

Understanding Our GIFTED

Dedicated to helping gifted children reach their full potential

Social/Emotional Lives of the Gifted

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*Karen W. Tunks and
Rebecca M. Gilles*

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Are We Preparing Gifted Children for College...Or Preparing Them for Life?

James T. Webb PhD

James T. Webb, Ph.D., *has been recognized as one of the 24 most influential psychologists nationally on gifted education. Dr. Webb has written more than 70 professional publications, fifteen books, three DVDs, and many research papers for psychology conventions or conferences regarding gifted and talented children. Four of his books on gifted children have won “Best Book” awards. In 1981, Dr. Webb established SENG (Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted Children, Inc.), a national nonprofit organization that provides information, training, conferences, and workshops, and he remains as Chair of SENG’s Professional Advisory Committee.*

During the last several years, I have become increasingly concerned with the question, “Are we preparing gifted children for college? Or are we preparing them for Life?” As parents and educators, we want our children to be successful. But what does that mean? In academics? In careers? In financial worth? In life? In relationships? In families? What is it that we should be nurturing? All of these? If so, how?

At the outset, I want to credit Lisa Rivero, a Board member of Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted, who is the author of several books (*Creative Home Schooling; A Parent’s Guide to Gifted Teens; The Smart Teens’ Guide to Living with Intensity*) and whose books and blogs have shaped my thinking for this topic..

In her book *A Parent’s Guide to Gifted Teens*, Lisa raises the question: “...should college prep really be a full-time vocation? Young people, especially gifted teenagers who feel pressured to fulfill their potential sooner rather than later, often say that they have little time for reflection, for imagination and personal discovery, for leisurely reading or sleeping in or even long family vacations...all of which cut into their college prep career” (p. 72).

And in her blog, she wonders, “What happens to high achievers when the vehicle for their success—school and its rules and structure—is no longer there?”

There are not many long-term studies of gifted youngsters, but two of the most recent are informative.

Felice Kaufmann did a 10+ year follow-up study of 322 youngsters who were Presidential Scholars from 1964-

1968. All were in the top one-half of 1% of National Merit Scholars; 77% ranked number one in their high school class.

Additionally:

62% held offices in student organizations; 51% had received one or more awards for leadership; 97% were college graduates; 61% had graduate degrees; 89% had received one or more awards in college

And yet...

55% had changed majors; 33% had changed majors two or more times, signifying some dissatisfaction; 29% doubted they had made the correct career decision, indicating uncertainty; Only some, 23%, had received special awards since graduating and were still seeking recognition; And 67% reported no participation in organized activities (“lack of time; no interest”).

Kaufmann noted that, “...these individuals, as a group, continued to achieve. They attended, for the most part, selective colleges and universities, pursued post-baccalaureate degrees and entered high status professions. Some continued on the course set during their high school years by winning other public awards and honors.

“Beyond the statistics, however, there were other thought-provoking lessons to be learned from this study. These were gleaned from the individual comments that were volunteered by the subjects in the open-ended sections of the questionnaires.” Here are a few comments from the Presidential Scholars:

“Achievement and recognition were everything when I was a Presidential Scholar. Now I’m more concerned with personal satisfaction. If something that pleases me earns me compliments or other recognition, I’m grateful, but I won’t compromise values or give up personal time to do anything which has as its purpose to gain recognition by others.”

“Much of my difficulty in the job-career area comes from (1) school, school, school—when I was little what I wanted to be when I grew up was to go to college and (2) my great diversity of interests. It’s a hard thing for those of us who were crammed with so many expectations to even know where we stand after ten years. Now it’s time to try new ways.”

“I have become very cynical about the meaning of life. I don’t think it’s possible to be happy without drugging oneself in one way or another. To live intensely in pleasure and pain seems the best possible goal. I bring this up because I think the depth of my cynicism is directly related to my happy, successful childhood symbolized by being a Presidential Scholar. If my childhood hadn’t been so idyllic, I wouldn’t be so cynical now. I feel I was misled by the nature of life by my parents and teachers—it’s much more grim than I imagined.”

Karen Arnold, in her 1995 book *Lives of Promise*, followed 81 valedictorians from Illinois high schools for 10 to 14 years. She describes these students as follows:

“Valedictorians leave high school at the top. Most continue to stellar academic

performance in college. Yet their career attainment varies considerably. And even though most are strong occupational achievers, the great majority...do not appear headed for the very top of adult achievement success” (p. 287).

“The most outstanding career achievers... are those who have found deep intrinsic meaning in learning and work” (p. 288).

The comments from these valedictorians echoed those of the Presidential Scholars. One said: “Your whole life you’ve been told, you go to high school, you go to college. And then once you get out of college, you’re not given as much direction anymore. You know, there’s no purpose in life anymore. What should you do after you graduate from college? You accomplished everything that everyone told you you should” (p. 287).

Another said: “Since high school, I had a general direction that I lived by, certain rules that all I had to do was do them: go to school, classes, do what they tell you to do. I did that well; I functioned well within that environment. But it didn’t create much of an individuality or creativity within myself. I never really explored what I really wanted—what did I really want in life?” (Arnold, 1995, p. 42).

As Arnold noted, school is often “the center of valedictorians’ activities and identities” (p. 41), prompting Lisa Rivero to suggest that “the time and focus necessary to be at the top of the class leaves little time for pondering questions of fulfillment or happiness, and little room for focusing on an

area of passion at the expense of the well-roundedness required for a perfect G.P.A.”

If not grades and college achievement, then what?

A blog by Roya Klinger, founder of the Bavarian Gifted Child Society, raised the question: “What are the factors that gifted children need to become successful and happy as adults?” Here are some sample comments from readers of that blog:

- Money, motivation, mentor.
- Resilience, reflectiveness, tenacity.
- Vision, flexibility, emotional insight, and good management of same.
- Understanding
- Self-awareness, understanding of giftedness, finding a like-minded/supportive and gifted life partner, the confidence to be different (and be happy about being different), the ability to “opt out” from the majority, resilience, determination, soul-affirming work, peace and tranquility and nature.
- Educational challenges, peer group, resilience, motivation, home support, opportunities to develop talent, recognition, acceptance.
- Being validated and valued for who they are and the skills/contributions they share.
- Someone who was significant in their lives—a path changer or path enabler.

I think we would agree that these are important. However, one blogger pointed out that, “The question is comparable to the question: What are the two most important spices to cook a wonderful dish? There is no

answer to the question.... [It] depends on the dish you want to cook.” The most important factors depend on how one defines success. And, of course, it depends on the child and her individual situation.

Blogger Paul Buchheit shared his thoughts, describing it this way: “Someone who spent his life working 80 hour weeks, living in hotels, and fighting his way up the corporate ladder to become VP of toilet paper marketing would probably consider himself more successful than a sandwich shop owner who spends his nights and weekends playing with his kids and working on hobby projects, but maybe the sandwich shop owner would be happier and healthier. Ultimately, it is up to each person to decide what success means to them, but I think it’s important that everyone be mindful of the decision they are making” (Feb. 2, 2011).

The notion of success is an existential one; one person’s success is not the same as another’s. And gifted children (and adults) are particularly likely to struggle with issues about success such as:

- What is the meaning of life?
- What is success?
- What is transient and unimportant vs. what is truly important?
- How can I best survive and thrive in this sometimes crazy world?

It is instructive, too, to look at what eminent people, particularly those who have made creative contributions to society, have said. Steve Jobs, in a 2005 commencement

address at Stanford, recalled his struggles with such issues: “I dropped out of Reed College after the first six months but then stayed around as a drop-in for another eighteen months or so before I really quit.... After six months, I couldn’t see the value in it. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, and no idea of how college was going to help me figure it out, and here I was, spending all the money my parents had saved their entire lives. So I decided to drop out and trust that it would all work out OK. It was pretty scary at the time, but looking back, it was one of the best decisions I ever made. The minute I dropped out, I could stop taking the required classes that didn’t interest me and begin dropping in on the ones that looked far more interesting.

“It wasn’t all romantic. I didn’t have a dorm room, so I slept on the floor in friends’ rooms. I returned Coke bottles for the five-cent deposits to buy food with, and I would walk the seven miles across town every Sunday night to get one good meal a week at the Hare Krishna temple. I loved it. And much of what I stumbled into by following my curiosity and intuition turned out to be priceless later on.”

Clearly, relevance and meaning in life were important to him. I will tell you more about Steve Jobs later.

Do we want our gifted youth to earn degrees? Well, yes, if they want to enter a career that demands a degree. Rejecting college will certainly cut off certain careers, such as medicine, law, scientific research, and architecture, though some people have

returned to college for those degrees later in life.

I have known many people with several degrees—college, M.A., M.S., Ph.D., J.D., M.D. They were gifted, and their degrees documented their ability.

I have also been with people, though, who did not have degrees but were also quite gifted. Growing up in the Deep South, I remember many gifted people from Civil Rights days in the 1960s—Blacks from the Deep South some with little formal education, others who dropped out of their colleges, to lead the Civil Rights movement.

And I have known others who had college degrees but who decided to take a non-traditional path of life meaning rather than seeking fame and fortune. Phil and Kathy Dahl-Bredine, graduates of prestigious Carleton College, gave up potentially lucrative careers to move to a small town in New Mexico where Kathy founded a Montessori school and Phil started a business cooperative to encourage Hispanic families to start businesses in a town whose economy had been depending on the nearby mines. Now they are lay missionaries in Oaxaca, Mexico, teaching indigenous people, among other things, how to make solar ovens and to farm sustainably.

