EINSTEIN OR COLUMBINE: THE DARK SIDE OF INTELLIGENCE, CREATIVITY, AND TALENT. THE SOCIO-AFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF GIFTED AND HIGH ACHIEVING STUDENTS

Rebekah Granger Ellis

University of New Orleans (UNITED STATES)

Abstract

It is often said gifted individuals have powers either to help or to harm. Intelligence, creativity, and talent can steer toward both negative and positive ends of the moral/ethical continuum. Bright individuals can be either creatively malevolent or creatively benevolent depending on the interweaving of their values and behaviors. Gifted individuals develop asynchronously in multidimensional layers (intellectual, psychological, emotional, physical); they are exceedingly mature in some areas and immature in others. Gifted individuals are possibly at greater risk for adjustment difficulties, especially during adolescence and adulthood, due to their heightened sensitivity to interpersonal conflicts and higher levels of alienation and stress as a result of their intellectual and creative abilities. Some gifted students struggle in their school and community environments due to emotional intensity, motivation and achievement issues, lack of peers and isolation, identification problems, sensitivity to expectations and feelings, perfectionism, intense frustration, and emotional outbursts. These gifted students endure and survive in school rather than flourish. The spotlight on bright individuals who act violently against others adds to the common perception that a hidden vulnerability lies in some gifted individuals, and the need for curricula addressing all developmental aspects of gifted students has never been more tragically obvious. With the increase in violent attacks perpetrated by gifted individuals, the difficult questions need to be asked: What went wrong? Could it have been prevented? Are we meeting the needs of the whole gifted individual? What curricula models address the intellectual, moral-ethical, and social-emotional learning needs of gifted students? This paper seeks to answer these questions by (1) exploring antisocial, violent, and maladjusted behavior among gifted youth and (2) studying teaching methodology for encouraging psychosocial and socio-affective development.

Keywords: psychosocial development, socio-affective development, maladjusted behavior, social-emotional education, moral-ethical education, gifted individuals, gifted curriculum.

1 INTRODUCTION

An extensive body of literature establishes the social and emotional needs of gifted youth. Gifted individuals exhibit unique personality and intellectual characteristics, which may appear as strengths, but there is a potential for severe social and emotional problems to develop (Clark, 1997; Delisle, 2013; Webb, 1994). Gifted individuals develop asynchronously (intellectual, psychological, emotional, physical); they are exceedingly mature in some areas and immature in others, which often results in intense frustration, extreme sensitivity, and emotional outbursts. The higher an individual's intellectual capacity, the more extreme the asynchrony will be (Goerss, 2005; Morelock, 1992; Neville, Piechowski, & Tolan, 2012; Schwartz, 2013; Webb & Kleine, 1993; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1989; Webb, Gore, Amend, & DeVries, 2007; The Columbus Group, 1991). Although many gifted students thrive in their school environments, some struggle due to emotional intensity, motivation and underachievement issues, lack of peers and isolation, identification problems, sensitivity to expectations and feelings, perfectionism, depression, and anxiety. Approximately 25% of gifted individuals experience social and emotional difficulties, which is more than double that of the their non-gifted peers (Amabile, 1989; Davis & Rimm, 1994; Gallagher, 1991; Grobman, 2006; Jackson & Peterson, 2003; Kim, 2008; Mendaglio & Peterson, 2007; Moon, 2009; Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon 2002; Peterson, 2008, 2009; Peterson & Ray, 2006; Peterson & Rischar, 2000; VanTassel-Baska, Cross, & Olenchak, 2009; Oliphant, 1986; Ritchie, 1980; Robinson, 1980; Webb, Amend, Webb, Goerss, Beljan, & Olenchak, 2005; Winner, 1996).
2 MORAL, SOCIAL, AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF THE GIFTED

