

School Counselors Light-Up the Intra- and Inter-Personal Worlds of Our Gifted

by Cynthia Marie-Martinovich Lardner

Creative, talented and gifted children, broadly defined as the top 16% of the bell curve (Silverman, 2002a), often find few programs, elusive funding and few specially-trained professionals. One reason gifted children have special needs is that they develop asynchronously, or unevenly. A child may soar in his or her ability to intellectually comprehend matters far exceeding their chronological age, while the necessary development has yet to occur as to enable them to process the same matter emotionally. Annemarie Roeper advocated that gifted children are integrated for who they are and society needs to accept them without assigning yet another label.

Kazimierz Dabrowski, a Polish psychologist and psychiatrist, developed a hierarchical theory of personality development called The Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD). Regardless of giftedness, a term not specifically defined in Dabrowski's work, children prone to advanced personality development often exhibit "over-excitabilities" ("OEs") (Tillier, 2001). These OEs can be found in five realms: psychomotor, sensual, emotional, imaginative and intellectual. Over time, these OEs or intensities have become regarded as possible indicators of giftedness (Webb, 2000; Webb, 2001). The earliest proponent of applying OEs to identify the gifted was psychologist Michael Piechowski, one of Dabrowski's original students (Mendalgio, 2002). While every gifted child may not exhibit each OE, gifted children almost always exhibit higher than average intellectual and emotional intensities.

Dabrowski called having high levels of intensities the "Tragic Gift" (Tillier, 2001). To the unsophisticated observer, these intensities might be perceived as psychopathological rather than indicators of a strong potential for advanced personality development. The intensity of the gifted has, unfortunately, resulted in some highly gifted individuals being improperly labeled as severely mentally disabled due to an inappropriate assessment (Funk-Werblo, D., personal communication to Susan Grammers, 2001).

In reality, gifted children are not inherently more at risk than their non-gifted peers for developing psychopathology as defined by the DSM. As to DSM diagnosis, only mood disorders appear with greater frequency within the creatively gifted population. Despite the many myths, there exists no hard data that gifted individuals, absent extenuating circumstances, are more likely to commit suicide, use drugs or drop-out than the population at large (Delisle, 1986).

One area in which the gifted have been identified as being at risk is in the domain of learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder. In 2002, Silverman (2002a) presented study results reflecting a sample of 4,000 children tested over a 22 year period by her and her colleagues. The study concluded that up to one out of six children studied had a learning disability, attention deficit disorder or other neurological condition. While this number may be higher or lower in a different sample population, it remains a significant

potential area of risk (Silverman, 2002a). Unfortunately, to the untrained, such disabilities – termed a dual-exceptionality or 2E - often go undiscovered and unaddressed. A spin-off of this problem is when a 2E child crafts their own compensatory strategies thereby masking their gifts. Even the youngest gifted children are so sophisticated that they develop their own compensatory skills allowing them to function at least as average in the traditional classroom.

When gifted children have unmet or unrecognized needs, when they do not feel accepted and or are isolated, when a sense of universality or normalcy is absent, when appropriate educational and social opportunities are lacking, where there is introversion and internalizing, and when there are cultural or language barriers, the risk level increases (Moon, Niehart, Reis & Robinson, 2002). Regardless of whether a gifted child is intense, has unmet or unacknowledged needs, has a learning disability, is asynchronous or even has a neurological condition, intervention is necessary. Early intervention might inoculate this group from some potential risks or minimize others. Unfortunately, there is not enough research on every possible risk and each risk needs to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. (Moon, Niehart, Reis & Robinson, 2002). Counselors should either obtain training enabling them to identify and work with this population, or to cultivate a basic understanding of characteristics indicative of giftedness and then refer them to a specialist. Counselors choosing to work with gifted children should be proactive, prevention-oriented and capable of being challenged by what others might regard as a recalcitrant or temperamental child. Prevention builds resilience, social skills and self-efficacy. Furthermore, as most children's difficulties arise from group interactions, they are also best solved in groups. (Corey 2004). Working with gifted children in a group setting presents a further opportunity for counselors to identify, resolve or even prevent problems.

Silverman (2003) opined that the optimal time to reach out to **all** gifted children is upon their entrance into formal education:

Many gifted children receive a good foundation for self-esteem within their families. Then something happens: they meet other children. By the age of five or six, openness and confidence are frequently replaced with self-doubt and layers of protective defenses. Being different is a problem in childhood. Young children—even gifted ones—do not have the capacity to comprehend differences. They have difficulty understanding why other children do not think the way that they do. They equate differentness with being "strange" or unacceptable, and this becomes the basis of their self-concept.