And a few years ago, my wife and I traveled the entire length of the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon in wooden dories. Our guides—all college graduates—were a naturalist, a dentist, and a graduate-degreed flautist. These trips were their passion and gave their lives meaning.

You, too, know people who have taken non-traditional paths in searching for success on their terms.

Two names you know are Warren Buffett and Bill Gates:

Warren Buffett, billionaire chairman of Berkshire Hathaway, dropped out of the University of Pennsylvania after two years. Later, he did go back to get his bachelor's degree and MBA.

Bill Gates, a college dropout, has been named the richest person in the world by Forbes magazine 27 times. Just 10 points away from a perfect score on the SAT, Bill Gates enrolled at Harvard College but took a leave of absence two years later to form a partnership with classmate Paul Allen, who was also a college dropout. The partnership later became Microsoft. In 2007, Bill Gates received an honorary doctorate degree from Harvard University. In 2009, Forbes reported Gates' net worth at \$40 billion.

There are many other very successful and well-known people who dropped out, or never attended, college, such as Julie Andrews, Warren Beatty, David Geffen, John Glenn, Peter Jennings, Steve Martin, Steven Spielberg, Ted Turner, Mark Zuckerberg, and Jack Kent Cooke (who later established a foundation that supports the education of gifted children).

Fame and success have not been enough for many of them. Bill Gates, along with his wife Melinda Gates, and Warren Buffet have pledged to give away at least half of their net worth to charity in their lifetimes

or at death—and they are asking the nation’s billionaires to make a similar pledge.

The traditional route is not the only one that can lead to a meaningful life. Making a difference in the world, in their opinion and in mine, means more than just educational or career achievements. Life success implies that you are doing something meaningful such that at the end of your life, you will feel that you have left the world a slightly better and kinder place.

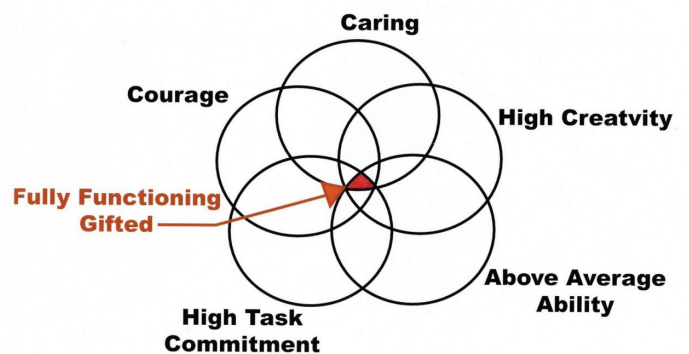
I think, too, that these existential issues tie in with how we conceptualize gifted individuals. Years ago, Renzulli, in his study of gifted eminent adults, found that all of these individuals showed three basic characteristics: above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity, and Renzulli’s conceptualization has become a foundation in the gifted education field.

Certainly these three characteristics are important, though in my opinion the characteristic of task commitment is often the most overlooked. Ellen Winner, in her excellent 1996 book *Gifted Children: Myths and Realities*, pointed out how often gifted children and adults have a “rage to master,” and psychologist Anders Ericsson has documented the need to spend 10,000 hours (about 10 years) of intense, deliberate practice to become expert in a field. I also think this is where the Dabrowski overexcitabilities help us understand the intensity and focus that is key for so many gifted individuals. Ericsson has pointed out that life achievement is more a matter of “deliberate practice” and motivation than

it is intelligence, and the new definition of gifted formulated by NAGC in 2010 noted that “As individuals mature through childhood to adolescence, however, achievement and high levels of motivation in the domain become the primary characteristics of their giftedness.” (<http://www.nagc.org/index2.aspx?id=6404>)

However, although persons with intellect, creativity, and task commitment are certainly gifted and likely to be high achievers, I think more is required if they are truly to be successful. I believe we need to add two more essential characteristics to Renzulli’s basic three: courage and caring. Without courage and caring, gifted persons may find educational or career success within a field, but I doubt they will find life success, nor will they become a fully functioning person.

Traits of Fully Functioning Gifted



How can we cultivate these five traits in our gifted children, who are so bright, intense, strong-willed, often sensitive, and sometimes quirky? How can we help them learn to manage their intensity, their sensitivity, their courage and caring? How can we nurture in them, too, the resilience they will need

to manage and overcome obstacles and failures? After all, the more you care, the more you are likely to be disappointed and to feel hurt.

We must nurture passion to help our children be more likely to experience and develop Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and we must help them develop resilience (Seligman, 1996). Del Siegle, a former president of NAGC, helped me understand how we often deprive our young gifted children of the opportunities to learn frustration tolerance, persistence, and resilience—and we do it when the children are in primary grades. The children come home with grades that are consistently 100. The teachers tell the parents, “You have nothing to worry about; she is getting perfect grades.” But parents should worry—worry that their children are getting perfect grades and are not being challenged. These children are ones who, later in their lives, often give up or crumble when faced with challenging situations.

I also want to point out that the current educational and social climate, in my opinion, makes it difficult to cultivate these five essential traits that are needed to prepare children for life. In today’s society and educational system:

- Conformity, mediocrity, and fitting in are what is valued—not excellence, creativity, or the path less traveled.
- Our schools emphasize grades and regurgitation of information; peer pressure is almost universal, and bullying is widespread.

- The book *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth* (Robbins, 2012) points out the cliques in middle school and high school, where “many students think that to be accepted, they have to fulfill the role their group has imposed on them.”

- Classmates label gifted students as geeks, nerds, dorks, emos, goths, indies, or freaks, and popularity and belonging is emphasized more than ability.

- Sylvia Rimm (2008) has pointed out that peer pressure like this primarily lasts until the end of high school. After high school, gifted students have the freedom to migrate to a self-contained gifted program that we call colleges and universities, or into the workplace where achievement is more valued.

- To go against peer pressure requires one to be non-traditional. That takes courage, and you run the risk of being alone and even alienated from others who do not understand.

Schools are not the only area of concern. What parenting style is best if we want to prepare children for life, not just for college?

Two recent books essentially describe two extremes of parenting, and parents can choose whether they want to go more toward one or the other, or whether they want to be somewhere in the middle.

The book by Amy Chua (2011) called *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* emphasizes discipline and achievement. The Tiger Moms believe:

“they know what is best for their children and therefore override all of their children’s own desires and preferences.”

“their kids owe them everything...and must spend their lives repaying their parents by obeying them and making them proud.”

they need not be concerned with their child’s self-esteem because “they assume strength, not fragility.”

“that the best way to protect their children is by preparing them for the future, letting them see what they are capable of, and arming them with skills, work habits, and inner confidence that no one can ever take away.”

Paul Buchheit, in his February 2011 blogpost, described Tiger Mom parenting this way: “Amy Chua has two main points: 1) Learning is not fun and 2) It’s important to make kids dependent on praise and admiration. What Chinese parents understand is that nothing is fun until you’re good at it. To get good at anything you have to work, and children on their own seldom want to work, which is why it is crucial to override their preferences. This often requires fortitude on the part of the parents because the child will resist; things are always hardest at the beginning, which is where Western parents tend to give up. But if done properly, the Chinese strategy produces a virtuous circle. Tenacious practice, practice, practice is crucial for excellence; rote repetition is underrated in America. Once a child starts to excel at something—whether it’s math, piano, pitching, or

ballet—he or she gets praise, admiration, and satisfaction. This builds confidence and makes the once not-fun activity fun. This in turn makes it easier for the parent to get the child to work even more.”

Author Lenore Skenazy (2009) has a very different approach, which she calls Free-Range parenting. She says:

“Children, like chickens, deserve life outside a cage.”

“The overprotected life is stunting and stifling, not to mention boring for all concerned.”

“Kids need a little more freedom.”

“A Free-Range Kid is a kid who gets treated as a smart, young, capable individual, not an invalid who needs constant attention and help.”

Skenazy describes how she let her nine-year-old son take the New York Subway alone, and what a liberating and educational experience it was—but she also notes the extensive criticism she received from other parents. She says that many parents today fret and worry too much and are overprotective. Children are much more capable than we think they are, and they need more freedom—like the freedom we had when we were kids. Our parents turned us loose in the neighborhood to play, and we learned a great deal from natural consequences. We learned how to manage ourselves.

Skenazy suggests that the media have convinced us that the world is incredibly

dangerous, but—based on statistics—she says we actually don't have to be so afraid. Too many parents are over-involved in their children's lives and are helicopter parents.

Whereas Amy Chua's approach is based on extrinsic motivation and control, Skenazy's approach focuses on intrinsic motivation and self-management. The extrinsic path to success is to focus on being the person you are told to be and put all of your energy and drive into fitting that mold. The intrinsic path to success is to focus on being the person that you are and put all of your energy and drive into being the best possible version of yourself.

