Child Development
Readings for Teachers

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Introduction

There are many different facets to the study of that special needs group that is known as gifted. What follows is a presentation intended to introduce the reader to some of the fundamentals. It is a controversial area with persistent mythologies associated with it. But this is not new for negative views of high ability individuals can be found throughout history. However, great strides have been made in education of the gifted.

This discussion on giftedness will touch on history, definition, and characteristics. A significant portion will focus on two adjustment problems which often bring gifted children to the attention of the teacher and counselor. The paper will end with a note on the educator and the gifted student.

The author brings over ten years of counseling experience with this population. If there is one important conclusion to be drawn from that experience, it is the importance of the helping professional's attitude to the success of transactions with this group of students. It is in this spirit that the following presentation is made.

Brief Historical Note

Research on giftedness is traced back to Sir Francis Galton (cousin of Charles Darwin). Galton's focus was genius and intelligence testing. He believed that intelligence was associated with sensory acuity. The measures developed attempted to assess visual, motor, and tactile sensitivity and reaction time (Davis & Rimm, 1989). Galton's study of eminent British scientists is accepted as the first comprehensive study of gifted individuals.
(English Men of Science, 1890, cited in Whitmore, 1980). As a result of his work, he proposed activities which attempted to identify and quantify the characteristics of genius. These activities were among the first tests of intelligence. With the advent of the Binet test, however the largely psychomotor activities which Galton proposed were later discounted. In any case he is acknowledged as a pioneer in the systematic study of the field which we call "Giftedness" today.

While Galton’s contribution is seen more and more in the texts regarding giftedness, the one individual that is considered the first American to study gifted children is Louis M. Terman. His often-cited work is the longitudinal study of over 1,000 gifted individuals, published in five volumes, with the first published in 1920.

Despite the fact that Terman’s work has been criticized over the years (one of the more common complaints has been the methodological problems with his research), it is difficult to underestimate his influence in the field. For example, the modes of identification and the characteristics of gifted children noted in the literature can be traced to Terman (Swassing, 1985).

Terman’s sample consisted of children whose IQ was 140 or higher. He reported that these children were superior to other children in virtually every domain: health, academic achievement, and physique. Terman believed that his data indicated that associating eccentricities with high intelligence was a myth (Grinder, 1985).

A third major historical figure is Leta Hollingworth to whom are attributed a number of firsts in the field. She is acclaimed as being the first to focus on the needs of gifted women, to address the topics of emotional development, and among the first to write on curriculum and instruction for gifted children (see Silverman, 1989, for a detailed discussion of these "firsts").

What Is Giftedness?

The recent perspective on giftedness has been influenced greatly by the definitions provided by Marland (1972) in the now-defunct United States Office of Education and the work of Renzulli (1978). These among other initiatives have reinforced a multifaceted view of the concept. By focusing on six areas, Marland expanded the unidimensional view of giftedness as being equated with solely superior intelligence.

In the original proposal of Marland’s definition the phrase “gifted and talented” was used. The gifted and talented were defined as those who are capable of superior performance in any of the following: general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, visual and performing arts, leadership,
creative thinking, and psychomotor ability.

Such a broadly-based definition was accompanied by the use of multiple identification methods. These include standardized tests – individually-administered IQ tests, and achievement tests – and nominations by teachers, parents, peers as well as self-nominations. Attempts were made to move beyond the single IQ score approach. Typically, a score of 130+ on a WISC-R is accepted as placing someone in the “gifted” range (Wechsler calls this the “superior” range).

Renzulli’s work is notable for at least two reasons: like Marland, he also contributed to the broadening of our view of giftedness but he added some new dimensions. Renzulli added the notions of motivation and production to the conceptualization of giftedness. Giftedness is defined as characterizing those individuals who demonstrate above-average ability and high levels of both, task commitment, and creativity.

Whereas others indicate that superior ability is required, his definition points to high ability. This has important implications for the number of potentially gifted students. When superior ability is used as a criterion, 2 to 5% of the population form the target group. Estimates of the high ability group are as much as 20% of the school population or school jurisdiction. This is not to say that Renzulli believes that all of the high ability students are gifted. To be designated gifted, the student must also demonstrate commitment to achievement. Renzulli notes that these traits need to be applied to “any potentially valuable area of human performance” (1978, p. 184).