(Silverman, 2000). This is a terribly oppressive experience for children. It is exacerbated by the fact that, in most school systems, identification of the gifted, and for that matter, learning disabilities, does not occur until third grade when standardized tests are first administered. By then, many gifted children have learned that, in order to gain social acceptance, it is best to hide their gifts or to "dumb down". These children may lose their drive to learn or to display their abilities, at least while in the school environment, thereby resulting in under-achievement. A few of the many reasons cited for under-achievement are a fear of failure or success, being either unaccepted or

unsupported by peers, having undetected learning disabilities and, most importantly, being placed in an educational setting that does not generate opportunities for taking calculated risks, building resiliency, developing effective study skills and experiencing socially acceptable competitiveness. (Silverman, 2004).

These are not new problems or challenges. It is one born of a long history of teachers receiving nominal formal education in giftedness and little, if any, related in-service training in addressing the gifted's academic, social and emotional needs. Even a teacher well-trained in gifted pedagogy may find it difficult teaching a differentiated curriculum to a socio-economic, cultural and racially-diverse classroom in which there exists a 70 and, in extreme circumstances, a 100 point IQ spread. Meeting children's intellectual needs at either end of the bell curve -- plus those who are 2E or even 3E -- requires extensive differentiated curriculum. The outliers at either end of this IQ range may also complicate meeting the social and emotional needs. As a result, the average classroom is not the ideal environment to identify a gifted student, let alone one who is underachieving, "dumbing down", learning disabled or socially isolated. In fact, it is more likely that the "bright" children will be viewed as gifted, and the gifted viewed as problematic (Szabos, 1989).

For these children, and all other gifted children, counselors, in an era of educational budget cuts, can provide sorely needed support in the public and private school sectors. To date, both gifted children and adults have been under-served by the counseling profession. The problem begins in our graduate schools in which counseling students currently receive no standardized instruction in the unique needs of the gifted. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) is currently reviewing and up-dating its accreditation standards for 180 graduate counseling programs to hopefully require that giftedness be taught commencing in or after 2008. School counselors are currently required to take only one class in psychopathology, and none specifically related to psychopharmacology or learning disabilities. The current curriculum is the product of the traditional role of the school counselor, which is to offer guidance, to be supportive and promote personal growth, and to assist with career and college choices.

This historical pattern need not continue. With proper training, "Counseling in schools can be envisioned as either remedial or developmental. In remedial counseling, the emphasis is on problem-solving and crisis intervention. With this approach the counselor is a therapist who helps correct problems. In developmental counseling, the counselor also has a therapist role, but the primary function is to establish an environment in school that is conducive to the educational (cognitive and affective) growth of gifted students." (Colangelo, 2002). Counselors can become more cognizant of gifted students unique needs by attending conferences, taking on-line coursework, reading journals and other written material, watching videos and observing or assisting at a private school or camp for gifted children. Learning about the gifted will empower counselors to understand that the gifted are no different than any other potentially at risk population and by employing basic Rogerian skills, such as unconditional positive regard and being congruent, they can support gifted children in the educational setting,

regardless of whether they too are gifted. In this regard, it is important to mention Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Even if a counselor is not intellectually gifted, it is almost a certainty that having made it through a rigorous academic graduate program, that the counselor will possess strong gifts in the interpersonal and intrapersonal realms.

This position is endorsed by The National Association for Gifted Children's (NAGC) Counseling and Guidance Division. The NAGC (2003) found that a partial solution to the impediments and lack of supportive personnel in the school setting can be found by cross-training counselors to work with the gifted. More specifically, the NAGC concluded that:

1. Identifying very young gifted children may preclude the need for later counseling services;
2. Counseling is effective with gifted middle childhood students; and
3. There are specific techniques that are known to benefit gifted students, including "...use of earliest recollections, music therapy, family systems therapy, Gestalt psychology, control theory applications, Bruner's growth principles, Dabrowski's theory applications, group dynamics, structured guidance intervention, biofeedback, and intermediate strategic intervention."

Based on its findings, the NAGC recommends that school districts "...designate one full-time counselor per school dedicated to meeting the affective and counseling needs of gifted adolescents. This counselor is responsible for group and individual interventions for adjustment and motivational difficulties, career counseling, and college placement/guidance for all identified gifted and high talent students in the school." Another full-time counselor should be designated to conduct regularly scheduled group affective sessions with both elementary and middle school children. Counseling gifted children, from a group perspective, should focus on a proactive, preventative role (NAGC, 2003). For instance, group sessions would allow children to express themselves and find other children having similar views, interests and feelings, thereby negating perceptions of being "odd" or "different" and fostering universality. This type of counseling intervention reduces the possibility of at risk children from developing emotional problems requiring professional intervention in the middle school years.

