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Affective development of gifted students with nontraditional talents

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Abstract

Children, whose talents and gifts exist in those domains distinct from the intellectual, academic, and athletic realms should still be considered gifted. They are especially talented in one or more areas of human pursuit although their talent is reflected in domains unique from those customarily served by schools; and their social and emotional development appears to be unique. Such young people are in particular danger for generalized school failure, for the manifestation of a variety of social and emotional problems, and are at risk for underdevelopment and occasionally even denial of their talent. Case study data are used to examine this conundrum and its potentially negative effects on individual student's emotional self-development. Included are explorations of several interventions for enhancing affective growth among a group of students that is triply different from their peers.

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Conceptualization of under-achievement continues to be as muddied as any phenomenon among gifted students; some even doubt its existence. However, there is general agreement among professionals that underachievement among gifted youngsters represents a significant discrepancy between a student's school performance and some index of ability (Rimm, 1986). While underachievement among gifted youth is most frequently defined academically, the notion of underachievement must also extend to youngsters who fail to operate at a level commensurate with indicators of superior ability *in any area of human pursuit*. As eminence can occur within any of the realms of intelligence, underachievement or accomplishment disparate from indicators of ability, can similarly emerge in all aspects of human capacity. Yet, aside from studies of stress factors among artistically gifted young people (e.g., Kogan, 1995) and of blocks diminishing effectiveness among the creatively talented (e.g., Davis, 1992), there is little inquiry about under-achievement aside from that which is academic.

Regardless of its context, under-achievement eventually produces the same outcomes for gifted young people who experience it. Eventually, gifted underachievers, due to a cycle of disappointments, are placed at risk of self-doubt. A continuing spiral of failure faces even those gifted youngsters who have experienced years of tremendous accomplishment prior to their under-achievement; negative feelings about self-worth, doubts about self-efficacy, and questions about identity exacerbate the deteriorating situation. Underachievement interferes with sound affective development, yet social/emotional foundations likely are as critical to accomplishment as talent alone. For instance, the predictive value of the construct of hope (the social/emotional opposite of the pessimism that usually results from underachievement) has been demonstrated statistically by Snyder (1994). Snyder summarized the powerful influence human feelings have on achievement among otherwise talented people:

> "...high hope may assure people of some success in reaching goals; high intelligence or a record of achievement only gives them a chance" (p. 24).

Differing Underachievement Patterns Based on Type of Giftedness

When considering a broader conception of underachievement, allowing for discordant performance and ability in a wide range of gifts and talents, the purported precision in identification of underachieving gifted students all but disappears. In the academic domain, identification procedures usually compare student academic ability (often using IQ test scores) with academic achievement (often using standardized achievement test scores). Where significant discrepancies are noted, under-achievement has been diagnosed in spite of the limitations of such an overly simplified operational definition (Delisle, 1992). While the causes for such discrepancies remain undetermined pending more research, traditional identification processes are based largely on psychometric results.

Given the increasing research, however, supporting a multiplicity of abilities beyond those potentials that can currently be measured psychometrically, the issue of under-achievement has become more complicated than simply using test discrepancy formulae. To employ test scores to identify underachievement among students who possess significant spatial giftedness or

interpersonal talent — both of which are distinct from the kinds of giftedness usually identified and served by schools — is as inappropriate as using IQ cut scores for placement of students in intelligence domain-specific programs (Ramos-Ford & Gardner, 1997). In the few schools that have implemented programs aimed at identifying and serving nontraditional giftedness (beyond the general academic or athletic varieties), comprehensive qualitative studies of pupils help to determine talent; feasibly, identification of under-achievement and its possible causes can employ the same ethnographic processes. Even in academic-only gifted programs, school attempts have increased in the collection of more detailed data than revealed by tests results alone, as these data have proved useful for placement and programming.

