Psychological and Social Aspects of Educating Gifted Students

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This article discusses salient components of the research base on the psychological and social aspects of educating gifted students in three areas: the psychological and social needs of gifted students, school-based issues common to gifted students, and the social coping strategies gifted students employ in school settings. An information management model (IMM; Coleman & Cross, 1988) is discussed as a means to anticipate and understand gifted students' psychological and social experiences and behaviors. Practical recommendations enabling teachers, parents, and counselors to provide effective guidance for gifted students complete the manuscript.

"I'm different you know; you show intelligence and you're outspoken and people tend to isolate you and put a label on you." (This is an excerpt from an interview with a gifted student [Cross, Coleman, & Stewart, 1993].)

The previous quote represents one person's experience of being a gifted student in school—a social handicap. The psychological and social lives of gifted students have been the subjects of research in the field of gifted education. For example, issues such as the effects of labeling on gifted students (Colangelo & Brower, 1987; Hershey & Oliver, 1988; Kerr, Colan-
gel, & Gaeth, 1988), the stress gifted students experience (Baker, 1996), the social problems gifted students describe (Betts, 1986; Kunke, Chapa, Patterson, & Walling, 1992; Tomchin, Callahan, Sowa, & May, 1996; Webb, Meckstroth, and Tolan, 1982), and the suicidal behavior that gifted students exhibit (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996; Delisle, 1982) have been examined. In addition, researchers and theorists have also been exploring other perspectives of the psychological nature of gifted students. For example, Cross et al. (1996), Piechowski (1991, 1997), and Silverman (1993) have been interpreting and testing the utility of Drabowski's (1967) theory of personality, the only psychological theory specific to gifted development (Silverman, 1993).

Although there is no paucity of publications on the social and emotional needs of gifted children, a review of 270 manuscripts published between 1952 and 1996 identified only 59 (21.85%) including empirical data (Gust, 1997). Of those with data, few publications reported on carefully controlled studies, and consequently, definitive characterizations of the psychological and social needs of gifted students do not exist.

The purpose of this article is to discuss salient components of the research base on the psychological and social aspects of educating gifted students. To that end, three areas are included: the psychological and social needs of gifted students, school-based issues common to gifted students, and the social coping strategies gifted students employ in school settings. After these areas are discussed, an information management model (IMM; Coleman & Cross, 1988) is presented as a means to anticipate and understand gifted students' psychological and social experiences and behaviors. Recommendations enabling teachers, parents, and counselors to provide effective guidance for gifted students complete the manuscript.

Psychological and Social Needs of Gifted Students

The research base in this area considers needs as a byproduct of one of two possibilities. The first is that needs in the psychological domain will exist as a function of specific characteristics gifted student often possess. For example, excessive self-criticism is a personality characteristic that causes a child to experience the world in a certain way. In the child's experience, this quality reflects needs they have. The second way psychological needs emerge is as issues that become relevant as the child interacts within a specific environment. For example, a child who has perfectionistic tendencies and who exists in a school environment that encourages competition might experience a greater sense of self-doubt or poor self-image due to the personal struggle that is associated with that personal characteristic (per-
fectionism) as it interacts with that specific setting. In other settings, the characteristic may not exist as a psychological need per se. Issues are examples of larger, more general concerns gifted students have in school. For example, a common issue for gifted students in school is learning how to adapt to the expectations that exist within a school’s social milieu.

Basic Needs

When considering the psychological and social needs of gifted students, one must realize that they are children first. Hence, the issues and needs that exist for them will often reflect those relevant to their respective age groups. Moreover, many of the needs these students have in this domain exist or are exacerbated because they are children (Webb et al., 1982).

A second important consideration is that many of the psychological and social needs of gifted students are the same as those for nongifted students (Coleman, 1985). Therefore, attending to their needs as children first by focusing on the issues associated with normal development is a good place to start, but knowing the specific need areas unique to gifted students will enhance one’s ability to meet their psychological and social needs more fully.

An appropriate organizational structure for considering this area is to divide the needs into two categories: endogenous needs and exogenous needs (Webb et al., 1982). Endogenous needs are those that originate from the characteristics of the individual. Hence, the needs exist as a function of the gifted child’s characteristics exclusively. Exogenous needs differ from endogenous needs in that exogenous needs exist primarily from the gifted child’s interaction with an environment. In essence, exogenous needs are needs that emerge as byproducts of the interaction of specific characteristics of the child with the environment; they do not, however, necessarily exist across differing environments.

