

Counseling Agendas for Gifted Young People: A Commentary

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This article addresses the existence of special issues associated with counseling highly gifted young people. Included among the issues that differentiate such children from their peers are feelings of isolation, a conviction that differentness is wrong (and their fault), adherence to an entity theory of intelligence, daily irritations with the pace of school, asynchronies in development, real or apparent multipotentiality, needs for individuation, and establishing common ground between counselors and gifted students. Through counseling, high ability can also be viewed as an asset in dealing with life's challenges. Adults responsible for educating or counseling gifted children have an obligation to introduce them to the subculture of intellectual accomplishment as well as how to negotiate the bureaucracy of higher education.

Introduction

In this paper, I address two issues. First, what common counseling issues or problems are encountered by gifted children as a function of their rapid intellectual maturation and their differentness from peers? Second, what messages about life's possibilities and special subcultures are professionals responsible for conveying to gifted children?

Counseling Issues Related to Being "Different"

To consider special issues faced by intellectually gifted children is to stride into muddy waters. Even when we restrict our attention to those whose abilities lie within the domains favored by schools, the individuals with whom we deal are too complex and varied to be neatly categorized. Gifted children come in two genders and in an almost infinite variety of shapes, colors, backgrounds, talents, and

propensities. Some of their variability comes from the nature and degree of the "gifts" themselves. As we all know, some children's abilities are moderately advanced while others are light-years ahead of their peers; some children have uneven profiles of abilities; some children's special interests and talents dominate their lives; whereas others have yet to discover passions. Personal characteristics vary as well. Some children, for example, show a marked discrepancy between capacity and performance. In some, the spark of creativity or intellectual risk taking is rampant; in others, it is suppressed or nonexistent. Some children exhibit the full range of sensitivities and intensities described by Dabrowski and others (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Mendaglio, 1995); some are sturdy and nearly unflappable. Gifted children differ among themselves at least as strikingly as any other group on the planet.

Having worked in the field of mental retardation for three decades, I am well aware that one's level of intellectual ability can determine not only one's achievement and learning potentials but many of one's personality characteristics as well. At the high end of the normal curve, however, much less is "explained" by one's level of intelligence (Robinson & Robinson, 1976); and the variety of settings in which one can thrive becomes much wider.

Are there, then, counseling concerns specific to gifted children and youth? Speaking practically rather than theoretically, there are (Silverman, 1993). These issues derive from a lack of fit between the children and their environments and from the degree and quality (with or without their awareness) of being "different" rather than from characteristics inherent in the gifted children themselves.

In this field we are so often accused of elitism that talking about height, agility, or strength seems safer than talking about intelligence. Let us consider the worldview of a person who is very tall. One day, while standing on a foot-high box to reach a kitchen shelf (by chance the difference between my husband's height and mine), I suddenly grasped how different our perspectives must be. Height conveys, among other things, a more powerful and imposing presence; it broadens one's horizons; and it creates physical distance from little people like children. Yet, beyond a certain altitude, there is a high (pardon the pun) probability that one will be treated as deviant, that self-image will be affected, and that one will see the world from a perspective so different from everyone else that communication is impaired.

The implication of this view of difference is that no distinctive set of issues will be of concern to all gifted individuals, but that the greater the ability level, the greater the vulnerability to maladjust-

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ment and the more likely that certain issues will emerge (Silverman, 1993). Like other children, the problems gifted students bring to counseling usually arise from family relationships. Their intellectual abilities can be assets in coping with school, family, and peers. Yet, far out on the continuum, differentness becomes a liability. At some point, being very bright becomes a burden as well as an asset.

Issues Created by Marked Differentness

Without overlooking the assets that advanced cognitive abilities can provide, let us consider a sampling of the liabilities familiar to us all, issues that are typical but not exclusive agendas in counseling gifted children.