Consequently, professionals are confronted with the task of making educational judgments based largely on observable behaviors that usually cannot be measured empirically. The dilemma arises when professionals attempt to isolate behaviors and collections of behaviors to diagnose student needs. To wit, while giftedness of the more typical ilk addressed by schools (academic, intellectual, athletic) tends to have its own set of identifying characteristics (Silverman, 1993), behaviors associated with nontraditional talents are not necessarily as discrete.

By way of illustration, confusion of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) with giftedness and creativity has emerged as a concern (Baum, Olenchak, & Owen, 1995; Cramond, 1994). Although the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) delineates ostensibly precise circumstances and traits for determining which individuals have ADHD, these same descriptors signal several other student populations: highly gifted youth who are unchallenged in school (Kearney, 1989; Silverman, 1989); creative youngsters who find few outlets in which to demonstrate their creativity (Cramond, 1994); academically talented pupils who have learning problems (Baum & Owen, 1988; Olenchak, 1995); gifted and talented young people who are culturally diverse and/or those from impoverished socioeconomic situations (Ford & Harris, 1991; Griffin, 1992); and youths who have gifts that remain unserved or underserved by the schools in which they are enrolled (Baum, Olenchak, & Owen, 1995; Vaughn, Feldhusen, & Asher, 1991).

In a recent study, a list of 18 social and emotional, 5 physical, and 10 academic characteristics was distributed to 285 teachers, counselors, and psychologists; participants were asked to attribute each characteristic to ADHD, giftedness, both, or neither (Kardaras, 1996). It was found that a small number of characteristics (11 of 33) were isolated and attributed *only* to ADHD or *only* to giftedness or to neither. Two-thirds of the characteristics were identified with *both* ADHD and giftedness. Kardaras also found no significant differences between professions in how they attributed characteristics. More critically, she concluded that significant training is critical for educators and other professionals *before* they can discriminate characteristics and attribute them accurately. Therefore, it is appropriate to conclude that the business of identification of giftedness, underachievement, or any other human need via behavioral manifestations is, at best, complex and, at worst, inaccurate.

If professionals have difficulty discerning characteristics of giftedness from those of ADHD, imagine the quandary when identification systems must account not only for talents aside from those schools serve but also for underachievement! Though Kardaras' study did not examine underachievement specifically, *all* of the 33 characteristics included in her survey have been previously ascribed to under-achievers and particularly to under-achievers who are also gifted (Rimm, 1986). Such descriptors as "low self-esteem and unhealthy self-concept," "inferiority feelings," "unrealistic standards and goals," "inability to sit still when situations demand," "somatic complaints," "lack of academic initiative," "disinterest in competitive activities," and "schoolwork consistently incomplete" appear in lists of characteristics often employed in the identification of underachieving gifted students.

Consequently, underachievement among gifted students, like giftedness and underachievement separately, is not a clearly defined construct. Although research results have shown that various intervention approaches are successful for transforming underachievement among gifted students into success, few generalizations can be applied across the domains of multiple intelligences (Delisle, 1992; Emerick, 1989, 1992; Rimm, 1986). One of the few research results that appears generalizable is the need for underachieving gifted youth to adjust their attitudes about their own abilities so that a more optimistic, hopeful affective realm develops (Olenchak, 1995; Silverman, 1991; Whitmore, 1980).

Differing Affective Development Based on Type of Giftedness

The affective development of all gifted students has been profiled by a number of researchers. Silverman (1997) describes the social and emotional development of gifted children as *asynchronous,* or usually age-appropriate as compared with their advanced intellectual skills. Others conclude that gifted students often demonstrate their superior cognitive skills at an early age, yet affective development often remains comparable to or even occasionally behind that of their age mates (Jackson & Klein, 1997; Tannenbaum, 1992; Wright, 1990). However, these previous studies focused on students judged to be gifted according to traditional intellectual, academic definitions. What about the social and emotional aspects of students whose talents are less traditional in nature?

