

Counseling Gifted Students in Hong Kong: A Critical Need

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With the increasing number of programs and services for gifted students in Hong Kong, it is recognized that gifted students do have unique social and emotional needs in addition to their specific learning needs. The critical need for counseling services as an integral component of gifted programs is examined by reviewing the recent greater emphasis of providing counseling services for gifted students in North America, and the problems and issues specific to counseling gifted students in Hong Kong. The relevant issues include self-concept and self-definitional problems, heightened emotional sensitivity and overexcitability, perfectionism, underachievement, and multipotentiality. Implications of the development of counseling services for the gifted in the context of the whole school approach to guidance and counseling in Hong Kong are discussed.

The education of the gifted and talented has generally focused on the provision of programs and services to meet the specific learning needs of gifted and talented students. The concern for their emotional and counseling needs, however, has been a more recent emphasis (see Colangelo, 1997; Milgram, 1991; Silverman, 1993b). Thus, counseling and related helping professions were not involved in the early development of gifted education, nor were they regarded as an integral part in the design and development of program services for the gifted. This underemphasis by educators can be traced to the myth that gifted students are well adjusted and do not need counseling services, a myth that was created in the early studies, notably the longitudinal Terman studies of 1,528 gifted children in the 1930s in North America (see Goleman, 1980; Terman, 1954).

The North American Experience

Prior to the Terman studies, there were prevailing assumptions that brilliant students were physically weak, unattractive, and emotionally unstable. Cesare Lombroso in 1895, for example, tied genius to insanity and feebleness, and included stuttering, short stature, general emaciation, sickly color, rickets (leading to club-footedness, lameness, or a hunchback), baldness, amnesia/forgetfulness, sterility, and left-handedness to "signs of degeneration in men of genius" (see Davis & Rimm, 1994; Simonton, 1994). The scientific data of Terman studies indicated the contrary. Gifted students were better adjusted psychologically and socially, and were even healthier than the average person. In adulthood, they reported greater personal adjustment, emotional stability, self-esteem, professional success, and personal contentment, and they showed a below average incidence of suicide and mental illness. However, it is well known today that Terman's sample was a teacher-nominated sample of exclusively white and middle-class youngsters tested with the Stanford-Binet and could not be representative of the wider population of gifted students (see Colangelo, 1997). Nonetheless, findings of the Terman studies serve to dispel the genius-insanity myth but unfortunately also sway educators from recognizing and providing services to meet the unique emotional and counseling needs of gifted students.

Leta Stetter Hollingworth is perhaps the first to contribute evidence in the 1940s to support that gifted and talented students do have social and emotional needs (Silverman, 1993a). Hollingworth noted that there might be discrepancies between gifted students' physical, intellectual and emotional development, causing difficulties that merit counseling attention. She further noted that the failure to provide challenging opportunities in regular school environment to meet the educational needs of gifted students might also lead to students' apathy. Thus, Hollingworth anticipated results yielded in recent surveys, which indicated that events related to academic achievement, together with social status and career aspirations, were generally found to be great concerns of gifted students (e.g., Karnes & Oehler-Sinnett, 1986). Following the pioneering work of Hollingworth, counseling gifted students has received increased attention, as evidenced by the establishment of research and guidance programs in various centers in the 1970s and the 1980s in the US, including those at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Wright State University, Kent State University, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the University of Denver,

and the University of Iowa (see Colangelo, 1997; Davis & Rimm, 1994). In general, it is now recognized that gifted students need counseling help with a variety of self-definitional, social, and family issues, along with academic and career-related problems.

Gifted Education and Counseling in Hong Kong

Historically, gifted education and talent development have not received due attention in the education system in Hong Kong. Educational and counseling services were provided for the less advantaged groups, such as the sensory impaired, the mentally handicapped, and the learning disabled, rather than for the gifted and talented (see Chan, 1997a). It was not until the 1980s that some attempts have been made to introduce enrichment activities for the gifted at the Hong Kong International School by the Extended Learning Committee (Wu & Cho, 1993). An upsurge of interest in gifted education in the late 1980s and early 1990s was generated among local educators and scholars with the forming of the Gifted Education Council. Since then, the Gifted Education Council has been active in supporting research and enrichment programs for gifted students, and has made proposals regarding gifted education to the Hong Kong Education Commission.

The Hong Kong Education Commission in its fourth report introduced the first policy statement on gifted education. Specifically, students with gifts and talents are defined as those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential in one or more of the following areas: (1) general intellectual ability; (2) specific academic aptitude; (3) creative and productive thinking; (4) leadership ability; (5) visual and performing arts; and (6) psychomotor ability (Hong Kong Board of Education, 1996; Hong Kong Education Commission, 1990). The Commission further estimated that some 20,000 potentially gifted students would require programming, and made recommendations regarding the provision of services, mostly enrichment activities, especially for academically gifted and talented students. Unfortunately, the counseling needs of gifted students continue to be largely ignored in the design and service programming for the gifted in Hong Kong.