Psychological, moral, social, and emotional development depends on the way an individual perceives and processes information; therefore, these developmental areas are profoundly influenced by intellect (Goerss, 2005). “In some cases, academic intelligence is not necessarily connected to the capacity for emotional or social intelligence, and there may be heartbreaking internal disconnects. This may build a tragic road, perhaps strewn with experiences of withdrawal, alienation, loneliness and rejection” (Rowley, 2012, para. 2). Gifted individuals typically engage in intense self-criticism, set unrealistically high expectations of themselves and others (intolerance), have a difficult time establishing peer relationships, manipulate others, and exhibit patterns of depression and underachievement (Adderholt-Elliott, 1989; Clark, 1997; Powell & Haden, 1984; Seagoe, 1974; Webb, 1994; Whitmore, 1980). Several studies have shown that gifted individuals, particularly boys, are bullied frequently because they are distinctly different from their agemates (Peterson, 2004; Schroeder-Davis, 1998, 1999; Clark, 1997; Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Many gifted individuals are often in environments where others “do not understand or value them, where they are repeatedly criticized for the very characteristics that make them who they are, and where they are pressured to change to conform to the molds constructed by others” (Webb et al., 2005, p. 64). These situations can be heightened in gifted students who also have characteristics of emotional and/or behavioral special needs. These are often displayed through characteristics of withdrawal, depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. They may also be exhibited through socialization problems such as immaturity, hyperactivity, peer and adult conflict, humiliation and criticism towards others, and aggression (Amabile, 1989; Davis & Rimm, 1994, 1998; Kim, 2008; Kim & VanTassel-Baska, 2010; Oliphant, 1986; Ritchie, 1980; Robinson, 1980; Schwartz, 2013).

Gifted children are a very diverse group, and many do not display noticeably negative behaviors. Often, these problematic traits are not the prominent characteristics of a gifted individual; however, that is not to say the traits are not present; gifted youth are adept at disguising their emotions and feelings in order to appease others and live up the expectations of those around them (Jackson & Peterson, 2003; Nelsen, 2010; Robinson, 2008). “There are kids that are able to maintain their self-esteem and their belief in their self to struggle through these problems, but what we wonder is how many other kids there are who are not able to maintain that belief in themselves” (Rowley, Eide, & Eide, 2005). In examining the socio-affective development of gifted adolescents, Neihart, Reis, Robinson, and Moon (2002) concluded gifted individuals face many situations that complicate and inhibit their social and emotional development, such as asynchronous development; ill-fitting social environments (interests, advanced skills, and maturity); tensions created by their intensity (high energy, competitiveness, creativity, ambition); underachievement (denying their abilities) in order to fit in; mismatched school curricula (level and pace of learning needs); and negative attitudes and environments (anti-intellectual and unsupportive) (Neihart et al., 2002). Robinson (2008) emphasized that all of these situations can be exacerbated in twice-exceptional gifted students, those classified as doubly (and often multiply) different from the average student by either a learning, psychological, or physical disability; an ethnic or sexual minority affiliation; or a dysfunctional family or home life.

Torrance (1962), an eminent leader in the field of gifted creativity, addressed the emotional energy of gifted individuals as being used either creatively or destructively. Likewise, Kim (2008) argued creativity can be a benefit or a burden, depending on whether it is channeled into productive behaviors. In traditional school environments, highly creative individuals often underachieve and face interpersonal problems because of their unique personality and abilities. Moreover, in addition to their atypical ability for divergent thinking, creative individuals exhibit extreme sensitivity and a “capacity to be disturbed”; especially in the early adolescent years, creative students are terrified of rejection by peers, extremely insecure and self-conscious, and exceedingly awkward in social relationships (Torrance, 1962).