Affective Concerns Exacerbated by Nontraditional Talents

Personality traits of gifted individuals tend to include high degrees of sensitivity, perfectionism, and intensity, each contributing to greater degrees of stress than in other students (Silverman, 1993). Tendencies abound among able children, whether gifted academically or otherwise, to become deeply concerned about moral issues at an earlier age than peers (Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991; Silverman, 1993). Sophisticated awareness of world events, injustice, and ideals, when combined with the feelings of impotence experienced by all children, are likely to have serious influence on the social and emotional development of gifted children. While distinctions certainly exist between the emotional characteristics of gifted individuals, persons of high ability of *any type* tend to develop pronounced sensitivities and, therefore, require specialized affective curriculum and instruction.

There are distinctions that differentiate those with intellectual, academic gifts from those whose talents are less traditional (Amabile, 1989; Kogan, 1995). A wide array of external variables — home, parents, peers, school, social values, among others — have important influence on the affective development of individuals, gifted or not. Due to heightened sensitivities, these external variables have a pronounced effect on the affective development of academically gifted individuals and an even greater impact on the social/emotional development of those possessing gifts that are less frequently addressed by schools.

Today, most gifted persons must learn to adapt to schools and to a society that frequently fails to praise their talents and often rejects them altogether. Certainly, pejorative terms like "nerd" and "egghead" symbolize society's apparent contempt for individuals who are intellectually gifted. For whatever reason, present-day education, even where gifted programs flourish, has too often chosen to rebuff gifted individuals; bumper stickers about honors students serving as punching bags for other pupils appear on cars throughout the United States. Surely such disdain causes negative emotional reactions among the academically gifted population. Other than athletic giftedness, few other kinds of talent are as actively supported by schools, and efforts on behalf of academically gifted persons are totally inadequate in comparison to the often extravagant expenditures of time, effort, and money extended to athletic giftedness; nonetheless, the fact remains there *are* a number of programs available for persons of superior academic/intellectual potential; far fewer program options are afforded students with less traditional talents (U.S. Department of Education, 1993).

While academically gifted students often respond to social disapproval by hiding their gifts, they have some chance for adjusting their affective development when specialized programs group them together for intellectual as well as affective support. Contrast this with students who possess remarkable talents in domains other than those athletic or intellectual, for whom designated school programs are seldom available. In the absence of suit- able school experiences, these children not only hide their abilities but they come to deny them (Amabile 1989; Hay & Bakken, 1991; Kogan, 1995). Among gifted populations, rejection of one's abilities, especially self-denial, often leads to increased risks for under-achievement, dropping out of school, delinquency, eating disorders, drug abuse, suicidal ideation, and other activities deemed not only unacceptable socially but also personally destructive (Delisle, 1997; Kogan, 1995; Olenchak, 1997; Olenchak & Hébert, 1996).

Over the past decade, research on gifted youth other than those intellectually/academically gifted or those athletically talented has been limited to three categories: gifted students with concomitant disabilities; those from poverty, minority and/or overlooked cultures, or otherwise being at educational disadvantage; and those who are underserved due to their gender and/or degree of giftedness. Although few studies have examined the emotional risks among students who have significant talents aside from those academic, the strong similarities with those from poverty et al. place them equally in danger. A recent investigation that concentrated on extraordinary talent in dancers examined the negative out-comes, including serious health problems, that repeatedly occur as a result of inappropriate and/or inadequate training both in schools and in specialized dance programs (Kogan, 1995). Apparently, talents that remain either underserved or unserved in schools produce the same negative outcomes. Such children have little reason to be optimistic, and persons who lack "optimistic willpower" are not likely to find or develop "optimistic waypower" (Snyder, 1994, p. 44).

