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# Counseling Gifted and Talented Students: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Issues

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*In this article the historical development of counseling gifted and talented students is traced, beginning with movements emphasizing vocational and educational guidance, testing and individual differences, and child study. Also discussed is work growing out of these efforts, including the contributions of Terman, Hollingworth, Witty, and Strang. Recent major contributors, counseling programs, ideas, and trends are documented. A number of contemporary issues are summarized, including factors that may have contributed to the neglect of this population in the past. Counseling needs of gifted students are identified, and the importance of additional research is emphasized. Finally, several suggestions are made regarding future directions in counseling this special population.*

Counseling of gifted and talented students began in the 1920s, emerging out of three intellectual movements: testing and individual differences, child study, and vocational and educational guidance. In this article we trace the major historical developments of counseling gifted and talented students, summarize contemporary issues, and suggest directions for future research.

## EARLY HISTORY

In 1869 Sir Francis Galton launched the movement to emphasize testing and individual differences in psychology. He developed a number of statistical procedures, psychometric concepts, and an assortment of objective mental tests to study individual differences. He also attempted to study quantitatively the concept of genius or superior mental ability (Galton, 1869, 1883).

After World War I and during the Great Depression there was a growing need for vocational selection and job placement services to meet the changing demands of the nation's work force and economic structure. Educators and social workers began to apply the study of individual differences and psychometrics to vocational issues using the trait-factor theory of counseling earlier developed by Parsons (1909). The field of vocational guidance emerged out of this marriage of disciplines (Super, 1955; Whiteley, 1984). Like intelligence tests, many vocational interest tests were inspired by experience with bright young people.

The child study movement, led by G.S. Hall (1903, 1911), has also had an important impact on gifted children. The leaders of this movement sought to understand the natural growth and development of children, to improve educational practices, and to provide knowledge for parents and significant others so they could better foster maximum development. The child study movement was composed of diverse interests and was criticized by members of the mainstream in American scientific psychology for not using experimental methods of research. These factors led to the fragmentation and adoption of the movement's

issues by other forces, including those with interests in testing and individual differences. In contributing to the growth of these new and more scientific groups and in focusing systematic attention on the study of children, the child study movement had a major impact on American psychology and education (Davidson & Benjamin, in press), including psychology and education of gifted students.

## THE TERMAN STUDIES

The influence of Hall and the child study movement were major factors in the founding of the gifted child movement by Lewis M. Terman in 1921 (Terman, 1925). Terman's interest in children, psychometrics, and intelligence resulted in the beginning of a massive longitudinal study of 1,528 gifted children. The project, titled *Genetic Studies of Genius*, remains unparalleled in its comprehensiveness, number of participants, and duration. Using gifted children identified by the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, Terman (1916) and his associates collected data on issues relating to physical, social, and emotional development as well as intellectual accomplishments, career development, and life satisfaction (Burks, Jensen, & Terman, 1930; Oden, 1968; P.S. Sears & Barbee, 1977; R.R. Sears, 1977; Stanley, George, & Solano, 1977; Terman, 1925; Terman & Oden, 1947; Terman & Oden, 1959). The Terman studies grounded the study of gifted persons within the tradition of scientific research, influenced the development of numerous longitudinal studies of gifted children and adults, and greatly influenced current views of the psychological characteristics of gifted individuals.

These studies were not without problems. Although Terman and his associates found that gifted children were physically more developed and socially more stable than were average children (Burks, Jensen, & Terman, 1930; Terman, 1925), this conclusion was later found to be misleading. In fact, Terman's sample was so badly biased that the best way to use the data from the Terman studies is to look at the life development of students who have high IQs, are non-disabled, and are environmentally advantaged (Sears, 1979). Thus, although Terman's studies provided considerable information on the development and characteristics of gifted children, critics have argued that his findings created a myth about these talented youngsters: that they are all well adjusted and can get by without specialized psychological or educational services. The Terman myth may have contributed to the professional neglect of gifted individuals by psychologists, counselors, and educators (Kerr, 1981; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan 1982; Whitmore, 1980).

## HOLLINGWORTH'S INVESTIGATIONS

While Terman was studying a highly selective sample of children from West Coast school systems, Leta Hollingworth was work-

ing with individual children from the New York City public schools. Her work with gifted students began when she attempted to demonstrate the difference between subnormal and superior intellectual functioning to her class at Columbia University Teachers College. Hollingworth made several important discoveries in her clinical work with gifted children. Using longitudinal case studies, she found that most gifted students were well adjusted, as Terman's studies had shown. She found, however, that as a student's intelligence quotient rose above about 150, adjustment problems increased. For those with IQs above 180, social and emotional adjustment could be very difficult. Students at these extreme levels of intelligence were as different from the average student as were students at the lower extremes (Hollingworth, 1926, 1942).