I think that there is wisdom to be found in both approaches, depending on the child's personality and each family's values. But I actually think some more fundamental parenting guidelines are highlighted in the classic book *Cradles of Eminence: The Childhoods of More than 700 Famous Men and Women* (Goertzel, Goertzel, Goertzel, & Hansen, 2004). These parents were often non-traditional, and what they modeled was quite different from behaviors of other parents. The most prominent themes were:

- Homes usually were full of books and stimulating conversation.
- The families valued learning, and the children loved learning.
- As children, most of them disliked school and schoolteachers.
- These children learned to think and express themselves clearly from practice at home.
- All had learned to be persistent in pursuing their own visions and goals.

- The parents held strong opinions about controversial subjects.
- The parents, particularly mothers, were highly involved in the lives of their children, even sometimes dominating.
- The parents often were pressured by others to have their children conform to mediocrity.

Think about families who dare to be different. Consider immigrant families who leave their country, their family, their friends, their language, and their customs because they are seeking a better life for their families. Think about parents who relocate in order to find better opportunities for their children, and homeschooling parents who often go against local opinion. These families provide models of independence, intrinsic motivation, idealism, and usually provide havens for their children to do likewise. Many of them create their own family traditions rather than just adopting the traditions handed down to them.

How can this information help you in preparing your children for life rather than just preparing them for college? Here are a few specific suggestions that perhaps you can implement in your own family:

- Have the courage to be non-traditional and to create your own family traditions.
- Be aware of what you model. Do you read? Discuss ideas in the family?
- Value the relationship. Use respect.
- Help children understand their intensity and sensitivity and passions.
- Avoid harsh criticism and power struggles.
- Guide children firmly but gently.

- Expect competence, but give children time to simply be children.
- Nurture inner-directedness and resiliency.
- Help children learn to trust themselves rather than the majority.
- Let children learn by natural consequences.
- Model the courage required to be creative and caring.

I hope that we will be able to give our children:

- The knowledge to know the questions and the freedom to ask the questions
- The caring to want to pursue the answers
- The flexibility to create new ideas when the old ones no longer work
- The persistence to pursue the answers
- The compassion to care about the outcome
- And the courage to act with integrity

I promised that I would tell you “the rest of the story” about Steve Jobs’ commencement address. It illustrates so much of what I have said.

“Reed College at that time offered perhaps the best calligraphy instruction in the country. Throughout the campus every poster, every label on every drawer was beautifully hand-calligraphed. Because I had dropped out and didn’t have to take the normal classes, I decided to take a calligraphy class to learn how to do this. I learned about serif and sans-serif typefaces, about varying the amount of space between different letter combinations, about what makes great typography great. It was beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can’t capture, and I found it fascinating.

“None of this had even a hope of any practical application in my life. But ten years later when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me, and we designed it all into the Mac. It was the first computer with beautiful typography. If I had never dropped in on that single course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts, and since Windows just copied the Mac, it’s likely that no personal computer would have them.

“If I had never dropped out, I would have never dropped in on that calligraphy class, and personal computers might not have the wonderful typography that they do.

“Of course it was impossible to connect the dots looking forward when I was in college, but it was very, very clear looking backwards ten years later. ...you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever—because believing that the dots will connect down the road will give you the confidence to follow your heart, even when it leads you off the well-worn path, and that will make all the difference.

“...I was lucky. I found what I loved to do early in life. Woz and I started Apple in my parents’ garage when I was twenty. We worked hard and in ten years, Apple had grown from just the two of us in a garage into a \$2 billion company with over 4,000 employees. We’d just released our finest creation, the Macintosh, a year earlier, and I’d just turned thirty, and then I got fired.

How can you get fired from a company you started? Well, as Apple grew, we hired someone whom I thought was very talented to run the company with me, and for the first year or so, things went well. But then our visions of the future began to diverge, and eventually we had a falling out. When we did, our board of directors sided with him, and so at thirty, I was out, and very publicly out. What had been the focus of my entire adult life was gone, and it was devastating. I really didn't know what to do for a few months. I felt that I had let the previous generation of entrepreneurs down, that I had dropped the baton as it was being passed to me. I met with David Packard and Bob Noyce and tried to apologize for screwing up so badly. I was a very public failure, and I even thought about running away from the Valley. But something slowly began to dawn on me. I still loved what I did. The turn of events at Apple had not changed that one bit. I'd been rejected but I was still in love. And so I decided to start over.

"I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods in my life.

"You've got to find what you love, and that is as true for work as it is for your lovers. Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work, and the

only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking, and don't settle. As with all matters of the heart, you'll know when you find it, and like any great relationship, it just gets better and better as the years roll on. So keep looking. Don't settle."

I think that Steve Jobs said it well.

Following your passion—and helping your children follow theirs—is a key to success. If we can help a child identify his or her passion, then we can often build on it to achieve a transfer of motivation to many other areas in the child's life. Success is more than just grades, accolades, degrees, and achievements. There has to be an emotional component to your life's efforts as well if those efforts are to be satisfying, and that is what I hope you will convey to your children.

When we first started SENG at Wright State University's School of Professional Psychology, one of my advanced doctoral students who worked in the SENG program gave me a quote from the artist Flavia Weedn that I still have framed on my office wall as a mantra, and I want to share it with you.

"And what is as important as knowledge?" asked the Mind.

"Caring, and seeing with the heart," answered the Soul.

And this, I hope, is what you will continue to be do in your interactions with all children, but particularly those who are so intense, sensitive, and often not in the mainstream. •

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A Feeling for Books: Using Literature to Promote Social-Emotional Development

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Social-emotional development is a fundamental part of a child's overall well-being. Healthy development forms a critical foundation for building positive relationships and a strong self-esteem. Social-emotional development includes the ability to express and manage emotions and to establish secure relationships (Cohen, Onunaku, Clothier, & Poppe, 2005). Most theories acknowledge the importance of observing and interacting with others as crucial to development. Erik Erikson's (1963) theory of human development provides a well-known framework for understanding the typical developmental stages of social-emotional development (Trawick-Smith, 2010). Erikson's theory presents eight stages ranging from birth to death; the first four stages span childhood and early adolescence.

Erikson's First Four Stages of Psychosocial Development

Age	Stage	Strength Developed
0-2	Trust vs. Mistrust	Hope
2-3	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	Willpower
4-5	Initiative vs. Guilt	Purpose
6-12	Industry vs. Inferiority	Competence

This demonstrates the rapid changes that occur in children's social-emotional development from birth to age 12.

Erikson's basic premise is that with positive experiences

and constructive relationships, children gain increased capacity to be trusting, self-controlled, motivated, and intellectually inquisitive. At each stage, children develop abilities that help them navigate future challenges relating to others.

Children with gifted abilities may struggle in the area of social-emotional development. The disparity between advanced academic abilities and average social-emotional growth, asynchrony, becomes apparent as they interact with others. This asynchrony (Morelock, 1992), may continue throughout adolescence. The behavior of gifted learners can fall at either extreme on the continuum of social-emotional development. For example, they may demonstrate deep sensitivity and empathy toward an animal that is injured but express impatience and irritation with a classmate struggling to learn a skill or concept. This can result in children being misidentified and given incorrect labels such as emotionally immature, shy and withdrawn, or excessively talkative and overly excitable. The intensity of gifted children's behaviors often exacerbate the usual problems associated with the various stages of childhood (Buescher, 1985), leaving them emotionally vulnerable.

All children have a natural desire to be accepted by peer groups and recognized by adults for their talents. But for gifted students, this can be particularly difficult to achieve. In fact, school environments can be the most restrictive and stressful environment for gifted students (Schuler, 2011). Gifted traits such as perfectionism,

emotional intensity, and insistence for logic can make it difficult to "fit in" with peers. Behaviors such as refusal to complete repetitive assignments, difficulty accepting criticism, and resistance to authority often puts gifted students at odds with teachers and other adults. The very abilities that make children gifted learners can also result in feelings of rejection, anger, and depression.

Halsted (2009) has identified four aspects of social-emotional development as they pertain to gifted learners. The first is establishing an identity. While all children must establish their own identity, a gifted child is faced with the task of recognizing and accepting an identity that can be quite different from the norm. Possessing characteristics that are often unpopular or misunderstood presents a challenge for gifted children in terms of maintaining a healthy self-image. Secondly, gifted children often have a tendency toward introversion, thus requiring increased time alone. Since humans beings are naturally social creatures, the desire to be alone may be viewed negatively adding the complication of trying to balance their craving for solitary time with the social expectations of others. A gifted child's preference for being alone also contributes to challenges with fostering and maintaining relationships, which is Halsted's third aspect. Again, we see that common gifted characteristics, such as a heightened sensitivity to the words and actions of others and an unusual perspective, make it difficult for gifted children to relate to and communicate with peers. These

characteristics contribute to a gifted child's ability to achieve a sense of belonging. Pendarvis, Howley and Howley (2005) point out that superior intellectual ability and specialized interests may result in gifted children preferring the company of older friends or adults. Giftedness, however, does not necessarily include social maturity. There is a distinct need for role models to demonstrate how to foster friendships, use coping skills, and develop empathy. The final characteristic common of gifted learners that can interfere with social-emotional development is the need for perfection. While this trait can be beneficial in some contexts (Silverman, 2008) it can also negatively affect their sense of self-worth.

