EDF6607 Gifted Education: Identification and Programming

Assessment 2

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Considering the gifted child as a tapestry of complex intellectual, emotional and social constructs is imperative in fully supporting not only the student's academic development, but the development of the person as a whole. Whilst not sighted on any curriculum documents; Teachers, by the very nature of their profession, have a duty of care to be responsible for the positive development of their student's academic, emotional and social well-being whilst in their care. Being neglectful or flippant of this duty of care is detrimental to the students and teacher's well-being alike.

This paper examines the importance of considering teacher attitudes towards gifted students, and the impact that negativity can have on the gifted child's social, emotional and academic development. Within the scope of emotional wellbeing of gifted children, this paper will explore a specific psychological characteristic of giftedness known as "asynchronous development" and what connection this characteristic might have on behavioural difficulties and in turn, negative teacher attitudes and misconceptions towards gifted students.

According to Smith and Chan (1998), attitudes toward the gifted are important because:

> *"There is a common consensus among gifted educators that appropriate identification of an programming for gifted and talented students depend greatly on teacher's attitudes, views, understanding of the nature of giftedness and issues regarding education of the gifted"*
>
> *(Smith and Chan (1998) in Plunkett (2002) p.240)*

I understand Smith and Chan's (1998) point above to be multi-faceted, suggesting that the development of giftedness is reliant on:

1. the quality of a positively differentiated curriculum, responding to the academic needs of the student, and;
2. a supportive environmental classroom culture which understands and values difference, special talents and giftedness. This in turn meets the socio-emotional needs of gifted students to be supported and develop self-confidence in their abilities to achieve.

Both factors are highly influenced by the teacher, school culture and school curriculum policies. In so doing, a positive and enthusiastic attitude that is furnished by specific training in understanding and supporting giftedness is imperative to the success of developing gifted students.

Being self-reflective, a common misconception about social characteristics concerning giftedness I held as a pre-service teacher was to assume that the brightest children would be quiet, studious, concentrate for long periods, attentive and curious. This misconception is common, informed by an ignorance of how gifted children's cognitive overactivity can influence overexcitable behaviour. Lisa Rivero (2012) discusses this in 'Many Ages at Once' for 'Psychology Today':

> *"Many people assume that the brightest children in the classroom are the ones who are most able to pay attention, to sit still, to do their work, and to conform to the expectations of authority. They are the children who know how to act their age, at least; or, even better, they display unusual maturity. They fit in and are easy students to teach."*
>
> (Rivero (2012) p. 44)

Certainly, if this is the assumption of behavioural characteristics of giftedness held by teachers, experiencing otherwise might draw negative attitudes towards the student as they had not lived up to the expectations suggested above.

Whilst many students in my class portrayed these characteristics however, many did not. In particular, the children who had been identified as gifted. These children were overactive, vibrant, intense, creative, overly demanding of attention and intriguing. They added colour and excitability to my classroom. Certainly, they were often the most likely to throw tantrums, overreact and become emotional though they were also the most likely to throw in wonderfully insightful concepts to whole class discussion. Of the four gifted students in my classroom, three were recently diagnosed with ADHD. Over the course of the term, all three were placed on medication to treat the diagnosis. I watched them progress from happy, excitable, colourful children to what could only be described as muted. Certainly in treating the ADHD diagnosis, in the hope that their behaviour would be 'tamed,' it was apparent to me that the whole child had been treated and their intellectual 'spark' deteriorated. I was heartbroken for them, and searched for answers.

I watched in disbelief as staffroom discussion concerning these children centred around how much more 'manageable' they had become in their muted state. This is a true observation, they certainly had become more manageable, and so are lemmings. I didn't want a muted classroom, I wanted a vibrant classroom and given

the drastic change in their behaviour and apparent intellectual creativity, I felt a duty of care to investigate as to whether the children had in fact been mis-understood and mis-diagnosed.

My concept was simple. As If cognitive traffic is exaggerated in the gifted child, then certainly this might in fact be exhibited in physical overexciteability, correlating with ADHD behaviours and chemical construct. Also, if one treats the overexciteable behaviour with medication designed for treating ADHD, does this influence the intellectual and creative attributes and abilities? My observations in the treated students certainly attested to this.