Feelings of Isolation

Long ago Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1942) and Lewis Terman (Terman & Oden, 1947) identified the essential loneliness of highly gifted children. They exist with young bodies, old minds, and social maturity somewhere in between. Their schoolmates have age-appropriate interests, language, and humor that highly gifted children have already left behind. At the same time, older children may be disinterested "on principle" in developing friendships with a younger child, and parents cannot fill the roles of both parent and best friend. The social world of these children is often out of sync. Generally, it is the children who are most advanced who are most at risk (Janos, 1983) whether or not they identify their differentness as the source of their discomfort.

Differentness Is "Wrong"

Even for children who are moderately gifted, differentness is an issue with which to contend every day. Gifted children as young as 8 years of age who admit to the difference, despite describing it in what to adults are positive terms ("smarter," "faster," "better at games"), tend to report having too few friends. Equally bright 8-year-old children who either deny or are unaware of their difference tend to be more satisfied with the number and quality of their friendships (Janos, Fung, & Robinson, 1985). And bright as they are, gifted children too often conclude that any differentness from peers is wrong and, furthermore, that it must be their fault. In our society, children

are taught to be like everyone else, a pressure that grows more demanding and pervasive as adolescence approaches and effloresces. Blending into the crowd may become an obsession, especially for adolescent girls. Although most research demonstrates that gifted youth exhibit relatively sturdy mental health and self-esteem up through middle childhood and again at college age, the years of early and middle adolescence tend to be rockier and riskier, both for those who fail at blending in and those who protest that they do not want to. (Robinson & Noble, 1991).

Being Bright Means Having Things Come Easily

Carol Dweck (1995) has described the special hazards of what she terms an *entity theory of intelligence*. This theory holds that one's cognitive ability is a given, an established quantity that is demonstrable in inverse proportion to the amount of work needed to accomplish a task. Such a view is contrasted with an *incremental theory of intelligence*, namely, that one's ability develops from studying and hard work. Bright children entrapped by an entity theory tend to forego deep intellectual investment and avoid entering new activities in which they cannot be instant experts. Such avoidance can be costly to their achievement and rob them of the essential joy of mastering challenges. Indeed, school work is often too easy for gifted students and attained victories are hollow. Eventually, however, when entity theorists do meet challenges, they are less prepared than are incremental theorists. Grades become erratic; school becomes (even more) aversive; subterfuges are invented ("The teacher is boring.") to explain why, when they did not work, their grades plunged. Because of this avoidant behavior, it is difficult for teachers and counselors to shift students' perspectives to reflect an incremental theory approach, to convince them that smart people really do work hard at learning (and generally have more fun).

Daily Irritations

It is easy to underestimate the cumulative irritations and frustrations with which highly gifted children must deal, especially if they are required to spend 6-hour days in classrooms that proceed, as one student said, "like a permanent slow-motion movie." How is a person with the best of goodwill toward her classmates supposed to handle her impatience while she waits for those who need many repetitions to learn material she knew before the lesson started?

Another counseling issue revolves around effective ways to handle such negative emotions.

Asynchronous Development

So prominent is asynchrony in the developmental profiles of gifted children that one group of professionals (Columbus Group, quoted by Silverman, 1993) actually defines giftedness as asynchronous development. According to their definition, higher mental capability is accompanied by heightened intensity and consequent psychological vulnerability. Such asynchrony produces frustration for the gifted child who may be able to imagine what she cannot produce or who may find one kind of task unexpectedly harder to master than another. For example, children who are advanced in verbal ability are not, on average, much advanced in motor skills (Robinson, Dale, & Landesman, 1990). The higher the peaks in talents and abilities, the greater the potential asynchrony, even when all abilities are "above average."

Asynchrony in children's development also confuses adults who expect them to behave as maturely as they speak or to exhibit the emotional control that accompanies the same mental age in children of average development. Indeed, sometimes the children do act maturely and sometimes they act "their age." Inappropriate expectations, inconsistent expectations, or both on the part of adults intensify adjustment issues for gifted children.

