Actualization of Giftedness: Effects of Perceptions in Gifted Adolescents

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Introduction

One of the most familiar markers of adolescence is the cognitive concept of the personal fable - the part of adolescent egocentrism involving an adolescent's sense of uniqueness (Santrock, 2001, p. 134) -which includes the adolescent's belief that no one can understand how they really feel due to his or her exceptionality. This perception is usually a misleading one for adolescents. Although this idea is commonly discussed within the psychological sphere, questions about the adolescents who actually are part of an exceptional group are rarely asked. If the field of research on adolescent psychology is historically new, then the research on gifted adolescents is even newer. Aside from the ongoing debate about what giftedness really is, researchers and educators are also divided on the most effective way to educate and counsel this group. Without a clear consensus on what the concept of giftedness is, it is difficult to know how to approach this group as a whole, much less the short but eminent developmental period of adolescence. This paper examines the literature on giftedness and problems of gifted adolescents. It first provides a short description of what giftedness is and how it manifests in adolescence. It reviews the implications of present research, especially in regards to the actualization of giftedness. Though they are a group with high potential for actualization of their talents, gifted adolescents face some of the most challenging obstacles due to the lack of understanding of giftedness, giftedness in adolescence, and approaches to the developmental changes of this group. Specifically, this paper focuses on the developmental changes in gifted students' self-perception and perception of the world. After illustrating the importance of adolescence in gifted individuals and the importance of the gifted individuals' perceptions, I propose a study intended to further our knowledge and understanding of this valuable group.

What is Giftedness?

It is difficult to come up with a single definition of what it means to be gifted. Stereotypically one may think of the intellectually advanced young child with thick glasses who is versed in molecular physics yet cannot drive a car. The picture that is often painted of gifted people can be boring, unflattering, or even cruel. As Delisle (1992) points out, it is understandable why gifted children, when told of their label, often categorically deny it: "Gifted?" they say, "Not me. I'm just a regular kid." (p. 31)

Giftedness is found in mild, moderate, and profound levels and is more infrequent as the level of giftedness increases (Milgram, 1991b). Often researchers and educators fail to distinguish between mild and moderate levels of giftedness, but levels of mental retardation are clearly delineated (Milgram, 1991b). No one would suggest that mildly retarded individuals learn the same curriculum, in the same manner and setting as profoundly retarded, and as Winner (1997) notes, moderately gifted children are very different from profoundly gifted children. In IQ terms, a moderately gifted child has

an IQ between about 130 and 150, whereas a profoundly gifted child has an IQ of about 180 or above.

Although IQ is the most used method of classifying gifted and non-gifted children (Winner, 1997), educators often define giftedness more specifically. An influential report by the U.S. Office of Education (Marland, 1972, cited in Dixon, 1998) defined six categories of giftedness:
(a) general intellectual ability,
(b) specific academic aptitude,
(c) creative or productive thinking,
(d) leadership,
(e) visual or performing arts, and
(f) psychomotor ability
(p. 3).

Gifted children are more likely to be independent, active, and persistent problem solvers. Beginning in early childhood, these children show intense curiosity, high motivation, obsessive interests, and a metacognitive awareness of their problem-solving strategies. Gifted children also require less structure and supervision, and they score higher on self-efficacy and internal locus of control (Griggs, 1991; Piirto, 1999; Rogers, 1986, cited in Winner, 1997).

On the other hand, certain issues arise for gifted children that do not arise for their non-gifted peers. Gifted children must deal with higher expectations from teachers and parents. Because they are often talented in many areas (a term coined multi-potentiality), decision making can be more difficult. As well, they may confront feelings of isolation or loneliness because of their cognitive and social differences (Griggs, 1991).

Gifted Adolescents

Although gifted adolescents go through the same developmental stages as their age peers, they handle changes and transitions differently (Dixon, 1998). They are concerned with typical adolescent dilemmas (friendship and love relationships) as well as with adult issues such as public welfare (cheating, stealing, scandal), life-and-death scenarios (Colangelo, 1989, in Delisle, 1992), and existential issues (finding direction and purpose in life) (Delisle, 1992). They express more altruistic wishes than their peers (Chiu & Nevius, 1990) and have a heightened awareness of the interdependence among people, concepts, and environments, as Roeper (1989, in Delisle, 1992) describes:

"[They] are global thinkers, apt to see the whole, the philosophy or the scientific framework, before they concern themselves with the details. They are concept-oriented, and have an enormous desire to make sense of this world, to master it, and to make an impact on it. They want to find out, they want to make discoveries, because of their inner need for intellectual and emotional order." (pp. 9-10)