An abundance of research has established highly creative students often underachieve, have serious school problems, exhibit undesirable characteristics, and have difficulty in traditional school settings (Amabile, 1989; Davis & Rimm, 1994; Goertzel & Goertzel, 1960; Oliphant, 1986; Rim & Davis, 1976; Ritchie, 1980; Robinson, 1980; Torrance, 1962). The individual’s high levels of sensitivity, capacity to be easily agitated, and socialization difficulties can compound these problems, leading to a highly volatile situation. “What is most important here is that creativity can lead in several different directions: moral action or immoral action, achievement or failure” (Runco, 2009, p. 110). Gifted youth, especially those diagnosed as twice exceptional, often have social and emotional challenges, which can cause them to channel their intellectual power for immense tragedy instead of for enormous good (Rowley, 2012).
3 THE DARK SIDE OF INTELLIGENCE, CREATIVITY, AND TALENT

History is replete with individuals demonstrating that there is an equal propensity for a dark side to creativity and giftedness (Hitler, Mengele, Stalin) as there is a light side (Gandhi, Thoreau, Einstein). This is also evident in studies of the “evil genius” and correlations between psychopathologies and creativity (Becker 2001; Sass & Shuldburg 2000, 2001; Runco, 2009; Runco & Richards, 1998) and studies of behavior problems of creative youth (Kim, 2008; Kim & VanTassel-Baska, 2010). In response to the national attention on mass violence by gifted individuals, Olenchak and Hebert conducted a study of the 50 or so major school violence instances in the United States following the Columbine incident. They found that 85% of the perpetrators were in fact gifted and talented students or in hindsight (by their characteristics, test scores, or grades) could now be identified as gifted (Rowley & Olenchak, 2005; Webb et al., 2005). This sobering assessment has led many experts in the field of gifted development to study this phenomenon and possible interventions. “The precursors to adult criminal activity can be observed in some children as early as the preschool years and some authorities believe that antisocial patterns of behavior are established by age 10. In many cases, the developing criminal mind is evident by mid to late adolescence” (Neihart, 2009, p. 313). In his 2013 NAGC National Conference presentation, “Shock and Awe: Mass Murderers Among Gifted Youth” Delisle examined gifted mass murderers from 1999 to 2012 (Red Lake, Virginia Tech, Columbine, Tucson, Aurora, and Newtown) and outlined multiple and universal points of convergence. Multiple points of convergence found were: social awkwardness; victims of frequent bullying; previous hints of planned shootings; diagnosed with mood disorders or anxiety (several were on Prozac); shootings were well-planned, months or even years in advance; referred/tracked by mental health professionals; very little (in some instances no) prior criminal behavior; within months of shootings, experienced a significant loss (divorce, death, defeat)—a “psychotic break”; and repetitive viewing of violent media and obsession with prior mass shootings (p. 12).

These multiple points of convergence raise the concerns of (1) potential side effects of medicine, namely suicide (murder-suicide) and paranoia; (2) possible psychotic breaks experienced with failure or loss; and (3) social awkwardness perhaps leading to “loners” with feelings of isolation, rejection, and despair. According to Delisle’s (2013) study, universal points of convergence (present in all mass murderers) were: shooters were described as ranging from “bright” to “highly gifted” in their formative years, although their school records vary in quality (some were underachievers); all were mid- or late-adolescent males; all were familiar with location of shootings; all had a fixation with death, gore, and violence in writings and/or actions; as a retaliation for bullying and/or perceived transgressions for an injustice they felt; however, no direct threats were given to victims prior to attacks (p. 13).

Kerr and Cohn (2001) noted factors of “boredom, lack of honest information, ridicule, and lack of acceptance of the gifted boy’s true self can lead him to behave like a sociopath” (p. 224). However, they contend that gifted “sociopathic-like behaviors of self-centeredness, manipulation, rebelliousness, aggression, and self-destructiveness are learned behaviors that can be unlearned” (p. 204). Likewise, Runco (2009) asserts that unethical behavior in gifted and creative youth can be avoided. Ethical action is a decision or choice one makes; “similarly, unethical action is also at least partly voluntary and a function of decisions…. [T]here are certain undesirable correlates and components of creativity…involving morals and ethics, that we should not accept. They can be controlled and we should work to change them” (p. 109). If we are aware creativity and intelligence have a dark side and that dangerous behaviors in gifted individuals surface long before acts of mass violence, then recognition and intervention should be a top priority in gifted education “[S]ometimes being intellectually-gifted comes with an emotional price; we need to grow a map of reality that includes reaching out to children who seem unreachable” (Rowley, 2012, para. 9).