The urgent need for counseling services for the gifted and talented in Hong Kong has been repeatedly voiced by teachers and parents, although the supporting evidence they provide is by and large anecdotal. Since educational psychologists at the Hong Kong Government Education

Department provide services for identifying gifted students on the basis of intellectual assessment with the Hong Kong Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, it is said that close to 700 students have been identified. These students have registered at the Fung Hon Chu Gifted Education Centre, and their demand for services has indicated a corresponding need for counseling. From a different perspective, teachers who have gifted students in their regular classrooms find these students difficult to manage, as they might be perfectionist, emotionally sensitive and overexcitable, confused about their own giftedness, and might even be underachieving. Parents, on the other hand, generally have higher expectations on their children being labeled gifted, and feel that they have not done enough to provide opportunities for their gifted children and to help them realize their full potential. Thus, the development of gifted education in Hong Kong needs to be met with a parallel development in the design and implementation of counseling activities to assist students in their self-discovery, in understanding themselves, their abilities, motives, interests, values and issues of being gifted. The recognition of a critical need for providing counseling services for students should hopefully lead to the suggestion of counseling functions, activities, and strategies that can be carried out by teachers and parents of gifted students.

Issues and Problems in Counseling Gifted Students

Over the years, there is an accumulating body of evidence indicating that a number of problems and issues need to be carefully addressed in understanding and counseling gifted students (Milgram, 1991; Silverman, 1993b). They, among others, include self-concept and self-definition especially in relation to being labeled gifted, heightened emotional sensitivity and overexcitability, perfectionism, underachievement, and multipotentiality. These issues have great relevance for counseling gifted students in Hong Kong, and will be discussed briefly below.

One of the most common self-concept related problems for gifted students is the feeling of being different and not fitting in with family and peers. This arises from gifted students' knowledge of giftedness and their reactions to being labeled gifted. Gifted students have ambivalent feelings and multifaceted attitudes about their giftedness. They tend to view themselves positively in terms of personal growth and academics, and negatively in terms of social peer relations (Kerr, Colangelo, & Gaeth, 1988). While they are generally positive about being labeled gifted, they

may perceive that nongifted peers and teachers view them negatively (Colangelo & Kelly, 1983). Indeed, only those who know the gifted well have positive attitudes toward the gifted student, and their attitudes become more negative as they have less and less personal knowledge of the gifted student (Monaster, Chan, Walt, & Wiehe, 1994). In addition, nongifted peers and family members may not understand giftedness, leading to either unrealistic expectations, or to jealousy, resentment, and outright hostility about the high ability (Silverman, 1983; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982). It appears that the greater the gifts, the greater the chances of poor social relations, and being gifted may mean feeling socially isolated and not being normal. Thus, it can be expected that many gifted students in Hong Kong, like gifted students elsewhere, will experience adjustment problems and identity problems regarding who they are and what they wish to become. Indeed, in the Programs for the Gifted and Talented at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, one frequently came across requests from some participants and their parents that the involvement of the participants should not be disclosed to their school personnel for fear that the students would be labeled gifted and would be isolated from their peers. In this connection, counseling gifted students should aim at helping these students develop more positive self-concepts, comprehend their own giftedness in relation to self, school, and society, interact more effectively with peers, siblings, parents, and other adults, and integrate their cognitive, emotional, and social development.

In addition to the above self-concept issues, gifted students are also said to possess a high level of sensitivity and overexcitability. Piechowski (1997) described the effects of such emotional giftedness in psychomotor, intellectual, imaginal, sensual, and emotional areas. It is said that emotional giftedness, with its components of high energy and quest for knowledge, powers the achievements and accomplishments of the gifted whose sense of justice, sensitivity to others' feelings, and compassion in turn present strong potential for moral leadership and inspiration to others. The downside of emotional giftedness, however, also leads gifted students to feel different, isolated, and doubtful about themselves, and to come to believe that there is something wrong with themselves. Some anecdotal evidence in Hong Kong has also revealed that in some cases, the expression of intense emotions and exaggerated activities have led teachers and parents to view the students as having attention deficits with hyperactivity, and to resort to medical consultation for medication. Thus, counselors need to introduce the concepts of sensitivity and overexcitability to gifted

students, their teachers and parents such that gifted students will feel legitimate in their "abnormal" reactions and what they cannot help experiencing and wanting to express.

Related to the perception of giftedness is yet another issue, the problem of perfectionism of gifted students (Adderholdt-Elliott, 1989). Very often, perfectionism stems from meeting the expectations of being gifted, continual success, and the internalization of the extreme positive feedback from parents and teachers. These conditions are readily encountered at home and in school in Hong Kong. Consequently, gifted students may unrealistically impose perfectionistic goals upon themselves in all arenas, and work desperately to protect their identity of giftedness. Falling short of their self-imposed goals may lead to great stress, causing gifted students to spend their lives worrying, feeling like failures, and working too hard. It is therefore challenging for counselors to help these gifted students achieve the understandings of the impossibility of perfection in everything, the difference between doing one's best and overdoing, and the difference between reasonable pursuit of excellence and compulsive perfectionism.