Cases of Underachievement in Nontraditional Gifted Students

To illustrate the affective development among students whose talents differ from those in academic or athletic realms, two case studies are featured. Each study encompassed a minimum of one academic year of which a minimum of six months was spent in a comprehensive school-generated intervention program. Using methods for qualitative, microethnographic research described by Patton (1990), data were collected through triangulated sources of participant observations, interviews, and analyses of documents such as testing protocols and anecdotal notations. Participant observations ranged from weekly to monthly over at least one school year, and quarterly interviews of 1-to-2 hours were completed during the period of investigation. Field notes were collected from each contact with the two case subjects, and transcriptions were later completed. Document reviews were conducted of the journals maintained by each subject, of the records made available from each subject's school and intervention programs, and of the transcripts. To analyze the information collected, data were categorized and coded, and themes

emerging from the data were corroborated by two researchers external to the inquiry who are considered expert in qualitative analyses. Following the cases is a general discussion of the affective dimensions of nontraditional giftedness.

Rachel

Known as an exuberant child, Rachel entered the sixth grade amidst the trauma of moving from a largely self-contained neighborhood elementary school to a consolidated middle school. While many of the friends she acquired during her grade school years joined her in the new site, she found herself separated from them for sizable portions of each school day. Her school program during the elementary years was gauged according to Rachel's average or slightly above average test scores in all subjects; no specialized programming was previously extended her. Shortly after her sixth-grade year had started, Rachel was reprimanded by her math teacher for chatting at a time when she should have been listening. Asked to remain after class to discuss the transgression, Rachel was quick to inform her teacher that she was simply trying to console another student who was feeling particularly upset about the change to middle school. Drawn from a log about Rachel the math teacher instigated that day, Rachel's own words best express the circumstances:

> Leslie wasn't feeling so great. You know, we have all lost our sense for who we are. I mean it is hard to just leave the friends and teachers you have been with since kindergarten and suddenly be in this big place with a lot of new faces. All I was trying to do was make Leslie feel a little better… she can't even open her locker yet, and I was trying to set up a time we could get together so I could help her.

Fortunately for Rachel and for Leslie, too, their math teacher understood better than they may have ever guessed. In fact, as the school year progressed, the teacher doggedly tracked Rachel's significant organizational and human relations abilities, and while Rachel was not necessarily marked by other teachers or most of her peers as a leader, she often was at the forefront of classroom leadership. However, Rachel's math teacher began to notice the young girl's name regularly appearing on the school's daily tardy, absence, and disciplinary action lists. Mystified because Rachel was seldom absent from math and was never in trouble there, the teacher decided to investigate further. She found that although Rachel's academic record had never been stellar, the child had performed best in language arts classes, and behavioral difficulties had never been a concern except for occasional incidents of crying. Rachel's mother described her as an "unusual child who has always cried easily when other people were hurt or upset."

Once more, Rachel was fortunate for her placement with a teacher who was persistent in figuring out ways the school could thwart a student's unhappiness. Meeting with one of the school's counselors, the math teacher inquired about Rachel and was told the young girl was among a group of "troubled students" becoming well known for not taking school seriously, for occasionally becoming involved in disturbing but not serious mischief before and after school, and for being truant. Dismayed, the math teacher shared her log about Rachel with the school counselor, and a long, arduous process began to alter the course Rachel's young life was taking.

First, the counselor recommended that effort be made to find out exactly what was troubling Rachel. Given the degree of mutual trust and respect that had already been established with the math teacher, the counselor suggested the teacher interview the child. During this session, it was learned that Rachel felt as though "she didn't belong at the school because nobody thought she was worth anything." When asked about the possibility of renewing some of the friendships she had built during her elementary school years, Rachel indicated that this also was not possible:

> I can't find anybody here. Everybody thinks I am weird. All I want to do is help people get along. There is so much stuff going on in the world, and I think all of the kids here would be happier if we just worked together. I know how everyone is feeling about school - I mean, we're all lost here and nobody is able to admit it. I had an idea that it would be cool to get all of us sixth-graders together, maybe once a month for special parties, music, and some treats, but I made the mistake of telling some people about it and why I thought it would be good for everybody. Ha! They laughed and said I was a nerd… if I was a nerd, I'd get good grades and all. I hate this place. I'm not good at anything. I don't belong here. Maybe I ought to just quit.