Much has been written about the social, emotional, and psychological needs of gifted children (Adams-Meyers, Whitsett, & Moon, 2004; Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Clark 2002; Cohen & Frydenberg, 1996; Cross, 2001, 2005; Dai, Moon, & Feldhusen, 1998; Delisle, 1987; Reis & Renzulli, 2004; Roeper, 1995; Silverman, 1993; Thistlethwaite, 1959), but despite the evidence and research provided, few school district curricula across the United States systematically address these issues (unless in response to threats or maladaptive behavior) and continue to incorporate methodologies, policies, and procedures that seem oblivious to the dark sides of intelligence and creativity (Peterson, 2003; Sternburg, 2010).
A CALL TO ACTION: THE NEED FOR COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM

Numerous developmental theories address various aspects of the connection between cognitive processing and affective domain, such as affective taxonomy (Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia, 1964), theory of positive disintegration (Dabrowski, 1964, 1967, 1970, 1972), theory of moral development (Kohlberg, 1964, 1969), hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1971), and overexcitabilities and positive disintegration (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1975, 1986). However, education curricula across the country fail to meet these specific developmental processes. According to research in social and affective neuroscience, the components of the human brain cannot be separated: the intellectual and cognitive elements are interdependent, complementary, interwoven, and reciprocal with the affective, moral, emotional, and social elements; they are all equally part of decision-making, reasoning, problem-solving, and critical and creative thinking processes (Changeux, Damasio, Singer & Christen, 2005; Folsom, 2009; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Haidt, 2001; Howley, Howely, & Pendarvis, 1995; Immordino-Yang, 2008; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Immordino-Yang & Faeth, 2010; Kramer 1990; Labouvie-Vief, 1990; Sternberg, 1985, 2010; Tannenbaum, 1975; van Geert & Steenbeek, 2008; Vare, 1979). When education focuses heavily on the intellectual aspect to the detriment of all other components, it will inevitably lead to an uneven psychological development, which will only exacerbate the gifted individual's asynchronous development (Morelock, 1992; Roeper, 1995; Silverman, 1993).

WHICH VALUES, ETHICS, AND MORALS SHOULD BE TAUGHT?

If high levels of creativity and intelligence can lead to malevolence without socio-affective intervention, what are the constructs creative and intelligent individuals need to develop that could dissuade them from using their abilities for destructive purposes? Sternberg (1998, 2001ab, 2003, 2010) claims educators must teach for “wisdom”, which he defines as using both intelligence and creativity in order to achieve “the common good”. This is achieved by encouraging students to balance personal desires with the desire’s of others and with contextual factors (such as community, environment, and God) in all courses of action. Sternberg's description of wisdom is congruous with moral thought, reasoning, and decision-making developmental classifications (Kohlberg, 1969, 1976, 1984; Kohlberg & Diessner, 1991; Kolberg & Selman, 1972; Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971; Gilligan, 1982; Turiel, 1979, 1983, 1998, 2002). All argue similarly for education to encourage development in these areas: the need to teach the intellectual, social, affective and conscious processes, which are the core of moral development. It is vital for gifted curricula to combine the essential intellectual-cognitive, social-behavioral, and affective-emotional processes; they are all necessary parts of the multidimensional learning that encourages psychological and socio-affective growth and moral development (Cross, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Dewey, 1964; Doddington, 2008; Folsom, 2004, 2009; Ferguson, 2006; Kramer, 1990; Landrum, Callahan & Shaklee, 2001; Nevitt, 2001; Roeper, 1995). However, the question remains whose values and what values should be encouraged? According to Sternburg (2010), socio-affective teaching should encourage positive values of integrity, compassion, sincerity, honesty and reciprocity, which are universally held by the world’s historically great ethical systems and religions. “Where those values have been attacked...creativity and intelligence generally have been used for dark purposes, such as during the time of the Third Reich and in Darfur, among many other places, today” (p. 318).