**Characteristics of Gifted Students**

Most texts on the education of the gifted provide a list of traits that are said to characterize gifted children and adolescents. Their presentation may vary. For example some may take a child case study approach for illustrative purposes while others use a biographical sketch of eminent scholars and some combine the two (e.g., Kitano & Kirby, 1986). Regardless of the presentation format, much of this literature is clearly rooted in the works of Terman and the more recent contributions of Barbara Clark (Clark, 1989). Prior to a discussion of some of these characteristics, a precautionary note is required.

A potential hazard of such lists of characteristics is the reinforcement of a myth of homogeneity. The act of labelling any special-needs group and the addition of characteristics of such individuals may result in an insidious process of believing that all the members of the group are alike.

Selected characteristics will be presented under two following categories of cognitive and affective.

**Cognitive** The characteristics that a teacher or parent is struck by are
typically those of the cognitive variety. A gifted child may grasp complex material easily. Language development is precocious. The child may show an early interest in reading and in some cases, the child may teach him/herself to read. The child may express a keen sense of curiosity, and retention of a great deal of information. Of particular relevance for education is the rate of learning. One way to describe this is by the concept of “one trial learning.” An adult may be impressed by the rapidity in which a child learns what is complex in nature. Telling or explaining to the child once is sufficient. An important consideration here is the notion of timing. For example, it is not so impressive that a person plays chess competitively but that it is done at an early age (Gallagher, 1989).

Independence/self-directedness is another characteristic often attributed to these individuals. They project an independence in their thinking and in the formulation of their own views of the world. There is a tendency towards self-directed activities. For example, they may identify a hobby or project which they are interested in and pursue at great length and depth.

Affective Self-criticism and high expectations of self and others are other characteristics which Clark and others describe. The gifted child and adolescent is highly self-critical. The self-criticism is associated with, among other factors, high expectations of self and others. The heightened self-awareness is associated with a sense of feeling different.

Sensitivity is another affective dimension that can describe gifted individuals. Here the term is used in a dual sense of the child or adolescent being more sensitive to cues/stimuli than their non-gifted peers and, emotional sensitivity, in the sense of being easily moved.

A sense of humor is also highly developed among this special needs group. This may be demonstrated in their perceiving unusual connection among things or it may be sarcastic and caustic directed to others.

Some Commonly-Experienced Adjustment Problems

Both counselling experience and the literature indicate several problems that may arise. It is not that problems about to be discussed are unique to these children, but that they seem to be more prone to them given the characteristics of gifted children. Blackburn and Erickson (1986) consider the experiencing of difficulty in specific areas with such certainty that they speak of a "predictable series of developmental crises" (p. 553). The potential problems addressed here are academic underachievement and social maladjustment.
A gifted child may grasp complex ideas with precocious ease. The child may show signs of early comprehension, impressing others with the breadth and depth of his thinking and in the world. There is a tendency for the gifted child to possess a heightened self-awareness and a keen sense of the child or adolescent's own abilities and limitations. The heightened self-awareness, combined with a clear perception of the child's own intellectual abilities, leads to a sense of personal identity and a desire to pursue interests and hobbies at a great length and depth.

Another characteristic often attributed to gifted children is their independence in their thinking and personal development. They may identify a hobby or area of interest at a very early age, and often pursue it with great dedication and enthusiasm. This independence and self-awareness can lead to a sense of identity and self-worth, but also to a desire for recognition and validation from others.

### Academic Underachievement

Underachievement, as discussed in the literature on giftedness, is a complex matter which is highly resistant to change (Colangelo & Zaffran, 1979; Fine & Pitts, 1980; Rimm, 1986; Whitmore, 1986).