Endogenous Needs

The first set of needs to be noted did not emerge from the research in gifted education; however, they are findings and theories that look at the nature of people generally and, as such, are foundational to the more recent research in the gifted education field. They are also quite important because they provide a framework from which we can interpret the role of the needs that follow. Perhaps the most significant theory underpinning much of the research in gifted education is Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1970). The theory asserts that people have several basic needs that must be satisfied
before they can ascend to the higher tier needs. In the hierarchy—just after
the first (physiological) and second needs (safety)—there are two needs
relevant to the psychological and social domain: the need for belongingness
and love (level three) and esteem needs (level four). According to the theory,
gifted children would have to have satisfied these two needs in the psycho-
logical and social realm before they would be able to move toward self-ac-
tualization. The satisfying of needs consumes time and energy. In a very
practical sense, the more time one spends trying to satisfy the lower level
needs on Maslow’s hierarchy, the less time and energy can be spent oper-
at ing at the higher levels, which are generally more closely associated with
being a successful student. Counselors, teachers, and parents must make
regular assessments of where on the hierarchy (in this case) gifted students
are. By maintaining the well-being of the students, the facilitation of their
psychological and social development becomes possible. An example of
this theory’s efficacy is in the United States government’s continued fund-
ing of the Head Start Program to guarantee that children from modest
means have sufficient nutrition and sustenance to help them satisfy their
basic needs as they prepare for school. This commitment has existed for
over 2 decades and at a cost of billions of dollars. Few people would doubt
the importance of children being ready to learn in the early grades in school
as an important factor in their later success as a student. Maslow provided
a theory that explains readiness as a function of satisfying biologically based
needs. Because researchers in gifted education focus their efforts on identi-
fying and nurturing those students capable of manifesting extraordinary
levels of performance, respecting the relationship between the most basic
to the most advanced drive states as motivating human behavior (as
described by Maslow’s hierarchy) is a natural fit. Maslow’s hierarchy also
establishes a baseline for understanding all people by recognizing the
connections among physiological, safety, belongingness and love, and es-
teem needs. Creating environments that encourage maximizing human
potential necessarily must take these needs into account.

One of the difficulties for educators and counselors when trying to help
gifted children is that Maslow’s hierarchy considers a person’s develop-
ment across the life-span and, therefore, exceeds regular school years.
Hence, even though there exist in gifted children needs for belonging, love,
and esteem, they will not likely be fully realized until the adult years.
Despite the fact that little research has been conducted specifically testing
the utility of Maslow’s hierarchy with a sample of gifted students (e.g.,
Karnes & McGinnis, 1996), the theory emphasizes the importance of schools
providing a safe and accepting atmosphere where academic successes are
supported and consideration is given to the fact that gifted students, like
all students, need to feel like they belong and have a positive self-image.
Recently, several researchers have been exploring the efficacy of Drabowski's (1967) theory of personality as a means for understanding gifted students (Cross et al., 1996; Mendaglio, 1995; Silverman, 1993). Piechowski (1997, 1986) has been the leader in forwarding the basic tenets of the theory that has two components: overexcitabilities and levels of development. In his theory, Drabowski posited that gifted individuals manifest supersensitivity (translated into English as overexcitabilities) in several areas: psychomotor, intellectual, sensual, imaginative, and emotional. Overexcitabilities are described as expanded awareness, intensified emotions, and increased levels of intellectual and physical activity. The research in this area shows early promise in greatly expanding the understanding we have about gifted students in the psychological and social domain. For example, it should not be surprising to see a young gifted child being very upset by social injustices around the world. The level of emotional intensity might appear more common to an adolescent than an elementary-aged child. Understanding that these strong reactions are an aspect of their gifted personality rather than a behavioral or emotional disorder has implications for teachers, counselors, and parents (Mendaglio, 1995).

Perhaps the most common topic appearing in the research that considers the endogenous psychological and social characteristics and needs of gifted students is that they have uneven development; sometimes called asynchronous development (Delisle, 1992; Silverman, 1993). This can be seen in differences between the level of their general aptitude, or specific aptitude, and other aspects of their development such as their physical abilities or social and emotional development. Many in the field believe that asynchronous development represents a need in and of itself, regardless of the student's environment.