Special Concerns of Gifted Adolescents

It is interesting to examine when and how children who are different learn this about themselves. From the time gifted children are very young, they are able to detect differences between themselves and others. Delisle (1992) uses the analogy of a physically able person and a physically disabled person crossing the street. He says that even though one may cross faster it does not make that one person "better than" the other, just "better at". Gifted students do not become elitist about themselves, he says. Rather, they become more empathetic:

"When people understand that others are not being different to spite them; that ignorance or lesser ability in a certain area is not feigned; and that excellent performance is usually spread out among many people and many subjects, then their reactions are more likely to be empathetic rather than critical. You understand the limits of others and do not expect them to perform as well as you do. Instead, [gifted students] will see the limit and extent of their gifts in relation to their own particular strengths and those possessed by others." (p. 34)

As gifted children get older, their self-concepts become increasingly differentiated and are greatly challenged during adolescence. This crucial period of identity formation is the first time gifted students consciously confront their giftedness (Dixon, 1998). The results of studies that examine the impact of giftedness on adolescent self-concept are sparse and inconclusive. Some say that gifted students seem to have no major struggle in coming to terms with their own giftedness (Manaster, Chan, & Watt, 1994), while others discuss dys-synchronous development: "the very real situation that exists when gifted students have thoughts, ideas, and mental acuity that outpaces their handwriting skills or shoe sizes" (Delisle, 1992, p. 36).

Learning to deal with oneself is distinctive for gifted adolescents. Delisle (1992) points out some problems gifted students have due to their vast array of talents. Adolescents deal with the fact that they can be good at something they do not enjoy doing; thus, they learn that being good at something does imply that it must become one's primary life focus. As well, gifted adolescents are prime candidates for performance anxiety. Gifted adolescents often over commit themselves to extracurricular activities while still maintaining an extremely high average in the most difficult courses. Gradually, they must learn to be productive without overextending themselves.

Delisle (1992) also discusses peer-related problems. Adolescents do not want to stand out, and this is more pronounced for gifted adolescents because their talents and skills often do stand out from the peer group. Brown and Steinberg (1990, cited in Dixon, 1998) discuss how the peer group does not work for academic excellence, inflicting peer pressure against academic achievement. They point out the disappointing reality that many of the most intellectually capable high school students strive to be less than they can be in order to avoid rejection by peers.

On a more general level, gifted adolescents may need to address certain questions about societal issues before the time preordained by society as appropriate. As the naïveté of childhood gives way to the sophistication of adolescence, once-cherished beliefs and impressions shatter: parents do make mistakes, teachers aren't always right, friends can stab you in the back, politicians sometimes lie and lie again. (Delisle, 1992, p. 143). These things may affect gifted students to a greater degree because of their heightened awareness of issues of humanity, both on a personal and societal scale.

Gifted Girls

There is a clear clash between the societal expectations placed on males and females that becomes even more disheartening when it comes to gifted females. Generally, gifted females do not show correlations between IQ and career prominence while men do (Delisle, 1992; Dixon, 1998). In addition, there is a marked difference between the aspirations of gifted females compared with gifted males. Delisle (1992) reports that young children do not differ by gender in their life aspirations, but difference begin to occur during adolescence as a result of home life and societal standards and expectations. While boys maintain their high-status profile of career aspirations throughout the teenage years, girls show a clear pattern of decline.

The gender problems are pervasive. Gifted girls may become disinterested in academics if they find that boys feel threatened by their abilities (Schwartz, in Milgram, 1991). They will fear alienation from their girlfriends who may view them as showoffs (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997, cited in Dixon,

1998), and they may also minimize their talents in relationships with equally gifted peers (Leroux, 1994, cited in Dixon, 1998). What is most ironic about this problem is that gifted females are even less stereotypically "feminine" than non-gifted females and gifted males are less stereotypically "masculine". Piirto (1998) recently investigated this hypothesis of androgyny in the personalities of the talented. In her studies using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Piirto found a reversal of preferences from the norm. The group of gifted adolescent girls preferred Thinking (T) to a greater degree than in the normal population, and a greater number of the gifted adolescent boys preferred Feeling (F) than in the normal population.