Hollingworth identified a number of special problems. First, gifted students' educational needs were often not met by the school environment. Students spent excessive time in activities they found boring or repetitious. Because of this boredom, Hollingworth (1942) claimed, the gifted student "receives daily practice in habits of idleness and daydreaming" (p. 270).

Second, she observed that many gifted students lacked successful peer relationships (Hollingworth, 1942). The similarity in cognitive ability and match of interests on which companionship is based were apparently missing in the peer relationships of gifted students. Such differences led to less social interaction, underdeveloped social skills, and sometimes social isolation.

Third, there was a difference between the intellectual and emotional development of gifted students. Intellectually these students functioned like adults; they were able to think abstractly and were concerned with values, meaning, and world concerns. Emotionally they were children, and their youth prevented them from being able to help solve the social problems that they were concerned about. As Hollingworth said, "To have the intellect of an adult and the emotions of a child combined in a childish body is to encounter certain difficulties" (Hollingworth, 1942, p. 282).

Fourth, gifted persons often developed a cynicism and negativism toward authority that resulted in social conflict. Fifth, the patterns of cynicism and lack of peer companionship may have prevented successful social and emotional adjustment in adulthood (Hollingworth, 1942). Finally, Hollingworth found that gifted students had needs for vocational guidance that were being neglected. The students that she interviewed reported difficulties in narrowing their interests to a single career because of interests and abilities in a wide range of areas. She also found that they experienced stress because of the expectations of others and the need for guidance in making long-range plans (Hollingworth, 1926). Hollingworth demonstrated that gifted students have unique counseling and guidance needs. Her findings and her methods in working with gifted students remain relevant today.

#### WITTY AND STRANG

Led by Hollingworth, counselors of gifted students in the 1930s and 1940s continued to emphasize social and personality factors. Witty (1940) studied the personality and behavioral characteristics of gifted children, and Witty and Jenkins (1934) first described intellectual giftedness among Blacks and other students of culturally different backgrounds.

Strang (1960) wrote about the social and emotional needs of gifted children and worked with the parents of gifted students. She (Strang, 1951) was concerned about maladjustment for three reasons: first, the loss of talent that may result from maladjustment is expensive to society; second, misguided talent may be used in socially destructive ways; and, third, maladjusted individuals fail to gain life satisfaction and self-fulfillment. Strang

(1951) encouraged the use of counseling and guidance strategies that focused on the development of self-understanding, positive self-concept, and social responsibility. She discussed the need to teach gifted children self-guidance and self-improvement skills and the need to explore meaning in their lives. Strang encouraged the involvement of the school and the family in the counseling and guidance process.

#### RECENT HISTORY

The recent history of counseling gifted students began with the efforts of John Rothney, John Flanagan, and John Gowan in the late 1950s (Zaffrann & Colangelo, 1979). All three of these men studied with Truman Kelley and John Brewer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in the 1930s. Brewer was a colleague of Frank Parsons, who is considered the father of vocational guidance. Truman Kelley was the statistician for Lewis Terman.

Major work in counseling gifted and talented students was begun by Rothney in 1957 with the founding of the Wisconsin Guidance Laboratory for Superior Students at the University of Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Guidance Laboratory later changed its name to the Guidance Institute for Talented Students (GIFTS). The GIFTS program, under the direction of Marshall Sanborn, Nicholas Colangelo, and Phillip Perrone, was the major center for counseling gifted and talented students in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. In the spring of 1985 the GIFTS program ended because of lack of funds.

John Flanagan became director of Project Talent, a longitudinal study of the nation's top 5% of high school students (Zaffrann & Colangelo, 1979). John Gowan founded the Summer Gifted Child Creativity Classes in California during the 1960s. Gowan trained counselors to work with gifted students and has been a major force in promoting counseling services for this population (Zaffrann & Colangelo, 1979).

With the work of Guilford (1959) the concept of creativity became popular in literature about gifted individuals. Torrance (1962, 1965) studied and discussed the special needs of students who were considered creative. Torrance's definition of creative students was based on their thinking style. Creative students demonstrated greater fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration in their thinking style (Torrance, 1962). The definition and identification of creativity remains a controversial issue, and although there are many interpretations, none satisfies everyone concerned with the topic (Borgers & Treffinger, 1979).