Another common psychological need described in the literature emerges from gifted children's tendency toward perfectionism (Webb et al., 1982). Perfectionism is being dissatisfied with the difference between one's ideal performance and one's perception of his or her actual performance. This characteristic is also described as having unreasonably high expectations for one's performance. Numerous manifestations of problems have been attributed to perfectionism, such as high levels of stress, uncompleted projects, and an unwillingness to engage in risk-taking behaviors (Baker, 1996).

A third common psychological need of gifted children results from their tendency for excessive self-criticism (Anderholt-Elliot, 1987). This need emerges from their pattern of being highly critical of themselves when they fall short of accomplishing an ideal performance. Because they may also have perfectionistic tendencies, their self-assessment will often be very disappointing, yielding the excessive self-criticism.
Another often discussed characteristic of gifted students is called multipotentiality (Silverman, 1993). Multipotentiality describes how many gifted students show great promise and interest in numerous areas. Being successful in numerous areas is very difficult and requires vast amounts of time and commitment to each area. When combined with any of the previously mentioned endogenous characteristics, multipotentiality often becomes problematic in the lives of the gifted students, as it can lead to higher levels of stress and emotional upset.

**Exogenous Needs**

As noted previously, exogenous needs emerge from the characteristics of the person within the culture, norms, and expectations of a specific environment; they are not extant characteristics of the individual per se. In this article, the discussion is limited to the psychological and social needs of gifted students in a school environment. Before discussing characteristic interactions in school, one should note that all the previous endogenous characteristics and needs may exist within the school setting, and because each school has its own personality and distinct social milieu, it is difficult to accurately predict whether or not a particular gifted student will thrive or struggle due to psychological and social issues (Cross, Coleman, & Terhaar-Yonkers, 1991). It is, however, reasonable to illustrate commonalities to gifted students' experiences and how they evolve over time. Perhaps the most common example of a gifted child's exogenous characteristics leading to psychological or social needs emerges from their need for academic engagement interacting in a school environment not accepting of students who are very serious about learning (Cross, Coleman, & Stewart, 1995). What emerges from this interaction can be any of the following in the social domain: need to feel accepted, need to affiliate with other gifted students, and need for recognition of accomplishments. In short, studies have shown that exogenous needs emerge from the characteristics the gifted child has in either their psychological or intellectual domains, interacting in an environment that is perceived and or experienced by the child as at odds with their nature (Cross et al., 1991, 1995; Cross & Stewart, 1995). The same qualities the individual gifted student has in a different environment may not manifest in psychological and social needs.

**School-Based Issues Common to Gifted Students**

The experiences of gifted students in school are similar to those of nongifted students, as schooling is largely a social enterprise. During the
early grades, the curriculum is relatively undifferentiated, and students generally are less aware of each other’s differences (Maltby, 1985). Children’s interactions are somewhat limited by the structure that keeps cohorts of students together. Consequently, academic differences are less obvious than in later years. Young students are also less aware of their surroundings because they tend to be more egocentric than in later life. Given these characteristics of elementary schools, giftedness exists as only one of many important qualities that are used to distinguish among students. Making the experiences more complicated for gifted students are two very important differences from their nongifted peers: (a) their capacity to understand academically sophisticated concepts (e.g., algebraic formulas) beyond what is typical for their age and other topics (e.g., feelings) at an age-appropriate level; and (b) the fact that giftedness, unlike other differences among groups of people (e.g., race, physical handicaps), is not visible; it can be hidden.

During elementary school, gifted children, like all children, learn how to be students within their particular school’s environment. They pay attention to the messages sent to them by students, teachers, and other adults. They come to understand, through their own experiences and through vicarious learning, what happens when students act in certain ways (Bandura, 1986). Of course, all these perceptions are being developed through the eyes of a child. In short, their understanding of how to be a gifted student is being learned in the environment in which they are schooled. Because their experiences outside school will either generally support or confuse their understanding, they tend to adopt certain patterns of behavior they believe to be adaptive while in their specific school setting (Cross et al., 1991). For example, gifted students often cope with stresses associated with giftedness by attempting to “work hard and achieve, focusing on solving the problem, physical recreation, seek relaxing diversions” (Tomchin, Callahan, Sowa, & May, 1996, p. 23).

