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A Case Study Review on Social-Emotional Problems Affecting Gifted and Talented Students

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Abstract

In recent times, studies focusing on the issue of gifted and talented students in Turkey have gained much traction. However, so far, these appear to have been limited in terms of the intervention strategies they offer. The question of how to respond to the social and emotional issues of gifted and talented students remains an issue, which is a source of debate, based on the experiences on the field and the directions offered by the latest studies. While giftedness is associated with positive thoughts and beliefs, these come a number of challenges that require closer examination. Consequently, the aim of this case study is to discuss the social-emotional issues experienced gifted and talented children, with regards to effective intervention programs which are often overlooked and not thoroughly examined. Determining the type of acceleration practice could be a very subjective decision and possible risk and resources should be analyzed in order to determine what is best for the child's needs. As outlined by this case study, the proper identification of intervention strategies should respond to the problems experienced by students in the social and emotional realm. The review concludes with recommendations that could help school counselors, families and educators in assisting gifted and talented students, based on existing relevant literature.

Keywords: Gifted and Talented Students, Social and Emotional Issues, Case Study, School Counseling

1. Introduction

1.1. Student's profile

In this case study, the student in focus is a 12- year-old female. The school counselor attached to the student the name "Sarah," in order to protect her actual identity. Sarah is in 6th grade at an Iowa City Community School District's elementary school. Both of Sarah's parents are French and she is a French American. Sarah speaks fluent French at home and has a younger brother who is in 2nd grade with whom she reported to have occasional fights. Sarah comes from a very supportive family where she feels supported and loved but seems to struggle with getting along with her younger brother.

1.2. Ethical consideration and informed consent

According to the ACA/APA Code of Ethics, the school counselor stated that she is ethically responsible to respect the confidentiality of the information and act for the best interest of her welfare. Sarah is a minor (12 years old); thus, informed consent was documented through communication with her mom, who agreed to help when the counselor requested for an interview with her daughter. When the school counselor met with Sarah, she explained the reason about interviewing her (i.e., about a case study for a class project). The school counselor stated that she did not plan to publish or report my case study conceptualization and stated that she was committed to keeping the confidentiality of the interview unless it revealed itself to be harmful for Sarah or to another individual. Sarah nodded and stated that she understood. When the school counselor interviewed her, her mom was at work, but knew that Sarah and the school counselor were meeting at their house on a scheduled time. The school counselor thanked both Sarah and her mom for their contribution, for their willingness to help and cooperate and for their time in this assignment.

1.3. Academic concerns and intervention

Through talking to her mother and Sarah, it appeared that language arts are an area where Sarah feels strong. Upon request, Sarah's mother graciously shared some of her daughter's educational documents (e.g., Parent/Teacher Conference) to help the school counselor get an idea of her school performance and social and emotional growth, in order to assist with this case study. Her teacher documented that when she read, she used strategies flexibly. Her writing was well organized, thorough and supported by evidence and rationale. She enjoyed book discussions in small group settings where she tended to take charge and would ask questions during instructions. She used reading strategies such as summation, questioning, evaluating and inferring. When writing, she was skilled in summarizing ideas and articulating the main theme of the book. She strove to think critically and used her critical reasoning skills when making predictions. Sarah read all genres of literature, with a particular gravitation toward fantasy. Sarah did very well academically and found schoolwork easy as she enjoyed a challenge. However, it appeared to the school counselor that Sarah did not have much opportunity to work on this area in her Extended Learning Programs (ELP) time.

Sarah did well in math and sciences during in-class discussions and in small-groups – as well as independently. She contributed to the classroom conversation, making connections and applying outside information to that presented in-class. Similarly, she carried information learned in class outside school to incorporate it into her life. Sarah showed a deep level of understanding of the information presented and would come up with novel ways of applying it. Sarah was engaged in projects using various computer software programs (e.g., animation). When she is engaged in using software related to computer animation etc., she was able to absorb and use the information and instruction presented to her. In the event a particular result wasn't pleasing, she was able to rethink her process and seek new ways of solving issues to reach at a most visually pleasing solution.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social and emotional concerns

Looking at her educational documents that were provided by her mom (e.g., Parent/Teacher Conference), the school counselor learned that Sarah's teacher viewed her to be a very friendly girl who gets along well with most of the students in school. In solving partner and group problems, Sarah worked on being fair and cooperative, and being respectful with people in her group. According to her teacher, Sarah demonstrated a strong work habit which came across when she listened to directions and got right to work to complete tasks.

