

**Meeting the Guidance and Counseling Needs of
Gifted Students in School Settings**

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Abstract

A practicing school counselor discusses the necessity of providing specialized guidance and counseling services for gifted and talented learners. Unfortunately, school counselors today may not have adequate knowledge or training to be able to provide such services and some may have attitudes and biases that prevent effective work with these students. Yet, school counselors have unique skills to apply in service delivery. This discussion examines academic, career/vocational, social, and affective needs of gifted students and areas for which they may require specialized assistance. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2004) can guide and support school counseling professionals as they obtain the education and training necessary to better meet the needs of gifted and talented learners, who are indeed part of *all* students whom they are admonished to serve.

Meeting the Guidance and Counseling Needs of Gifted Students in School Settings

It has long been recognized that gifted and talented students have unique personal, social, and academic characteristics that distinguish them from their non-gifted peers. Specialized guidance and counseling services are recognized by many experts in the field as essential to the maximum educational achievement of gifted and talented students (Colangelo, 1997, 2002; Gentry, 2006; Kerr, 1991; Moon, 2002, 2004; Milgram, 1991; Peterson, 2006; Reis & Renzulli, 2004; Silverman, 1993; VanTassel-Baska, 1990). Unfortunately, much of the literature that exists regarding the social and emotional development and, more specifically, the counseling needs of gifted and talented children are targeted for parents, educators, or clinical practitioners (Moon, 2004).

However, in response to the expanding knowledge base concerning the social and emotional needs of gifted students, more current publications do include some practical considerations and suggested guidelines for the guidance and counseling of gifted and talented students in schools (Cross, 2004; Gentry, 2006; Mendaglio & Peterson, 2007; Moon, 2004; Peterson, 2003, 2006; Reis & Moon, 2002). In addition, specific programs, counseling models (e.g. Mendaglio & Peterson, 2007, Moon, 2002) and group counseling curricula (Peterson, 2006, 2008) have been published. And most recently, special conferences, seminars, and workshops designed to help guidance counselors and other support services personnel to better meet the needs of high ability students have been offered by colleges and universities, state boards of education, professional organizations such as the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC)

and Supporting the Needs of the Gifted (SENG), and independent professional development providers.

Sadly, the vast majority of both elementary and secondary school counselors today are unaware of the unique guidance and counseling needs of the gifted and talented students they serve and are unable to provide the types of specialized services that these students require. The primary cause of this deficit appears to be the reported lack of attention that school counselor training programs give to the gifted and talented as a special population. According to a 2005 study of nationally accredited graduate programs in school guidance counseling (Peterson & Wachter, 2008), the preparatory curricula for most programs provided little, if any, information concerning the characteristics, social and emotional development, or differentiated counseling needs of high ability students. Clearly, without any educational background or training, few practicing school counselors may have sufficient knowledge about the special guidance and counseling needs of gifted and talented learners to be effective with this population and may be unaware of the complexity of related concerns and unequipped to respond appropriately to them (Peterson, 2007).

Besides a lack of preparation in how to best provide in how to best provide guidance and counseling services for gifted and talented students, Peterson (2006) noted that school counselors may also “have attitudes and biases that preclude trusting relationships, and therefore, effective work, with them” (p. 44). As an example, when asked how he worked with high ability students, one veteran school counselor responded that bright kids don’t really need counselors for much of anything because they are smart enough to figure things out for themselves. Unfortunately, this attitude

seems to be quite pervasive. According to Lovecky (1993) and Peterson (2003), the common myth among educators, counselors, school psychologists, and even mental health professionals, is that gifted and talented students do not require any additional guidance or special assistance because of their high abilities. The inability to and the possible resistance of school counselors to provide appropriate guidance and counseling services for high ability learners is an issue which has long been overlooked and which presents a frustrating educational and developmental dilemma: If school counselors cannot or will not provide the kind of specialized support and guidance in academic, career/vocational, social, and emotional domains that gifted and talented students truly need, then who will?

Why School Counselors?

According to Colangelo (2002), no counseling professional is likely to have as much contact with gifted and talented students as the school counselor. Due to the nature of their roles, school counselors are uniquely qualified to provide the types of services and resources that can benefit these students. School counselors are specially trained to implement comprehensive, developmental programs that promote and enhance student achievement and to provide assistance in academic, career, and personal/social domains. Because school counselors are in a position to form open, trusting relationships with students, they can provide individual nurturing and support or offer group counseling assistance covering a variety of topics. They can also monitor student academic progress and provide guidance with appropriate course selection, career planning, post-secondary educational options, and special programs and enrichment opportunities. In addition to their direct contact with students, school

counselors can provide resources, share information, and work collaboratively with teachers and parents to help meet the specific needs of exceptional students.