Perhaps, equally common as the irrational compulsion for perfectionism is its seeming reverse of underachievement of gifted students. However, perfectionism and underachievement can be related in terms of, for example, procrastination, fear of failure, and all-or-nothing mindset (Adderholdt-Elliott, 1989). Usually, underachievement is interpreted as a discrepancy between assessed potential and actual performance. Underachieving students are characterized by low self-esteem, academic avoidance behaviors, and poor study habit, unmastered skills, and social and discipline problems. In developing programs for underachieving gifted students, Rimm (1997) maintained that underachievement among the gifted is as prevalent as a national epidemic, as half of gifted students in the US do not perform to their tested abilities. In Hong Kong, it is unknown to what extent this condition is prevalent, given that our school environments generally value students' accomplishments. However, our system of not allowing grade skipping, and a common core curriculum, which prescribes all students to study identical materials at similar speeds or in similar styles, may inadvertently foster underachievement in gifted students who find school not providing challenging opportunities for their learning. One also wonders what proportions of our "unmotivated" students, who openly criticize the quality of our schools and the abilities of individual teachers, or claim that they "don't care" or "didn't really try" in regard to their poor

grades, are in fact gifted underachievers. Further, overly high expectations from Chinese parents in Hong Kong may set achievement outcomes too high, thus failing to foster successful relationships between effort and outcomes for their children. Nonetheless, it is now recognized that underachievement among gifted students is complex, and requires counselors to work with gifted students at self-esteem enhancement through success experiences and realistic goal-setting, and understanding the relationship between efforts and outcomes. Reversing underachievement among gifted students is again a complex process that requires the close collaboration of parents and teachers, and counselors can play an important role in making home-school partnership a reality.

While parental expectations may influence gifted students' perfectionism and underachievement, they also have an impact on the career selection and decision of gifted students. It is believed that gifted students generally possess abilities and interests in many areas, a notion known as multipotentiality (see Rysiew, Shore, & Carson, 1994). The vast choices, which gifted students perceive among areas of interests, career aspirations and goals, may overwhelm them so that they are not able to make and maintain their decisions. Thus, gifted students may need career counseling through the decision-making process. While the notion of multipotentiality has recently been challenged, above-level ability, preference, and value assessment may be offered to help gifted students better understand their strengths and relative weaknesses to facilitate career decisions (Achter, Benbow, & Lubinski, 1997). Counselors should be reminded that gifted students in Hong Kong are often pulled in competing directions by themselves, parents and sometimes teachers, who may recognize different talents, interests, and motivation in these students. Some parents, keenly aware of their children's high ability, may expect great accomplishments. Other parents may ignore their children's special abilities and talents, and expect them to enter the family business. Thus, parental expectations and multipotentiality can be important concerns for many gifted students in Hong Kong.

Developing Counseling Services for Gifted Students in Hong Kong

Colangelo (1997) described two approaches, remedial and developmental, to developing counseling programs for gifted students. The remedial approach is essentially a therapeutic model, emphasizing problem-solving

and crisis intervention. The developmental approach is the preferred model. In this approach, although counselors are also available for therapy, the more important goal is to establish, with knowledge of the cognitive and affective needs of gifted students, an environment in school that is conducive to the growth and development of the gifted students.

While school guidance or counseling services in Hong Kong cannot be readily characterized by the adoption of a remedial or a developmental approach, there is a gradual trend of moving from a remedial emphasis where the therapy-expert is the school social workers to a whole school approach where all teachers are involved in the programmatic efforts to meet the educational and emotional needs of all students (see Chan, 1997b). Despite that most schools are still operating with the remedial emphasis because of tradition and the lack of resources, the whole school approach with its preventive emphasis has great potential in meeting the needs of students of diverse abilities and backgrounds, including gifted and talented students who will not be normally provided with counseling services under the misguided assumption that they can manage on their own. Thus, the whole school approach is in line with the preferred developmental approach in the development of counseling services for gifted students. In this approach, individual counseling will help gifted students better understand their strengths and weaknesses so that they may more fully develop their potential. Group counseling with other gifted peers, on the other hand, may focus on sharing perceptions of being gifted, including heightened sensitivity to moral issues and reactions to parental expectations, such that gifted students can validate their experiences of feeling different. Finally, counseling with families will help families anticipate and adjust to changes when their children are labeled gifted with gifted or nongifted siblings, facilitate collaboration of parents and teachers, and establish a home environment conducive to the talent development of gifted students.

In summary, individual, group, and family counseling are predicated on the recognition that gifted students do have unique social and emotional needs that interact in the development of talent. With the development of an increasing number of programs and services for gifted and talented students in Hong Kong, counseling should be regarded as a necessary and integral component of programming for the gifted and talented. Successful talent development depends not only on being knowledgeable and expert in both counseling and giftedness on the part of the counselors, but also on implementing a developmental counseling approach that foster the

cognitive and affective growth of gifted and talented students both in school and at home. From a slightly different perspective, it is also important to emphasize that the unique social, emotional and career development needs of gifted and talented students may require differentiated counseling services. Research will need to be conducted to determine what counseling strategies are most effective with what types of issues, including culturally and locally relevant issues, and whether traditional counseling models and current practice need to be reexamined when working with gifted and talented students in Hong Kong.

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