The school counselor observations during the interview interaction with Sarah revealed that she was very positive, and the school counselor found her to be very friendly and cooperative. The school counselor assumed that Sarah was comfortable with the school counselor, since the latter knew her since first grade. Over the years,

what struck the school counselor about Sarah was how much she had heard about sensitivity from fellow students. The school counselor remembered hearing that Sarah cried a lot. In response, the school counselor met with her at various times. The school counselor was conscious that she should not let this bias interfere with the quality of my interaction with Sarah. While she saw Sarah grown and matured, perhaps her sensitivity had changed in the ways how she expresses herself as she evolved developmentally as a young lady.

The school counselor realized that she had learned a few things about Sarah that she had not noticed before, such as how she had matured and grown. For example, to facilitate the conversation informally, the school counselor asked Sarah about her thoughts going to Junior High. She immediately responded: *"I am very nervous."* Sarah's eyes were very alert when she made that statement, as if aware of a threat, which the school counselor could tell from her face. The counselor asked her what she was doing to help relieve her unease. It appeared not much. The school counselor asked: *"Have you been talking about these feelings related to going to junior high with your parents?"* To which, she said that she hadn't. The school counselor then asked: *"What is it that you are nervous about? Are you worried about school work?"* She stated, "No" and added: *"I am not worried about school work and I am worried about losing my friends."* Then, we chatted about what she could do to stay connected with her friends. Sarah thought a lot about how to stay connected and the bigger school size in junior high was concerning to her since she thought that it would have a negative influence on her current friendships and make them grow apart in a way beyond her control.

2.2. Acceleration: Extended learning programs (ELP)

This descriptive case study guided by exploratory questions (Yin, 1993) on issues related to ELP program and acceleration practices. Interview questions focused on issues perceived by the student regarding her experiences. Before talking about Sarah's ELP experience, the school counselor sought to provide some information about ELP. According to the Iowa City Community School District, ELP identifies students for programming who demonstrate outstanding ability or potential in academic and/or intellectual areas. ELP is a program which provides appropriate differentiated instruction and educational services corresponding to their abilities and needs beyond those provided by the regular classroom. To be placed in the program, students need a Core Total score or Composite score on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills at or above the 97th percentile, using Iowa norms, or a Standard Age composite core at or above the 97th percentile on the Cognitive Abilities Test (ICCS, 2008).

The school counselor wanted to learn what Sarah's ELP experience had been like and asked her when she joined the program. The school counselor found out the following: Sarah has been in the ELP since 5th Grade and was recommended to the program by her teacher once she had met the basic requirements. Sarah stated that she enjoyed her time, the projects she works on, and the friend she had at the ELP. Sarah stated that she was called to leave her regular classroom three times a week for an hour each time to work with a TAG instructor and other ELP students. The school counselor learned that there were three types of grouping practiced in the school and that Sarah was 1) working with other 5th and 6th grade ELP students on various projects for an hour (i.e., computer animation); 2) conducted her language arts work at the ELP with other 6th grader ELP students; 3) and had an hour to work alone on a project of her choice. When the counselor asked about her feeling regarding ELP, Sarah stated that she loved the time there. When the counselor asked about which projects, she enjoyed, Sarah said she was making a movie, had been involved in skit in which she and other members in her group argued about an issue related to a lawsuit involving a broken arm, had been involved in drawing and a project called "Topics of Future: Pets of the Future." She stated that she envisioned the pets/animals being in three types and added there may be more. Sarah stated those three types were: a) genetically engineered pets – such as a dog she designed with pink head (which was "so cute"); b) clones and c) robots – such as a robot fish. Sarah seemed excited talking about her project. The school counselor asked what she liked particularly about ELP, to which she stated she got the chance to talk about things without being worried about distracting other students. She loved the projects, whether group or individual, and loved the other kids. Sarah also had concerns about how difficult it would become to spend time with her friends who were male.