Rivero (2012) suggests that what might be occurring here is a classic case of "asynchronous development." Whilst the common misconception is that student's with heightened intellectual abilities of that beyond their years, they are in fact emotionally and behaviourally 'out of sync' with their chronological age. Carol Bainbridge describes:

> *"The advanced intellectual development of gifted children can lead parent, and other adults, to expect more advanced behaviour from these children. A five-year-old who can discuss world hunger like a ten-year- old us often expected to behave like a ten-year –old. When he acts like a five-year-old instead, a parent (or teacher) comes to see that behaviour as immature"*
> *(Characteristics of Gifted Children, By Carol Bainbridge, http://giftedkids.about.com/od/gifted101/a/giftedtraits.htm)*

Environmental factors may also influence "asynchronous development" Rivero (2012) argues that many highly intelligent children are out of sync with their classmates and their environment, drawing attention to the fact that they are behaviourally different to others. However, Rivero (2012) suggests that this is symptomatic of asynchronous development, not in fact attributed towards a misdiagnosis of behavioural disability such as ADHD:

> *"Adults should know that gifted children will not necessarily fit comfortably within a group of age peers or meet the usual expectations in terms of their development. For young children, this lack of fit may lead to misdiagnoses or premature diagnoses of learning and other disorders,*
>
> (Rivero (2012) p. 44)

The creation of a positive learning environment which only includes gifted students (at varied levels) specialised is looked at by Kronborg and Plunkett (2012).

"At the beginning of the year teachers were unsure about gifted students and their social relationships, but by the end of the year teachers observed that students had developed strong social bonds with their peers and this was reflected in the teachers' more positive responses in regard to gifted students' social acceptance of peers and their relationships in this schooling environment."

(Kronborg and Plunkett (2012) p.39).

This indicates that having placed many gifted children together, perhaps the level of social isolation through asynchronous developmental problems are lessened, in fact these students form a type of camaraderie through their lack of 'in sync-ness' with other 'normal' children. In this instance, they are all out of sync, together. Unfortunately this is not an option for all gifted children, though certainly it is something to think about when ability grouping.

Dr. Nadia Webb (2005), a neuropsychologist argues that parents, teachers and health specialists need to understand not to place expectations on gifted children that their behaviour, decision making and judgement skills will be conducive to their heightened intellectual age:

"they may be tempted by the academic precocity of gifted children to place an inordinate emphasis on early achievement and fulfilment of adult expectations. Also, we might expect older gifted students to have more mature judgment at an earlier age than their classmates, even though the reverse can be true."

(Webb (2005) p.65)

M. L. Kalbfleisch (2001) suggests that "asynchronous development" in *The International Handbook of Giftedness*, may in fact be a positive influence in development*"One hallmark of creative giftedness is the ability to remain resilient and child-like, to suspend reason or entertain multiple forms of it." (M. L. Kalbfleisch (2001) p.186)*

Meaning, whilst brain development may be staggered or prolonged due to "asynchronous development" this could be a positive influence in allowing children time for intellectual exploration, creativity, and growth. Jean Goerss (2005) identified that extremes of asynchronous development vary between levels of intellect, determining that a higher intellect attributes to a higher level of asynchronous developmental fracture:

"The more extreme the intellectual advancement is; the more extreme the asynchrony. Social and emotional development depends on the way we perceive and process information and therefore is profoundly influenced by our intellect"

(Goerss (2005) p.186)

However, Goerss (2005) agrees with M. L. Kalbfleisch (2001) that the fracture between intellect and asynchrony is a temporary and developmental hallmark of giftedness. Of course, if understood by those around the child, and adjustments are made to encourage emotionality to 'catch up' to intellect over time *"gifted children may 'grow into' their intellect and become more balanced, more normal"* Kalbfleisch (2001).

Goerss (2005) explains that this hurdle of 'fitting in' is difficult for the gifted child, because, in the case other children; whose major developmental task is to "*prepare for life outside his family by developing a strong sense of belonging in a world in which he is not the centre of attention,"* Goerss (2005) the 'normal' child often finds identity through the conformation of 'normal' behavioural standards.

