unbroken string of successes in the early grades. Such a striving to be always the best and without error runs into a progressively more and more difficult situation as the courses get more difficult and the student is expected to be innovative and creative in addition to being a collector of facts.

Since creative thinking almost always requires wrong answers or false starts as a part of the process, the student who has perfectionism as part of their personality is placed in a stressful situation where it is necessary to maintain the fiction of perfect performance to maintain one's reputation.

Problem of Averages

When the emotional status of a group, any group, is being discussed the results are presented in *averages*. The fact that gifted children, as a group, are less depressed does not mean that there are *no* depressed gifted children. This accounts for the reaction from many teacher groups when such a general statement about the superior mental health of gifted students is made. "What about Sally?" one teacher asks, since everybody in the school knows what a mess Sally, a clearly gifted girl, is making of her life. The answer of the scholar is that the general principle still holds and Sally is atypical of the group pattern.

But, what about Sally? Surely we need an effective counseling service to be as concerned for her as for the other students they are trying to help. It is a concern that busy counseling programs may underestimate Sally's need since she is gifted. (Willings, 1985).

Supersensitivity

Recently, some observers, impressed with a theory by Dabrowski, have suggested that the very characteristics which make these students outstanding in academic performance might also lead to special adaptation problems. The ability to see relationships and to integrate knowledge across disciplines is one of the clear talents of gifted students. Their ability to anticipate the future and their mental ability to create alternative worlds account for the great popularity of science fiction among such students (Gallagher, 1985).

However, the ability to see the future also carries with it the potential of being depressed by what you see. Several studies (George & Gallagher, 1978; Landau, 1976; Clark & Hankins, 1985) explored the attitude of gifted students towards the future. They were asked

in both studies whether they felt the future was bright or dark, and what reasons they gave for their view. In both studies, one in the United States and one in Israel, gifted students turned out to be *more pessimistic* about the future than did the average student and they were able to give a number of clear reasons why they felt pessimistic.

These gifted students have learned well some of the themes that have gained prominence in the media such as the potential destruction of the environment, the rapid increase in world population, the potential for a disastrous war, the impact of drugs on society, etc. The pre-adolescent student of average ability was much more immune to these ideas and had more faith that a good future lay ahead of them, personally and societally.

The Presence of Guilt

One other dimension of the gifted student's emotional status is the potential for the development of substantial guilt feelings on the part of such students. Many of these students perceiving themselves to possess so much talent and capability have to wonder, "What did I do to earn so much talent, while others of my classmates have so little?" In some ways, it is like the reaction of persons who have, through sheer luck, survived disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes and tornadoes while others around them have perished. They tend to ask "Why was I saved when others as worthy as myself perished?"

The guilt feelings that come from being given outstanding talent through no action of their own can be compounded by some common experience many gifted students have in school. It is not unusual for students to get A's and to be extensively praised for performance that they themselves know is far less than their best effort. Not only are they "unworthy" because of receiving unusual talent, but unworthy again because that talent is being substantially underused.

A recent experience of the author in evaluating a program in a special school for highly gifted students yielded further information on this topic. When students attending a special and rigorous school were asked how much homework they did in the public school they had attended prior to this special program, they stated that they did little or no homework. What homework they did was done easily in the classroom while they were waiting for the other students to catch up.

When asked how much homework they were doing in this spe-

cial school, they stated that they were spending perhaps two and half to three hours a night at their homework. Interestingly enough, these statements were not often made with resentment. On the contrary the dominant feeling expressed among these students was that, for the first time, they were being asked to use all of their talents to the maximum and they felt relatively good (i.e. not guilty) about the new challenges they faced. (Gallagher, Coleman, & Staples, 1989).

For many years the question of the emotional status of gifted individuals has intrigued both the general public and the professional educator. Which pattern is more typical and to be expected? Are the psychotic episodes of Van Gogh or the depressions of Edgar Allen Poe and Hemingway the norm of the gifted, or is the solid family responsibility of Bach, or the broad ranging contributions of a Jefferson more to be expected?

Underachievers.

One of the puzzling subgroups in the gifted area is the "gifted underachiever". There is a widespread observation starting with Terman and his associates but continuing through other observers such as Whitmore (1980) and Butler-Por, (1987) that there is a link between poor self concept and low achievement on the part of gifted students and adults.

But this is a classic chicken-egg problem. Does the poor achievement cause the poor self concept, or does the poor self concept result in poor achievement? For example, Kaiser & Berndt (1985) sought indicators that were predictors of loneliness in the gifted adolescent. In studying summer Governor's school junior and senior high school students, ages 14-17, they concluded that the majority of gifted adolescents are exceptionally well-adjusted and find their success goes hand in hand with a healthy self confidence and self esteem.

Nevertheless, nearly one in eight of the gifted students reported not only significant loneliness but depression and anger (p. 76). There is a link between symptoms of helplessness, introversion, guilt and low self esteem in such children, who consequently need help from counseling.

Although one need note that most of these studies had samples that were composed of effective gifted students who made it in those programs because they were academically efficient, there is little evidence available to contradict the overall pattern of group good adjustment and less stress, with those outstanding exceptions noted here.

A recent review of related literature by Bandura (1989) has suggested that there is a complex interweave between these two elements, that is, poor achievement tends to confirm a low self concept, while the low self concept tends to result in poor achievement, and thus the cycle of non-productivity continues.

