

Gifted Students and the Adults Who Provide for Them: Lessons Learned From Terrorism

Every fall, approximately 300 gifted adolescents descend on the Ball State University campus to attend the Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics, and Humanities (the Academy). The Academy is a state-funded residential school for academically gifted junior and senior high school aged students. It draws its students from across the state, creating a very diverse community of high-ability learners.

The students come from over 120 high schools and the transition for the 160 juniors new to the Academy is always difficult. The staff of the school prepare for the onset of counseling and adjustment problems, bringing to bear a great deal of expertise and commitment.

For years, the pattern has been that earliest concerns the Academy counseling staff must attend to revolve around homesickness, minor adjustment problems, roommate concerns, and then, midterms. A week before midterm examinations, the school's student life counselors, coordinator of academic guidance, and supervisor of psychoeducational services experience a rush of students expressing worries about their impending exams. The students are attended to in numerous ways to help them work through the issues concerning them. This pattern was being observed again this year until September 11, 2001. Immediately thereafter, the pattern changed. Like most Americans (and the people of many other countries), Academy students were traumatized. A big difference this year was in the school's ability to provide effective counseling services given the fact that the adults at the Academy were very upset as well. Shock, worry, doubt, and fear were all visible in both the student and the

adult faces. The need to provide a safe environment for the students may have been what enabled the school to carry on and the adults to begin the healing process themselves.

Much of the next week was spent providing basic comforts. Innumerable conversations among the students, students and adults, and the adults ensued. Crying was commonplace. Efforts were made to answer questions about the meaning and intention of the event. Many of our regularly scheduled classes were used to discuss the events, and a special volunteer session in the evening was also held. The students were most interested in learning more about the Middle East. Some watched news reports, but many more set out to learn more in other ways, so they could understand better the meaning and significance of the terrible events. The students needed to understand. They needed to know. Very few defaulted to a simplistic understanding based on ignorance or fear. The gifted students needed to know what factors were important to understanding the events of September 11th.

At this same time, a Fulbright Scholar from Saudi Arabia was living at the Academy. His primary goal for being at the Academy was to create a similar school in Saudi Arabia. This person's family

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was about to follow him to the United States when the terrorist acts occurred. Academy students and staff had grown fond of the visiting scholar, and he was becoming an accepted part of the community. He watched Western and world news reports, showing increasing amounts of upset and depression as the events of September 11th were analyzed. His heart sank as it was reported that many of the parties involved were Saudis. For six weeks after September 11th, his wife and young daughter were unable to come to the United States to join him. They were very fearful about traveling alone, and about how they might be treated in the West.

The first Friday after the terrorist attacks, our visitor went to pray at the local mosque. Soon after arriving, numerous local preachers and ministers and one police officer arrived. They positioned themselves around the border of the building in an effort to guarantee that those in the mosque could worship freely and with no fear of attack. While there was no indication in the local community that there would have been any problem, the effort was greatly appreciated by those from the mosque, locals, and many who were living and working at the Indiana Academy. Seeing our friend suffer along with us, while at the same time being unable to be with his family gave the acts of terrorism a world perspective that was obvious. The considerate acts from the community who are often maligned as being uneducated, provincial, too conservative, and even backward, illustrated the importance of good acts in a time of tragedy. It also revealed the mischaracterization of people all over the world by the media. In essence, it reminded us to look at the behavior of people when judging character. The Academy community was

keenly aware of the kind, gentle Saudi who was as negatively affected by these events as the rest of us. He came to work every day and modeled acceptance and genuine care for others. His presence at the school provided a daily reminder of the importance of being both compassionate and knowledgeable.

