The Social and Emotional World of Gifted Students: Moving Beyond the Label
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Any attempt to characterize the social and emotional worlds of the gifted child must consider the vagaries of definition and philosophy in gifted education, as well as the logistical and methodological limitations inherent to research on this population. Nevertheless, it can be said broadly that the students we often identify as gifted, as well as those who might benefit from gifted services but who remain unidentified, navigate an additional layer of complexity on the basis of their cognitive capacity. In addition, gifted status presents unique intersectional interactions with other facets of identity, advising against easy conclusions about these students.

The Problem of Definition

In bringing contemporary research to bear on the practical issue of working with students identified as gifted, it is always important to recognize that the label “gifted” is conferred through various mechanisms, pursuant to a tight but often contrasting set of definitions. As a result, it becomes particularly important to read research literature with an eye to the sample and consequent population of generalizability. Strong conclusions based on observation of students identified for math acceleration may offer only modest help for counselors at a residential summer camp for gifted students identified by a general IQ score. Thus, a word on definitions is warranted to allow for appropriate interpretation of the literature.

The bulk of the literature suggesting that gifted students possess characteristic social and emotional problems was produced at a time when such students were thought to constitute a discrete, fixed population of children with a well-defined set of common traits (Borland, 2005). As such, it was logically consistent to posit social and emotional concerns among those traits and to attribute those concerns simply to being “gifted.”

In the intervening decades, however, scholars have increasingly abandoned this conception for a much wider distribution of definitions based on both empirical and theoretical concerns (Dai & Chen, 2013; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005). While intelligence and achievement are the most frequently cited criteria for gifted identification protocols in the United States (Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted [CSDPG], 2010), other essential criteria have been posited by scholars. Renzulli (2012), in his Three Ring Model of giftedness, suggests that creativity and motivation should complement cognitive capability in the identification of giftedness. Sternberg (2000) includes practical and creative factors along with analytical in his triarchic model of giftedness. In more recent work, Sternberg (2003) includes a role for wisdom in his “wisdom, intelligence, creativity, synthesized” model (WICS) that directly addresses social and emotional capabilities in identified students. Finally, Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell (2011) advocate for a developmental model that highlights cognitive potential early in life but increasingly focuses on achievement and eminence as the student matures into adulthood.

While the dissolution of a fixed model of giftedness removes some of the logical consistency behind claims of unique social and emotional concerns, it is important that we recognize the collective wisdom and experience that produced such claims, exploring both individual traits and broad social and emotional trends in populations of students identified under current conceptions of giftedness.
Common Threads

Across definitions and through a body of careful scholarship, and in resonance with practitioners, there is a consensus that both being gifted, and being identified as gifted, lend a layer of complexity to the social and emotional experiences of such students. While conceptions of giftedness will vary across time and geography, we can also posit some reliable similarities that may help to frame the contribution of gifted status to the social and emotional experience of gifted students.

A definitive idea at the core of most philosophies is that the gifted child is fundamentally different on one or more traits from their age peers. While obvious in statement, it is worth remembering that much of the phenomenological experience attributable to gifted status is defined by the nature and magnitude of this difference. In most of the public school systems in the U.S., and in many international settings, this asynchrony is identified in general aptitude or intelligence (Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted [CSDPG], 2010). However, federal definitions in the U.S. allow funding to be directed also to atypical development in leadership, specific talents, or creativity (NAGC, 2019b).

Inasmuch as important social and emotional concerns are driven simply by a sense of misfit, the asynchrony behind gifted identification needs to be consistently considered when addressing student concerns. Thus, whether we are discussing national-level violinists, or a student with a striking penchant for history and an ability to navigate the complex thought incumbent to that discipline, we might imagine both sometimes have to go outside their immediate peer group to have the discussions that feed the soul. For this reason, it is worth discussing gifted students as a generic body despite their variance.

A related factor that defines the social experience of gifted students is the response of those around them, both to their abilities and to any resultant labeling as gifted. An internal experience of difference is its own challenge, but it is further complicated by the overt and covert messages from family, friends, and others in the social orbit. Teacher reactions, for example, can range wildly from admiration, to unrealistic expectation, to frustration and fear. Thus, in consuming literature on the social and emotional realities of gifted students, it is important to ask to what degree the conclusions would be applicable in a more appropriate social or academic setting.