"A sociologist would say he must acculturate." And to acculturate, the 'normal' child must have "*some success in navigating and coping with expectations and he must develop an affinity for; a camaraderie with his peers."* Goerss (2005)

However, this 'fitting in' process is made more difficult for the gifted child experiencing asynchronous developmental difficulties as he struggles to identify with the peers he finds in school.

> *"He usually does not share their interests and may find their behaviour puzzling. He may be unable or unwilling to respond to his peers as they expect; or to conform to the school's expectations. He may not be ready to cope with this new environment and, thus he may be unable to complete a basic developmental task. If so, he will suffer social and emotional complications that could profoundly affect his future."*
>
> *(Webb (2005) p.65)*

Certainly, failure to "*acculturate"* Goerss (2005) with his peers due to asynchronous development would be greatly compounded by a misdiagnosis of behavioural difficulties such as ADHD and placed on treatment. Obviously, the student would then understand himself as very different and struggle with self-identity under this new 'label.' It certainly appears to be a horribly destructive cycle for the developing gifted child.

Another facet of asynchronous development is explained by Lisa Kreger Silverman (1983) as a heightened sensitivity, particularly moral sensitivity toward the *"welfare for the entire society."* Silverman (1983), Director of The Gifted Development Centre identifies this as another form of asynchronous development that is particularly prevalent in the gifted child.

Silverman (1983) discusses a case study to illustrate this facet of asynchronous development, describing a nine year old boy under examination, who is asked to spank a doll three times. The boy refuses numerously, though on the fourth occasion he gives into the examiner and reluctantly spanks the doll the required three times *"then he hugged the doll tightly to comfort it and would not give it back to the examiner. Antoine is highly gifted (IQ 150+)."* Silverman (1983)

Silverman attests that this instance is one of over 1,800 similar stories at the Centre in which she works, demonstrating it to be symptomatic to the emotional and psychological 'out of sync-ness' between the gifted child and other children attributed to by asynchronous development. Other moral hypersensitivities common in gifted children identified by Silverman (1983) include:

> *"compassion toward others, protective, and easily moved to tears; they feel others' feelings, respond strongly to criticism, and tend to react strongly to light, noise, textures, air pollution, and certain foods. Perfectionism and intensity also appear with great regularity in parental descriptions of gifted children"*
>
> *(Silverman, L. K. (1993a). (pp. 51)*

The origin of said hypersensitivities and overexcitabilities attributed to asynchronous development may be viewed under the framework of Kazimierz Dabrowski's (1964, 1967, 1972) Theory of Emotional Development. Using neurological stimuli to solicit emotional and behavioural responses in creatively gifted children, Dabrowski (1964, 1967, 1972) recorded a heightened reaction in these individuals than others. "*He called this phenomenon "nadpobudliwosc," ("superstimulatability"); it has been translated as "overexcitability."* Said *"overexcitability"* appeared in Dabrowski's (1964, 1967, 1972) recordings to be consistent with the theory of asynchronous development:

> *"thought of as an abundance of physical energy, heightened acuity of the senses, vivid imagination, intellectual curiosity and drive, and a deep capacity to care. Individuals may experience one or more of these OEs at varying degrees of intensity."*
>
> *(Dabrowski, K. (1964). Positive disintegration. London: Little, Brown*)

Similar to Goerss' (2005) theory that certain differences in behaviour and emotionality caused the children to struggle with 'fitting in', Dabrowski (1964, 1967, 1972) claimed that *"because of their sensitivity and integrity, these individuals are capable of bringing humanity to a higher set of values, but that they are at great risk of being destroyed by society because of their inherent differences."* Dabrowski (1964, 1967, 1972)

Considering Dabrowski's (1964, 1967, 1972) Theory which is founded in neurological science, clearly there are some connections between the "overexcitability" in which he had identified as inherent in the gifted child and the diagnosis of ADHD. Sal Mendaglio (2001) agrees:

> *Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration (TPD) (Dabrowski 1964, 1967, 1970, 1972), while largely unknown in education, psychology and psychiatry, has found a home in gifted education. It has been used to address various aspects of gifted students' functioning, including emotional sensitivity and intensity (Fiedler 1998; Piechowski 1997); misdiagnosis of conditions, such as ADHD (Baum, Olenchak and Owen 1998); creative personality (Schiever 1985); spiritual development (Morrissey 1996) and counselling.*
>
> *(Mendaglio, S., and M. C. Pyryt. 2001. P.98)*