The following discussion draws heavily upon the author's experience in counselling gifted students. In general, intellectual giftedness may be seen as a double-edged sword. Consider this. The cognitive characteristic of a young gifted child who grasps complex material readily, is capable of retaining a large store of information, and can make connections among bits of information easily. Couple these with precocious linguistic competency—listening and speaking skills appear to be adult-like—and comprehension. As a result of this type of attribute, the young child may enter the school system with a great deal of general knowledge, and not only an interest in reading but advanced reading ability. This state of affairs may converge to enable the child to learn new material with ease.

One consequence is the impact on the development of study skills. If the gifted child receives no feedback from the learning environment that increased effort is needed to master new material, there is little need to develop such characteristics as perseverance. Since the child learns readily, study skills go undeveloped. In this scenario, a predictable underachievement crisis occurs when the student encounters curricular material which is too difficult, too complex for casual treatment. For some, this may occur in junior or senior high school. For others, this may not occur until college or university. Some subject areas are mathematics and physical sciences. These subjects can be described as “binary” academic areas—either one knows the material or does not. It seems that after years of conditioning that one should grasp a new concept immediately, it is difficult for some gifted students to accept that effort needs to be exerted for the understanding of some subject matter.

Another dimension in the conceptualization of academic underachievement that is unique to gifted students relates to other characteristics and intervention by adults. These children have also been described as perfectionistic and independent. Perfectionism may work to stifle motivation, e.g., “why bother trying if I can’t be perfect.” In addition, the independence attributed to these children may also contribute to underachievement. It is not unusual for these children to have highly developed interests at a young age. At times hobbies may become major preoccupations.

Sometimes teachers and parents unwittingly encourage an “underachievement crisis” by their reinforcing the independent study of gifted children. One child, age ten, comes to mind who was keenly interested in electronics. He would be happy to spend most of his waking hours working on...
various projects in this area. This child was also connected to a mentor—an adult who was an electronic technician—with whom he could develop this interest. Such an interest may become problematic when the child becomes focused almost exclusively on it and the significant adults permit this usually to avoid conflict with the child. By allowing this to occur, a teacher may unknowingly predispose the child to later underachievement since the child may be encouraged to work on his project while the teacher attends to the other children. In this type of situation, the gifted child may eventually experience a deficit in basic skills. Parents may also contribute by allowing the child to have too much control prematurely (Rimm, 1984). In the extreme situation the child is taught implicitly that she/he can do what she/he wishes.

It is ironic that even some parents and teachers who are enlightened about gifted children, can behave as if they too believe the myth that these children “have it all”; and, therefore, one should not be concerned with their acquisition of basic skills. It seems that these adults believe that the child needs encouragement in independent study since “they are gifted they already know or can learn the basic stuff on their own.” This is clearly not the case.

**Social Maladjustment**

Another common problem which brings gifted children to the attention of counsellors and psychologists is social maladjustment. That is not to say that all gifted children will experience peer relationship problems. The potential for such problems may stem from at least two sources. One of these is related directly to the nature of giftedness while the other is artificial.

In the first instance, the gifted child may be prone to difficulties in this area due to lack of opportunity. Inherent in any accepted view of giftedness is the notion of a small minority which constitute this special needs group. The gifted child, then, simply has little opportunity to interact with peers of similar ability and interests.

A related source of potential social maladjustment is related to the above point but is reflective more of adult’s reaction to the child’s giftedness. This can be illustrated by a “typical” day in a “typical” gifted child’s day. Much of a child’s time which is not spent in school is spent in solitary activities. These children can be voracious readers, and avid computer fans. They may have well-developed hobbies. And then there are various educational/enrichment activities which these children are literarily driven to by parents who wish to do their share of providing enrichment, e.g., music lessons, visits to museums, science centres, mentorship activities.
The social domain is not necessarily neglected by parents and others. These children may be active in organizations such as cubs, guides and church groups. It must be noted that these activities as well as school provide a very structured social environment. While the child may experience a variety of this type of social opportunity they may not be experienced in the more unstructured situation where she/he can meet other children simply as children. Peer adjustment problems may not be evident in a scout troop or in a classroom. It is more likely that they are first noticed at such times as school recess and lunchtime.

The gifted child may be prone to social maladjustment due to simple lack of opportunity to develop and practice social skills with other children. Not having other gifted children to meet with and the solitary nature of a child’s day-to-day schedule are factors to be considered.