Logistical and Methodological Limitations

In addition to recognizing the limits to generalizability imposed by differences in definition, it is also critical to note that research in gifted education is subject to several consistent methodological concerns. Sample sizes are often small, and issues of operationalization make it difficult to compare across states or even school districts. For this reason, a great proportion of practical decisions are made on the basis of anecdotal or experiential data. Furthermore, support for research on gifted populations is limited, for many of the same reasons that programming for such students is neither ubiquitous nor well-funded.
Finally, on many social and emotional constructs, it has been suggested that gifted students are more likely than their peers to give the answers they perceive are desired, muting potential differences. It is with an eye to these limitations that the following social and emotional constructs should be discussed.

**Resilience or Risk: Social and Emotional Traits in the Research**

In 2019, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) published a revision of a position paper on gifted students, originally adopted in 1988. A review of the series of prior versions offers a succinct perspective on how the social and emotional worlds of gifted students have been conceived, in the main, over the intervening decades. The narrative over time is a movement from a definitive list of critical concerns to be expected in the population to a smaller set of traits, some of which may be more prevalent, and others of which may just present differently in the gifted.

There is a substantial body of empirical work suggesting that gifted students are, on average, as well adjusted as their peers (Bain & Bell, 2004; Bracken & Brown, 2006; Cross, Cassady, Dixon, & Adams, 2008; Mueller, 2009). There is also a persistent corpus of literature suggesting that students who are identified as gifted are disproportionately prone to a list of social or emotional concerns (Mendaglio & Peterson, 2006; Webb, 1994). The following sections offer a research perspective on the most commonly attributed concerns.

**Social competence.** The asynchrony that often defines giftedness is theoretically bound to the concern that gifted students have a more difficult time finding and making friends. However, recent scholarship suggests that social ineptness is no more prevalent in gifted students than it is in their non-identified peers (Pfeiffer, 2013). That being said, as we deconstruct the broad construct of social competence, there are pointers to potential differences on specific factors.

Shechtman & Silektor (2012), for example, compared non-identified students to identified students in pull-out programs and segregated classrooms, grades 5-12, across eight schools in Israel. The authors found that while no broad differences emerged on total scores for social competence, loneliness, or empathy, the non-identified peers exhibited higher tolerance for self-disclosure but less emotional empathy. In addition, students in pull-out gifted programs exceeded the non-identified students on measures of assertiveness and cognitive empathy.

Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Thomson (2012) surveyed current and former participants in the Northwestern University Midwest Academic Talent Search, grades 5-12, on their self-perceptions of social competence. They found that the students were positive about their ability to make and keep friends and were happy about the future. In addition, being identified as gifted was not seen as a negative factor in social situations. Interestingly, the authors found that social aptitude was significantly higher in those students who had experienced subject acceleration in school.

Košir, Horvat, Aram, and Jurinec (2016) discovered similar results among Slovenian elementary students. The authors allowed classmates to choose three students they “liked most”,...
as well as three they “liked least”. There were no differences in positive nomination, but gifted
students received fewer negative nominations. Teacher assessments of acceptance also showed
the gifted students to be more accepted, on average, than their non-identified peers. These results
were broadly supported in the meta-analysis conducted by Francis, Hawes, and Abbott (2016).

The gifted student as social pariah is an outdated trope, persistently reinforced in media
and entertainment. While isolation and ostracization exist and must be addressed, the studies
above demonstrate that high social functioning is just as prevalent among these students. When
social issues present, it is worth considering who constitutes a true peer for the asynchronous
child and where those peers exist in their world.

**Self-concept.** The division of self-concept into multiple dimensions (e.g., academic,
social, physical) has offered a productive perspective on gifted students. In the bulk of the
literature, identification as gifted has little predictive power for global self-concept (Neihart,
1999), with much greater variance attributable to other factors. Once individual dimensions are
measured, however, significant differences can be found.

