The Social and Emotional Lives of Gifted Kids

Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D.
Jody and Layton Smith Professor of Psychology and Gifted Education
Executive Director, Center for Gifted Education
The College of William and Mary
“Well, yes, we could read your blog... or you could just tell us about your school day.”
Myths of Being Gifted

The Gifted . . .

- are more prone to emotional disturbances
- have everything going their way
- can succeed without help
- should be valued mostly for their brain power
- are more stable and mature
- should assume responsibility for others
- enjoy being examples to other children
- have abilities that are always valued by their families
- excel or exceed the norms in all areas of development
- need to be disciplined more than others
- will always reveal their giftedness
- are high achievers with high motivation to excel in school
Gifted students are the most heterogeneous group to study because they can vary the most on the most variables
Gifted Characteristics

**Personality**
- Insightfulness
- Intensity
- Sensitivity/Empathy
- Need to Understand
- Non Conformity
- Perfectionism
- Perseverance
- Acute Self-Awareness
- Need for Mental Stimulation
- Excellent Sense of Humor
- Questioning Rules/Authority

B. Clark

**Intellectual**
- Capacity for reflection
- Passion for Learning
- Early Moral Concern
- Complex Thought Processes
- Exceptional Reasoning Ability
- Divergent Thinking/Creativity
- Analytical Thinking
- Facility with Abstraction
- Intellectual Curiosity
- Rapid Learning Rate
- Vivid Imagination
Endogenous Characteristics

- Originate from characteristics of the individual
- Examples in Gifted Students:
  - Overexcitabilities
  - Asynchronous Development
  - Perfectionism
  - Excessive Self-Criticism
  - Multipotentiality
**Exogenous Characteristics**

- Emerge as byproducts of the interaction of characteristics of the child with the environment

**Example in Gifted Students:**
- Desire for academic engagement within a school environment not accepting of students who are very serious about learning
Issues in Development

- Gifted students are children first
- Many psychological and social needs are the same for gifted and nongifted students
- Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs
- Psychosocial Development – Erikson
- Making Friends
- Dating
Our children are taught to don masks before they recognize their own faces. They are made to put their tender, pliable forms into prefabricated shells - cultural roles prescribed for age, sex, and class. All too soon the open faces and fluid selves are disfigured as were the bound feet of the women of Manchu China. They are crushed to meet social expectancy. Those who fail to escape the constraints of masks and sheaths can only look ahead, not up or down, right or left.

Elizabeth Drews, 1972
Traits Meet Social Expectations and are Interpreted as Possible Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Traits</th>
<th>Social Expectations</th>
<th>Interpretations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive</td>
<td>Mixed messages</td>
<td>Possible attendant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sees relationships</td>
<td>School structures</td>
<td>problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Gifted role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical</td>
<td>Sex role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative thinker</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has special interests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad information base</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strives for mastery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

from *Schooling the Gifted* (p. 161), by L.J. Coleman 1985, Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley
The Stigma of Giftedness

There is evidence to show that the gifted are influenced by their peers’, parents’ and teachers’ feelings about their abilities. If they are seen as mental freaks, unhealthy personalities, or eccentric simply because they are brainy or creative, many of them will avoid the stigma through conformity. Some would rather underachieve and be popular than achieve honor status and receive ostracism.

Tannenbaum
Gifted Students in Schools

No, we can't swim any faster! The school curriculum is geared for the slower swimmers, so the ten of you have to wait for the others to catch up...

Reality vs. Theory...
Is Being Gifted a Social Handicap?

- Schools are largely social enterprises
- Stigma of Giftedness Paradigm
  - Gifted students want to have normal social interactions
  - They learn when others discover their giftedness, they will be treated differently
  - They learn they can manage information about themselves that will enable them to maintain a greater amount of social latitude
Stigma of Gifted Students

"Mr. Wickers called me 'gifted' in front of the whole class. I'm ruined."
Coping Strategies

Continuum of Visibility

HIGH VISIBILITY  INVISIBILITY  DISIDENTIFYING

Continuum of Verbal Responses to Threatening Scenarios

Additional Social Coping Behaviors

- Sitting Quietly
- Underachieving
Setting: In the cafeteria line, several people from your class are discussing the biology exam.

Tracy: Man! Wasn’t that test impossible? I must have spent 10 minutes trying to label that crazy diagram of the muscular system.

Chris: I blew the whole thing, even though I studied really hard.

Marti: I probably failed it too.

Marti says to Jon, “I bet you breezed through it and didn’t even open the book to study.” Actually, Jon spent several hours studying and thought it wasn’t a difficult test. If you were Jon, what would you be most inclined to say?
“Biology Exam” Responses

A: “Tests can be hard sometimes.” (cover-up)
B: “Yeah, that exam was a pain.” (lie)
C: “I probably studied as hard as you did, but the test wasn’t too hard.” (placate)
D: “I thought it was kind of easy.” (truth)
E: “How long did you study?” (cop-out)
“Substitute Teacher”

Setting: In the hallway between classes
Pat: Wasn’t that substitute teacher for Ms. Cross awful? I couldn’t figure out what she was trying to say about the Western Expansion. She really lost me.
Fran: How about what Pete pulled on her, pretending he was sick and ready to throw up on her desk!
Jo: She even believed it. I wish I had thought of that one! I would rather have spent the period in the clinic instead of sitting in that class.

Everyone but Billy nodded their heads in agreement. Fran looked at Billy and asked, “Didn’t you think that was hysterical?” Billy felt the substitute had started an interesting topic, but Pete had made it impossible for her to teach. Billy thought Pete had been unnecessarily rude. If you were Billy, which would you be MOST inclined to say?
“Substitute Teacher” Responses

A: “Pete can be funny sometimes.” (cover-up)
B: “I thought the class got out of control; Pete went too far.” (truth)
C: “Some of it was funny, but Pete shouldn’t have gone that far.” (placate)
D: “Pete was funny; the substitute was asking for it.” (lie)
E: “I wonder when Ms. Cross is coming back.” (cop-out)
Recommendations

- Treat gifted children as children first
- Establish communication among parents, teachers, and counselors
- Teach gifted children social skills, ways to manage stress, and to enjoy nonacademic activities
- Try to understand the social milieu of school
Recommendations

- Learn about individual child’s personality, social goals, and needs
- Find counseling for gifted students and their families
- Create opportunities for gifted children to interact
- Model adaptive behaviors