3. Discussion

3.1. Social and emotional problems: An uncharted territory in accelerated students' life

Interviewing Sarah made the school counselor realize how much acceleration practices overlooked the social-emotional aspects of gifted and talented students' experience. Since the publication of *The Social and Emotional Curriculum with Gifted and Talented Students* (2009), the domain had gained in importance and may be representing a new paradigm shift in gifted and talented education. We do not seem to recognize the fact that gifted and talented individuals are social and emotional beings, contrary to misconceptions. This is true in the sense that though transition is hard for many, it will be hard for Sarah. Any acceleration practice (i.e., ELP) should embrace the self-growth and social-emotional development for gifted and talented students, which is necessary for nurturing potentials, as one's social-emotional development stage defines much of the course of their life, beliefs, feelings and behavior. A sense of security in personal relationships, growth in skills, knowledge and confidence generate happiness. Such statements are especially accurate when the personal development process challenges the individual to make special efforts above and beyond their functioning in learning/academics and in rising above personal struggles in life (Carver, 1998). In terms of how this relates to Sarah's anxieties, acceleration practice should integrate such concerns to help her process and work through her issues. To echo Saylor (2007), talent development goes beyond advancing one's talent performance; and is just about supporting the gifted and talented in achieving an integrated personality and life that is self-satisfying.

It can be very difficult when a young child does not have skills in terms of dealing with their emotions. Acceleration practices should recognize the relationship between the cognitive, personal, emotional, social, and moral development. This notion is well captured by the concept of asynchrony (or known as uneven development) and is defined in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as "variability of development," which it describes as a key characteristic observed in gifted and talented children at various paces. In the late 20th century, the term asynchrony was used to describe the developmental characteristics of gifted and talented children; that is, their mental, physical, emotional, and social abilities may all develop at different paces" (2009). Gifted and talented children typically do not follow the developmental spectrum sequentially and viewing identity from an integrated and constructive perspective can help educators as they consider the relevant students' affective aspects. Sarah, for instance, may have the ability to function academically two-three grades above her age level, but this does not mean she is equally skilled in managing her emotions.

Sensitivity among gifted and talented children takes place in many shapes. For example, gifted and talented children feel easily hurt, show compassion toward others and empathize with how others might feel, are protective, cry easily, act strongly in response to criticism, and react strongly to information received through the senses (pollution, noise, and some food items) (Silverman, 1994). Sarah admitted that she cried a lot. This may be one of the areas that might have made her feel apart from the other children. Silverman (1994) commented that gifted and talented children display cognitive complexity and their unique personality traits can thus create exclusive experiences and awareness that isolates them from others.

The complexity of identity development is recognized throughout the literature. An acceleration practice integrated into the curriculum, which focuses on identity development earlier than other students, could be beneficial for gifted and talented students. VanTassel-Baska (2009) states: "*Students need to start addressing the large questions of: "How do I define meaning for myself?" and "What are my life themes?"*" (p. 117). Consequently, the questions, "*What am I good at? What do I want to accomplish in my life? How can I achieve the goals that I've set for myself? focus on personal problem finding and solving*" (Moon, 2009, p. 24) and are at the core of social, emotional, moral, academic and career development. They allow understanding where the students are on the developmental spectrums and what their unique developmental needs and features. This is especially helpful knowing that gifted and talented students are ready for work on career development much earlier; thus, educators can provide them support (Moon, 2009). If such social-emotional development related questions had been integrated into her ELP curriculum, Sarah would have the opportunity to benefit from

exploring such issues as why a particular archaeology project she mentioned upset her because she responded to the bones with fear. She could furthermore perhaps explore how this could relate to future career decisions.

Assisting a gifted and talented student in making good life decisions, developing a philosophy of life and optimizing their full potential are lifelong agenda items. Thus, the complexity of the gifted and talented development is recognized undeniably. Adult life-span developmental models could be integrated into the acceleration practices to serve as developmental intervention to be sensitive to the social and emotional development of the gifted and talented. Echoing the complexity of identity development in the gifted and talented, based on her clinical observations and theoretical proposition, Silverman (1994) commented that gifted and talented children display cognitive complexity and their unique personality traits create exclusive experiences and awareness that makes them apart from others. As an essential element to the welfare of the entire society, moral sensitivity is a central trait in the gifted and talented experience (Silverman). Sensitivity among gifted and talented children takes place in many shapes. For example, gifted and talented children feel easily hurt, show compassion toward others and empathize with how others might feel, are protective, cry easily, act strongly in response to criticism and react strongly to information received through the senses (pollution, noise, and some food items).