In a seminal meta-analysis, Litster and Roberts (2011) leveraged 40 studies to compare
multiple dimensions of self-concept. They found that gifted students in these studies exhibited
higher global self-concept, along with higher perceived competencies in both academic and
behavioral domains. However, physical and appearance competencies were significantly lower
than non-identified peers. This study provides a good baseline for more recent research.

Sarouphim (2011) also found higher general self-concept and academic self-perception
among gifted Lebanese middle-school students. In the previously mentioned study by Shechtman
and Silektor (2012), gifted students were once again found to have higher global, academic, and
behavioral self-concepts, while physical was lower. Košir et al. (2016) reiterated the findings on
academic and global.

Among gifted students, it is interesting to note that Hoogeveen, van Hell, and Verhoeven
(2009) found that gifted students who had been accelerated showed stronger global self-concept
than those who had not. At the same time, Marsh et al. (2015) summarize a set of studies
suggesting that acceleration is among practices that challenge academic self-concept in gifted
students due to the impact of increased class-average achievement. Importantly, these differences
between gifted students can still be interpreted in the context of the larger differences between
identified and non-identified students.

**Depression.** The perception of high incidence of depression has been a long-standing
concern for gifted populations. A combination of social lack of fit and existential thought seems
a strong recipe for difficulties in adjustment, but empirical evidence suggests that no relationship
can be claimed. In a comprehensive review across samples and methodologies, Cross and
Andersen (2016) consider comparative evidence to be “inconclusive” (p. 79).

The consensus that gifted students are no more likely to experience depression has been
supported across multiple studies.

A meta-analysis by Martin, Burns, and Schonlau (2010) focusing on studies that
compared identified and non-identified students found strong consensus that no significant
difference existed between the populations. Comparative scholarship following that study agrees. Bolland, Besnoy, Tomek, and Bolland (2019) studied hopelessness among low-income gifted students and found gifted identification to be predictive of lower levels, and another meta-analysis by Frances, Hawes, and Abbott (2016) framed results surrounding depression in a meta-analysis of multiple studies, finding that gifted students in general were less prone to anxiety and depression.

Importantly, the interaction between gifted status and other student traits cannot be disregarded. For example, Frances, Hawes, and Abbott (2016) identified giftedness as a risk factor for depression among youth in juvenile detention facilities. Similarly, Mueller (2009) detected a higher level of depression among Hispanic gifted students as compared with their non-Hispanic gifted peers, a difference that did not exist in the non-gifted comparison group. Cross and Andersen (2016) point out that contemporary research can still be found indicating both risk and protection, potentially attributable to such interactions.

**Perfectionism.** It is a well-documented fear that students who are more cognitively capable will succumb to unhealthy perfectionism through a combination of external labeling pressures and their own sense of identity. As researchers have explored multiple factors within the construct, productive results are emerging. What was once considered a quality to be measured on a single spectrum from healthy to unhealthy is now modeled as two independent traits: functional and dysfunctional perfectionism (LoCicero & Ashby, 2000; Parker, Portešová, & Stumpf, 2001). This development allows for the more precise question of whether dysfunctional or unhealthy perfectionism is more prevalent in gifted students than in non-identified peers.

While a number of studies have been conducted with populations identified as gifted in this regard, only three comparison studies have been conducted in recent years (LoCicero & Ashby, 2000; Parker & Mills, 1996; Parker, Portešová, & Stumpf, 2001). Despite differences in sample construction and measures used, these studies all support the conclusion that identified students show fewer unhealthy manifestations of perfectionism than their non-identified peers. With this in mind, the lived experience of gifted students exhibiting maladaptive perfectionism is likely qualitatively different, and attention must be paid to the roles of social prescription and demographic interactions (Margot & Rinn, 2016).

**Intensities, Overexcitabilities, and the Five Factor Model.** Some of the most reliable empirical findings on the social and emotional traits of gifted students have sought to explain a greater perceived amplitude of experience among these students. Practitioners dating back to the formative days of Terman and Hollingworth have suggested that highly cognitive students often experience phenomena more deeply than their peers. The broad title for discussing these concerns is “gifted intensity”, and while the term intensity has yet to be sufficiently operationalized, there are multiple books available on the subject.

