

Gifted Adolescents' Attitudes Toward Their Giftedness

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess gifted adolescents' views of their own giftedness and their perceptions regarding how giftedness is viewed by others. One hundred eighty-four gifted adolescents completed an open-ended questionnaire on giftedness. Results indicated that their views of giftedness were not unidimensional. They were positive about their giftedness but did not believe that others were positive. Also, gifted adolescents viewed giftedness as positive with regard to their personal growth and academic performance but as negative in social relations with others. Gifted adolescents have strongly mixed attitudes about their giftedness.

Three books, *On Being Gifted* (American Association of Gifted Children, 1978), *Gifted Children Speak Out* (Delisle, 1984), and *Gifted Kids Speak Out* (Delisle, 1987), present gifted children describing the impact of giftedness on their lives. A conclusion that can be drawn from these books is that gifted children are ambivalent about their giftedness; they were often pleased by their superiority in academic tasks or performances in talent areas but concerned about the possible negative perceptions of their peers.

Recent empirical research has provided some confirmation of this ambivalence. Colangelo and Kelly (1983) found that while gifted youngsters were positive about being labeled gifted, they perceived nongifted peers and teachers as holding negative attitudes toward them. The study revealed, however, a neutral rather than a negative attitude held by both peers and teachers. Colangelo and Brower (1987a; 1987b) found that while gifted youngsters were positive about their giftedness, they did not think their siblings or parents were positive. The studies indicated that siblings and parents were considerably more positive about the label than gifted youngsters believed.

The results from the above studies do not simply indicate poor judgment on the part of gifted youngsters. The studies affirm a positive evaluation of "giftedness" by gifted youngsters, an evaluation slightly more positive than that reported by nongifted agemates, parents, and teachers. The issue seems to be that the wariness expressed by gifted youngsters is considerably more intense than the evidence justifies. Regarding the "gifted" label, accuracy may not be as important as the actual belief. Sternberg (1985) has provided some excellent evidence on the power of implicit theories. His work

indicates that people act on their beliefs (i.e., their implicit theories about reality); therefore, gifted young peoples' overestimation of others' negative responses toward them may shape their behavior more than other people's actual responses.

Most studies of gifted students' self-concepts have been performed on young children (Ross & Parker, 1980). It would seem that the perception of the negative social effects of giftedness would be more pronounced in adolescence when young people are highly sensitive to evaluations by others (see Bronfenbrenner & Mahoney, 1975; Erikson, 1963; Miller, 1983). The present study was undertaken in order to determine the attitudes of gifted adolescents toward their own giftedness as it relates to personal, academic, and social concerns.

Method

Participants

One hundred eighty-four gifted students ($N = 81$ males; $N = 103$ females) participated in this study. They ranged in age from 15 to 17, with 16 the modal age, and all were high school juniors. All participants had been selected for the Guidance Laboratory for Gifted and Talented at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Selection to the Laboratory program included class rank (upper 5%) and 90th percentile and above composite on their most recent standardized achievement tests.

Instrument

The Attitude Toward Giftedness (ATG) questionnaire was developed by Deeds (1982). The questionnaire included five open-ended questions focusing on the impact of giftedness on self and others. Deeds has used this instrument in individual and group counseling as a catalyst for discussing self-perceptions and giftedness. Because each item is treated separately, reliability and validity data for the scale as a whole are not appropriate.

Putting The Research To Use

This article can be helpful to all those who guide and counsel gifted adolescents because it shows the complexity of young gifted people's attitudes toward their abilities. Our findings show clearly that gifted adolescents understand that there are academic, social, and personal consequences of giftedness. Counselors need to examine each of these areas separately if they wish to identify and intervene in conflicts students might be experiencing.

Procedures

As part of the initial Laboratory program, participants were given 20 minutes to complete the five-item Attitude Toward Giftedness (ATG) questionnaire.

Results

The results are based on the ratings of the responses to the questionnaire. Three judges served as raters; two rated all questionnaires and a third, the experimenter, broke ties and consulted on difficult cases. A measure of interrater reliability was obtained for ATG categories by calculating (number of rated categories) / (number of rater agreements). The percentage of agreement per item ranged from .92-1.00 with an overall average of .96 agreement prior to consultation. Chi-square crossbreak tables were constructed in order to analyze gender and rural/urban differences. Since no rural/urban differences were found, this issue was not discussed. The results of the responses to the questionnaire were organized into the five following categories:

1. The meaning of giftedness

Responses to ATG item #1 (Being gifted means) reflected how students viewed the nature of giftedness. Students viewed giftedness as either a trait (i.e., an inherent ability or inborn talent) or a performance (i.e., behavior or performance, giftedness is what you do) variable.

