

Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D.

## Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: Straight Talk

In the past year I have been asked during interviews on two different occasions what message I would like to convey directly to parents, teachers, and counselors of gifted children. Consequently, I have had a fair amount of time to think about this and have developed a list of eight topics I think are important enough to speak to quite directly.

1. The first topic that I would like to address is the question “Are all students gifted?” The answer to this question is no. As Jim Gallagher has said on many occasions, “gifted in what?” To be gifted one must ultimately be gifted in something. All children are wonderful. They are considered in many cultures as the most valuable beings in the world. Even so, they are not gifted by the profession’s definitions. Giftedness is a scientific construct that has a relatively circumscribed definition. Therefore, only a small portion of children would actually be identified as gifted.

2. Students with gifts and talents are as equally mentally and physically healthy (if not more so) as the general population of students. Studies in the United States going back 80 or more years, along with multiple more recent studies, have illustrated this fact again and again. Even in very specific areas such as suicidal behavior, recent research has shown that suicide ideation among the gifted is at the same level or less than that of the general population. And, while we do not know for sure in terms of prevalence rates of completed suicide, significant differences between the general population and students with gifts and talents have not been shown.

3. This third issue is difficult to describe as it deals with how we come to know about gifted children. Who are the gifted, and how do we come to find them? We tend to define giftedness as children who require a special

education. We tend to identify them on the basis of the potential or abilities for outstanding performance in the future. Then, over time, we anoint them gifted or talented on the basis of their achievement in a specific domain.

Although these three emphases of definition, identification, and recognition seem quite similar, in fact they are different. With young students who have verbal skills, we typically find them with some indication on a standardized test or a hint a teacher picks up on. This is really an effort to predict the future by determining that a child has a need warranting a special education. Then we bring to bear what we can in terms of teaching, curriculum, and other opportunities to develop these potentialities into talent areas such as mathematics, language arts, and the like. The primary problem is that we know there are influences on each of these three areas, including social class. So, economic status tends to end up being a very important variable that prevents us from identifying and providing the services these children need to be successful. This is very important given the increasing diversity in our country. This is, in my opinion, the most important issue of our day—finding and servicing all of the children with gifts and talents.

4. Another very important issue is the fact that many of us have changed our views about what giftedness is, from that of an entity, meaning something that one is born with, to a phenomenon that that is incremental in its development. Professionals including Carol Dweck have written about this way of thinking. The incremental model is much more representative of what actually takes place in a person’s life from birth until death relative to developing specific skills. Across the lifespan, people receive instruction, struggle with some failure and develop knowledge and skills. This is

a much healthier notion to guide the efforts of a parent, teacher, or counselor in terms of the work we do on behalf of our children. We should not think of them as fully formed because someone has anointed them as gifted (entity model). But, rather, we should think of them as requiring a special education now and over time. With our expertise being brought to bear, the child will hopefully reach his or her full potential.

5. The fifth topic is parenting and the development of students with gifts and talents. The research base here over the years has been rather meager but it is growing. We know from research on the development of children in general that there are predictable outcomes of parenting styles and approaches. As we continue to pursue the development of students with gifts and talents, we need to conduct considerable research in this area so we can better guide and prepare parents to work with children. Engaging children in dialogue that accentuates communication, while at the same time helping them individuate, can lead to high levels of agency and greater life successes. Until the research base in this area expands, however, we would be wise to draw on the best practices of parenting research in general. We also can draw from research investigating the lived experiences of gifted students and how they cope with their lives in school. These two databases will shed light on parenting issues. With gifted studies research, we should carefully monitor the growing research bases on perfectionism and resiliency and gifted students. Insights about parenting students with gifts and talents, while in its early stages, are being revealed, holding great promise for guiding parenting practices in the future.

6. The next issue is diversity and giftedness. There is so much yet to know about diversity and gifted students that we are just scratching the surface. All groups of people have samples within them who have outstanding potential to develop into great talents within and outside of the traditional culture they represent. Moreover, as we become more diverse as a country, this fact has become increasingly obvious in some areas such as the visual arts, where there is a physical manifestation of emerging talent that most adults can recognize. It is easy to garner the resources to support these students while other talent domains such as early mathematic potential or logic takes awhile to reveal itself in a manner that the general population can understand. So much work needs to be done in the area of diversity and giftedness to maximize the potential of all the students.

An interesting corollary to the diversification of America intersecting with the technology evolution is playing out socially among our students. We have been living through fascinating changes in American culture over the past 20 years or so as an evolution of technologies in terms of laptop computers, desktop computers, and, more recently, gaming in the extent to which people from all walks of life participate in these activities. One of the manifestations of this evolution has been the change of the language associated historically with gifted children such as being called a *nerd*, a *geek*, a *brainiac*, or any number of other things. This evolution where gifted children often are top competitors in games, in fixing computers, or in setting up things has raised their status in the general population. Stores have Geek Squads and adults will use the term *geek* or *nerd* as an adjective rather than a noun. I think it is showing that as our country becomes more diverse, being an

academically or intellectually gifted person gets defined in the broad context and over time is becoming less as a problem for gifted people as compared to what it was 50 or even 20 years ago.