After this revelation, the math teacher asked Rachel if she might be interested in organizing activities that would help others. Though tentative in her response, Rachel said she would participate. Thereafter, the counselor contacted a community group dedicated to assisting the poor that was interested in recruiting student volunteers to help with fund raising, serving meals to the homeless, and erecting housing. With the encouragement of the math teacher, Rachel met with the director of the community service program, and the two quickly discovered their mutual sensitivity for the plight of others.

Over the seven months that followed, Rachel's altruistic nature took over, while her weekly counseling sessions aimed at developing her ability for understanding and coping with what she termed "a wicked world." Rachel helped the program

director organize and present an assembly to recruit fellow students for participation in the service pro-gram, devoted time each week at the community "soup kitchen," and convinced the school principal to approve a school club for supporting the community program. Serving as the club's sponsor, Rachel's math teacher observed that her overall attitude was much more positive, and attendance issues drastically diminished. More critically, Rachel demonstrated much more contentment with her life as a sixth-grader.

Tim

A third-grader enrolled in a program for students with learning disabilities, Tim was described by his teacher as "a pain in the neck." Active, interested in building puzzles and models, and intrigued by mechanical devices, Tim saw little need for school:

"If I could do anything, I would get away from this place! It is such a waste of time! All I do is work and work and get nowhere! Sometimes I think I should just run away - except I like my mom and dad. It's just this place makes me try to do stuff I can't do… don't want to do and don't need to do. Maybe I should go somewhere else so I can build models and do the stuff I like.

Certainly, Tim's special education- dominated curriculum was replete with in-class remedial activities, pull-out visits to specialists, and meetings about which he was fully aware where his parents and school officials "tried to figure out what's wrong" with him. In response, Tim often daydreamed in class, work undone day after day, but behavioral problems also were arising on a regular basis. Teachers, who described him as becoming "hostile" and "rude," referred him to the principal when, one afternoon, Tim chose to disappear into the woods behind the school playground; an hour passed before a special education aide located him sitting on a tree limb overlooking a creek at the rear of the school grounds. Tim later explained his disappearance to the principal:

I was watching all of the kids and the water and trying to decide why I like to watch water running in the creek and nobody else would. Then I started wondering what it would be like if we could build a special bridge across the creek and a raised walkway over the marsh so that we could have a way to let everybody learn to enjoy the creek and to study it and the animals around it without disturbing nature.

Opportunely, a psychologist who had been working biweekly with Tim and several other students in group counseling, was included in a meeting to update Tim's special education program. When the creek incident was recounted and some of Tim's comments were shared, the psychologist recognized that the child was actually signaling the school to adjust his program. Beginning with that staffing meeting, emphasis in Tim's program was changed from one oriented toward remediation to one that would identify and allow equal emphasis on his strengths. After completion of both observations and interviews to survey Tim's interests, the psychologist, working with the school's enrichment specialist to analyze the results, asked the boy if he might be interested in working with an adult to plan and construct the bridge and walk-way he had envisioned.

For the remainder of the school year during an hour or two weekly, a vocational arts teacher from a nearby high school worked alongside Tim to analyze the project to which they were both committed, to develop a plan for constructing a permanent bridge over the creek, and to chart a proposal for an elevated walkway that would serve as a school nature trail across the marshland adjacent to the creek and the school playground. Between sessions with the high school mentor, Tim worked with the school psychologist on an array of different affective activities aimed at enhancing Tim's ability to identify and resolve problems.

The following summer, Tim and the high school teacher recruited students and parents from his elementary school as well as the high school, and just prior to the reopening of school for his fourth-grade year, the bridge and nature walk-way were completed.

Analyses and Discussion: What Makes for Successful Intervention?

The synopses of the cases of Rachel and Tim illustrate two distinct but similar youngsters, each demonstrating in their own fashion the potential talent prevalent in students with gifts. The themes revealed from comprehensive data analyses of these two cases, as well as across six additional case studies of similar inquiry (Olenchak, 1997; Olenchak & Hébert, 1996), are consistent.