For some time, the work of Dabrowski (1964) on his Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) offered a framework for describing what he called “overexcitabilities” in students. Dabrowski claimed that cognitively advanced youth experienced more and more profound
overexcitabilities, which were precursors to identity transformation, and this resonated with practitioners who worked with gifted students. Unfortunately, the concept of overexcitabilities is limited in both meaning and validity in the absence of the entire TPD, and so predictive power is limited.

Scholars on Dabrowski advise caution when interpreting OE scores in isolation from the “overall context of development potential” (Kane, 2009). Tillier (2014) also addresses the limitations in how the theory has been applied to gifted education. For now, the implications of OEs for gifted educators are largely unknown, and OE scores offer little wisdom for service.

In an attempt to link practice to more reliable research, the gifted community is increasingly turning to the five-factor model (FFM) of personality. Vuyk, Kerr, and Krieshok (2016) offer an informed critique and crosswalk between Dabrowski and the FFM. The authors offer a considerable review of studies supporting an empirical relationship between the factor of Openness to Experience and both general and specific intelligence traits, relying most heavily on the work of Altaras-Dimitrijević (2012) with Serbian high school and university students identified as gifted.

Important support for the Openness connection is also found in Zeidner and Shani-Zinovich (2011) and a seminal work by McRae et al. (2002). In addition to supporting higher Openness to Experience in gifted students, both of these studies also indicate the presence of lower levels of Neuroticism during adolescence. These factors may prove more useful in understanding and engaging gifted students who are highly reactive to social or emotional stimuli.

**Underachievement.** The identification of high-ability underachievers can be difficult, given the wide variety of definitions involved (Assouline & Colangelo, 2006). Operationalizations of underachievement typically involve a measured discrepancy between aptitude and achievement, aptitude and grades, or achievement and grades, but the criteria used are often misleading, including standard measures of IQ (Rimm, 2008; Ziegler, Ziegler, & Stoeger, 2012). Nevertheless, the sense that students with high academic potential are not living up to that potential, or even to the standards of their non-identified peers, can have implications for self-actualization and sense of fulfillment.

Structure is being created around the definition and identification of underachievement in identified students. Using the School Attitude Assessment Survey – Revised (SAAS-R), McCoach and Siegle were able to identify high-ability students whose grade point averages (GPA) fell in the lower half of their class with roughly 80% accuracy by assessing their motivation, self-regulation, and goal valuation (2003). Using the same instrument, Figg, Rogers, McCormick, and Low (2012) were able to distinguish between achievers, underachievers, and what the authors referred to as “selective consumers,” or students who were motivated on specific topics of their choosing.

A literature review of nine studies conducted by White, Graham, and Blaas (2018) indicates that achievement in the gifted responds predominantly to personal factors, such as motivation, emotion, and perception of school. However, there are a variety of situations that
might provoke the kind of discrepancy that is typically used to characterize underachievement, including test anxiety, poor instruction, or deprived communities (Rimm, 2008). For this reason, White et al. call for further research into the interaction of school context and gifted student motivation.

Gifted students exhibit underachievement for a variety of reasons. Identification and labeling processes often imply fixed notions of ability, suggesting that students either do, or do not, qualify to be gifted. Under such circumstances, the risks of failure are amplified, and underachievement can be a defensive mechanism against that danger. Gifted students can also be driven to underachievement through a sense that no matter how well they perform on curriculum below their level of understanding, they will be given less credit by others and by themselves for the success. In fact, the ability to succeed at a task can be undermined by its meaningless simplicity. Finally, we have to recognize that underachievement can be driven by a simple frustration with tedium. Producing best effort on repetitive, simple tasks is difficult, and poor performance can be a counterintuitive call for a more challenging curriculum.

Diversity and Multicultural Considerations
The representation and participation of multiple U.S. cultures in gifted education is a troubling discussion. Scholars and national interest organizations agree that cognitive capacity is not predicted by race, culture, or socioeconomic status (NAGC, 2019c; Nisbett et al., 2012), yet participation in gifted programming and advanced coursework is heavily predicted by these factors (Card & Giuliano, 2015; NAGC, 2019a). Students identified as gifted in the U.S. are overwhelmingly white, Asian, and upper-middle class. Because much of the experience of the gifted student is defined by interaction with the social and school contexts, the following factors are worthy of consideration.