A critical secondary benefit of discussion groups is promoting social affiliation. Initial contacts made in discussion groups may grow into genuine relationships that continue into the child's everyday world. Andrew Mahoney (2003) stated that there are "four constructs" in counseling gifted children starting with validation, affirmation, affiliation and affinity. Mahoney (2003) noted:

In affiliation, secondary relationships (i.e., peers, siblings, colleagues, etc.) become highlighted. These relationships enhance the individuation of the self by encouraging separation from the family of origin and from the parent. In this way, affiliation supports individuation and the development of a healthy and whole self. Included in this process is recognition of the need for belonging and feeling that "who I am" has a place and

meaning. Gifted affiliation provides a forum in which individuals are appreciated and accepted for their uniqueness. For example, with appropriate affiliations, a gifted child will not have to deny their giftedness in order to make friends.

Mahoney (1998) cites the following example:

Counseling groups offer one form of socialization. David never had the opportunity to talk to a peer about how badly the kids made fun of the things he said. By joining a counseling group of highly gifted 8- to 10-year-old boys, David began to understand how to deal better with the kids at school. He found the group to be a place of safety and support that enabled him to survive in his world.

By reaching out to gifted children in a genuine, sensitive manner, employing unconditional positive regard, a counselor can support gifted students as they develop, maintain or enhance their self-concept. Self-concept or one's own perception of self arises from both internal and external factors. Self-concept is an emotional gauge of emotional affect and motivational level. The end product is self-worth (Hoge and Renzulli, 1991).

Through-out the educational process, Renzulli and Hoge (1991), in a paper published by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT), concluded that gifted students retain an enhanced *academic* self-concept through-out their education. When tested at the 5th, 8th and 10th grade levels, *academic* self-concept was slightly higher in a regular classroom than in a magnet program. Renzulli identified two variables that might alter self-concept. First, labeling a child seems to positively affect self-concept. Second, moving a child from a regular classroom to a magnet program resulted in a decline in self-concept. Some variability was noted in the program-focused studies (Hoge & Renzulli, 1991). Colangelo and Assouline (1995, 2000), in a later study also published by the NRC/GT, which focused on children with IQs exceeding 160, concluded that at the elementary school level improper placement will precipitate a noticeable decrease in *interpersonal* self-concept. It is important to recognize that, if given the opportunity, children at this level could complete the entire elementary curriculum in one year.

For *all* gifted children, by or in high school, self-concept and interpersonal skills decrease, while anxiety and isolation increase. For some gifted children, self-concept relative to peer relations diminished as they progressed through school. (Colangelo & Assouline, 1995, 2000). "Positive self-concept can be correlated with challenge-seeking, willingness to do hard work, take risks, and effectively evaluating personal performance." (Neihart et al., 2002). "Learning to cope internally and respond to others makes all the difference, as emotional intelligence, not IQ, is the dominant factor in predicting overall success" (Lardner, 2004). By working with the gifted in the school setting, counselors nurturing universality and affiliation, can boost self-concept and self-efficacy thereby increasing emotional intelligence.

Once a school counselor establishes an expertise in giftedness and a rapport with the gifted children, the counselor can then branch off to provide other needed support services. Two areas where support services could be delivered would be by providing in-service training to teachers and other professionals, and modeling effective skills in the classroom that benefit the gifted, as well as the classroom as a whole. If these services are accepted, a counselor may then find teacher-initiated consultation occurring. "Caplan (1970) provided one of the more popular definitions of consultation, by stipulating that consultation is both a voluntary and nonhierarchical relationship between two individuals who are professionals from differing occupations, such as a counselor and a teacher. Consultation is most successful when initiated by the consultee, in this case, the teacher, for the purpose of solving a work-related issue. (Robinson, 2002).

Another area in which counselors may become involved is consulting with parents, sending home information and hosting informal and interactive parent and family groups. This starts a positive holistic process whereby the teachers', the counselor's, the parents' and, most of all, the children's self-concept and self-efficacy are all enhanced.

References

Colangelo, N., & Assouline, S. G. (1995). Self-concept of gifted students: Patterns by self-concept, domain grade level, and gender. In F. J. Mönks (Ed.), *Proceedings from the 1994 European council on high ability conference* (pp. 66-74). New York, New York: Wiley.