Most critically, one or more adult role models affiliated in some way with the school became confidantes with the subjects on a very personal level. Sharing of one's innermost feelings, ideas, and beliefs allowed for construction of a bond in which the individual value of each student was foremost in the relationship. To enhance the rapport, the role models in each case had to be completely open-minded, accepting the student as he/she is yet, at the same time modeling, demonstrating, and nurturing positive alternative behaviors to those prevailing in school. Moreover, role models, sharing a keen enthusiasm in common with their protégés, served as mentors in the areas of interest held in common with the students.

Second, each school was willing to provide a variety of affective and cognitive training strategies for reinforcing the personal value of self among the students. In related manner, focus on each student's nontraditional strengths and interests received positive recognition and attention through both cognitive and affective programming. Moreover, the schools engaged in an intentional effort to identify the nature of the nontraditional gifts of students who were on track for school and perhaps life failure, with special focus on each student's affective development. The fact that each student felt devalued and dejected necessitated affective intervention that, over time, reinforced self-concept and the individual student's sense of worth.

Finally, to support the affective interventions, the schools developed substantial opportunities in which the subjects could explore and develop their unique talents. These efforts included forums where students with nontraditional gifts were able to showcase their abilities, much as science fairs and honor rolls provide for celebrating the feats of intellectually gifted youth and sporting events and trophies contribute to the acceptability of athletically talented students. After all, if others are to understand the value of nontraditional talents, schools must establish forums through which those abilities can receive special recognition.

Case study data, when coupled with reviews of previous research, reveal interesting affective needs among students whose giftedness lies in fields that are not typically supported by school programs. These nontraditionally gifted youth often feel as if they do not belong to *any* group, and the school itself is often viewed by such students as foreign, cold, and aloof. Whenever individuals, gifted or not, feel separated from the mainstream of society, they risk development of a wide array of social and emotional problems. Behavioral issues, denial of talent, and even denial of self are but a few of the concerns arising from students whose unusual talents go unnoticed and unserved. Such gifts may be classified according to the multiple intelligence perspectives of some current researchers. Perhaps more accurately, nontraditional talents might be viewed as those that do not gain consideration and support until one reaches adulthood. Certainly, the bent toward humanitarianism that captured the young Mother Teresa - not unlike Rachel — and the need to combine construction with its natural environment that transfixed Frank Lloyd Wright at an early age - not dissimilar from Tim — were secured by adequate reinforcement in their respective affective development, or we likely would never have known of their immense talents. Yet, the cases of Tim and Rachel are ones of success. There are numerous others that have not concluded so well. How many students with diverse gifts are overlooked by schools?

The Challenge of Nontraditional Giftedness

Students whose talents are rooted in domains other than those which society has chosen to serve or to reward — the nontraditionally gifted — are at significant risk of underachievement. Although academic underachievement is one issue that confronts this population, it seems more critical to recognize the potential for underachievement in the nontraditionally gifted student's talent domain. Though academic under-achievement is of concern to teachers and parents of any child, there must be growing consciousness that academic success alone is unlikely to nurture in nontraditionally gifted students the zest, commitment to task, ability, and creativity upon which gifted-like performances are founded. If anything, an entrenched school system and social climate, often supporting appropriate programs only for academic and/or athletic gifts while ignoring others, runs the risk of so alienating these young people that they may never fully realize their potential.

The case studies that serve to illustrate the primary hypothesis of this article are but a sample of many this researcher has collected, and those are simply a minor representation of the innumerable cases of nontraditionally gifted students across the nation and around the globe. Regardless, they provide sufficient opportunity for professionals to reflect on the diversity prevalent among a population we too frequently refer to as if it were homogenous: gifted people. While there has been effort to alert the field to the needs of gifted students whose differences lie in socioeconomics, race and culture, gender, and concomitant disabilities, there has been little attention paid students whose talents are significant yet are different from those traditionally revered by educational and social institutions. The time has come to create educational services for gifted and talented youth with *all kinds of abilities,* lest we plan a future without diversity of talent.

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