Failure to serve. When we miss minority and low-income children who would benefit from programming, we produce students who are not receiving appropriate educational challenge, and that can generate a host of behavioral and personal concerns. In addition, unidentified minorities will see a population of students identified as gifted which is skewed heavily in terms of race and SES, under the auspices of educational authority. The implicit message is unfortunate and unavoidable. Honoring the abilities of unidentified students and helping them interpret those abilities for themselves becomes doubly important in the absence of formal identification and programming. The National Association for Gifted Children offers recommendations for best practice in inclusive identification mechanisms, including the use of local norms when testing and emphasizing universal enrichment to develop underprivileged students before identification.

Misaligned programming. Many gifted programs in the United States identify verbal acuity and deliver enriched learning experiences surrounding that advanced literacy. Such programming is nearly universally in English, shutting out students who are highly verbally precocious in other first languages. Similarly, identification for programming in mathematics, creativity, and other traits of interest is often dependent on English language facility. Students
who might benefit from advanced instruction in their first language are left to consider the question of whether they are truly gifted, even if their experience of identity suggests they could do more.

A response to this concern has been the increasing use of non-verbal identification instruments, such as the NNAT or COGAT non-verbal scale. While the spirit of inclusion is commendable, this practice introduces the possibility of students identified for service that is, ultimately, delivered in a language with which they are not fully proficient. Broadening identification must imply a broadening of service curriculum if we are invested in serving all students.

**Interaction of cultural values with gifted education.** The United States has developed as one of the most predominantly individualistic nations on Earth. This social framework lends itself to gifted programming that heavily emphasizes service for student self-actualization, with little attention paid to the benefit to the community. While this is a discussion for a different article, this perception of individual achievement and separation from the peer group often interacts with specific cultures to reduce participation or negativize perceptions of gifted education. Thus, when seeking to work with gifted students from more communal or field-dependent cultures, homage must be paid to the need to tie individual achievement back to family or community benefit.

Promising research has been done on integrating student sense of identity with the value priorities inherent in gifted education. Domestically, Azano, Callahan, Brodersen, and Caughey (2017) deployed place-based curriculum in rural communities to demonstrate that advanced rigor and creativity can be founded in the familiar cultural world of the student. Internationally, Webber, Riley, Sylva, & Scobie-Jennings (2018), worked with multiple Maori communities to develop gifted programming based on negotiating tribal priorities with the perceived requirements of a more western European academic world. The result was a program that honored the lived experience of the student, while still aligning with dominant frameworks for advanced academics. Both of these research threads recommend a critical analysis of the cultural values inherent in a given philosophy or definition of giftedness and how these interact in the emotional world of the student.

**Non-binary gender and sexual identity.** Understanding the powerful intersectionality of giftedness and LGBTQ identification is critical to appropriate service for students. The social and academic experiences of gifted students are marked by the negotiation of personal difference and the pursuit of security and belonging within that context. Students who identify as nonnormative in their gender or sexual identities share this struggle, with the added complexity that their gender status is more likely to imply abuse or harassment at school (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2018). Thus, both factors deeply contribute to the social and emotional complexity of their school experience.

The experience of identifying as LGBTQ and gifted is more than the sum of its parts. In an exploration of Dabrowski’s overexcitabilities across gender identities in gifted students, Treat (2006) found significant interaction between OE profiles and specific gender expressions,
indicating fundamental cognitive differences on the basis of both sexual identity and gender expression. Responses to this complex experience of difference in LGBTQ populations reflect the coping strategies often identified in cis gifted students, but the interaction of gender and giftedness also produces unique strategies. Ethnographic interviews conducted by Hutcheson and Tieso (2014) with gifted LGBTQ undergraduate students revealed strategies including “finding supportive groups of friends; hiding or downplaying their LGBTQ identity; participating in extracurricular activities; confiding in supportive teachers; developing their writing, musical, and leadership talents to compensate for and express their feelings of difference; and conducting research to understand and develop their identity” (p. 363). The authors suggest that gifted students disproportionately rely on their talents and passion pursuits to find respite.