Coping with Peer Relationships – Deliberate Underachievement

One way in which some gifted children, particularly young adolescents, cope with acceptance by peers is by deliberately underachieving. These individuals are conscious of the potential for rejection by their chronologically peers and decide to curtail their academic achievement as a grade-off for social acceptance. A student capable of superior achievement and who has demonstrated past achievement may consciously achieve at a lower level. These children in a trusting relationship will speak eloquently about their underachievement as the price they are willing to pay for peer group acceptance.

Fear of Success

One concept which has been used to try to explain the differential achievement between male and females is fear of success. This was originally proposed by Horner (1972) but literature on gifted females has recently adopted it as a viable rationale for the underachievement of those females. For example, a recent illustration of this is Bell (1989) who claims that “the discomfort with competitive achievement situations is not uncommon among girls” (p. 118).

As originally proposed by Horner, the phrase referred to the lowering of a female’s achievement motivation due to the fear of some negative consequences in their social relationships. Fear of success (FOS) was initially called “fear of the negative consequences of success” by Horner which makes the idea clearer. Like many other concepts in psychology, FOS generated much research but the results have been inconclusive. It is surprising that little empirical work has been conducted on gifted females since Horner theorized that the high ability female would be the most
susceptible to FOS.

One way to conceptualize FOS is to view it as an instance of deliberate underachievement. Fear of success is said to peak during early adolescence when peer relationships and their influence are paramount. The gifted female who is affected by this concept may be viewed as fearing the negative consequences of her academic success as being rejection by her peers, males in particular. As a consequence, such a student consciously decides not to approximate her potential to achieve. In this view of FOS, it is clear that the concept is rooted in gender stereotyping. Presumably in a social environment where such stereotyping does not exist the high ability female need not concern herself with the possibility of being viewed as “too aggressive.”

The Joy of Teaching

The focus in this section has been problems. However, it is important to note that a gifted child may be a source of enhanced job satisfaction for educators. Given the quickness at grasping concepts, heightened curiosity, ability to synthesize, the viewing of ideas from other perspectives, they can be a joy to teach.

The Educator and the Gifted and Talented Students

Having briefly discussed the nature of giftedness, selected characteristics, and some potential problems, we now turn our attention to the educator – teacher or counsellor.

Attitudinal Considerations

A fundamental component in successful transactions with gifted children, as with all children, is our attitude towards them. An “occupational hazard” of working with these children, particularly when we are relatively inexperienced, is the perception of threat. It may be unnerving to a teacher to encounter a young child who may know more than she/he does about a variety of topics especially when these happen to be in the very subject matter being taught. As counsellors, we may be taken aback when a young client begins to debate with us the validity of a technique we are using. It is difficult in these situations not to experience defensiveness.

This sense of threat and therefore the perceived need to defend oneself is heightened when we ourselves feel insecure in our professional roles. A characteristic of those working effectively with gifted children and their families is that of professional competence and self-confidence. Some gifted children will notice when we make mistakes and be discrete in their
advising us of them while others make sure that all the class members notice (Betz, 1989). When we teach to the capable student we need to know our subject matter and feel confident, otherwise these higher ability students will justifiably take us to task.

Giftedness and the Teacher

Must a teacher be gifted to teach those that are gifted? It is very seductive to respond to this question in the affirmative. If this were the response, then we would be limited to teaching only those students with whom a high degree of similarity can be assumed. Teaching the gifted need not be based on our own giftedness or lack of it. A far more important factor is our sensitivity to the characteristics and needs of the child.

Teacher Preparation

There is evidence of a trend to place a greater emphasis on the preparation of teachers who are primarily expert in their subject area (Parke, 1989). Knowledge of the nature of giftedness, characteristics and learning needs is essential as well. It is important that all teachers-in-training be exposed to some fundamental information on these special needs children for two reasons: teachers are the primary access points of the support services offered in any school jurisdiction, and, they may wish to pursue it as a specialization. Referrals for any special program or service typically begins with the observations made by the classroom teacher. Knowledge of this special needs group will enhance the teacher’s role in the identification of gifted children.

References


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