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Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted Students: What School Counselors Need to Know to Most Effectively Serve This Diverse Student Population

Paper based on a program presented at the 2007 Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Conference, October 11-14, Columbus, Ohio.

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As advocated by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2005), school counselors are called to proactively serve all students. Thus, to best meet the needs of all students, counselors must be aware of the strengths and challenges inherent to a variety of student populations. Peterson (2006) highlights the limited attention given to the unique social and emotional needs of gifted students in many school counseling training programs. This presentation and paper have been structured to provide a broad introduction to the needs of gifted students for school counselors in training, and is applicable for professional development workshops geared toward expanding the knowledge of current practicing school counselors and other related school personnel.

The first challenge in understanding this population is to be aware of what is meant by the term “gifted student.” Currently, no universal definition exists, and the criteria vary from school system to school system. Generally, the term implies a student with superior mental ability or intelligence, and has been used as both a measure of potential and achievement. The No Child Left Behind definition states:

The term “gifted and talented,” when used with respect to students, children, or youth, means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, p. 544)

A more widely used definition within the field of gifted education comes from the 1991 meeting of the Columbus Group, and highlights the unique needs of this population:

Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly

vulnerable and requires modification in parenting, teaching, and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (Columbus Group, 1991)

The first challenge faced by counselors new to working with this population is navigating the language used by the school system when describing the needs and educational approaches used with exceptional children. Counselors are encouraged to consult with their colleagues in the gifted education and special education departments at their school to best understand the local application of descriptors used in working with this population. Counselors must also gain a solid understanding of the local school system's policies and procedures regarding identification and services available to this population. To best understand gifted students, school counselors should also be aware of the following characteristics that are common, yet not universal, to the gifted population.

Characteristics of Gifted Learners

Gifted students generally possess a persistent intellectual curiosity along with superior abilities to reason, generalize, and problem solve. They often display a wide range of interests and the perseverance to develop one or more of these interests to considerable depth. Gifted students may produce superior written work and/or possess a large vocabulary. Many gifted students are avid readers who learn quickly and more easily retain what is learned. Gifted students may readily grasp complex mathematical or scientific concepts and may exhibit creative ability or imaginative expression in the arts. Often, gifted students may be able to sustain concentration for lengthy periods on topics of interest. Many set high standards for themselves and enjoy intellectual challenge. Gifted students often show initiative, originality, and/or flexibility in thinking with the ability to consider problems from a number of viewpoints. Such students can be keen observers and are generally responsive to new ideas. In addition, gifted students often show social poise or an ability to communicate with adults in a mature way (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002).

It is important to note that these characteristics can sometimes lead to conflicts within the classroom. The gifted child may get bored with routine tasks, resist changing away from interesting topics or activities, or disagree vocally with others. They may be overly critical of themselves or others, impatient with failure, and perfectionistic. On occasion, the gifted student's unique sense of humor may be manifest through inappropriate jokes or puns. Gifted students may tend to ignore details, turning in messy work or reject authority, be non-conforming, and stubborn. Gifted students who are more emotionally sensitive and empathic may be misunderstood as overreacting, when they are overwhelmed with a situation. In addition, gifted students often have a tendency to be highly sensitive to environmental stimuli such as lights and noises, which they have difficulty tuning out. Nordby (2004) highlights that many of these more challenging tendencies of gifted students resemble those used in identifying attention deficit and related disorders, thus educators need to be aware and observant of slight differences to truly understand the student's needs.

Common Myths

Many individuals within the school system still hold onto a number of myths regarding gifted students. It is critical for school counselors to be aware of these myths and to advocate for these students' true needs. Berger (2006) outlined the most commonly held false beliefs regarding gifted students:

- Gifted students do not need help. If they are really gifted they can manage on their own.
- Gifted students are a homogenous group, all high achievers.
- Gifted students have fewer problems than others because their intelligence and abilities somehow exempt them from the hassles of daily life.
- The future of the gifted student is assured – a world of opportunities awaits.
- Gifted students are self-directed; they know where they are heading.
- The social and emotional development of the gifted student is at the same level as his or her intellectual development.
- Gifted students are nerds and social isolates.
- The primary value of the gifted student lies in his or her brain power.
- The gifted student's family always prizes his or her abilities.
- Gifted students need to serve as examples to others and they should always assume extra responsibility.
- Gifted students make everyone else smarter.
- Gifted students can accomplish anything they put their minds to.
- Gifted students are naturally creative and do not need encouragement.
- Gifted children are easy to raise and a welcome addition to any classroom.

Common Truths

As most teachers and individuals who have worked closely with gifted students will realize, these myths tend to minimize the true individuality and humanness inherent to all students. While an understanding of common characteristics of gifted students assists us in identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses, ultimately each student and his or her needs must be examined independently. Berger (2006) countered these myths with some common truths about gifted students.