To research the social coping strategies of gifted students, a stigma of giftedness paradigm (SGP) was created by Coleman (1985), based on Erving Goffman’s (1963) seminal book *Stigma*. The revised SGP has three basic tenets: (a) gifted students want to have normal social interactions (normal is based on an idiosyncratic definition); (b) they learn that when others discover their giftedness, they will be treated differently; and (c) they learn they can manage information about themselves that will enable them to maintain a greater amount of social latitude (Cross et al., 1991).

In studies testing the efficacy of the SGP by asking students to describe the experience of being a gifted student in school, researchers reported that many gifted students either feel stigmatized or potentially stigmatized by their giftedness (Coleman & Cross, 1988; Cross et al., 1993) and that they
have specific strategies for managing the stigma of giftedness (Cross et al., 1991). Additional studies have considered subgroups within the population of gifted adolescents in terms of self-perceptions of their own social integration in school (Cross et al., 1995). In these studies, some students indicated an awareness of their giftedness at an early age. In their accounts of an early recognition of being gifted, students indicated that they became aware of possible undesirable consequences of being known as gifted (Cross et al., 1993). They described being embarrassed when used as examples for other students, confused when students taunted them, and upset when told by the teacher that he or she was disappointed in them due to a test score, answering a question in class incorrectly, or any number of other "failures." In short, evidence emerged that suggested that early experiences gifted students have in school may either directly or vicariously be negatively impacting their psychological and social development by influencing their patterns of behaviors into coping strategies.

Situations in School When Gifted Students Feel Vulnerable

In 1991, a study was published that described six situations in school when gifted students felt aware of their giftedness to the extent that they often engaged in social coping strategies (Cross et al., 1991). The scenarios were created from interviews of a number of adolescent gifted students (Coleman & Cross, 1988). The following are examples of times when gifted students perceive themselves as vulnerable to the expectations of others while in school. The most commonly discussed situation in which gifted students felt vulnerable was immediately after test results were given and classmates were discussing both their experience of taking the test and their test performance (biology exam). See Figure 1 for a complete description of the biology exam scenario. The second most often noted scenario was in class when a specific piece of information was being asked for by the teacher during a class lecture (class lecture). A third common scenario involved a school day when a substitute teacher was present and a student was acting out in the class (substitute teacher). The fourth scenario involved a student being faced with an opportunity to engage in a social activity with friends or to stay after school for an extra-credit work session (extra credit). The fifth scenario involved students making fun of a slow student (Ted). And finally, the sixth scenario involved a group of students comparing test scores (test scores). After the scenarios were created, social coping strategies described during the interviews were standardized and included with each scenario. Examples of their claimed behavior patterns are discussed later here.
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In the cafeteria line, several people from your class are discussing the biology exam.

Tracy: Man! Wasn't that test impossible? I must have spent 10 minutes trying to label that crazy diagram of the muscular system.
Chris: I blew the whole thing, even though I studied really hard.
Marti: I probably failed it too.
Marti says to Jon, "I bet you breezed through it and didn't even open the book to study." Actually, Jon had spent several hours studying and thought it wasn't a difficult test. If you were Jon, which would you be most inclined to say?
  a: "I thought it was kind of easy." [TRUTH] b: "I probably studied as hard as you did, but the test wasn't too hard." [PLACATE] c: "How long did you study?" [COP-OUT] d: "I probably studied as long as you did." [COVER-UP] e: "Yeah, that exam was a pain." [LIE]

Figure 1. Biology exam scenario.