TEACHING FOR INTELLECT, MORAL-ETHICAL, AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Certainly, teaching to stimulate the moral, social, emotional, and psychological development of gifted students, in addition to challenging them intellectually, is a daunting task. Teachers often express time constraints, overwhelming curriculum requirements, lack of concern for the affective domain, inadequate teacher preparation for addressing moral-ethical aspects, lack of assessments for affective functioning, uncertain role expectations or fear of indoctrination, and misinformation about affective development and the social-emotional needs of gifted individuals (Blackburn & Erikson, 1986; Bloom, Hastings & Madaus, 1971; Egersma, 1981; Folsom, 2009; Levey & Dolan, 1988; Mehrens & Lehman, 1987; Tannenbaum, 1983). Additionally, teachers receive insufficient educational preparation in the intellectual, social, and emotional components necessary to establish humanistic and constructivist environments and to consciously design curriculum that encourage students’ socio-affective and moral development (Folsom, 2009). Indeed, the socio-affective elements of learning are often neglected in gifted students' general education classrooms where standardized test preparation, mandated
curricula, and pacing charts take precedence and consume the majority of classroom time. The moral-ethical and social-emotional needs of gifted students are also often overlooked in the students’ gifted and talented classrooms, where teachers have little time (often only a few hours each week) with their students and emphasize only cognitive skills of critical and analytical thinking, problem-solving, and creative and divergent thinking (Folsom, 2009). In order to accomplish this, teachers must purposefully develop curriculum, instruction, and learning environments in such a way to encourage students to develop both intellectually and emotionally, both cognitively and affectively (Cross, 2005; Dewey, 1964; Doddington, 2008; Folsom, 1998, 2009; Frey & Sylvester, 1997; Kohlberg, 1978; Runco, 2009; Sternberg, 2010). Gifted individuals require a curriculum that not only challenges their talents and areas of giftedness but also provides support for the very specific social and emotional difficulties that accompany those gifts (Clark, 1997; Rowley, 2012; Seagoe, 1974; Webb, 1994). If schools are to dramatically transform into emotionally, intellectually, and physically safe places where students have the opportunity to develop their affective, behavioral, and cognitive potential, school administrators and teachers must “consciously include both the intellectual and the social-emotional components that are important to moral development in their teaching, curriculum planning, and administrative management” (Folsom, 2009, p. 289). However, teachers need to be shown how to easily incorporate socio-affective strategies into the regular curriculum.

Rowley (2012) contends if social and emotional life skills were taught in all school districts, then teachers and parents could be given support by appropriate resources within the school or directed to support resources outside the school (i.e. therapists, educational material, support groups). According to Rowley and Olenchak (2005), this comprehensive curriculum means more money from the state and districts, it means more time from teachers and administrators, and it means more effort from all stakeholders, but they warned, “If we don’t do this, we will regret it, not only as a nation but as a world in the future”. Sadly, ten years later, the country is reaping the tragic effects of inaction. Gifted students develop asynchronously in multidimensional layers (intellectual, psychological, emotional, physical), and if we continue to emphasize only intellectual development (the easiest part of gifted children) at the expense of their areas of greatest need (socio-affective development), we are committing a grave mistake. When education focuses heavily on the intellectual aspect to the detriment of all other components, it will inevitably lead to an uneven psychological development, which only exacerbates the gifted individual’s asynchronous development. With the demand for performance-driven curriculum, the focus has shifted away from the children who learn it. However, if schools are to dramatically transform into safe places where students are able to develop their full potential, we must reevaluate the overemphasis on intelligence at the expense of the rest of the child.

REFERENCES