Gifted Adolescents and Schools

There is a persistent voice in gifted research reminding us that gifted adolescents are not a homogeneous group and should not be treated as one. A large proportion of research calls for individualized, distinctive guidance and education of gifted adolescents (Dixon, 1998; Griggs, 1991; Manor-Bullock et al., 1993). Gifted education focuses so much on identification of students for programs, evaluation of existing programs, or design of a curriculum to meet and challenge the academic needs of gifted students, and unfortunately, as Dixon (1998) notes, the whole child is not always considered. She points out that the research indicates a strong need for a better understanding of the process of adolescence and its effects on gifted students, as well as the need to work with students individually to help them actualize their potential.. As Winner (1997) points out, gifted children are qualitatively different from their peers and they often go underchallenged in the classroom.

Bricker and Braverman (1998), in their article "Are too many kids labeled gifted?" also address the problem of keeping gifted students in mainstream education, pointing out that too few gifted students are getting the services they deserve. Mainstream education, a "one-size-fits-all service", benefits the kids in the middle the most, and because some people believe that equal opportunity means everyone should get the same education, today's gifted students are an endangered species. Although we would expect children with no intellectual interests to be bored with school, it is disturbing that the most able students often dislike school and feel they get little out of it, as Winner notes (1997). As one girl describes, school seems to squelch the gifted student's natural motivation: "I get so frustrated with the things they make me do in school. I find myself questioning whether or not they are seriously asking me to do this. They really do think that they are giving me a challenging assignment! I know I often forget that other people cannot do these sorts of things easily. I am thankful for my gifts, but at the same time, I get so frustrated because they make me do these mindless things when I could be doing something else!" (Buchan, 2000)

Self-Actualization

Clearly, formal schooling does not always help exceptional adolescents to self-actualize. Gifted people have what Piitro (1999) calls entelechy: "a particular type of motivation, inner strength, and vital force; the ability to actualize one's beliefs" (p. 352), but it is disheartening that the group with the most interest and potential to develop themselves should have so much trouble finding an appropriate milieu in which to do so. The findings of recent research on gifted adolescents point directly to three ingredients of self-actualization: self-concept, perceived challenge, and motivation.

Even early research, like Feldhusen (1986), argues that a positive self-concept is a driving force in the actualization of giftedness. He argues that gifted students must first of all have an "accurate perception of self as gifted or talented and perception of self as capable of creative or innovative endeavor" (p. 120). Dixon (1998), in her literature review, concludes that a positive self-concept is vital to the actualization of one's potential. She points out that the newest trend in gifted education deals with social-emotional needs of the gifted, including self-concept, self-efficacy, and social

adaptation. Indeed, it is crucial to help gifted students understand themselves in order to reach their high-level potential. After reviewing the current educational strategies, Delisle (1992) also concludes in favour of positive self-concept, noting that no variety of special programs can be effective if the participant does not believe that she is worthy of them. This is especially important for the gifted girls who tend to downplay their talents, as discussed earlier.

Recently, researchers have looked at how students' motivation interacts with the level of challenge. Wong and Csikszentmihalyi (1993) reported that intrinsic motivation predicted the difficulty level of the courses that gifted students took over a four-year period. In their study of subjective experience, Moneta and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) found that school life affects the happiness and motivation of talented adolescents as a function of the levels of challenges and skills it involves - in this case, the unhappiness of under-challenged gifted students was actually measured. They noted that when both challenges and skills are perceived to be low, the person experiences apathy and the overall quality of subjective experience is the lowest, but when one perceives high challenges and skills, the overall quality of subjective experience is highest. Most recently, Rea (2000) examined how talent development can be seriously undermined by a lack of motivation. He notes that talent development requires optimal motivation, where students are "absorbed so much that they lose track of time and feel their efforts to be effortless" (p. 187). Thus, if want gifted students to learn because of school and not in spite of it, we must learn more about their perceptions of themselves, perceptions of their skills, and perceptions about the level of challenge of various tasks. Once this is understood, we can create more congruency between their perceived level of skill and the perceived challenge of the task at hand in order to maximize their subjective experience and promote their self-actualization.

Why Adolescence?

So much of the literature focuses only on gifted children and gifted adults. We know that the development of any kind of gift is a long-term endeavor beginning early on in life, so how can we ignore the importance of gifted persons' adolescent years any longer? It is the most important time for developing self-concepts and identity for coming to terms with one's own giftedness. It is during this time period that perceptions of oneself and of the world begin to develop. Gifted children do not just become gifted adults; these individuals must go through their adolescence as well. Tolan (1994) illustrates the importance of this transitional period in speaking of what happens to those gifted adults who do not learn about their giftedness during adolescence:

"Whoever gifted adults may be, they are not people with talents that should be developed, but they are people with unusual minds. Gifted children do not disappear when they graduate from high school or finish college or graduate degrees. They become gifted adults. If they enter adulthood blind to their unusual mental capacities, they may go through their lives fragmented, frustrated, unfulfilled and alienated from their innermost beings." (p. 137)

According to Buchan (2000), this is precisely what educators fail to understand that giftedness is enduring and does not taper off after childhood. Gifted adults will naturally become frustrated and confused if they do not learn this very fact about themselves early on. Adolescence, then, is an important and pivotal part of the development of gifted individuals.