- Gifted students are often perfectionistic and idealistic
- Gifted students may experience heightened sensitivity to their own expectations and those of others, resulting in guilt over achievement or grades perceived to be low.
- Gifted students exhibit asynchronous development – their chronological age, social, physical, emotional, and intellectual development may all be at different levels.

- Some gifted students are “mappers” (i.e., sequential learners) while others are “leapers” (i.e., spatial learners). Leapers may not know how they got a “right answer,” and mappers may get lost in the steps leading to the correct answer.
- Gifted students are problem solvers who benefit from working on open-ended, interdisciplinary problems.
- Gifted students may be so far ahead of their chronological age classmates that they know more than half the curriculum before the school year begins. Their boredom can result in low achievement and poor grades.
- Gifted students often think abstractly and with such complexity that they may need help with concrete study and test-taking skills. They may not be able to select one answer on a multiple choice question because they see possibilities in all choices.
- Gifted students who do well in school may define success but their grades and failure as anything less than an “A.” By early adolescence they may be unwilling to try anything where they are not certain of guaranteed success.

Types of Gifted Children

As stated previously, while gifted students are often discussed as an undifferentiated group, it is important to keep in mind that these students are affected by the environment, personality, community, previous educational experiences, relationships, and their own personal development. Betts and Neihart (1988) proposed a theoretical construct to help provide insight into the different behaviors exhibited by gifted students in their attempts at image management. The most commonly thought of type of gifted student is labeled the “Successful” gifted student under this framework and constitutes about 90 percent of the students identified as gifted through school programs. The “Challenging” gifted student is divergently gifted and is often not identified in schools. The “Underground” gifted student seeks to hide their giftedness in an attempt to better fit in with their peers. This type of behavior is often exhibited during middle school, when the significance of peer groups is central to an adolescent’s development and identity formation. The gifted students labeled “Dropouts” in the Betts and Neihart (1988) model are angry, feel rejected, and their needs have been neglected in the schools. They may act out or be defensive, depressed or withdrawn. The “Double-Labeled” are typically an ignored group. These students are twice-exceptional having characteristics of learning disabilities as well as gifted capabilities.

These students are difficult to identify as their strengths compensate for their weaknesses and their learning difficulties mask their strengths. The final type identified by Betts and Neihart is the “Autonomous Learner” who actively uses the system to create new opportunities. This framework often helps school counselors to recognize that not all gifted students within the school system have been identified as such. In addition, it provides a framework for understanding and describing the diversity of needs that such students will require within the academic setting.

Counseling Issues and Concerns

Regardless of which type of gifted student you encounter, a number of issues and concerns will be common to most at some point in their development. As with all students, gifted students face concerns surrounding peer pressure and social acceptance. Unique to gifted students development are the challenges related to the asynchronous nature of this development, in which one's intellectual development may outpace his or her social and emotional development. A theorist within the field of gifted education, Dabrowski (Dabrowski, 1972; Mendaglio, 1998), offers a unique perspective into the needs and challenges of gifted students in his descriptions of overexcitabilities that are prevalent among gifted students. While beyond the scope of this paper, he is a theorist to be aware of when facing a student with intensities outside of the norm.

Other common issues and concerns critical to be aware of when working with gifted students include their acute self-awareness and need to be understood as different from their peers, a need for mental stimulation and the impact of perfectionism on their academic and personal lives. Gifted individuals often have a strong sense of humor, as well as a unique sensitivity to the needs of others. This can lead to an "existential depression" when such students are confronted with the harsh realities of life coupled with an intense desire to better the world, yet lacking the capacity to change the realities to their perceived ideal. Yet, gifted students also possess a strong perseverance that can be accessed as a positive coping strategy with proper guidance and support. Underachievement is an issue of growing concern facing counselors working with gifted students, and much work is currently being done within the field of gifted education to better understand the complexity of this issue.

Summary

This paper has outlined some of the very basic characteristics and challenges presented by gifted students within the school setting. As school counselors, our role is to work as an advocate for the student and a liaison between the various professionals serving that individual within the school system. Counselors are in a unique place to bridge the work of teachers, specialists, and parents in best meeting the student's individual needs. Counselors can also provide a supportive environment within the school by establishing counseling groups for gifted students in which they can normalize their issues and garner support from others. The counselor can assist gifted students in understanding and coping with their unique intellectual, social, and emotional needs during various stages of their development. Counselors can promote the gifted student in developing a realistic and accurate self-concept while encouraging and supporting the student in realizing the totality of their individual potential. Working from a holistic growth perspective, school counselors are in the ideal position of assisting the gifted individual in merging and making sense of the different components that builds their personality, extending their worth beyond the merely intellectual to encompass their social and emotional realms as well.

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