Social Coping Strategies Gifted Students Employ in School Settings

To cope with the perceived expectations within the six scenarios noted earlier here, gifted students described five categories of behaviors in which they engaged. The strategies represent behaviors that were placed on a continuum of visibility (Cross et al., 1991). The continuum (see Figure 2) attempted to represent the possible range in the goals for the coping behaviors from telling the truth and thus standing out from the group to lying in an effort to blend in totally with other students. The researchers named the categories: truth (saying what is believed to be true), placate (telling the truth only after efforts are made to play down a perceived differentness), cop out (an attempt to redirect the conversation from oneself to another person), cover-up (saying something on the basic topic being discussed but specifically avoiding answering the direct question), and lie (saying something directly opposite of what is believed to be true; Cross et al., 1991). The scenarios were presented to over 3,000 gifted students. The researchers found that gifted adolescents do significantly vary their coping strategies based on their interpretations of expectations within each scenario and based on their desires to reach their social goals. These reported coping patterns are considered behavioral manifestations of their social cognition and evidence that their social goals affect their behaviors in school.
Additional studies have illustrated other examples of social coping behaviors (Cohen & Frydenberg, 1996; Tomchin et al., 1996). For example, Coleman (1985) listed the following as ways gifted adolescents try to cope with the expectations of others: not admitting a test was easy, being non-committal about accomplishments, avoiding answering questions about moral or ethical concerns, asking questions in which you know the answer, not volunteering answers, going out on a date with a "dumb" kid, and not telling your age if you are accelerated (pp. 182–183). These examples are described as methods for blending in with other students.

In another list, Coleman (1985) illustrated how gifted adolescents try to be disidentified with gifted students. To that end, they are seen with people who are not gifted, who ask silly or crazy questions, or who tell jokes; go out for extracurricular activities for which they have little talent; are very pleasant; claim a test was very difficult; feign interest in small talk; or make fun of other gifted kids (p. 182). These two lists of social coping strategies demonstrate how a great deal of time, energy, and worry are being consumed in an effort to survive in the social milieu of schools.

One of the most detrimental coping mechanisms academically gifted students employ is underachievement. Determining the exact incidence rate of underachievement is quite difficult (Rimm, 1997). According to the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), approximately half of identified gifted students do not achieve commensurately with their measured ability. Given the belief among many in the field that we tend greatly to underidentify gifted students from minority backgrounds, the actual underachievement rates may be even greater than 50%. Moreover, the underachievement does not end by grade 12. Evidence also exists that of the total group of students who drop out of high school, 10% to 20% are identified as gifted students (Lajoie & Shore, 1981). Rimm (1997) attributes the underachievement patterns to issues related to their home, school, and peer environments. Rimm claims that the three main pressures gifted underachievers feel include the following:

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Truth Placate Cop-out Cover-up Lie

(1) the need to be extraordinarily intelligent, the "smartest," or both; (2) the wish to be extremely creative and unique, which can translate into nonconformity; and (3) the concern with being admired by peers for appearance and popularity. (p. 416)

Rimm (1997) claims that the pressure gifted underachievers feel actually comes from internalized stress they put on themselves because they are gifted and because they have been admired by adults in society for their academic accomplishments. She goes on to say that the internalized stress does not tend to originate from the gifted child's parents. When these experiences occur in a school with an anti-intellectual milieu, social coping becomes a common remedy to the lack of acceptance (Cross et al., 1991). Underachieving can be interpreted as a coping strategy. The most severe coping strategy is to end one's life purposefully. Suicide rates are growing in various subgroups of society, and it is currently the second leading cause of death among adolescents (Felner, Adan, & Silverman, 1992). Moreover, the incidence rate of suicide has grown among adolescents from the 1950s (Holinger, Offer, Barter, & Bell, 1994). According to Smith and Crawford (1986), 10% of all adolescents attempt suicide. Incidence rates for attempting suicide appear to increase significantly across groups of adolescents who would be described as at-risk students. Among this group, 33% of troubled adolescents attempted suicide (Tomlinson-Keasey & Keasey, 1988), as did 61% of a group of juvenile offenders (Alessi, McManus, Brickman, & Grapentine, 1984). Salient risk factors for suicidal behaviors include psychiatric disorders; family relations; family history of psychiatric disorders, suicide, or both; drug abuse, alcohol abuse, or both; environmental stressors; exposure to other attempts; social isolation; homosexuality; prior suicidal behavior; and firearms that are present within the home (Dixon & Scheckel, 1996; Holinger et al., 1994). Despite the growing knowledge base about adolescent suicides, very little research exists that sheds light on the suicide of gifted adolescents (Cross et al., 1996).

A recent study involving the psychological autopsies of gifted adolescents who committed suicide (Cross et al., 1996) attempted to discern whether giftedness influences suicidal behavior. Drabowski's theory (1967) was used to interpret the data collected. In addition to several of the aforementioned correlates of suicide as agents in the cases examined, evidence emerged that the overexcitabilities, which Drabowski described and which some in the field of gifted education have forwarded as endogenous characteristics of gifted students, were potentially influential in the suicidal behavior. Hence, endogenous characteristics of gifted students when paired with correlates of suicide may be seen in time as potentially
lethal combinations or as identifiable warning signs that may be helpful in preventing suicides.