Proposal

It seems that the research focus is moving away from the development and assessment of educational programs to the intrinsic aspects of the gifted adolescents themselves. We know that these adolescents are not sufficiently challenged. We know what makes for challenging, worthwhile, enjoyable experiences - a proper balance between perceived skills and perceived challenges. The problem is in the identification of the appropriately challenging conditions. Previous attempts based

their educational programs on external ideas and theories. We now are turning toward the subjective perceptions of the adolescents. This is an essential task in identifying what a gifted adolescent will find challenging or not. It is likely that since the minds of these students are qualitatively different, the situations in which they are challenged will also be qualitatively different. This idea has been wholly overlooked in the past. It is an answer to the call for a more individualized approach to education of the gifted. The complete reversal of an old method, however, cannot be solved through one research experiment. We cannot answer the entire question of how to change our approach based on the perceptions of gifted adolescents, but we must begin somewhere, which is the purpose of this study. We need to understand how the perceptions of gifted adolescents differ from non-gifted adolescents and how they change over the course of this transitional period.

Methods

Design

In order to get the best information about the changes that occur over time, this study has a longitudinal design. By comparing two groups of adolescents on more than one time of testing, we can observe both the differences between the two groups and the changes that occur within the groups over time. Because we know little about the qualitative differences of gifted adolescent perceptions, this study is not experimental but descriptive. We seek to discover the differences in perceptions of challenge at various school tasks. One selected variable is giftedness, which has two levels: gifted vs. non-gifted. The subjective perceptions will be collected repeatedly from the adolescents over a span of two weeks, repeated twice per year for four years.

Participants

Following recruiting procedures similar to other gifted adolescent researchers, teachers of a large high school will nominate approximately 200 students as showing the greatest talent in one or more of the following subject areas: mathematics, science, music, athletics, and the arts. Participants will begin the study at age 13 (grade nine) and complete the study at age 17/18 (grade twelve).

Measures

The perceptions will be measured using an Experience Sampling Method (ESM) similar to the one used in Moneta and Csikszentmihalyi (1996). Each participant is given an electronic pager to wear over the two weeks. The transmitter signals the pagers about eight times a day at random intervals. After every pager call, the participants fill out a sheet. The difference in this study is that the participants will not fill out questionnaires upon hearing the page, but an answer to two open-ended questions: 1) What are you doing right now? and 2) How is it challenging (or not)?. The purpose of this is to overcome the limitations of previous research where the experimenters ideas were imposed upon the participants. The goal of this is to get an unbiased response with the most information possible by asking the students to describe their perceived level of challenge of the task they are doing in school. Although it may be difficult to categorize the responses, it will give us more insight as to what is really going on inside the minds of the gifted and non-gifted adolescents.

Procedure

As already mentioned, participants will fill out a free description of the level of challenge of the task they are doing when the pager goes off. These samples will be taken from school life and home life in order to gain some idea of what is challenging for the adolescents. This is to account for the very likely possibility that nothing will seem challenging during school hours for the gifted adolescents.

Thus, we can get a picture of what both groups of adolescents perceive to be challenging and in what ways.

Results and Discussion

This experiment investigates the hypothesis that gifted adolescents have qualitatively different subjective perceptions than do non-gifted adolescents. Its purpose is to discover some of the similarities among perceptions of gifted adolescents compared with their non-gifted peers. It would be one of the few studies that do not test for a specific measure but allows for personal opinions. Once we understand more about the kinds of processes or kinds of activities that gifted adolescents find challenging, it will provide insights as to how they can make the best use of their time in trying to achieve their full potential. It would be useful for counselors, teachers, parents, and the students themselves to understand under exactly what conditions they are challenged. From this study, we can learn how to approach gifted education, whether it is by the tasks involved or the processes involved in the tasks. We would learn more about exactly what fulfills those individuals whose potential exceeds the average requirements for fulfillment. We can try to understand more about the precise situations in which girls demean their own talent. It would truly be a relief for gifted students to expand their minds and abilities instead of being under-challenged in educational situations that are inappropriate for their level.

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