



Social/Emotional Needs: The Rage of Gifted Students

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The experiences of gifted students in school are quite varied and reflect a wide variety of factors. For 17 years, I have written about their experiences from two perspectives, that of a researcher and, using their own words, that of the students themselves. I have come to believe that the lived experiences, or *Lebensvelt*, of gifted students in school is one of the richest areas in the field of gifted education in which to conduct research.

I believe that we are far from understanding the relationship between the experiences of gifted students, how they make sense of these experiences, and how these experiences affect gifted students' behaviors in school and their long-term psychological development. As our society has evolved, our schools increasingly have become a setting where all of society's values interact. Our beliefs, hopes, aspirations, and prejudices coexist in tight physical quarters. Some schools, such as a new \$74 million high school in Indiana, provide students with beautiful surroundings and state-of-the-art equipment. Other schools, as so eloquently documented by Jonathan Kozol (1991), are disgraceful, run-down facilities, struggling to provide their students such basic necessities as textbooks. Schools exist in the largest cities and the smallest towns. All schools have two things in common—policymakers rely on them to acculturate students into the preferred mold, and it is expected that this will be done for the least amount of money possible. All of the children from age 5 or 6 attend because it is the law. In all these various settings, parents hope that their children's lives will be improved by earning a good education.

All these factors and circumstances exist within a large system of dominant beliefs and ideologies that Bronfenbrenner (1994) described in his ecological approach to contexts of development as a macrosystem. The macrosystem is the larger context of values and mores that influence the behaviors of the students. The next system, the exosystem, includes linkages between two or more settings that affect the individual. Mass media, governmental agencies, educational systems, and religious hierarchy may impact the individual indirectly. The mesosystem is where the various microsystems interact. The individual lives daily in the microsystem of school, home, and neighborhood. For example, a gifted adolescent lives with his or her family and attends a local school (microsystem), may see his or her school friends in church or in the neighborhood (mesosystem), learns from the mass media about stereotypes he or she should hold (exosystem), all within the framework of Christian capitalism, the dominant ideology of our country (macrosystem). The public schools in the United States have been described as anti-intellectual environment (Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995), an attitude promoted in the exosystem, dealt with directly in the mesosystem and perhaps causing conflict daily in the microsystem.

These various layers of influence on gifted students' experiences cut across their values and cause them to look for meaning in those experiences. Gifted students often receive mixed messages from the ideas and values represented in the exo- and mesosystems. Common mixed messages that older gifted students experience include claims by some adults that giftedness does not exist, does not matter, or that gifted students are already advantaged and should not receive any special consideration. Parents encourage them to do well in school, while at the same time, students describe their experiences in school primarily as being bored, and waiting for other students to catch up. Perceptions of how they are valued in their school, how students and adults treat them, are created and internalized, sometimes leading to feelings of rage. According to the Webster's College Dictionary (Costello, 1992), one definition for rage is "a violent desire or passion." (p. 1113) While very few gifted students act out in violent ways, many do seem to acknowledge internalized feeling of rage. This column will attempt to articulate what I believe is a deep-seated rage that many gifted students feel. I will note how I came to this conclusion and a few ideas about what we might be able to do to improve the situation.

Throughout my career, I have observed, interviewed, counseled, and tested gifted students. To date, I have accumulated data from approximately a dozen states and 15,000 gifted students. Much of these data have come from school and program evaluations that I have conducted. My professional interest has always been to try to capture the essence of their experiences and to eventually create a model of development representing their stories. A belief I have come to hold is that gifted students are affected by their experiences in differing school settings in individual ways. For example, in small rural schools, students describe the experience of being gifted as being part of a family or community. On the other hand, students in large suburban schools describe feelings of being stereotyped with limited social latitude. A function of this experience is often to maintain the social status one has by playing a role—in this case, the stereotypical gifted student. Avoiding threats to the role status becomes a priority, leading students to avoid taking positive risks and to create social-coping strategies. Tacit-coping strategies are also formed. In essence, the social milieu of each school is different, causing idiosyncratic patterns of effects on a student's development.