Criteria for Selecting Literature

Children's literature has much to offer gifted children as they face the social-emotional challenges of being part of a group. There is a wide variety of quality children's books on topics that are relevant to gifted learners including making and keeping friends, establishing an identity, needing time alone, feeling different, and striving for perfection. It is typically easier for a gifted child to think about problems in the context of fictional characters because he or she is personally removed from the issue. A different perspective can open up new possibilities for problem solving and resolving relationship issues. Discussing books about characters facing difficult circumstances similar to their own is less

threatening because they are talking about someone other than themselves.

In order to identify books that have the potential to help gifted learners, it is important to have an understanding of the four aspects of social-emotional development discussed earlier. Equally important is a general knowledge of books that reflect and depict the world as it is viewed by gifted learners. Halsted (2009) suggests beginning with a set of criteria when identifying books with social and emotional appeal for gifted learners. Criteria may include books with characters that are:

- learning how to cope with issues or problems relevant to gifted learners.
- markedly different from his or her peers.
- learning to accept differences in others or developing empathy.
- a gifted child, youth, or adult (implicit or explicit) successfully coping and leading a productive life.

In addition to helping them solve problems, gifted children will be able to identify with the characters and their situations and reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness. Stories that touch the emotions help guide the precarious social-emotional development of gifted children by providing insight and possible solutions to the issues they face every day. (See next two pages for a list of books that will appeal to gifted learners.) •

Bibliographic Information	Age	Genre	Theme
Aldrin, B. <i>Reaching for the Moon</i> . Harper Collins. 2005.	6–10	Biography	Using abilities
Bass, H. <i>The Secret World of Walter Anderson</i> . Candlewick Press. 2009.	6–10	Biography	Time alone
Beard, A. <i>In the Water They Can't See You Cry: A Memoir</i> . Touchstone, 2012.	12 and up	Biography	Using abilities
Boyce, F. C. <i>Cosmic</i> . Walden Pond Press. 2011.	10 and up	Fantasy and Science Fiction	Time alone
Dahl, R. <i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i> . Penguin Group, 2004.	8 and up	Fantasy	Identity
Dahl, R. <i>Matilda</i> . Puffin, 2007.	7 and up	Fantasy	Identity
DiCamillo, K. <i>The Tale of Despereaux</i> . Candlewick. 2006.	9 and up	Fiction	Identity
Draper, S. <i>Out of My Mind</i> . Atheneum Books for Young Readers. 2010.	10 and up	Realistic Fiction	Identity Using abilities
Fitzhugh, L. <i>Harriet the Spy</i> . Yearling. 2001.	8 and up	Realistic Fiction	Identity
Golding, W. <i>Lord of the Flies</i> . Perigree. 1959.	13 and up	Fiction	Identity Using abilities Building relationships
Gratos, J. <i>Dead End in Norvelt</i> . Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2011.	10 and up	Historical Fiction	Identity Time alone Building relationships
Hatkoff, I., Hatkoff, C., & Kahumbu, P. <i>Owen & Mzee: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship</i> . Scholastic Press. 2006.	8 - 12	Nonfiction	Building relationships
Holm, J. L. <i>Turtle in Paradise</i> . Yearling. 2011.	8 and up	Historical Fiction	Identity Building relationships
Humphrey, S. <i>Dare to Dream! 25 Extraordinary Lives</i> . Prometheus Books. 2005.	8 - 12	Biography	Using abilities
Konigsburg, E. L. <i>The View from Saturday</i> . Anthenium, 1996.	9 and up	Fiction	Abilities Building relationships
Konigsburg, E. L. <i>From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler</i> . Yearling. 1977.	8 and up	Fiction	
Lee, H. <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> . Harper Publishing. 2010.	12 and up	Fiction	Identity
Lewinson, L. <i>How Mice Became Small</i> . Swordpen Publishers. 2007.	9 and up	Fantasy	Identity

Bibliographic Information	Age	Genre	Theme
Lord, C. <i>Rules</i> . Scholastic. 2006.	8 and up	Realistic Fiction	Identity Building relationships
Lowry, L. <i>The Giver</i> . Random House, 2002.	12 and up	Science Fiction	Identity
Madison, L. <i>The Feelings Book: The Care and Keeping of Your Emotions</i> . American Girl, 2002.	8 and up	Nonfiction	Identity
Moss, M. <i>Sky High, the True Story of Maggie Gee</i> . Random House. 2009.	8 and up	Nonfiction	Using Abilities
McKinley, R. <i>Beauty: A Retelling of the Story of Beauty and the Beast</i> . HarperTeen. 2005.	8 and up	Traditional Literature	Building relationships
Orwell, G. <i>Animal Farm</i> . Signet Classic. 1946.	12 and up	Fiction	
Riordan, R. <i>Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief</i> . Hyperion, 2008.	10 and up	Fantasy	Using abilities
Palacio, R. J. <i>Wonder</i> . Knopf Books for Young Readers. 2012.	8 and up	Realistic Fiction	Identity
Paterson, K. <i>Bridge to Terabithia</i> . HarperCollins. 1977.	8 and up	Realistic Fiction	Identity Building relationships
Schmidt, G. D. <i>Okay for Now</i> . Clarion Books. 2011.	10 and up	Realistic Fiction	Identity Building relationships
Schmidt, G. D. <i>The Wednesday Wars</i> . Clarion Books. 2007	10 and up	Historical Fiction	Identity Building relationships Using Abilities
Spinelli, J. <i>Loser</i> . Harper Collins. 2003	8 and up	Realistic Fiction	Identity
Spinelli, J. <i>Maniac Magee</i> . Little, Brown Books for Young Readers. 1999.	12 and up	Realistic Fiction	Using Abilities
Spinelli, J. <i>Stargirl</i> . Ember. 2002.	12 and up	Realistic Fiction	Identity
Stead, R. <i>When You Reach Me</i> (2009) and <i>Liar and Spy</i> (2012). Wendy Lamb Books.	9 and up	Realistic Fiction	Building relationships
Van Cleve, K. <i>Drizzle</i> . Puffin, 2011.	8-12	Fantasy and Science Fiction	Identity Building Relationships
Vanderpool. C. <i>Moon Over Manifest</i> . Delacorte Books for Young Readers. 2010.	9 and up	Historical Fiction	Building relationships
White, E. B. <i>Charlotte's Web</i> . Harper Collins, 2004.	8 - 12	Fiction	Building relationships

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A Unique Perspective on the Emotional Needs of Gifted Students: Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities

Angela Novak

Angela Novak holds an A.B. and Ph.D. from The College of William and Mary and a M.A. from the University of Connecticut. She was a teacher in a mix of regular, special education inclusion, and gifted classrooms for 9 years and is currently the Academic Director for the Summer Institute for the Gifted.

When I first learned about overexcitabilities, I wasn't just overly excited -- I was thrilled. I was reading a theory that explained aspects of myself that I'd felt were strange, abnormal, even crazy. So I quite literally breathed a sigh of relief, and gained a better understanding, not only of how my gifted students think, but of how I tick as well. Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities is one of my favorite topics to talk about with parents, because, around the room, I see light bulbs coming on, nods of commiseration and sighs of relief, similar to my own, many years ago.

Overexcitabilities are part of a larger theory, the Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD), postulated by Polish World War I and II survivor Kazimierz Dabrowski. Dr. Dabrowski had both an MD and a Ph.D., straddling the world of psychology and psychiatry. He was intrigued by the varying levels of humanity he experienced in the wars, including his own incarceration -- how could some individuals act with so little regard for human life while others gave their lives protecting strangers?

Dr. Dabrowski began to study biographies of creative, gifted, and eminent individuals, in addition to conducting clinical studies of artists, actors, dancers and intellectually gifted youth. From this research, the Theory of Positive Disintegration, in which inner conflict is an essential piece of personality development, was born. In TPD, an individual moves forward in emotional development through a combination of factors called developmental potential, which

includes talents, special abilities and the overexcitabilities.

So what are overexcitabilities (OEs)?

Simply put, an OE is a stimulus-response that is different from the norm; it is a heightened ability to both receive and respond to stimuli. Originally translated as superstimulabilities (and you thought overexcitability was a mouthful!), Dabrowski described OEs as “expressed in increased sensitivity, awareness and intensity...As a result a person endowed with different forms of overexcitability reacts with surprise, puzzlement to many things, he collides with things, persons and events which in turn brings him astonishment and disquietude” (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 7). Dabrowski identified 5 OEs: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginational and emotional.

Motion and movement characterize the psychomotor OE. Individuals with this OE typically have a lot of physical energy, they may be speed talkers, use a great deal of gesticulation when speaking and sometimes have nervous tics. This activity is not limited to physical expression; it is also activity of the brain. One of my former students was always exhausted and he told me he couldn't get to sleep at night, because he had so much running through his mind his brain couldn't slow down enough to sleep.

Individuals with the psychomotor OE may be seen as impulsive, in speech and action, as well as very organized and competitive. An individual could

potentially be misdiagnosed as ADHD while exhibiting characteristics associated with a psychomotor OE. In 1998, Penny van Deur published a study with profiles of highly achieving adults, looking for examples of the OEs. The violinist Joshua Bell described physical activities, such as throwing boomerangs and tennis, as encouraging competition against himself, saying that he would lose himself in the sport.

The sensual OE is characterized by a heightened awareness of the senses, a strong reaction to sensory things like textures, smells or tastes. For most people, walking through the perfume counter at Macy's is a little overpowering; for an individual with a sensual OE, the smell is so strong, it's like hitting a wall that the individual just can't move past. It is overwhelming to the point of needing to hold one's breath, or circumnavigate the section just to avoid the smell.