Mendaglio (2001) then raises a significant point: *"Arguably, TPD has implications for the education of gifted students, but it provides no strategies or techniques that can be readily applied to the classroom."* Mendaglio (2001)

I would disagree with this, primarily because I feel that researchers, teachers and specialists can use the linkages between diagnosing ADHD and Dabrowski's (1964, 1967, 1972) Theory of Emotional Development to inform a concise diagnosis of giftedness and / or ADHD by considering the similarities between a clear case of struggles with asynchronous development or ADHD. Certainly, a teacher who may not be familiar with the psychological characteristics inherent in the gifted such as asynchronous development might refer the child for assessment of ADHD. Though I would assume that in some situations where gifted children have received a correct diagnosis, giftedness is still a factor to consider and should follow a specialised diagnosis and treatment process. Webb & Kleine (1993) agrees:

> "*existential depression or learning disability, when present in gifted children or adults, requires a different approach because new dimensions are added by the giftedness component. Yet the giftedness component typically is overlooked due to the lack of training and understanding by health care professionals"*
>
> *(Webb & Kleine, 1993).*

Clark (1992) and Seagoe (1974) also agree, suggesting that a mis-understanding by parents, educators, and specialists, in addition to "*problem situations (e.g., lack of appropriately differentiated education) leads to interpersonal problems which are then mis-labeled, and thus prompt the mis-diagnoses."* Clark (1992) and Seagoe (1974)

Behaviourally speaking Clark (1992) and Seagoe (1974) suggest that characteristics most prevalent in the gifted child as a result of asynchronous development closely mirror that of a diagnosis of ADHD such as intensity, sensitivity, impatience, and high motor activity so one could be forgiven to suspect ADHD in the individual. This is true neurologically speaking also.

According to Loye (1993), for moral sensitivity and overactivity *"is imbedded in a prehuman and human evolutionary sequence; largely governed by frontal lobe development"* (Loye, 1990). Whilst the diagnosis and treatment of ADHD is in effect an overactivity in the same area, as identified by Diane Purper-Ouakil, Nicolas Ramoz, Aude-Marie Lepagnol-Bestel, Philip Gorwood4 and Michel Simonneau:

> *"Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a highly prevalent neurodevelopmental condition, characterized by symptoms of inattention and impulsivity/hyperactivity to a degree that is inconsistent with developmental level. A variety of brain subregions including frontal and parietal cortexes, basal ganglia, cerebellum, hippocampus, and corpus callosum were found impacted in ADHD"*
>
> *Loye, D. (1993, May). P.6)*

This diagram below demonstrates the frontal lobe area of affect:

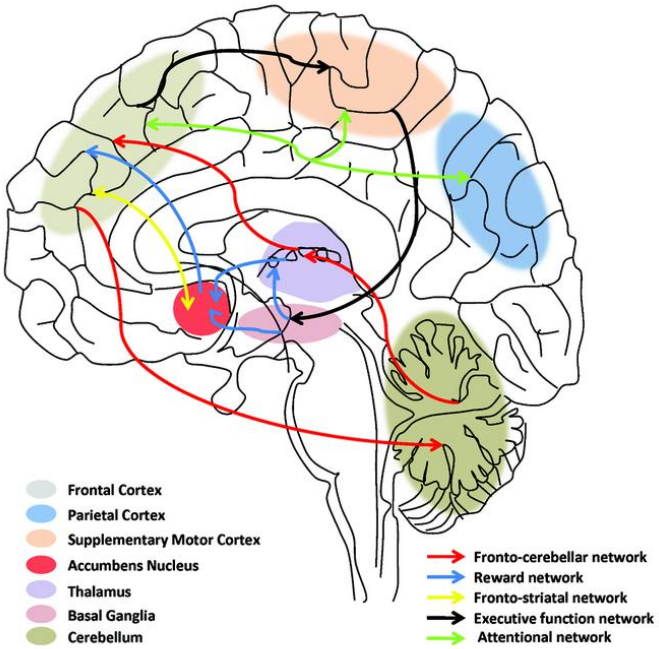

Image from: "Neuropsychiatric Disorders and Pediatric Psychiatry" (2001)

http://www.nature.com/pr/journal/v69/n5-2/full/pr9201196a.html

Certainly there are also links to Rivero (2012) suggestion that asynchronous development in the gifted is an 'out of sync' between their behaviour, intellect and chronologic age with Diane Purper-Ouakil, Nicolas Ramoz, Aude-