The media reported several incidents of homicide in high schools in the 1990s. "Reported" is an understatement. The stories were broadcast over and over and over. Perhaps the most dramatic of these tragedies occurred at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO. The news portrayed the events hourly for weeks after the event. The lesson we took away was that our children are not safe in school, and there was an (implied) additional threat from gifted students. The lessons we should have learned were that our children's experiences in high school (middle and elementary school) cause them to suffer. After the events at Columbine, I interviewed dozens of adolescent, gifted students about the event. Without one exception they stated that what the killers did was wrong and unforgivable, but, those I interviewed, all knew how they felt. They knew how the killers felt. I was quite taken by this. Adults were acting flabbergasted, looking for every conceivable explanation for the murders: video games, access to weaponry, and giftedness. I have since gone back and reread samples of transcripts and tape recordings of dozens of interviews I conducted over the past 15 years, and I was dismayed to find that the same thread was often conveyed. Because no tragic events were at the front of the minds of the gifted students being interviewed, I had phrased my questions in ways that did not encourage this type of evidence to appear as directly as in the post-Columbine interviews. But, in one way or another, many of the gifted students provided evidence of feeling rage about their treatment.

One of my former gifted students who had returned to his alma mater to build a Beowulf system of multiple computers, showed me an Internet web site (<http://slashdot.org/article>) made up of approximately 30 pages of adults' and high school students' comments about their high school experience. Jon Katz (2000) serialized the comments into "The Helmouth Series." Many of the hundreds of contributors nationwide self-reported being gifted students. Their rage is palpable. Below is the quote of one contributor to this serial.

"I stood up in social studies class—the teacher wanted a discussion, and said I could never kill anyone or condone anyone who did kill anyone. But I could, on some level, understand these kids in Colorado, the killers. Because day after day, slight after slight, exclusion after exclusion, you can learn how to hate, and that hatred grows and takes you over sometimes, especially when you come to see that you're hated only because you're smart and different, or sometimes even because you are on-line a lot, which is still so uncool to many kids? After class, I was called to the principal's office and told that I had to agree to undergo five sessions of counseling or be expelled from school, as I had expressed sympathy with the killers in Colorado, and the school had to be able to explain itself if I acted out. In other words, for speaking freely, and to cover their ass, I was not only branded a weird geek, but a potential killer. That will sure help deal with violence in America." Jay (Original Comment # 1)

How widespread is this problem? Unfortunately I cannot answer this question. I do believe that it exists and to a much greater degree that adults know.

What can we do to help gifted students reduce or eliminate their feeling of rage? How much of this is normal teen angst? Turn of the century psychologist G. Stanley Hall (1904) described adolescence as a period of "storm and stress." His work, along with that of other psychodynamic psychologists, created widespread belief that adolescents necessarily go through these periods. More recent developmental psychologists have largely discredited these claims. Many espouse the belief that some adolescents have this conflict-ridden experience of adolescence, while others only experience the conflict episodically. Many do not experience adolescence as a difficult period at all (Offer & Offer, 1975). My contention is that the mixed messages that gifted students receive across the various systems that Bronfenbrenner (1994) outlined, along with normal developmental issues, plus the repetitious images of adolescents engaging in homicides, suicides, and other undesirable behavior all contribute to the rage. Unfortunately because adults had some undesirable experiences while in school, they believe that what gifted students experience is just the same rite of passage that they endured. While I have little doubt that some of the current experiences gifted students are having would fit that category, I contend that contemporary gifted students experience taunting, bullying, and generalized, threatening behavior in ways different than in the past. The media has created beliefs in the minds of our students that they are not safe in schools.

The first step toward helping these students is to acknowledge that their experiences are not exactly the same as ours. Another is to work with the schools to bring about nonthreatening environments that do not tolerate any taunting or bullying. A next level of improvement is the need to work toward consistent messages being sent to gifted students about their value, worth, and responsibilities. The last suggestion cuts across most levels of Bronfenbrenner's model. Therefore, families and teachers will need to try to bring about change locally. Because the greatest influence will likely come from the individual and microsystem, beginning there makes the most sense. Disallowing negative remarks, anti-intellectual behavior, and encouraging respect for individuals of all ability levels and interests can be done and almost certainly will improve the conditions of all students in school.

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