During the 1960s and 1970s the attention of society turned toward the needs of handicapped and disadvantaged persons and toward minorities and women. Counselors who were working with gifted persons also began to focus on the needs of these special subgroups within the gifted population (Colangelo & Zaffrann, 1979; Kerr, 1981; Whitmore, 1980).

#### THE 1980s

When a highly gifted 17-year-old student named Dallas Egbert committed suicide in 1981, national attention was directed to the social and emotional needs of gifted persons. By creating a fund in Dallas's name, his parents helped James T. Webb to found Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted (SENG), an organization in the Professional School of Psychology at Wright State University, which offers counseling services, workshops, and a national conference addressing the needs of gifted individuals.

In 1982 Barbara Kerr established the Guidance Laboratory for Gifted and Talented at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln (UNL) to extend the work of both the GIFTS program and SENEG. The staff of this laboratory provide counselor training, support research on gifted persons with a focus on counseling issues, provide individual counseling services, and conduct 1-day career guidance workshops for gifted and talented adolescents.

With the closing of GIFTS in the spring of 1985, the UNL laboratory and SENG are the only university-based programs in the United States supporting counseling services for and research about the counseling needs of gifted individuals.

### CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Significant information is starting to accumulate on the needs of gifted persons, but there is very little experimental documentation of effective counseling and guidance strategies. What knowledge is available about counseling this population is based mostly on clinical experiences and descriptive research. Many factors have probably contributed to this general state of neglect. The Terman studies left both professionals and the public with the belief that gifted persons had no problems. Then, the controversy associated with identification caused the definition of gifted to keep changing. Other challenges are derived from concerns about the negative effects of labeling and the accusations of elitism (Whitmore, 1980).

A major problem in attracting professional counselors and researchers to work with gifted and talented individuals is a lack of funds. There is currently no federal money available for research or service programs for this population. Also, few graduate programs in counseling or clinical psychology offer any specialized training or experience in working with gifted and talented persons. A final problem in attracting doctoral level psychologists who are capable of high-quality scientific research to study and work with this population is the domination of the field by humanistic theorists. Historically, the humanistic goals of self-development and self-fulfillment have played important roles in the gifted child movement (Gowan & Demos, 1964; Khatena, 1982). Although there is no logical contradiction between a humanistic orientation and a scientific orientation, the personal and professional goals and the social and intellectual requirements may be different for these two groups (Gelso, 1979).

Despite these problems, knowledge has continued to accumulate about the needs of gifted students. Some of the current problems that have been identified include underachievement (Jackson, Cleveland, & Merenda, 1975; Newland, 1976; O'Shea, 1970; Perkins & Wicas, 1971; Whitmore, 1980; Zilli, 1971), perfectionism and overachievement (Roepert, 1982; Simpson & Kaufmann, 1981), depression (Lajoie & Shore, 1981; Webb et al., 1982), suicide (Bowers, 1978; Delisle, 1982; Fox, 1971; Lajoie & Shore, 1981; Lemov, 1979; Lester & Lester, 1971), school dropouts (Lemov, 1979), and delinquency (Lemov, 1979).

Other problems include difficulty in peer relationships (Webb et al., 1982; Whitmore, 1980), career development problems related to potential for multiple careers (Sanborn, 1979; Zaffran & Colangelo, 1979), the expectations of others (Kerr, 1981; Whitmore, 1980), the need for guidance in making long-range plans and help in coping with the delayed gratification required for reaching higher levels of education (Kerr, 1981; Sanborn, 1979), and early career closure (Marshall, 1981). A final characteristic that may at times create a problem for the gifted student is an early interest in values and the questioning of values that are held by peer groups, family, and society (Colangelo & Parker, 1981; Sanborn & Niemic, 1971; Webb et al., 1982).

### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Because of the current state of knowledge about counseling gifted students, there is a need to promote more research. This research should not only focus on the description of needs and characteristics of this special population but should move toward specificity in terms of interventions, population characteristics, and outcome measures. Experimental research is needed to establish better understanding of the change processes of gifted and talented students.

There is also a need to establish training experiences for graduate level counseling students. Finally, there is a need to expand counseling services for gifted and talented students. These services should include personal and career counseling as well as consultation with the educators and the families of gifted and talented clients (Hollingworth, 1942; Kerr, 1981; Strang, 1951; Webb et al., 1982).

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