Colangelo, N., & Assouline, S. G. (2000). Counseling gifted students. In K. A. Heller, F. J. Mönks, R. J. Sternberg, & R. F. Subotnik (Eds.), *International handbook of giftedness and talent* (2nd ed., pp. 595-607). Amsterdam: Elseiver.

Colangelo, N. (Fall, 2002). *Counseling Gifted and Talented Students*.

Delisle, J.R. (1986). Death with honors: Suicide among gifted adolescents.² *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 64.

Hastnett, N., Nelson, J. & Rinnh, A. (2004). Gifted or ADHD? The possibilities of misdiagnosis. [Roeper Review](#), 26 (2), 73-76.

Hoge, R. & Renzulli, K. (1991). Self-concept and the gifted child. The National Research Center on the Gifted and the Talented. No. 9104.

Lovecky, Deirdre V. (2004). [*Different Minds: Gifted Children With AD/HD, Asperger Syndrome, and other Learning Deficits*](#). London and New York, NY: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Mahoney, A.S. (1998). The gifted identity formation model - In search of the gifted identity, from abstract concept to workable counseling constructs. *Roeper Review*, 20 (3), 222-226. Retrieved March 29, 2003 from <http://www.counselingthegifted.com/articles/insearchofID.html>.

National Association for Gifted Children Counseling and Guidance Division. (n.d.). Recent research on guidance, counseling and therapy for the gifted. Retrieved March 29, 2003 from <http://www.nagc.org/CounGuide/guide.html> (no longer available).

Mendaglio, S. (2002) Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration: Some implications for teachers of gifted students. *AGATE*. Fall 2002 15(2) 14-22.

Moon, S., Niehart, M., Reis, S., & Robinson, N. (2002). *The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What Do We Know?*. (a service publication of the National Association of Gifted Children). Waco, TX:Purfrock Press, Inc. pp.267-268.

Niehart, M., Reis, S. M., Robinson, N. M., & Moon, S. M. (2002). *The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What Do We Know?* Washington, DC: National Association for Gifted Children.

Robinson, R. (Fall 2002). [What is the school psychologist's role in gifted education?](#) *Gifted Child Today Magazine*. Waco, TX: Purfrock Press, Inc.

Roeper, A. (2000). Giftedness is heart & soul, *CAG Communicator*, 31(4). Retrieved May 5, 2003 from the California Association for the Gifted website (no longer available)

Silverman, L.K., Developmental phases of social development, Gifted Development Center, Denver, Colorado As retrieved from the world wide web on October 29, 2004 at <http://gifteddevelopment.com/Articles/Developmental Phases.htm> (no longer available).

Silverman, L.K. (2003). Developmental phases of social development. Retrieved March 29, 2003 from Gifted Development Center website: <http://gifteddevelopment.com/Articles/Developmental Phases.htm> (no longer available).

Silverman, L.K. (2002a). What we have learned about gifted children 1979 – 2002. Retrieved April 12, 2003 from http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/we_have_learned.htm

Silverman, Linda K. (2002b). [Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner](#). Denver, CO: DeLeon Publishing.

Szabos, J. (1989). Making learning come alive. *Challenge Magazine*. Torrance, CA: Good Apple, Inc., Issue 34.

Tillier, B. (2001). An Introduction to Kazimierz Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration as retrieved from the World Wide Web on October 31, 2004 at <http://members.shaw.ca/positivedisintegration/Intro5.pdf>. (requires [Adobe](#))

http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/light_up_the_world.htm

Webb, James T. (2000). Mis-diagnosis and dual diagnosis of gifted children: Gifted and LD, ADHD, OCD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder. Paper presented August 2000 at the American Psychological Association Annual Convention, Washington, DC.

Webb, James T. (2001). Mis-diagnosis and dual diagnosis of gifted children: Gifted and LD, ADHD, OCD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder. *Gifted Education Press Quarterly*, 15(2), 9-13.

Cynthia M. Lardner sits on the Michigan Alliance for Gifted Education's Board of Directors, is an officer of the Macomb County-based Advocates for Developing Academic Potentiall and is a Master's level counseling student at Wayne State University. Cindi has developed a program for teaching counselors how to identify K-2 and work with K-8 gifted students. In addition to coaching and advocating for gifted children, Cindi is the single mother of four gifted children aged 6 through 15. Cindi was formerly a practicing attorney and is twenty-one year member of the State Bar of Michigan. She can be reached at cindilardner@hotmail.com.