Stress and Coping

The increasing stresses of modern life had been commented on by many observers. The instability of family life, the increasing effect of drugs and the uncertainty about the future have created a new environment which places more emphasis on the coping skills of individuals. The gifted student is not immune to these stresses. The important question is, does their high mental ability allow them to cope more effectively with such stresses?

Hill (1949, 1958) and McCubbin (1979) have developed a model for coping with stress which includes three major factors, each of which contributes to the likelihood that the individual can respond effectively to the stress. The first of these factors is the nature of the stresser itself and how severe it is. A life threatening illness is surely more stress producing than a severe cold, all other factors being equal. The second factor is the amount of resources, both personal and social, that the individual can call upon to deal with the stress. The presence of an extended family or a support network of friends can ease the influence of stress. The third factor is the perception of the event by the individual. What one person sees as a disaster another person may see as a challenge. Two people can react quite differently to the identical stress such as failing an exam or having a parent suddenly die. The birth of a handicapped child can be seen in one family as an unmitigated disaster while in another family it can be seen as a challenge provided by God, honoring that family with that challenge.

Coleman (1990) has conducted a study on coping skills by comparing a group of pre-adolescent students who are both gifted and learning disabled, with a similar group of students who were identified as learning disabled, but with average ability. Those learning disabled students who were gifted did not appear to possess any unique coping strategies beyond that possessed by the average students, but did appear to be more effective at using the coping abilities that they had and felt better about the results of their handling difficult situations than did the average student.

Research Needs

There is much "current wisdom" abroad in the field regarding the emotional status of gifted children that has little supporting research. It would seem essential for us to pursue some of these major questions to determine if, in fact, our current understanding, or current wisdom, is supported by evidence.

1. *Does the perception of the gifted underachiever have a substantial influence on their academic inefficiencies? With an expectation of low performance it is possible that what teachers and psychologists would call inefficient performance is perfectly satisfying to the student.*
2. *Is it true that gifted students are more responsive to treatment of anxieties or the remediation of inefficient strategies than the average student? Their ability to use language should make them more responsive to traditional methods of counseling. We do know that it is extraordinarily difficult to modify the coping patterns of gifted underachievers but can the manipulation of linguistic symbols change the behavior of the gifted students?*
3. *Does the impact of increased sensitivity to events create greater stress for the gifted individual?*
4. *Does their ability to imagine future events create additional concern and worry on the part of the gifted individual, when those future events are seen as negative?*

At this writing, the amount of evidence dealing with these and many other problems in this area is hardly impressive. Given our track record of past misunderstanding or misjudgment on the emotional status of gifted students, it would seem even more important for us to add definitive research evidence to either confirm or modify our current views. It will be difficult to organize effective educational services without more insight into the true nature of this component of gifted children.

References

- Adderholt-Elliott, M. (1987). *Perfectionism: What's bad about being good?* Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

- Bandura, A. (1989). Human agency in social cognitive theory. *American Psychologist*, 44 (9), 1175-1184.
- Bonsall, M. & Stellfre, B. (1955) The temperament of gifted children, *California Journal of Educational Research*, 6, 195-199.
- Butler-Por, N. (1987). *Underachievers in school: Issues and intervention*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Clark, H. & Hankins, N. (1985) Giftedness and conflict. *Roeper Review*, 8, 50-53.
- Coleman, M. R. (1990). Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
- Gallagher, J. (1985). *Teaching the gifted children: 3rd edition*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Gallagher, J., Coleman, M., and Staples, A. (1989). The North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics: An evaluation study. Chapel Hill, NC: Carolina Institute for Child and Family Policy.
- Gallagher, J., & Crowder, T. (1957). The adjustment of gifted children in the regular classroom. *Exceptional Children*, 23, 306-312, 317-319.
- George, P., and Gallagher, J. (1978). Children's thoughts about the future: A comparison of gifted and non gifted students. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 2 (1), 33-42.
- Hill, R. (1949). *Families under stress*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Hill, R. (1958). Social stresses on the family. *Social Casework*, 39, 139-150.
- Hollingworth, L. (1942). *Children above 180 IQ*. New York: World Book.
- Horowitz, F., & O'Brien, M. (Eds.) *The gifted and the talented: Developmental perspectives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Kaiser, C., & Berndt, D. (1985). Predictors of loneliness in the gifted adolescent. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 29 (2), 74-77.
- Landau, E. (1976) Children ask questions about the future of mankind. In J. Gibson & P. Chennells (Eds.). *Gifted Children: Looking to the Future*. London, England. National Association for Gifted Children. Anchor Press, Ltd.
- Lombroso, C. (1981). *The men of genius*. London: Walker Scott.
- McCubbin, H. (1979). Integrating coping behavior in family stress theory. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 42, 237-344.
- Schneider, B. (1987). *The gifted group in peer group perspective*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Subotnik, R., Karp, D., & Morgan, E. (1989). High IQ children at

- midlife: An investigation into the generalizability of Terman's genetic studies of genius. *Roeper Review* 11 (3), 139-144.
- Terman, L. (1916). *The measurement of intelligence*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Terman, L., & Oden, M. (1947). *Genetic studies of genius Vol. 4. The gifted child grows up*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Whitmore, J. (1980). *Giftedness creativity and underachievement*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Willings, D. (1985). The specific needs of adults who are gifted. *Roeper Review*, 8 (1), 35-38.