One of the central asynchronies faced by gifted children is their concern for the world's troubles, paradoxes, and mysteries (infinity, the Big Bang, death) before they have developed the emotional equipment to deal with such concerns. Existential questions arise about life's meaning in the context of a troubled world and how one deals with feeling personally powerless in the face of large-scale issues such as destruction of the environment, genocidal wars, or crime. Ordinarily, nongifted children are protected by their limited vision from grappling with such disturbing issues before they have established mature emotional controls. Gifted children not only may be more sensitive in spirit, more concerned with issues of justice, but also aware of ultimate implications that other children can, for the time being, escape. Malaise and low spirits characterize many youngsters while they grapple with these issues and, indeed, a few never get on with their lives with the enthusiasm and optimism that energizes healthy achievement.

Multipotentiality

Children with multiple talents are at risk for becoming fence-sitters pulled this way and that, long-term dilettantes who never really try anything wholeheartedly or for a long enough period to discover the satisfaction of true expertise. Although their abilities and talents may be high in multiple areas when compared with the norm, a more careful evaluation with out-of-level measures may well reveal distinctive profiles (Achter, Lubinski, & Benbow, 1996). Giving students more accurate feedback about their abilities; getting them off the fence, empowering them to experiment with who they are, and helping them to create a satisfying combination of their talents is another example of a counseling goal for gifted young people.

Establishing Independence

The families of some gifted students are so child-centered that their child's need for independence is obstructed. Children who have become overly dependent on adults may feel incapable of making their own judgments, may avoid taking risks, and may obsess over decisions such as choosing a college and career. Sometimes their families exacerbate the situation by blaming others, seeing the children as victims of unsympathetic teachers and classmates rather than capable of coping with matters themselves. Counselors can be helpful in supporting the process of individuation and self-determination.

Matching Characteristics of Client and Counselor

Success tends to be enhanced in psychotherapy when client and therapist are demographically similar (Sue, 1988; Takeuchi, Sue, & Yeh, 1995). Issues of trust and communication as well as unspoken assumptions are no doubt involved. In addition to ethnicity and background, mental ability is a relevant characteristic of counselor and client. It may well be difficult for skilled therapists of above average but not matching intellectual level to grasp the perspectives and deep questionings of the highly gifted youngster or even to understand what the client is talking about. A short person can stand on a box to approximate the perspective of a tall person, but intellectual gaps cannot be bridged so readily.

Some therapists would label as neurotic those characteristics that are quite typical of bright youngsters. Indeed, therapists are trained to look for psychopathy rather than health in people who are "different." Issues such as irritation with one's fellow students may be

seen as reflections of negative personality traits rather than arising from a poor match with one's school situation. Counselors tend, in particular, to see perfectionism as a neurotic trait. Although, in general, high degrees of perfectionism may be associated with lower degrees of self-confidence (Flett, Hewitt, & Davidson, 1990), supportive adults can enable students to practice "positive perfectionism" (i.e., setting high standards for oneself, working to meet those standards, and taking joy in their attainment). Passionate pursuit of one's own interests, even esoteric ones, to the exclusion of a well-rounded life may be seen by counselors as "peculiar" and socially isolating. Preferring one's own company to that of classmates similarly may be viewed as the product of social ineptitude. Gifted children's tendency to insist on intellectual honesty and their outrage at violation of the rules of fairness may be seen as elitist or "holier-than-thou" behavior. All too often and without checking to see how the student perceives the situation, counselors may assume that simply being in an advanced or accelerated class automatically leads to stress. ("Too little stress is stressful," one student told me.)