The month following September 11th was very difficult for those living and working at this special residential

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school. When one considers that all our students move away from their families to live together, along with the fact that the terrorist events are still very disturbing to the adults months later, and will likely become an important emotional milestone for the remainder of our lives, it was a time for lessons to be learned. Learned without the impediments of prejudices or preformed dispositions for how to understand the social and emotional needs of gifted students in our care. As I participated in this community, I tried to be as aware of the interactions among the various groups as

possible. I also worked to help orchestrate additional assistance for any person who needed it. Perhaps more importantly, I was constantly facing evidence that supported or contradicted certain aspects of the literature base on the social and emotional needs of gifted students.

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As has been said many times in the past by caregivers, gifted students must be treated as children first. In our case, however, I will expand that notion by saying that gifted students must be treated as *people* first, the primary distinction here being that providing care for a person is less fraught with age-specific prejudices. Academically gifted junior and senior high school aged students can have very powerful intellects. They can also be as emotionally mature or immature as any of their nongifted peers. Hence, to provide for them as a caregiver in the social and emotional domain, these issues must be considered. In other words, dealing only with the human needs, or the human needs in concert with perceived personality or emotional issues taken into consideration are inadequate as strategies. This is especially true when one considers the next issue.

The behavior of the students in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks has reaffirmed for me that many gifted students have a need to understand complicated matters. Aspects of this include the need to understand matters in a thorough and multifaceted way. Other aspects of this need are issues associated with engagement and control. For some, being engaged in the pursuit of understanding is an important part of who they are as a person, and denying

them that way of understanding the world is ineffectual counseling practice and potentially harmful in its own right.

Regaining a sense of control when dealing with major tragedies is important to many gifted adolescents. While many professionals who provide counseling services for victims of trauma would say this is true for all people, it can be a little different for intellectually gifted students. For example, regaining a sense of control for many gifted students is affected by the extent to which they are allowed or encouraged to pursue complicated understanding of matters in an intellectual way. Those providing services in times of tragedy should give gifted students opportunities to approach the healing process in this manner. To not do so can exacerbate feelings of helplessness and the sense of loss of control.

We also learned from monitoring community interactions since September 11th that this form of suffering can bring a community closer together. Interactions have been improved by the connections made by the students and adults during this time of struggle. Whether a person was adult or student, American or Saudi, local resident or Academy community member was less important than the fact that terrorism affects virtually all people negatively. This is true because people are far more similar than not. Subsequent to the terrorist acts, some of the barriers that tend to be socially constructed were dropped or relaxed, enabling better and more profound types of communications to go on. I suspect we witnessed and participated in a more raw and genuine form of existence as a community than is typically experienced. We dealt with each other as people first.

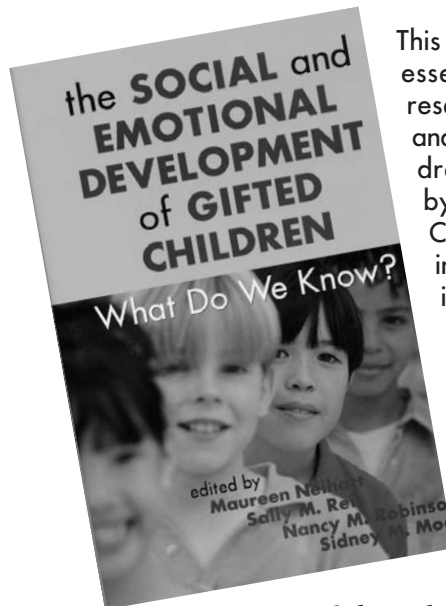
Even with the intervention efforts, a significant downside is starting to be

seen, however. Following these events, a higher than average number of our students are going back home to finish their high school experiences. Although it is disappointing for our school to lose these students, we appreciate that their physical safety, and emotional needs may have to be met among their families. Abraham Maslow's hierarchical theory of needs seems as viable today as ever. Our Saudi visitor's family did make

it to the Academy and lifetime friendships are being forged in the wake of tragedy. Let us attempt to see through the social conventions that keep us apart. As the recent tragedy taught us, dealing with all people as human beings first, then applying appropriate counseling services based on the needs of the individual hold great promise for guiding the social and emotional development of gifted students. **GCT**

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