Children with sensual OEs may be bothered by shirt tags, preferring the tags removed from clothes. I personally have tied my shoes several times because one side was looser than the other, and to leave it that way would bother me. The sensual OE also includes heightened aesthetic awareness; the individual may be moved to tears at a sonata or a sunset. This OE may also come with a tendency towards overeating for the pleasure of the taste of the food, or distractibility and inability to focus because of their environment.

Van Deur's (1998) study highlighted Australian physician and activist Dr. Helen

Caldicott as saying that music was food for her soul. Violinist and conductor Yehudi Menuhin felt that music was tactile and said he was able to feel music in his ears.

Individuals with intellectual OEs often enjoy logic, brain teasers and cognitive games. The challenge is in using complex reasoning and figuring out the puzzle. A strong logical imperative goes hand in hand with the intellectual OE, along with a focus on moral and ethical concerns. Individuals with intellectual OEs love the academe and enjoy the quest of learning simply for the sake of gaining new knowledge.

I've read stories about children who see a need and take it upon themselves to create a solution, whether it is creating a school plan to combat bullying, beginning a recycling program, repairing old computers to donate them to needy families, or starting a service where other children (and adults) can send in a precious toy to be repaired, free of charge. Van Deur's (1998) profiles include author Doris Lessing, who said that though poor as a child, she had books to consume voraciously and was therefore advantaged. Van Deur described author Aldous Huxley as having a passion for knowing and learning, and that he was said to have an "otherness" about him.

The imaginal OE is present in visual thinkers. Children with an imaginal OE may believe in magic or characters such as Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy longer than their peers. Individuals with an imaginal OE are likely to daydream, and get lost in the daydream to the point that

it almost becomes real, and they burst into tears or laugh with glee (sometimes in the middle of their teacher's algebra lesson).

For me, learning about the imaginal OE was my huge sigh of relief, as I could (and still can, to some extent) become lost in a daydream so intense that I have to shake myself out of it, catch my breath, and remind myself that it isn't real. Van Deur highlighted Joshua Bell as feeling that his violin has its own personality. Van Deur also pointed out imaginal OE in actor John Gielgud as he felt he was reinventing himself through the theater, -- that by pretending to be someone else, he gained authority that he didn't feel in other activities such as sports.

Dabrowski felt that the emotional OE was a central OE and that it was the powerful center from which the other OEs stemmed. An emotional OE can be seen as overreacting due to the intensity of emotion felt, as well as the broad range of emotions displayed. Individuals with emotional OE feel deep connections with others and strong senses of empathy and compassion.

To a child with an emotional OE, seeing his best friend playing with another student can be heartbreaking betrayal. Children with emotional OEs may be seen as acting immature, because the range of emotions they express as a 6-year-old is reminiscent of a younger child's burgeoning emotional expression. Van Deur's (1998) emotional OE profile was of Yehudi Menuhin, who believes that music can heal suffering. Menuhin felt that without the opportunity

to develop his musical gifts, he might have been unbalanced.

Not all children with overexcitabilities are gifted, and not all gifted children have overexcitabilities; however, there is a strong correlation between the two. Gifted individuals often show tendencies towards several OEs, and it is often in the combination of OEs that there are trends. For example, an artist is likely to have high emotional and imaginal OEs, whereas a scientist may be more likely to display intellectual and psychomotor OEs.

It is important to note that in the descriptions above, I use children, individuals and people interchangeably. OEs don't disappear after childhood; they may lessen in intensity (especially imaginal), but most adults have learned coping strategies to help them deal with their reactions. For example, I now hold my breath and push through the perfume counter, rather than circumventing that area of the store. Teachers and parents may find that teaching strategies and coping skills to children with OE may help the children to adjust to their classroom environment.

Sharon Lind (2000) and Michael Piechowski (2006) discuss strategies to help students with overexcitabilities. These strategies are not meant to help the child be divested of these personality traits, rather, to help the child to adjust to the world around her and make sense of her own reactions and the responses of others. Thus, an important strategy to consider with any OE is to discuss the concept of OEs and celebrate

the OE as a piece of the child's unique personality.

It is important to discuss the positive outcomes of the OE as well as the outcomes that may cause negative reactions from others. It also is essential to discuss the impact on others, raising the child's awareness of his impact on others, as he may not have realized this impact. Parents and teachers can focus on communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal, as well as stress management techniques. In addition to these general strategies, Lind (2000) and Piechowski (2006) also provide strategies that are geared toward specific OEs.

For a child who exhibits tendencies towards a psychomotor OE, it is essential that she is given the opportunity to have physical and or verbal activity. Strategies might vary based on the circumstance and surroundings; an example might be for a compulsive foot tapper to be allowed to take off her shoes or wear slippers to muffle the sound of the tapping that might impact other students. Some students need a measure of physical activity, so allowing a child to draw or squeeze a stress ball during lessons may increase her ability to attend to that lesson. My sister, an engineer, would bring her knitting to staff meetings; it helped her to focus, and she was able to stay completely on task because her hands were engaged in productive activity -- and the added bonus was warm scarves, sweaters and baby blankets for her family and friends.

For my student who had issues calming his mind to sleep, my first suggestion was to

start a journal that he could write in before he went to bed at night. This turned out to cause more frustration for him, as his 9-year-old motor skills could not keep up with his racing mind. The second solution was a better fix for him -- a tape recorder that he could use as an audio journal. The key to helping a student cope with the manifestations of her psychomotor OE is to create an environment in which she can move around, be spontaneous, and expend her energy, in ways that do not impact the learning of the other students.

Environment is also key for students with sensual OEs. Restricting the use of strong smells, and where possible, limiting the use of stimuli that they might find offensive. Instead of having 10 posters along the wall, a teacher could use a flip chart system so that only the poster applicable to the daily content is visible. Another suggestion is to limit the number of colors used throughout the room and to provide an area in the room with very little stimuli, such as a reading nook or a quiet corner, where students can work if distracted by the sights and sounds in the rest of the room. Some students respond well to calming music, while others do not, so the most important factor is determining the best environmental fit for the individual child. As I write now, I have a small box open on my computer with my favorite movie playing; the comfort of the sounds, the music, the story, all create a sense of calm in me that enables me to write (I can't even hazard a guess as to how many times I played it while writing my dissertation years ago).

Stress management techniques, mentioned in the general strategies section earlier, are also key here, as is teaching the child how to create an environment for himself that is soothing and conducive to his learning process. Probably the most important piece of advice, however, is welcoming, or at the very least, understanding, the student's emotional reactions to the stimuli. Allowing the child to express the beauty he sees in a particular artwork and responding to that expression is essential. Keeping a journal (audio, written, or video) may help the student collect his thoughts and express his emotions in a positive manner.

Intellectual OEs can be presented in the form of an endless curiosity and drive to learn. Teachers and parents would benefit from teaching the student varied research skills so that she can extend her natural curiosity into research. It is not necessary for the teacher to remain a sage on the stage at all times; facilitating a child with an intellectual OE in her quest for knowledge is more powerful than answering the (sometimes seemingly endless) stream of questions.

Similarly, parents and teachers can help to research outlets for this knowledge, ways to support the child with deep moral and ethical concerns in her drive to not only learn, but also to act and to create change. With the intellectual OE sometimes comes a critical view of others -- what the child views as honest criticism of a peer's idea can be perceived quite differently by that peer. It is important to help the child become aware of the impact her critique has on others.

Relaxation strategies and meditation techniques can be quite helpful to students expressing imaginal OEs. A child with an imaginal OE may need assistance in how to drive his imagination into a productive outlet, such as painting, drawing, designing or writing. Again, with the child whose imagination moves faster than his little hands, a recording device to take note of his thoughts is very helpful (and yes, there's an app for that). Children with imaginal OE may need help in distinguishing between the imaginary world of their dreams and daydreams and reality. Lind (2000) suggests having a child place a mental stop sign in his imaginary world to help separate the real from the imaginary.

Helping a child to realize that her emotional reactions are accepted is essential in helping with an emotional OE. It is useful for teachers and parents to help a child to anticipate and prepare for the emotional and sometimes physical reaction to stimuli. Learning her own warning signals will help the child with an emotional OE to circumvent or cope with the expected reaction. Parents and teachers can provide comfort and understanding in times of emotional distress and teaching relaxation and meditative strategies can also help.

Pearl S. Buck is quoted as saying, "The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: A human creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive. To them a touch is a blow, a sound is a noise, a misfortune is a tragedy, a joy is an ecstasy, a friend is a lover, a lover is a god, and failure is death.

Add to this cruelly delicate organism the overpowering necessity to create, create, create – so that without the creating of music or poetry or books or buildings or something of meaning, their very breath is cut off... They must create, must pour out creation. By some strange, unknown, inward urgency they are not really alive unless they are creating." Her poetic description of the creative mind can help paint a picture of the mind of a child with overexcitabilities. As parents and teachers, first we must understand the overexcitable tendencies and how we can help these children adjust and cope with their reactions, but we must also reiterate the creative and productive potential that these overexcitabilities bring to our gifted youth. •

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Five Things to Consider Before Homeschooling a Gifted Child

Jen Merrill

I was once told I should never, ever homeschool my son, that we'd probably wring each others' necks inside of a week. And yet, here we are, starting our second year of homeschooling and we're the most relaxed we've been in recent memory. I've learned a few things along the way, some lessons unique to homeschooling a gifted kid. So in case you're considering it, a few things to keep in mind.