Perhaps due to this sensitivity, Sarah could not study bones in an archeology project so had to switch groups. Perhaps an ELP curriculum that was more sensitive to Sarah's affective development could offer strategies on how to handle such overwhelmingly intense emotions so that the child is not distressed. Sarah admitted that she cried a lot, worried about losing her friends and worried about her transition to junior high. The school counselor found it interesting that she stated that she would even miss some of the more unpopular children at the school. This comment made the school counselor leave with a thought that how sincere and forgiving this child was about her feelings. Furthermore, the school counselor found it also interesting that she was not so ready for a gender-segregated junior high. Sarah stated that she would enjoy remaining close with her male friends from the elementary school but sensed the boundaries merging that come with puberty. Thus, it was perhaps puberty that was leading her to have difficulty accepting that she could no longer stay as close as she used to be in the elementary school. However, Sarah proudly shared a personal story where she was the only girl who was invited to a male friends' birthday party. Sadly, she stated: "You cannot have your male friends for a sleepover" and sighed. While many teens do not question such segregation, perhaps this indicates an exclusive awareness – one that reflects that noted by Silverman.

Perfectionist tendencies and emotional intensity also emerge regularly in parents' descriptions of their children – as well as children's own descriptions of themselves (Silverman, 1993). This is specifically applicable to Sarah, regarding the fact that she thinks she is a terrible speller, she is a procrastinator, she has high standards for herself, and she has problems with public speaking. Sarah stated she did well in school, but not too well. Obviously, Sarah wanted to do much better than how she performed and did not seem that impressed with her abilities. The school counselor asked: "Do you have high standards for yourself?" Sarah replied: "Yeah, kind of." Sarah may benefit from learning that no one is perfect, and no work can be perfected, but that we all can strive for excellence. Such realization may be a liberating experience in the perfectionist domain for children like Sarah. However, Sarah was not worried about academic challenges and thought she could handle those fine – her concerns mainly concerned adjustment. Sarah's school counselor and ELP teacher could collaborate in order to help ensure she develops an ability to handle her emotions to prevent them from becoming barriers to her accomplishments. Perhaps an affective developmental focus offers strategies on how to handle such overwhelming emotions. As an essential element to the welfare of the entire society, moral sensitivity is a central trait in the gifted and talented experience.

Webb (2002) states that gifted and talented children are at psychological risk due to their unique internal and situational factors and are more likely to be at risk of existential depression. The researcher (2002) asks: "Why should such existential concerns occur disproportionately among gifted and talented persons?" (p. 1). Persons of higher intellectual ability are more prone to experience existential depression, but rather than simply paying attention to the simple aspects of daily life, they give considerable thought to confront fundamental existential

issues (i.e., death, freedom). They tend to be idealist. They are able to think about other possibilities, which may lead them to experience emotions intensely and to become disappointed with the way things are. Having the ability to be multi-potential yet at the same time realizing their existential limitations can be frustrating. Helping gifted and talented children recognize, confront and cope with basic existential issues in an accepting way may allow them to manage their existential concerns. Thus, gifted and talented children can realize that they are not alone in their experiences. The ability to reflect on existential matters can be an instrumental skill as gifted and talented children to bury themselves so deeply in the social, political, or academic causes (Webb, 2002). Helping gifted and talented children build meaningful frameworks for life is essential as they strive to construct a personal philosophy of life, which reflects their cognitive complexity and is framed by their beliefs and values. Thus, an affective developmental focus in ELP curriculum could be instrumental in helping a gifted and talented child navigate such existential inquiries that could otherwise be overwhelming.

Self-concept is a very complex construct. While recognizing this intricacy especially for gifted and talented students, Moon (2008) examined the theoretical frameworks on the social-emotional development of these children. Noting the role of identity development theories in providing a conceptual framework on the process of identity development, she suggests that the theories require adjustment in order to capture the affective development of the gifted and talented. These adjustments should view the identity development from an integrative perspective, which incorporates child, adolescent and adult identity and life-span developments that sensitive to the differences with the development of other children, who are not identified as gifted and talented.

When choosing the acceleration programs in the education of gifted and talented children, they should also be evaluated in terms of their potential to meet the social and emotional needs of students. Each form of acceleration has very different academic, social and psychological consequences. Therefore, when accelerating a gifted and talented student, individual decisions should be made to match an acceleration type and program in line with the child's learning style, social and psychological characteristics and needs. In general, educators are against acceleration because they believe that students' social and emotional needs precede academic ones (Vialle, Ashton, Carlon, & Rankin, 2001). However, studies on acceleration have shown that its practices consistently bring about positive academic gains (Benbow, 1992; Gross, 1992; Kulik & Kulik, 1991, 1992; Swiatek, 1993). Psychological studies that support the social and emotional well-being of gifted and talented individuals should focus on strength as well as weaknesses; thus, they should not overlook the importance of building and supporting the good and positive, as well as rehabilitating the effects of negative situations in life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). For Sarah's social and emotional needs are met within the framework of the ELP program, the issue of how to eliminate the gap that may occur outside of ELP programs is an important one. Determining the type of acceleration implementations can be a very subjective decision; Potential risks and resources should be analyzed to make judgement on what is best for meeting the child's needs. The work of school counselors, whose job it is to help families and educators, is crucial on the selection of intervention strategies and responding to the social and emotional issues of gifted students. For this reason, determining the type of acceleration practice could be a very subjective decision.