Peterson (1998) observed that having exceptional ability does not exempt even the brightest children “from formidable challenges as they navigate through the school years” (p. 195). Because parents or other family members may not have the necessary back-ground and because teachers of the gifted usually do not have the training required to assist students with affective, career, or psychosocial concerns, school counselors can be key figures in responding to and serving those needs. Both Cross (2004) and Silverman (1993) asserted that proactive counseling programs for gifted and talented students are invaluable because of the positive effects on their psychological and social development and because support and guidance can help these students find their way through a public education system that is not necessarily designed to maximize or promote their success.

Why Specialized Services?

Although definitions of “giftedness” vary to some extent, most tend to convey that the development and experience of gifted children is unique and significantly different from that of non-gifted children. One popular definition by the Columbus Group (1991) even suggests the need for specialized counseling:

Gifted is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching, and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.

Social and emotional difficulties may arise because of gifted children's asynchronous or uneven development, exceptional abilities, and notable talents and can be especially problematic during the teenage years (Colangelo, 2002; Moon, 2002; Robinson & Noble, 1991). Moon (2002) reported the following:

Counselors who work with gifted children and adolescents agree that these young people have unique social and emotional issues related to their giftedness. The most common counseling need of this population is assistance in coping in a society that does not always recognize, understand, or welcome giftedness. (p. 213)

While gifted children are generally reported to be as socially and emotionally adjusted as their non-gifted peers (Colangelo, 1997; Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002; Silverman, 1993) and share many of the guidance and counseling needs common to all students, current literature points out a variety of areas and conditions for which they may require special assistance. These include: depression (Neihart, et al., 2002, Silverman, 1993), emotional intensity and heightened sensitivity (Lovecky, 1992; Mendaglio, 2003), feeling different from others (Coleman & Cross, 2001; Cross, 2001), perfectionism (Schuler, 2002), social isolation (Silverman, 1993), social skills deficits and peer relationship issues (Moon, Kelly, & Feldhusen, 1997; Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan, 1989), and stress management problems (Moon, 2002; Webb, et al., 1994). Cross (2004) adds that the social and emotional needs of gifted children are not static, but are greatly influenced by the environment in which the child exists and the culture in which he or she is immersed. An additional concern, then, is that these issues alone or in combination, can complicate other types of problems and situations that school

counselors frequently encounter on the job, such as parent separation or divorce, an unstable home life, personality conflicts, grief, behavioral issues, or motivational deficits. Some difficulties may be further compounded in students with dual or multiple exceptionalities who may not have effective coping skills or who may already be cognitively or affectively overwhelmed in school (Silverman, 1993).

Academically, the intellectual abilities of gifted students differ both quantitatively and qualitatively from average children (Cottrel & Shaughnessy, 2005). They learn at a faster pace, think or process more deeply, and require less repetition or practice to master assigned material, thus, warranting greater educational challenge in their coursework (Coleman & Cross, 2001; Silverman, 2002; VanTassel-Baska, 1998). However, if left academically unchallenged, these students can become bored and exhibit disruptive behaviors. Lack of goals, motivation, or direction, and failure to develop self-regulatory strategies can impact the academic performance of high ability students, for a variety of reasons (Siegle & McCoach, 2002). Gifted and talented learners may also feel pressure to live up to the expectations of parents, teachers, and other significant adults in their lives and many have a fear of failure, experience frustration, and underachieve in school (Schuler, 2002; Silverman, 1993).

Because exceptional talent or high ability does not necessarily translate into insightful college and career planning, gifted students may also require special assistance in these areas (Colangelo, 2002; Silverman, 2002). Many gifted students have difficulty with multipotentiality, finding it difficult to narrow their career choices simply because they are capable of doing so many things extremely well (Greene, 2002; Silverman, 1993). Such indecision in career selection may be manifested in

avoidance or delay in career decision-making or frequent change of college major and may result in extended post-secondary education or completely dropping out of college (Frederickson, 1986; Green, 2002). Gifted students who have made early, perhaps premature, career choices may actually limit further exploration of other career possibilities and may not consider the important elements of thoughtful planning, persistence, financial dependence, or self-sacrifice that may be involved (Silverman, 1993). Career exploration for gifted students can also be affected by uncontrollable factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, value conflicts, or chance events (Greene, 2002).

In summary, research confirms that the degree to which the educational needs of the gifted are met is a significant factor in their overall social and emotional development or adjustment (Colangelo, 2002). From their work with educational institutions nationwide, Davidson & Davidson (2004) reported that schools that meet the needs of gifted learners have many things in common including the recognition of their special career planning and counseling needs. For school counselors and other support services providers, it seems clear that gifted and talented students would be better served in school settings if their unique academic, social, emotional, and career planning needs were addressed through specialized guidance and counseling services adapted to meet those needs and designed to provide appropriate interventions and support.