Think long and hard about your motivation for homeschooling. What's driving you to pull your son or daughter from school and going the DIY route? The reasons are different for every family and every gifted kid. Usually they have something to do with school not being able to meet the individual child's needs. Gifted kids, with their complex wiring, often struggle in school because their needs are all over the map. Those demands will still be there when homeschooling, and they'll be front and center all day long. Be prepared for that. But also be prepared to see your kid thrive once learning is done on his or her own terms.

Deschooling is your friend. Embrace it, buy it flowers, take it out for coffee. What is deschooling, you ask? It's taking some time off from structured schooling to get the stress associated with school and homework out of the kid's system. The general rule of thumb is one month of deschooling for every year in traditional school. I screwed up and skimped on this. Learn from me, my children, do not skimp on deschooling. If learning is associated with stress and anxiety, no one wins and no one learns. Deschooling does not mean de-learning. Live at the library, watch documentaries (I highly recommend Netflix's streaming service), subscribe to interesting podcasts,

get museum memberships. Learning takes all forms.

Have you considered what kind of curriculum you'll use? If the answer is no, that is absolutely ok. I still haven't figured it all out yet. While I insist on structured mathematics, everything else is flexible. Some classes online, some with our co-op, some with me. Unit studies rock our happy little homeschooling world; it's the block scheduling of homeschooling. Seek out mentors for your child's intense interests, and get help for those subjects you just don't understand (hello, calculus!). Just be sure you know your state's homeschool laws; some require a lot more than others. Illinois, where we are, only requires teaching all major subjects in English. This can be good and bad. For us, it's ideal. I know how lucky we are.

What kind of support do you have? Online resources, such as Gifted Homeschoolers Forum, have been invaluable. We were also incredibly lucky to find a co-op for gifted homeschoolers. Once a week my son and I drive 40 minutes for a day of classes and hanging with similarly wired friends. He has found peers there, for the first time in a long time. And I appreciate being somewhere where my son's quirks are normal, instead of a cause for concern. A note on family: think long and hard about how you will tell extended family members and how you will react to their responses. I believe that the opinions of people living under your homeschooling roof carry more weight than those who don't. But that's me.

Finally, and most importantly, do you have a way to recover and recharge? Homeschooling is not easy, and homeschooling a complex gifted kid can be rough. Not only do they need so much educationally, but the asynchrony and social/emotional challenges they present can easily exhaust you. Yes, you already deal with them, but with homeschooling you're not drop-kicking them out the door for seven hours a day. If you don't have a way to recharge away from your kiddo, you're going to burn out. Burnout is ugly and painful. So join a wine book club, take up long-distance running, set up a weekly date with your significant other/best friend/yourself. It's an absolute must.

A year into our grand homeschooling experiment and I don't regret pulling our son for a second. It hasn't been easy but it's been worth it. He is happier and more relaxed than he's ever been. Learning is no longer associated with anxiety and stress and failure, but with curiosity and discovery and fun. And not a wrung neck to be seen. •

*Jen Merrill is a Chicago-based blogger and writer. After years of jamming her twice-exceptional son into various school settings that didn't quite fit, she's also now a new homeschooler and couldn't be happier. Jen is the author of *If This is a Gift, Can I Send it Back?: Surviving in the Land of Gifted and Twice-Exceptional as well as her blog Laughing at Chaos.**

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Emotional Needs of Twice-Exceptional Students

Cheryl Franklin-Rohr

Gifted students interact differently with their environment and as a result, may need extra support to help meet their emotional needs. In addition, if these students are also twice-exceptional, they may struggle even more with their emotional problems.

These are students who don't fit well in most environments. If they have been identified twice-exceptional through the lens of gifted programming, they may hear from their teacher or parents the common complaint, "If you would only try harder..." No matter how hard they work, their school work is usually inconsistent and certainly not reflective of their hard work or their true ability. If they have been identified gifted through the lens of special education, they have spent much of their school life being "fixed" by teachers through the use of remediation. They may have spent most of their instructional time working on concepts below grade level and just waiting for school to have meaning. For those twice-exceptional students who have not been identified as either gifted or learning disabled because the giftedness and the disability mask each other, school life must be extraordinarily painful. They struggle day in and day out without any support to help them with their weaknesses, and they never get access to the high-level instruction that the "gifted" students receive.

Twice-exceptional students may "demonstrate some of these affective characteristics : a strong, personal need for excellence that leads to unhealthy perfectionism, intensity of emotions and over-excitabilities, unrealistic expectations of self, increased frustration producing a lack of motivation, disruptive or withdrawn behavior, feelings of learned

helplessness and low self-esteem” (Olenchak & Reis, 2002).

Most twice-exceptional students experience a lack of control in their performance and output due to the conflict between their strengths and weaknesses. It is no wonder that these students want to control something in their school experience – even if this results in unhealthy perfectionism. This need for perfection can push students to become even more unproductive with their school work, and then the pressure can paralyze them even more. According to Neihart (1999), “perfectionist behaviors can lead to the setting of unrealistic goals for oneself and others, and this can further lead to problems for the gifted individual when actual performance fails to meet the desired standard”.

Emotional intensity, a characteristic associated with the gifted, can also lead students to question their mental outlook and the perception of their own coping ability. They experience life at an intense level: their highs and lows can be misdiagnosed sometimes as bipolar disorder or existential depression. Individuals with great intensity and sensitivity are susceptible to being misunderstood and alienated from the world.

Unrealistic expectations can result in constant disappointment and feeling of failure or of “being stupid.” The mixed messages that students receive from teachers and others can lead to these unrealistic expectations. A common message these students may hear is “If you are so smart, why can’t you do this work?” Another

unspoken message students receive is from teachers who give them less rigorous work, in effect telling the student, “You are not capable of doing high-level work.”

The dichotomy of feeling inadequate and/or stupid and experiencing boredom at the same time causes incredible frustration for twice-exceptional students. If they are in gifted programming, these students may encounter repeated punishment for not completing work on time or may be required to redo work because it is “too sloppy”. They may be placed in remedial classrooms where the needs of the special education students are so varied that teachers struggle to meet their instructional needs. Students on the autism spectrum are sometimes placed in classrooms for students with severe behavioral disorders because of an inadequate understanding of the needs of ASD students.

How frustrating would it be not to be able to count on your performance? One day (in one class) you can demonstrate your knowledge and in the next day or class it is as if you never learned it. How frustrating is it not to be able to demonstrate what you know because your hand doesn’t write as fast as your mind is working? How frustrating would it be to have a teacher assume you were stupid because you couldn’t explain your answer to a math question or couldn’t show your work? How frustrating would it be for teachers to think that you can’t be gifted because you can’t consistently produce at a gifted level? This high level of frustration can lead to further behavioral

issues as students try to avoid doing work that meets criticism. Students may also choose to avoid frustration through withdrawal.

When students have been told many times, either directly or indirectly, that they are incapable or that they need a lot of support, they often develop habits of “learned helplessness.” Learned helplessness occurs when a child does not engage in self-care or do things for himself. Frequently, this happens because an adult or adults in the child’s life do things for her that she should do for herself. Adults often feel that they are making the child’s life easier, but the opposite is usually the case. As Susan Winebrenner (2011) states, when we take away a child’s struggle, we rob him of his opportunity to learn.

Low self-esteem in twice-exceptional students arises from a variety of causes. “Often, their sense of self has been damaged by schools’ overemphasis on their disabilities at the expense of efforts aimed at enhancing their strengths” (Olenchak, 1994). “The surest path to positive self-esteem is to succeed at something which one perceived would be difficult. Each time we steal a student’s struggle by insisting they do work too easy for them, we steal their opportunity to have an esteem-building experience” (Rimm). If students are not successful, how do they gain and build self-esteem?

This brief look at some of the emotional issues of twice-exceptional students leads us to conclude that we have an imperative

to address their academic and intellectual strengths through appropriate gifted programming. •

Cheryl Franklin-Rohr is the Gifted and Talented Coordinator for Adams 14 School District and is on the Twice-Exceptional Cadre for the state of Colorado. She received her Masters in Gifted and Talented from UNC in 1986 and completed her Special Education Directors Licensure in 2010.

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Bibliotherapy: Fictional Peers and Mentors for Gifted Kids

Stephen Schroeder-Davis

Before you begin this article, please think about a book that profoundly influenced you and answer these questions:

1. How, when, and where did you first encounter the book?
2. In what ways did it affect you when you first read it?
3. Does the book in some way still influence you?

My first dissertation attempt sought to answer the question, “How are gifted children portrayed in contemporary children’s and adolescent literature?” I became interested in this topic after being exposed to the idea of bibliotherapy, “A form of supportive psychotherapy in which carefully selected reading materials are used to assist a subject in solving personal problems or for other therapeutic purposes” (American Heritage Dictionary, on-line, 2012), or more informally, the right book, at the right time, for the right person, for the right reason.