Research on how these two facets of identity interact is unfortunately sparse, not only because these students often hide or diminish these traits, but because the intersection of two minority subsets produces very small potential samples. Findings are also largely self-report of personal history, as students are often in college before they are comfortable living their sexual and gender identities. However, the potentially powerful interaction makes the support of gifted LGBTQ students critical to our work. Kerr and Huffmann (2018) suggest that it is “imperative for psychologists to actively address heterosexual and cisgender privilege in their work” as part of exposing and remediating the marginalization of these students” (p. 125). Treat and Whittenberg (2006) offer a succinct bibliography of further research on the topic.

Twice-exceptionality. The coexistence of giftedness and a special learning need, such as a learning disability or autism spectrum disorder, presents another circumstance under which the student must navigate two interactive factors while developing socially and emotionally. Identification of such twice-exceptionality is often difficult, as these factors can mask one another academically, resulting in omission from services on both counts. For the student, the tension between high capability and the diagnosed need can be frustrating.

Generalizable statements on the affective concerns of twice-exceptional students are elusive, possibly because the diversity of special needs matches or exceeds the variety of conceptualizations of giftedness. Foley-Nicpon et al. (2011) conducted a literature review across categories, suggesting that comprehensive individual diagnosis is required to identify twice-exceptional students and appropriately modify for their learning.

In response to the inability to draw broad conclusions across such diversity, Assouline, Foley Nicpon, and Whiteman (2010) focused specifically on the interaction between giftedness and written language disability. Through an extensive set of measurements on 77 students, the authors found that socially, the participants were perceived by teachers and parents as having more externalizing behavior issues. This perception was not shared by the students themselves.

Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

When considering the catalog of personal traits and experiences that define the lived experience of a student, it is critical to understand the potential implications of both giftedness,
under its many definitions, and identification as such. In seeking to best serve these students, personally and academically, consider the following practices:

1. Address the child, not the label. Recognize the limitations of current research and the likely variance around the mean. The social and emotional traits linked to giftedness, whether through evidence or anecdote, should not result in student performance to a false expectation of vulnerability or resilience.

2. Seek to provide peers. Sense-making and identity development occur increasingly through peer interaction across multiple domains. Students identified as gifted have demonstrated the ability to reach across developmental differences to form social circles, but there is an important security in not having to stand alone with those differences. A peer group can be provided through a number of academic and extracurricular models (e.g., cluster grouping, special school, acceleration, clubs).

3. Help the school challenge gifted students academically. Much of the school experience for gifted students is marked by boredom and frustration. Indeed, being forced to occupy a space and hear redundant messages without the freedom to ask engaging questions is a common and legitimate complaint. Advocate for academic placements and curriculum development that provoke productive struggle in the gifted student.

4. Be keenly aware that there are students with the capacity for such programming who are unlikely to be allowed to experience it, on the basis of behavior, race, gender, socioeconomic status, or simple misfortune, and that this omission will negatively affect their school experience. Construct and use local norms on standardized assessments when identifying students for gifted services to acknowledge that these are the students who may need more than the general classroom is ready to offer. Also, assist the gifted educational team in broadening early talent pools across demographics and developing hidden talent prior to formal identification, and encourage them to consider local community values in defining the students they seek to serve.

5. When working with advanced students, demonstrate your own intellect. This can serve the dual benefits of providing assurance that intellect is normal and productive, as well as giving them an outlet for the interests, concerns, and jokes that may fall on deaf ears elsewhere in their world.

6. Engage the entire community surrounding these students. As is best practice with other social and economic factors, we can benefit the student by seeking the wellbeing and education of those who impact them. Families and teachers can be confused about the implications of having a gifted child, and communication with stakeholders can result in increased support and a stronger fit with school and home context.

In their sweeping theoretical treatise on the history of gifted education in the United States, Lo and Parath (2017) identify several important ways in which the field is changing in paradigm. They highlight recent movement from *exclusivity to diversity, simplicity to complexity,* and importantly, from *being to becoming.* The nature of the gifted program is changing, and so is the nature of the gifted student. Now is a time for honoring historic wisdom on the social and
emotional landscape of these students in the context of these fundamental shifts in our foundation.
References