Students viewed their giftedness more in terms of performance (64%) than as a trait (36%). These results indicate that gifted students do not view giftedness or talent as a passive (inherent) quality but as a performance requiring effort and application. No differences were found related to gender.

2. Advantages of being gifted

The category for what was best about being gifted included responses to ATG items #2 (The best thing about being gifted) and #4 (I was happiest about being gifted when). Results were categorized into three groups: *Personal* included responses that focused on giftedness as an opportunity for personal growth, greater self-confidence or inner harmony. *Academic* included responses focusing on ease with course work, opportunities for advanced classes, getting high grades, problem solving abilities, and opportunities for scholarships. *Social* included responses focusing on social recognition, peer relations, and contributions to society.

Thirty-three percent felt the best thing about being gifted was personal; 37% responded with academic; and 29% felt social was the best. While there was a relatively comparable split among the three groups, it should be noted that 70% of these adolescents viewed giftedness as primarily a personal or academic advantage. While the social reward of being gifted was not perceived as a primary advantage, a chi-square ($\chi^2 = 4.71$, $p < .09$) showed a trend for females to perceive the social advantage more often than did males.

3. Disadvantages of being gifted

The category for what was worst about being gifted included all responses to ATG items #3 (The worst thing about being gifted) and #5 (I was unhappiest about being gifted when). These responses were also categorized as either *personal*, *academic*, or *social*. Five percent indicated that the worst aspect of being gifted was personal; 5% academic; and 90% social. This item generated the most striking response. Overwhelmingly, gifted adolescents viewed the social issues with the most concern. Chi-squares performed on male/female responses indicated that females viewed the social aspect as negative more often ($\chi^2 = 5.96$, $p < .05$) than males.

4. Affirmation of giftedness

Responses were rated as either affirming or denying giftedness. This category was based on responses to ATG items #1 (Being gifted means) and #4 (How did you feel when you learned you were gifted?). Affirmation included all responses that indicated agreement with being identified as gifted. Denial included all responses indicating disbelief or disagreement with being identified as gifted.

A very strong majority (91%) recognized their unique abilities and accepted the label as accurate. Only 9% did not accept the label as accurate. This finding is consistent with Colangelo and Brower (1987a; 1987b). Simply stated, when adolescents are identified as gifted it is generally not news to them. No gender differences were found.

5. Effects of the gifted label

Questionnaires were given an overall rating on the attitude a student held regarding the effects of his or her giftedness. Data were scored as either positive, i.e., overall satisfaction with his/her giftedness; negative, indicating an overall dissatisfaction; neutral, those responses where the overall effect was either mixed or ambiguous.

Regarding the overall effect of giftedness on *self*, 79% viewed it as positive, 2% as negative, and 19% as neutral. Regarding the overall effect of their giftedness on *others*, 5% viewed it as positive, 43% as negative, and 52% as neutral. It is evident from these results that giftedness is a positive quality in one's own life but that the perceived impact on others is negative or ambiguous. No gender differences were found.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that perception of gifted adolescents regarding their own giftedness is not a simple phenomenon. The perceptions vary greatly depending on how the issue is viewed.

This study does present some clear trends. First, giftedness is viewed as being a positive effect on self but a negative or ambiguous one on others. Second, giftedness is perceived as an advantage in terms of one's personal growth and academics. However, it is viewed as having strongly negative social implications. Third, gifted adolescents are well aware

of their unique abilities, and identification or labeling generally affirms what they already know. Finally, there are gender differences in perceptions of giftedness. Although gifted adolescents in general are wary of the social consequences of being labeled gifted, gifted females are particularly conflicted about social implications. While they more often recognized the social advantages, they also felt the social disadvantages more strongly. This finding is consistent with Kerr (1985) who reported on the heightened sensitivity and social conflict experienced by gifted girls and women.

It is clear from this study and related studies that the impact of the gifted label is strong and multifaceted. The effects on adolescents are striking. Gifted adolescents struggle with contradictory feelings. While they recognize and appreciate their unique abilities, they are concerned about the social stigma that such abilities may stimulate. It seems very important that educators, especially counselors and school psychologists, recognize and respond to the struggle experienced by gifted adolescents in coming to terms with their own giftedness.

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