Samuel Crothers (1916) coined the term when he combined the Greek words for books and therapy. There are two “branches” of bibliotherapy, clinical bibliotherapy, used by trained professionals to deal with significant emotional or behavioral issues, and developmental bibliotherapy, used by teachers, media specialists, and parents to help children develop self-understanding. My study was intended to promote a form of developmental bibliotherapy called interactive bibliotherapy, as I intended to promote the use of books with authentic, balanced portrayals of gifted protagonists with real life gifted students. The lesson plans that follow provide examples of my use of bibliotherapy in my classes, though I didn’t use that term at the time.

Analysis of the Portrayal of Giftedness in Contemporary Adolescent Fiction

Once I was accepted into the University of Saint Thomas's Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership I began thinking about a possible dissertation topic that would be interesting to research and relevant to my teaching position as a middle school language arts specialist. I was eager to combine my love of reading with my interest in the unique social and emotional needs of gifted students, and the idea of analyzing the portrayals of gifted kids in contemporary realistic fiction to determine authenticity and congruence with research literature appeared to have possibilities.

Dr. Karen Rogers, my dissertation chair, accepted my dissertation proposal under the working title "Fictional Peers and Mentors for the Gifted." Dr. Rogers and I agreed the only viable methodology for my study would be a content analysis, defined broadly by Holsti (1969) as, "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (p. 14). I spent two intensive years collecting books, reading and re-reading them, and performing the content analysis. Since I did not know what to anticipate as I read, I undertook an emergent content analysis, meaning I identified descriptive categories for the books after I began reading them. I discovered a historical progression in the portrayal of gifted children, starting with "disembodied intelligence," typified by series books such

as Tom Swift, Nancy Drew, and the Hardy Boys. In books categorized as representing disembodied intelligence, intelligence was clearly prized but involved little character development, and, since the characters do not age (the Hardy Boys have been 17 for a half-century) the series books are not "realistic fiction."

Over time, books with gifted characters evolved to what I called, "tangential portrayals," wherein the gifts of the characters were still peripheral rather than central to the story, as the gifted characters were not the protagonists, or their gifts were not central to the plot. Finally, as the writing of fiction involving giftedness became more sophisticated, "authentic portrayals" developed. The study affirmed the realism in books written primarily after 1985. After further careful examination of almost 200 titles, the following subcategories within the larger classification of authentic portrayals of gifted kids emerged (I have listed these categories separately, but in the majority of the books, there were several traits represented in the depictions):

1. Multipotentiality. Books with plots involving multipotentiality portrayed the advantages and difficulties ensuing from having many areas of passion and expertise.
2. Mentor relationship. A work in which many characters had a trusted adult serving as an advocate were classified under this identifier.

3. Desire for autonomy. While most kids desire independence, the gifted students depicted in this type of book were often fierce and precocious relative to autonomy.

4. Physical isolation. A key characteristic of a gifted protagonist in this type of book was sometimes ostracized, but more often he or she voluntarily selected physical isolation to pursue a passion.

5. Psychological alienation. Gifted characters sometimes felt estranged from significant others. These feelings reflected the character's sense that he or she was psychologically invisible—people did not understand him or her—or that he or she needed to withdraw from others' behaviors they viewed as immature, insensitive, or cruel.

6. Intensity and exclusivity of focus. In books of this type, many of the characters had “serial passions,” for example, first being enamored with poetry, followed by art, then drama, civil rights, ballet, and so on.

7. Coercive egalitarianism. This is the term I coined to represent “forced regression toward the mean.” In many of the books, gifted characters encountered some form of malign indifference, usually from institutions, and/or outright hostility from individuals, including peers, friends, relatives, and immediate family in response to their advanced abilities or extreme intensities. This theme was so prevalent, and so angered me, that I switched my dissertation topic to “anti-intellectualism,”

which I have addressed in many forums, including *Understanding our Gifted*.

8. Heightened sensitivity and awareness. Books in this category were characterized by the presence of a character or characters with the hypersensitivities or over excitabilities of which readers of UOG would be familiar.

9. Perfectionism. These books featured gifted characters bedeviled by perfectionism (this is the one characteristic I could have pre-coded!).

10. Familial and/or peer rivalry. Novels classified under this final category featured some kind of implicit or explicit contest, sometimes involving healthy competition, but more often a cause of pain and suffering.

The study that gave rise to these categories also involved writing the authors of many of the books, including luminaries such as Stephanie Tolan, Richard Peck, Judy Blume, Caroline Cooney, and Rita Williams-Garcia, all of whom responded with enthusiasm when they saw my preliminary findings. Stephanie Tolan was especially supportive, and, along with Dr. Rogers, was disappointed when I changed topics, as I found item #7 above, “coercive egalitarianism,” to be irresistible, and it has become a life-long interest.

The excitement we all felt about my research was due to the fact that the fictional portrayals in the best books were virtually a mirror image of the lived experiences of many gifted individuals.

Utilizing Bibliotherapy

Assuming most readers are as unfamiliar with bibliotherapy as I was when I started my investigation, I will outline the bibliotherapeutic process, provide an example of an “affective study guide,” and then suggest some resources for use at home or school. Readers should know that in order for a title to be listed as “recommended”, it had to be quality literature (in my estimation), include at least one (authentic) gifted protagonist and reflect issues, problems, themes, or situations gifted kids might encounter. While I was not particularly censorious (this is realistic contemporary fiction) I did not include any books I viewed as promoting or endorsing sexism, vulgarity, profanity, or racism. That said, adults should of course read any book they intend to share with children or students, which is necessary in order to optimize bibliotherapy, as the guidance and discussion provided by parents, teachers, and peers is invaluable. It’s also important to note very few of the books were “about” giftedness, but rather dealt with typical children’s and adolescent issues, such as coming-of-age, transferring schools, divorce, peer relationships, and so on. These typical “real life” experiences, however, were viewed through the lens of gifted protagonists. The books can be taught as specifically as being about giftedness—I did so in my GT cluster classes and within the context of Middle School Advisories—but the books were typically approached as middle school literature, and the issues

revolving around giftedness arose naturally through reading and discussion.

The classic description of developmental, interactive therapy (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986) is a four-step process:

1. Recognition: The reader forms identification with one or more of the characters.
2. (Self) examination: The reader reflects on ways he or she is like and unlike the character(s).
3. Juxtaposition: The reader “trades places” with or empathizes with one or more of the characters.
4. Self-application: Insights gained from the book are applied to the reader’s life.

Following is an introduction from an article I wrote for the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* that has specific relevance for home schoolers. In the article, I compiled a “best of” list from my investigation, including *Libby on Wednesday*, by Zilpha Keatley Snyder, (Delacorte Press, 1986). The summary is intended to frame the essential conflict between Libby and the majority of her age-peers.

Libby is an 8th grader attending public school for the first time after years of successful, intense home schooling. Libby is shocked to discover that her knowledge, abilities, and enthusiasm for learning are reviled by her peers, rather than revered as they were at home. She rebels, of course, but doesn’t really begin to fit in until she wins a

writing contest, affording her the opportunity to meet each Wednesday with four of the other best writers in school assigned the task of writing a book together. It is only in this setting that Libby feels free to reveal her love of writing and other passions. (Schroeder-Davis, 1994b, p. 327)

Prompting Reflection and Discussion: An Affective Response Guide

Once I'd changed my dissertation topic, I was officially through with my bibliotherapy focus, but I had dozens of books I knew could be used to explore giftedness and was eager to introduce the books to my middle school students. But I needed a vehicle to prompt reflection and discussion. I wanted a format that was organized but open-ended, and one that would not be a traditional "study guide," as we would not be focusing on traditional literary analysis. The analysis of plots, themes, characters, settings, and symbolism would be interwoven with the portrayals of the gifted protagonists and other characters in the novels. It was at this point I decided to adapt the ideas in an article entitled, "Dialogue with a Text," by R.E. Probst (1988) that had so impressed me I had saved it for six years. The adaptation was applied first to *Among Friends*, by Caroline Cooney (1987), and was published in Book Links in 1994 as part of their Classroom Connections series. The following plot summary (Schroeder-Davis, 1994b) of *Among Friends* provided readers of Book Links with the necessary context

to apply the affective response guide that followed:

Caroline Cooney's *Among Friends* is one of the novels I selected as part of my investigation of fictional peers and mentors for gifted students. Told in diary format, the story reveals friendships lost and found among a group of high school juniors. The novel is an ideal discussion vehicle for gifted students and their friends, who may be struggling with many of the issues depicted in the novel.

Jennie, Emily and Hillary (the "Awesome Threesome") and their classmates have been assigned a three-month diary project in their advanced English class. Emily and Hillary are becoming increasingly resentful of their friend Jennie, amazingly talented author, composer and musician who finds herself more isolated with each success. As her friends' animosity increases, Jennie's parents and teachers become ever more strident, constantly publicizing (and exploiting) her accomplishments. Jennie finds herself facing the forced-choice dilemma of popularity or productivity. (p. 25)

The Response Guide for *Among Friends*

DURING READING

1. Keep a journal of your reactions to Jennie's diary. Compare her friend's (or parent's, or teacher's) reactions to experiences you have encountered. Discuss similar situations in your own experience. If

none come to mind, speculate regarding the differences between you and Jennie.

2. Evaluate Jennie's coping strategies. How do you think she's doing? How would you handle her situation?

ALTERNATIVE READINGS

1. Rather than read the book as written, read each character's diary in turn, noting any patterns and cause and effect relationships that develop. Specifically, compare Jennie's diary to Emily's and Hillary's. What is destroying their friendship? Who is at fault? What can be done?