Parents of gifted children similarly are subjected to biased perceptions and expectations. It is often assumed that the advancement of the child and the ordinary ups and downs of his adjustment is the "fault" of the parents. Parents' informal assessments of their children's development are often very accurate (Pletan, Robinson, Berninger, & Abbott, 1995; Robinson et al., 1990), yet those assessments are frequently dismissed as biased. Parents who negotiate for adaptations in school programs are often seen as wanting a better education for their children than is afforded others. As for "pushy parents," well, hasn't everyone read Alice Miller's (1981) *The Drama of the Gifted Child: How Narcissistic Parents Form and Deform the Lives of their Talented Children*?

Counseling Assets of the Gifted Child

Within this context, it is worth pointing out that gifted children bring to bear impressive assets for solving their own problems, with or without the assistance of counselors. Inherent in high capability is a capacity for insight, making connections, conceptualizing alternative solutions, and employing adult language. Though, because of inexperience—they may not be "savvy" about practical situations and systems in which they find themselves—gifted students' verbal insights may be quite startling. Whether such insights translate, during counseling, into behavioral change may, of course, be quite another matter. One would guess that gifted children have special

aptitude for responding to cognitive behavioral therapy that combines intellectual insights with commitment to behavioral change, but this is purely speculation on my part.

Socialization into the Subculture

Everyone belongs to multiple subcultures as a result of their ethnicity, language, gender, religion, age, habitat, shared interests and activities, and so on. Although seldom discussed, there also exists a subculture characterized by intellectual challenge and accomplishment, made up itself of a number of more specific subcultures. The rules and values of these subcultures need to be transmitted to children. Most in need of attention are the children of high capability whose own families, by choice or circumstance, are unlikely to facilitate their entry and enculturation into intellectual domains. Here is a dimension of difference well worth the bridging.

Despite its "elitist" label, the subculture to which I refer is open to anyone, from any background, who is of high capability and focused on accomplishment. In this subculture, values center on:

- advanced understanding of meaning and abstraction and preference for these modes of thinking;
- a creative spirit and intellectual risk taking, or at least the appreciation of those qualities;
- broad-ranging curiosity;
- a love of the learning process for its own sake, both formal and informal;
- thinking deeply and engaging in skilled and effective discourse, both oral and written;
- goal orientation and hard work—focused, sustained practice leading to expertise and to the fulfillment of passions in the area of expertise;
- extensive and deep knowledge, some shared by others in the broad society, some highly specialized;
- appreciation of the expertise of others;
- a choice of adult roles that value intellect;
- pervasiveness of these qualities, which is reflected in the choice of leisure-time activities as well as vocation; and
- enjoyment of friends who share one's capabilities.

Those who don't belong to this subculture have difficulty appreciating its existence, its language, its values, and its compelling nature. Certainly this is not the only subculture to which bright

children should feel they belong, nor is it the only one they need know and appreciate.

Many gifted young people come from families that have endured negative experiences with schools, that have not participated in higher education, and that have no clear picture of the complex paths their children need to follow if they are to develop their capacities to their fullest. Academic choices made in secondary school affect those choices that follow. Choosing appropriate colleges and finding financial support for attending them, selecting majors, participating in honors programs, and identifying suitable graduate or professional programs all require an understanding of the bureaucracy and value systems of the educational system. Those children whose parents have not acquired this tacit knowledge are at a serious disadvantage. Bright students and their families need responsible adults to act as their guides, not just to the culture of the intellect but also to its institutions.

Children acquire the pleasures of the life of the mind and the world of the arts only with repeated exposure and immersion. As teachers, counselors, and friends of capable youth, we need to make possible for gifted children full membership in the intellectual community, especially for those whose homes do not reflect this subculture. We cannot abrogate our responsibilities for fear of appearing elitist. Only if we convey the impression that it is the sole community worthy of membership would we earn that derogatory label.

Issues of difference pervade the lives of gifted children. Few of these issues are unique to this population, although their particular configuration may be. Some of the issues are inevitably problematic, especially during adolescence. By providing guidance and support, however, we can help gifted young people to see and grasp opportunities about which others do not even dream.

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