7. True for the general population of adolescents, and especially true for some gifted adolescents, is the desire for authenticity among the adults they deal with. In my work at the Indiana Academy, I observed that many intellectually gifted adolescents desired interactions to be absolutely authentic and when they assess that an adult person is not being authentic—genuine—not only do they devalue that person but it causes them conflict in trying to make sense out of the importance they describe to adults and the authentic behavior. For some of these gifted young people, they conclude that most people are inauthentic most of the time and that the only true feeling is that of pain, and that every other feeling state is more manufactured than authentic. There are all sorts of negative ramifications to the belief that this feeling state of pain is the only genuine one. One of the results is students will find ways to feel pain so they feel themselves to be authentic, so they have feelings they can identify, and so they can gain a sense of relief. We know from our research that cutting behavior among our youth, adolescents, and young adults has increased quite a bit in the last 20 years and in my opinion is quite likely associated in some cases with this desire for authenticity.

8. The last important issue is that it is incumbent upon us as adults to act proactively on behalf of students with gifts and talents. The important point here is that we should all feel morally obligated to act on behalf of students with gifts and talents because not to do so is, in fact, choosing not to act.

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*You recently served as editor of Gifted Child Quarterly. Can you tell us some of the challenges you faced as an editor of a publication that serves educators, parents, and gifted children?*

The challenge of being an editor is just keeping up. Manuscripts come in daily. I had a rule that I had to deal with whatever came in, in a particular week, by the end of that week. Otherwise, I could not keep up. Other challenges included finding enough really good reviewers and not overtaxing good ones by sending them too many papers. And, there were times when I felt a paper was simply not appropriately developed enough for publication, even though the reviewers may have liked it. I always agonized over those situations. Rarely did I have an author who was upset with my decision and wrote me an angry e-mail or letter.

*You currently serve as a board member of the National Association for Gifted Children. Can you describe some of your responsibilities in this position?*

Well, right now I am serving as Governance Secretary. In that role, I help the organization with policy. I develop it, revise it, figure out if we need policy that is currently lacking, etc. I like the role very much. It is interesting to me and it helps me develop as an administrator. It also involves a lot of working with groups of people to try to get consensus. I enjoy that and sometimes it is very challenging. I also have liked being on the board because there are so many interesting people on it with different viewpoints. It is very intellectually stimulating.

*What research/writing are you currently working on?*

I am working on a special issue on distance education for *GCT*. I also am writing a chapter for a book. Rena Subotnik and colleagues are putting together on the use of statistics in gifted education research. About 10 very good statisticians wrote chapters on their specialty area of statistics applied to gifted education research.

My job is to respond to those chapters and apply their recommendations. This has been very challenging to me but a good experience—a growing experience. I also am starting a large study of the sociability and social skills of gifted children along with my colleagues, Dr. Seon Young Lee, with whom I have collaborated a great deal in the last 5 years, and Dana Thomson, who works here at CTD in the GLL program. We want to know how gifted kids vary in terms of their social skills and sociability and peer relations. We want to see if, in fact, higher ability kids have more difficulty and whether being in gifted programs assists kids and makes it easier for them to find a peer group, feel accepted, etc. We also want to investigate whether gifted children who experience difficulty making or finding friends have parents who may have experienced that as well when they were children. So, we are interested also in the role of the family in developing social skills and sociability. **GCT**

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Inaction has all sorts of consequences for gifted students in terms of their not being challenged in school, feeling frustrated, feeling unvalued, feeling like there is something wrong with them, and so forth. We cannot be guilty of turning a blind eye to the social and emotional issues and needs of students with gifts and talents. If we do nothing, we become complicit in the decline of their psychological well-being.

One approach to engaging others is for us use language that does not pit us against our colleagues. For example, when we talk about students with gifts and talents, we should frame our conversation within the goal set that our

schools should aspire to all students maximizing their potential, including gifted children. This will allow a different kind of conversation to be held than often occurs. This goal for students runs counter to minimum competency testing common to the U.S. Changing the conversation from minimum competency to maximizing the potential of all students will dramatically affect the opportunities for all students, including students with gifts and talents.

The social and emotional development of students with gifts and talents lasts a lifetime. We have learned many important lessons about how to help them develop during their school-age

years and with this newfound knowledge have corresponding responsibility to act. The eight issues discussed in this column bring to light some of the current thinking that can be helpful to those of us (parents, teachers, counselors) who are in important positions to help them develop. Understanding what giftedness actually is and is not, how to identify it, moving from an entity model of giftedness to an incremental model, continuing to strive to be as effective a parent as one can be, and understanding the needs of authenticity enable adults to assist in the social and emotional development of students with gifts and talents. **GCT**