An Underserved Population

Because school counselors are typically required to attend Special Education Case Conferences in their buildings or districts as part of their assigned duties, they

tend to have some familiarity with students with special needs. Some school counselors may have even taken courses during their graduate training or attended trainings, seminars, or workshops that pertain to the education of “at risk” or special populations of students such as those with learning disabilities, physical handicaps, emotional disorders, or other exceptional needs. Therefore, most school counselors, whether through education or experience, have acquired at least some minimal knowledge of the issues associated with special services students and the programs and accommodations designed to help these students more fully develop educationally.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about school counselor knowledge of the educational and support needs of gifted and talented learners, even though, according to Lovecky (1993), such students “are as different from average students as are the developmentally disabled” (p. 29). Although not usually recognized as students with special needs, the gifted and talented present as many challenges and require as much in the way of access to educational resources, services, and modifications as do those in Special Education programs. Yet, these students are definitely more underserved unless they happen to fall under the Special Education umbrella as they do in the states of Florida and Pennsylvania (Florida Department of Education, 2011; Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2010) or unless schools provide high ability programming that includes a school counseling component. Still, the somber reality is that unless graduate education programs or state departments of education require school counselors to have training in or familiarity with the needs of high ability students, specialized guidance and counseling services for these students is unlikely to be readily available.

A Mission for the Profession

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Ethical Standards (2010) and most state standards for school counseling professionals, one of the primary roles of school counselors is to promote the educational development of *all* students. Specific responsibilities to students mentioned in the ASCA Standards include concern for the educational, academic, career, personal, and social needs of *every* student. Clearly, providing for all students includes gifted and talented learners. Yet, how are school counselors to provide to provide the specialized guidance and support services that these students require if they have little or knowledge of their characteristics or their unique academic, social, emotional, or career needs?

Another interesting feature of the ASCA Ethical Standards (2010) and many state support services program standards is the recommendation that school counselors have knowledge of current and relevant literature, research, and resources and that they acquire educational or training experiences to increase their awareness or skills in working with diverse populations, including those with special needs. The ASCA also issued a revised position statement in 2007 concerning gifted and talented programs which included recognition that gifted and talented students have unique and diverse needs and the ability of professional school counselors to meet those needs is imperative. Further, the school counselor's role should include assisting in identifying these students, promoting the understanding and awareness of special issues that may affect them, collaborating with other school personnel to maximize their educational opportunities, and advocating for the inclusion of activities that address their social, emotional, academic, and career needs.

In addition to the ASCA Ethical Standards (2004), the Gifted Program Standards of The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) advocated that as part of gifted education programming, a plan be designed “to recognize and nurture the unique socio-emotional development of gifted learners” (p. 27) and further advised that awareness of these needs and of best counseling practices are essential (Landrum, Callahan, & Shaklee, 2001). Beyond just gifted education programming, Colangelo (2002) offered the following:

Gifted students need the assistance and nurturing counselors can provide. It will be a sign of effective schooling when counselors regularly use their skills and expertise with gifted and talented students in their schools. (p. 5)

What has become clear from the literature is that gifted and talented students are a population with special needs and should be entitled to school guidance and counseling services that are specially designed to meet those needs. It is important not to confuse the apparent lack of experience or training in how to provide specialized guidance and counseling services to gifted learners with a lack of legitimate need for those services to be provided. It is the professional responsibility of all school counselors to become familiar with relevant literature, pursue appropriate and necessary training or education, and find or create ways to more effectively meet the academic, career, social, and emotional needs of the gifted and talented students they serve. In this way, school counselors can better ensure that they are indeed working to meet the needs of *all* students; a mission that is ethical in practice, long overdue, and definitely necessary.

Where to Begin

Practicing school counseling professionals can readily access essential information about and increase their awareness of the characteristics, social and emotional development, and special guidance and counseling needs of gifted students through a variety of means. The first is through reading and becoming familiar with the extant literature concerning gifted and talented children. Books and journal articles written by prominent scholars in the field of gifted education, such as Colangelo, Moon, Peterson, Reis, and Silverman would provide an excellent start. Taking a graduate course or attending a conference, seminar, or workshop that provides information related to the social and affective needs of gifted learners and recommended practices for working effectively with them, would be beneficial as well. The local school district's broad-based planning committee for high ability education and the state gifted education association can also provide helpful information. Lastly, becoming familiar with state high ability or gifted education legislation and standards can assist school counselors in better meeting the needs of *all* students.

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Biographical Statement

Much of the research for this article was done before and during 2009, while I was a graduate student at Purdue University. I have almost completed my second Master's degree from Purdue, in Gifted Education. Currently, I work as the Director of Guidance at Fountain Central Jr.-Sr. High School in Veedersburg, Indiana. My role also includes that of Test Coordinator and High Ability Coordinator for the school corporation. The state of Indiana does provide for High Ability programming funded by a state grant that is renewable each year. However, I feel that much more can and should be done to help school counselors better serve high ability students in our state and nationwide.