In short, from underachieving to suicide, gifted students cope with their environments in many ways. Some are relatively positive behaviors, whereas others are life threatening. Counselors, teachers, and parents are facilitators of our society's children. To be successful in their task, they need to understand the research base pertaining to the psychological and social nature and needs of gifted students and how the school environment affects their behavior.

**IMM (Coleman & Cross, 1988).** The IMM (see Figure 3) provides a useful visual to illustrate the temporal nature of the interactions gifted students have in and outside of school. Each point (as noted with the letters A, B, C) in the model represents a situation when gifted students make decisions about how to cope with their giftedness. The model relies on a social cognitive framework (Bandura, 1986), which posits that people are active agents in their experiences in the world. Their social goals are considered important to their subsequent behaviors. The IMM is helpful in understanding the interaction between the endogenous characteristics of gifted students and their experiences within their school environments.

To understand the IMM, one should read from left to right, first noticing the child approaching a specific setting (e.g., school) that in the student's mind has certain social expectations for him or her. As part of raising children, parents and teachers tend to expend a great deal of time and energy teaching them how to act/behave in different settings (e.g., school church, in a restaurant). As the child comes to understand school, much of what is being discerned is how they should behave in this particular setting in order to be successful. Mediating a gifted student's behavior in school is his or her self-perception about whether or not he or she feels different from other students in the school. In the IMM, if they do not feel different (point A on the IMM), then they will have little need to develop social coping strategies. There is evidence that some gifted students do not feel different from their nongifted peers (Coleman & Cross, 1988; Cross et al., 1995; Manor-Bullock, 1995).

At the next decision point (B) on the IMM, there are gifted students who do feel different but do not develop social coping strategies per se. This point is arguable because many forms of coping strategies are quite subtle and may originate as a strategy and later become a common part of the child's behavioral repertoire. For example, focusing on school work (Tomchinh & Openheimer, 1996) can be a social coping strategy that later becomes more a part of the child's regular behavior and less of a strategy.
Figure 3. From “Is Being Gifted a Social Handicap?” from L. Coleman and T. Cross, 1988, Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 11, p. 44. Copyright 1988 by the authors. Reprinted with permission.
Continuing across the IMM, one arrives at point C. This is where a gifted child feels different and engages in social coping strategies that can be characterized as falling on a continuum of visibility (Coleman & Cross, 1988; Cross et al., 1991). The continuum of visibility (see Figure 2) is a construct that draws on the work of Erving Goffman's stigma theory (1963). The continuum reflects that as people act they reveal social goals that range from standing out further from other groups of students (high visibility) to becoming invisible (blending in with other groups). In the middle of the continuum is a place reserved for strategies (disidentifiers) that attempt to convince other people, by association, that the gifted student is really more like a group of students stereotypically not thought to be gifted (e.g., burners, doper, skate boarders, jocks) than he or she is like gifted students (Coleman & Cross, 1988; Cross et al., 1991). Combined, the behaviors of gifted students in school mirror their self-perceptions in terms of feeling different or the same and how they choose to act in order to maintain as much social latitude as they desire. Their self-perceptions and subsequent behavior patterns also reflect their social cognition and the social milieu of the school. The SGP in concert with the IMM provides useful tools for understanding why gifted students make certain choices about how to cope in school.

Providing Effective Guidance to Gifted Students: Charting a New Course

What can teachers, counselors, and parents do to guide gifted and talented students in school relative to their psychological and social needs? The following strategies include some ideas for us to begin utilizing immediately, whereas others will require training. Given the serious consequences of failing to effectively guide gifted students, it is important that those involved strive to implement the following suggestions.