Marie Lepagnol-Bestel, Philip Gorwood and Michel Simonneau noting the behaviour exhibited by ADHD sufferers is often is inconsistent with developmental level.

Unfortunately though, medication is also targeting this area, which would certainly impact the individuals capacity to develop emotionally and perhaps academically. This had certainly been my first hand observation described above. The three students discussed above diagnosed with ADHD and giftedness were prescribed medication Ritalin-AE. Susan M. Baum, F. Richard Olenchak and Steven V Owen in (Webb & Kleine, 1993) argue that treating ADHD with this medication is damaging to the development of giftedness:

> *"Medications are usually successful in controlling behaviour, but they are also suspected to inhibit creativity and intellectual curiosity in bright children. Anecdotal reports tell of gifted youngsters being "cured of their giftedness" in an effort to help attend to schoolwork"*
>
> *(Susan M. Baum, F. Richard Olenchak and Steven V Owen in Webb & Kleine, 1993).*

I would argue that this point is a demonstration of the effect ADHD medication (such as Ritalin-AE) has on emotionality and creativity represented in Dabrowski's (1964, 1967, 1972) Theory on Emotional Development and excitability of gifted students, "*evidence of unchallenging curricula (Reif, 1993), implications of the multiple intelligences paradigm (Gardner, 1983), and adult reaction to students' extreme precocity (Rimm, 1994).*

However, Susan M. Baum, F. Richard Olenchak (1994) and Steven V. Owen (1994) identify that "*no conclusive research exists to explain the impact of such medication on various thought processes, including those related to potentially creative, productive thinking."* So, at this point it is only anecdotal.

I introduced this paper as a discussion towards considering teacher attitudes towards giftedness as imperative to the emotional, academic and social development of the gifted child. Within this context I have considered diagnosis and probable mis-diagnosis of ADHD in gifted students, and the effect treatment of this condition can effect their development. In the case of the three students discussed above, I can attest that negative attitudes towards their extreme behaviour within the classroom and to the students themselves (behind closed staff room doors) certainly attributed to a quick referral and diagnosis of ADHD and an equally quick suggestion towards a prescription of medication to treat it. My primary concern is that this lack of research into how the child may be affected in all aspects, consideration of common behavioural attributes of the gifted such as asynchronous development and common overexcitability (Dabrowski 1964, 1967, 1972) might have led to the student's being mis-understood and in effect – harmed.

Kagan (1992) agrees with this, suggesting that by acceding specific training and understanding on giftedness can alter negative perceptions:

"Teachers who do desire professional growth can alter their dysfunctional conceptions about students if they are confronted with specialised training or experiences that challenge their beliefs"

(Kagan (1992) , in Plunkett (2002) p.241)

Plunkett (2002) also agrees, suggesting that neglect of specific training in giftedness in an effort to dispel misconceptions, personal beliefs and prejudices might result in damaging students. Whitmore (1980) illustrates:

"'Good' teachers who are unprepared to teach gifted students may not only be ineffective with them, but may also become primary contributors to the development of underachievement behaviours and negative attitudes"

(Whitmore (1980) p.400 in Plunkett (2002) p. 242)

Certainly, as a teacher, I can attest to wishing overactivity away in students on occasion. However, being informed in the psychological, emotional and neurological factors contributing to their behaviour discussed above has certainly furnished me with reasons for their behaviour – particularly in gifted children. I am incredibly grateful for this insight because in so gaining, I am able to better understand my students and adapt class activities around understanding their sensitivities and overexcitabilities. I can also understand that differences in their behaviour might leave them very much alone and isolated in the playground and this is important to teach out for from a wellbeing point of view.

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