2. Comment on the role of the adults in Jennie's life. Are they portrayed realistically? Have you had comparable experiences? How could Jennie improve her situation relative to these adults?

AFTER READING: FOCUS QUESTIONS

First Reaction: How did you feel immediately after reading the book? Explain why you felt as you did.

Feelings: What emotions or feelings did you experience? What characters or events prompted these feelings?

Associations: What memories were triggered as you read? Can you recall feelings or experiences similar to those of any of the characters? What was your situation? How did you feel? What did you do?

Important Judgments: What word or phrase is the most important to you? Why? What is the most important concept or idea? What is the most significant conflict? Why?

Responding to the Text: Was your response primarily emotional or intellectual? What part involved you most intensely?

Evolving Responses: Did your thoughts and feelings change as you read the story? In what way?

Other Associations: Did the text remind you of another book, story, poem, song, or film? Explain the connection.

Authenticity: Was this story believable to you? Can you cite a similar experience you have experienced or observed?

Problem Solving: Review Jennie's diary. What could she have done to reduce her difficulties? Should she do anything at all? What have you done in similar circumstances? What advice would you give the "awesome twosome"? How would you advise the adults in the novel?

Evaluations: How does Jennie solve her dilemma? What is your opinion of her solution? Did she compromise herself or make reasonable accommodations? How did the ending make you feel? Was it effective? How would you have ended the book?

Forecasting I: Will the "new" Jennie Quint be happier? More popular? As creative? As productive? Will she have more or less self-esteem?

Forecasting II: Imagine a 5-year class reunion of Westerly High. What are the six main protagonists doing now? Are they happy? Productive? Do they ever see one another? Are they reaching their potential?

The response guide is deliberately comprehensive to allow parents and teachers to adapt or abbreviate as needed. The guide's headings are intentionally broad so they can easily be utilized with other books, which is an assignment my graduate students enjoy as they can adapt the guide for use with one of the contemporary novels they are teaching. Students have submitted response guides to many contemporary novels with gifted characters, including *Matilda*, *Millicent Min*, *Girl Genius*, *The View from Saturday*, and *Welcome to the Ark*. I have also received adaptations allowing the response guides to be used with movies, including *Matilda*, *Little Man Tate*, *Dead Poet's Society*, *Amadeus*, and *The Breakfast Club*. A complete treatment of response guide use with the depiction of gifted individuals in television and film will have to wait for a future column, but as an example, the following is a guide to the movie *Breakfast Club*, submitted by a graduate student whose name, regrettably, does not appear on the guide that was submitted. The guide was written for other teachers of the gifted to respond to, but parts of it also could easily be adapted for use with gifted students.

Response Guide for The Breakfast Club

BEFORE VIEWING

Discuss each of the following questions in your small group before viewing the film: What is your image of a "gifted and talented" student? Explain your prototype. What do they look like? How do they interact with other people? How do they

fit into the social hierarchy? How are their gifts and talents manifested?

What makes someone gifted and talented? List and explain different gifts and talents that people can exhibit.

Explain the social scene at your high school. List and explain each of the different cliques. Where did you fit into this situation? How did you respond to kids from other groups?

What did your school system do to meet the needs of gifted students? What could they do better?

DURING VIEWING

Keep a journal while you view the film to help you with your reflection. Keep track of your responses to each main character. Explain your reactions, connections, and evaluations. Does the film seem realistic to you? Consider the characters and the plot.

Consider the issue of giftedness. How does it apply to each of the students? How have environmental conditions affected the development of their gifts? How well does the school system meet the needs of each student? What could be done better?

AFTER VIEWING

Choose several of the questions below that most grab your attention. Respond in writing in a 3-5 page reflection on the film.

Responses and Reactions

How do you feel immediately after watching the video? Explain your feelings.

How do you feel about each of the characters? Why do you think they made you feel that way?

Did your responses to the characters change throughout the movie?

What part of the film engaged you the most? How did it make you feel? What could explain this response?

What do you think of the ending? Explain.

Connections

As you watched, did it trigger any memories? Have you ever experienced any similar situations? Explain your situation.

The opening scenes introduce us to the five characters: “a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess, and a criminal.” Which one is most similar to you? Explain your rationale.

Of the five students, which one would have been your “enemy” in high school? Have your feelings changed since then?

As a teacher, which of these characters would be the most difficult student for you? Why?

Did this movie remind you of another movie, TV show, or book? Explain your connection.

Evaluations

Are the figures in the film characters or caricatures? Justify your opinion.

What is the most important scene in this movie? Explain.

What is the most important conflict in this movie? Explain.

What is the most important lesson that a teacher should learn from this film?

Who is the most gifted student? Justify your opinion.

Authenticity

How are the parents of each of the characters portrayed? Are real parents like this? Explain.

Each of the five students in this film seems to be scarred. Do all parents scar their children in some way? Justify your opinion.

What misconceptions do the kids have about each other? Do kids misunderstand each other this way in real life?

How did the principal treat the kids? Did he respond differently to each student? Do you think this happens in real life?

Is this story believable to you? Have you ever had a similar experience or heard of one like it?

Problem Solving

Pick one of the five students. What could his/her parents have done differently to be more effective?

Bender seems to be very bright, yet he is an underachiever and a behavior problem. What could the school do to better meet the needs of this “selective consumer” and channel his gifts and talents into more productive pursuits? Or, is he a “lost cause”?

The “Basket Case” also seems to be gifted and talented in several ways, and yet she is very troubled. What could/should the school do to help her better develop her gifts? Can she be saved, or is she beyond hope?

If these students comprised a “gifted cluster,” how would you as a teacher go about meeting their social and emotional needs?

How can schools help break down social barriers and encourage tolerance among students? Or, should this even be considered part of the mission of a school? Is it beyond the scope of public education?

Forecasting

What will happen in school on Monday? Will the lessons that they learned about themselves and each other last?

Assuming that these five students do in fact change forever, predict the effect that their changes would have on the social scene at the school. Will they change the hierarchy, or will they simply move to a new place on the hierarchy?

Assuming that these five students do in fact change forever, predict the effect it will have on their parents. Will their parents be accepting of these changes, or will they try to force their children to conform to their expectations?

Make a prediction about each of the five characters. What will they be doing in ten years? Will each character be living up to his/her potential? How will their gifts and talents serve them in their careers and lives?

After his conversation with the janitor and the letter that Brian wrote to the principal, do you think he will change? If so, will it last? How will he change? Will his change have an impact on the school climate?

I undertook my dissertation(s) and wrote this column in the hope it would contribute to the de-mystification of giftedness. If giftedness is indeed, a “double-edged sword,” then abundant, inexpensive resources such as books, films, and discussion guides can be utilized to surface the joys, sorrows, confusion, and complications that gifted individuals often experience. Further, when gifted characters are realistically represented in fiction, the gifted students as well as their age-peers are afforded an opportunity to discuss issues in an indirect, non-threatening manner, through the proxy of the gifted protagonist(s) and other characters in the books, which I found to be an ideal lens in which to discuss the categories referenced in my investigation, thus affording all of the students a means to understand giftedness in a more realistically, and hopefully benign light, which is of benefit for everyone. •

Stephen Schroeder-Davis has coordinated gifted programs in Elk River, MN for 31 years and teaches in the Saint Mary’s Gifted Certificate Program, which he created. Steve’s Master and Doctoral degrees focused on gifted issues, and his dissertation won the John C. Gowan Doctoral Research Award at NAGC’s forty-third annual conference. Steve writes and presents frequently on issues relevant to gifted students and their advocates

Resources

[Using Bibliotherapy with Gifted Children](#)

This post, from the “Unwrapping the Gifted”, describes how a K-12 gifted education specialist used bibliotherapy with her 5th and 6th grade gifted students to reflect on situations and issues related to giftedness.

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

Hoagies’ list of dozens of books featuring gifted protagonists.

<http://www.greatpotentialpress.com/some-of-my-best-friends-are-books-3rd-edition>

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Making Connections

Websites

[SENG Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted](#) website.

[Hoagies Gifted](#) Lots of good Social/Emotional resources.

[Emotional Intensity in Gifted Children](#) Article by L. Sword on Davidson Institute for Talent Development website.

[Social/Emotional Needs: The Rage of Gifted Students](#) Article by T. Cross on Davidson Institute for Talent Development website.

[Social and Emotional Development of Gifted and Talented Students](#) Paper by Nadia Webb, Psy D, with helpful worksheets for teachers.

[The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Students](#) A scholarly paper from NRC G/T at UConn by Carolyn Callahan, et al.

[The Social-Emotional Health of Gifted Children: An Interview with Psychologist Maureen Neihart, Psy.D](#) from the Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University website.

[Poudre High School, Colorado](#) Links to books and resources about the social and emotional needs of gifted learners.

[Prufrock Press](#) List of books related to the social emotional development of gifted students.

[NAGC Social Emotional Resources](#)

[The Social and Emotional Lives of Gifted Kids, Tracy L. Cross PhD](#) A good portion of this book available on Google Books.

[Nurturing Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children](#) A position statement from NAGC.

[Social and Emotional Issues: What Gifted Adults Say About Their Childhoods](#) Interesting quotes in an article by Deborah Ruf, PhD.

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