The first set of strategies represents those that might be intuitive when discussing students of average academic ability but tend to be overlooked when we think of gifted students. Perhaps the most important thing the three groups (parents, teachers, counselors) can do is remember that the child is a child first. It is quite common for adults to forget that the young person they are dealing with is, in fact, a child. Expectations can never transcend maturation. Treat children as young people first and deal with their specific gifts second. Do not treat the child as only his or her gift. As children, their giftedness may play a very small to a very large role in their self-perceptions of worth and self-concept. Focusing exclusively on the gift is similar to focusing only on a person’s skin color, height, or size of ears.
Giftedness, although clearly a dynamic characteristic, has an origin in genetics. Hence, one cannot be held accountable for a quality or characteristic. What they can do, however, is mask or hide their giftedness. How many artists, scientists, and mathematicians were never identified and their talent never developed due to the interaction of their endogenous characteristics and the expectations in a school setting in which they perceived it too risky to be outstanding? According to Rimm (1997), many gifted students underachieve due to adult figures focusing attention on their academic achievement without recognizing the entire child.

In recognizing the entire child, it is important that each party has a clear understanding of the child and the goals the teachers and parents have for the child. Because it is common for the three groups (parents, teachers, counselors) to have different goals, each can never have a complete picture of the child without communicating with the others. The importance of communication between the three groups of adults cannot be underestimated.

Parents and teachers can help gifted students by seeking outside experts. Many gifted children will need opportunities to develop in general or specific academic areas that lie outside the purview of the school. For example, providing mentor relationships can address many of the psychological and social needs of gifted students, for they enable the gifted student to grow and be challenged by an adult who represents a successful model for the student. Understanding the difficulties associated with a given profession allows many important lessons to be learned by the student outside the school setting. This can lead to a reduction of perfectionistic tendencies or excessive criticism. These relationships also provide a setting in which the gifted student can learn that opportunities for failure are necessary in the development of advanced understanding. School settings are often too central to the self-concept of gifted students for them to embrace failure actively as a part of learning. Exploiting the relationship of a mentor can allow the gifted student to explore and take desirable risks that help them develop in the psychosocial domain.

The second set of recommendations is, perhaps, less intuitive and may require the three groups of adults to seek additional training and information about gifted students. For example, teachers and counselors should try to assess the social milieu of the school. This can be much more difficult than one might think. In my many years of observing classrooms, I have been astounded by the extent to which the social expectations of differing groups for gifted students are never openly discussed or understood. Often the teacher and other school personnel have quite divergent views as well. Ironically, schools can be anti-intellectual enterprises (Howley, Howley, &
Pendarvis, 1995). Trying to assess the social milieu is a good exercise for all involved, as it quickly teaches the adults that their beliefs about the school are inaccurate and that the student may have many misperceptions that need to be considered. Each group also needs to learn that once gifted students start changing classes, there ceases to exist a single or dominant culture of expectations, and a myriad of subcultures with situation-specific expectations emerges (Bailey & Cross, 1997). One means to investigate the social milieu of a school is to interview students about what they believe to be valued and rewarded by the teacher. Another question that provides insight is the following: “When you think about being a gifted student in your school, what comes to mind?” Positive experiences in the academic domain will emerge quickly with little probing, or they will not be noted at all. If the students do not forward experiences and ideas that represent an academic climate, then talking with the teacher is futile. The perceptions of students about whether their school promotes academics are what affects their behavior, not whether or not a teacher tries to create such a culture.

Diversity is another important area requiring additional information to be gathered by teachers, counselors, and parents. Giftedness should be part of training in diversity. With little empirical evidence describing the psychological and social needs of minority students available and because many of the social and emotional needs of gifted students are situated in the school setting, creating an environment that embraces the numerous forms of diversity can ease the differing expectations (real and perceived) of all the participants. Gifted students must feel accepted in school if there is to be any chance for them to reach their potential (Tannenbaum, 1983).

The final set of recommendations calls for the creation of a significant and thoughtful effort at providing counseling services for gifted students. Schools should offer individual, group, and family counseling for gifted students. This sounds very easy to accomplish but, in fact, is rarely done. When efforts are made, the lack of significant training on the nature and needs of gifted students that teachers and counselors receive causes the efforts to be crude and often ends up exacerbating the problems the gifted students experience. Providing services to gifted students in a proactive manner is rarely considered, and even less often carried out. When services are provided, it is usually after an event or due to a serious concern on the part of someone representing the three groups. It is important to appreciate the aggregate loss to a gifted student's learning and future opportunities if they choose to go underground early in their school years. Consequences for becoming invisible are profound but subtle. A common outcome for gifted girls who attempt to blend in school is the poor positioning for future educational opportunities in mathematics and science. Proactive counsel-
ing needs to be offered to all gifted students by a knowledgeable adult. To that end, counselors may need to continue their professional training in the area of gifted students. This will allow them to offer workshops for teachers and parents on the psychological and social needs of gifted students.