The Iowa Acceleration Scale includes subscales that allow considering factors related to a) Academic Ability and Achievement, b) Developmental Factors, c) School and Academic Factors, d) Interpersonal Skills and e) Attitude and Support. Acceleration takes many forms such as: 1) Early Admission to Kindergarten, 2) Early Admission to First Grade, 3) Grade-Skipping, 4) Continuous Progress, 5) Self-Paced Instruction, 6) Subject-Matter Acceleration/Partial Acceleration, 7) Combined Classes, 8) Curriculum Compacting, 9) Telescoping Curriculum, 10) Mentoring, 11) Extracurricular Programs, 12) Correspondence Courses, 13) Early Graduation, 14) Concurrent/Dual Enrollment, 15) Advanced Placement, 16) Credit by Examination, 17) Acceleration in College, 18) Early Entrance into Middle School, High School, or College (Southern & Jones, 2004, p. 6).

The Iowa Acceleration Scale Research shows that typically parents advocate for acceleration for their children and schools respond on a continuum that ranges from full cooperation to outright refusal, with most falling somewhere in the middle. The Iowa Acceleration Scale (Assouline, Colangelo, Lupkowski-Shoplik, Lipscomb & Forstadt, 2003) provides an opportunity to build consensus around the acceleration decision and to reduce the

emotionality by using objective statement and a standard rubric. This tool is used by a team comprised of the sending and receiving teachers, the gifted and program coordinator, the principal and may include a guidance counselor, parent and the student. The group evaluates 20 statements and is required to come to consensus on each item. Acceleration decision-making instruments (e.g., The Iowa Acceleration Scale) should be used to provide structure to generate the best decision, which is not just concerned with academic issues. This case study made the school counselor realize the importance of evaluating a child's needs holistically. If Sarah's school were to adapt a program ELP, they would benefit from a tested framework with which to conceptualize gifted and talented students' educational needs in light of more than academic considerations (e.g., developmental).

4. Conclusion

Gifted and talented students come from diverse intellectual and cultural backgrounds with a range of needs and abilities. More empirical and case studies would shed lights on gifted and talented students with special needs. Providing students with accommodations to address the challenges presented by their unique needs is key to the application of effective acceleration practices. For example, twice-exceptional students present characteristics that encompass traits of giftedness while at the same time disability, challenging their identification and intervention. Although some progress has been made in the last two decades on twice-exceptional students' academic acceleration, more research on case studies is required to bridge the gap between research and practice since implementation of acceleration practices changes based on the disability (e.g., gifted students with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder) (Foley-Nicpon & Cederberg, 2015).

In the literature some fundamental justifications outlined for not accelerating gifted and talented students. Specifically, students who are gifted and talented in STEM subjects encounter four main excuses for not being accelerated. Ihrig and Degner (2015) highlight these excuses such as beliefs that acceleration may cause academic harm due to beliefs that current standards offers adequate challenges for gifted students. However, research findings disclose that acceleration leads to increased levels of achievement in STEM i.e., while accelerated students are still in school and later their careers (Ihrig & Degner, 2015). Even though the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics and the Next Generation Science Standards present more diligence into the curriculum, they are not adequately challenging enough for academically gifted pupils. Main principle of best practice with giftedness and talented students must be anchored around the "accessibility, equity, and openness" policy (Lupkowski-Scholik, Behrens & Assouline, 2018).

The school counselor has professional role and responsibilities related to gifted and talented students geared towards identification, intervention and educational programs. When school counselors deliver their program to meet students' academic, career and social/emotional needs, they are aware to meet unique developmental needs of gifted and talented students, especially when they present with special abilities. They work diligently when implementing their school counseling program aligned with the ASCA Position Statement on Gifted and Talented Student Programs (Adopted 1988; revised 1993, 1999, 2001, 2007, 2013, 2019). Specifically planned educational experiences support to sustain development of gifted and talented students (Sohailat, Soua'd & Mouhamed, 2013). In summary, the social-emotional issues experienced by gifted and talented children, with regards to effective intervention programs mandate thorough examination with respect to different traits.

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