To avoid some of the negative interactions among gifted and nongifted students, counselors need to teach prosocial skills to gifted students. Being able to anticipate and navigate social discourse should be a goal for parents of gifted children. This will reduce the perception on the part of the gifted child that he or she needs to blend in or trade off opportunities he or she wishes to have the advantage of taking.

The counselor and parents should explore with gifted students experiences they have had that have become important to their perceptions of the environmental expectations on them. Remember, many of the perceptions gifted students have that influence their understanding of their school's social milieu were developed when they were quite young and immature. Interviews with young gifted children have revealed a pattern of social coping strategies being formulated in the first grade (Cross & Stewart, in press). Talking with them can help them reframe the perceptions they hold that were developed through actual experience and that were developed through vicarious learning at a young age.

Counselors, teachers, and parents should teach gifted students adaptive coping strategies that do not risk their academic performance and subsequent academic opportunities. Because there are many coping strategies that are not healthy for dealing with psychological or social issues (e.g., blending in, underachieving in school, suicide), the three groups should become familiar with many successful and generally more positive social coping strategies available to them. For example, learning to participate in extracurricular activities, hobbies, and physical activities are ways to reduce stress, to learn additional life skills, and to meet people interested in a specific domain where similar interests can provide a bond. These strategies are easily taught through modeling.

Finally, it is important for teachers and counselors to create opportunities for gifted students to spend time together. Time for gifted students to be together encourages them to recognize that they are not alone and that it is acceptable to have serious academic pursuits; it often proves to be a catalyst for their academic careers. In evaluations of over 25 schools and programs for gifted students, several thousand gifted students over the past 13 years have told me that the best part of attending these programs was being around so many people like themselves (Cross, 1997). They described their experience by saying that for the first time in their lives they could be their "true self." Being in the majority, even if just for short periods of time, is a powerful experience for gifted students.
A recommended list of readings has been included in Appendix A to prepare counselors, teachers, and parents better to guide the psychological and social needs of gifted students.

Conclusions

The strategies and techniques described in this article can enable counselors, teachers, and parents to understand the nature of the psychological and social needs of gifted students more fully. Attending to these needs will help gifted students develop more completely in both their psychological and social areas as well as in their academic talent areas. Guiding gifted students may also prevent the more severe patterns of coping behaviors that include trying to blend in with nongifted students, underachievement, and even suicidal behavior. Remaining ignorant of the growing body of research concerning the psychological and social needs of gifted students can have dire consequences. Counselors, teachers, and parents need to join forces by first educating themselves, then serving as advocates for gifted students. The consequences of allowing children to fend for themselves in a society that is ambivalent about gifted students are unethical. Abraham Tannenbaum (1983) captured this phenomenon when he stated the following:

There is evidence to show that the gifted are influenced by their peers’, parents’ and teachers’ feelings about their abilities. If they are seen as mental freaks, unhealthy personalities, or eccentric simply because they are brainy or creative, many of them will avoid the stigma through conformity. Some would rather underachieve and be popular than achieve honor status and receive ostracism. (p. 466)

For students to learn and be successful in school, a classroom needs a level of organization and a structure that guides students to feel in control of their lives. Gifted students need to understand the expectations placed on them and need to have a learned person providing guidance during their struggles. School should be a place where gifted children will take academic and social risks. Amidst the varying expectations society places on gifted students to conform to numerous, often opposing, views of what they should be like, schools must exist as a haven for those children who are most serious about learning. Parents, teachers, and counselors are instrumental in providing the adult guidance necessary for gifted and talented students to thrive. By attending to gifted students’ psychological and social needs, they will be well prepared to maximize their potential. Left on their own to decode society’s messages about giftedness, their perceptions, and
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their psychological and social needs, gifted students are doomed to spending time and energy developing coping strategies that run the gamut from adaptable to highly destructive. Let us choose to help gifted students create plans that develop their talents to an optimal level.

References

Psychological and Social Aspects


Appendix A: Recommended Reading


