

Addressing Concerns of Gifted Adolescents through Optimism Attitude Model and Optimism Attitude Therapy

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Abstract

We live in the modern age where we are facing challenging times. This is especially so for adolescents who are at a critical and transition period trying to bridge childhood and adulthood. They have to cope with the rapid changes in all aspects be it physical, psychological, social or educational, at the same time acquire the characteristics of the mentally and socially healthy person. These difficulties are giving rise to many psycho-somatic problems like anxiety, tensions, frustrations and emotional upsets in day-to-day life. No doubt the present era is materialistic which develops stress and strain on the mind of adolescents. The education should be so designed that balanced personality could be developed. For the development of the balanced personality of individuals, they must be mentally healthy which puts direct effect on intelligence and moral judgments. These myriad problems become more manifest in gifted adolescents. The focus on psychological and social problems of gifted adolescents has emerged as a key area of researches in guidance and counselling, and the present study is a humble endeavour in this direction. Through exploring the cases of gifted adolescents in New Delhi, this study presented some findings consistent with those of former research but some inconsistent. These inconsistencies can provide an opportunity to contemplate the socio-emotional issues of gifted adolescent's female's new angles or directions.

Keywords: Adolescents; Gifted; Oam Attitude Model; Oam Attitude Therapy

"Whoever gifted adults may be, they are not people with talents that should be developed, but they are people with unusual minds. Gifted children do not disappear when they graduate from school or finish college or graduate degrees. They become gifted adults. If they enter adulthood blind to their unusual mental capacities they may go through their lives frustrated, unfulfilled and alienated from their beings"

Tolan (1994) [1]

Introduction

Adolescence is a period of transition. Dramatic changes occur in bridging childhood and adulthood. Poised between childhood and adulthood, adolescents undergo a range of changes that can make it a difficult time for the young people themselves, as well as for the adults who care for them. These changes are felt in all aspects of development, be it physical marking growing sexuality: cognitive when adolescents begin to develop rational and reflective thinking: Psycho social that marks coming to terms with self-identity, self-concept and above all adjusting to various relationships and employing coping strategies.

Researchers have always been inquisitive to explore and understand the psyche of adolescents. Stanley Hall, who first described adolescence as a period of "storm and stress [2] caught the attention of psychologists, educationists and researchers by storm. Hall (1904) at-

tributed adolescent 'storm and stress' to the biological changes that occur during this period. Neuro scientific research has demonstrated that the adolescent brain may be somewhat responsible for an increased potential for stress. The areas of the brain that mediate emotions, judgment, and organization are not fully developed at this age (Nagel, 2007).

Seeman (1999) opined that the adolescent brain is hot-wired' for emotion before it can identify, express, and manage them effectively. This, coupled with hormonal increases, may somewhat explain adolescent susceptibility for stress (Walker, 2002). The tendency for adolescents to high rates of psychopathology provides further evidence for a heightened susceptibility to stress.

According to Gumbiner another leading psychologist, they (adolescents) are partly accepted and partly rejected by the privileged class adults.

"Adolescence is indeed a decade-plus period of change and transition from childhood to adulthood, compounded by the added dimension of giftedness for many" Edwards and Kleine (1986).

It is worthwhile to have a comprehensive and sensitive definition or conception of giftedness before addressing the issues related to gifted adolescents. Merry (2008) has pointed out that 'developing appropriate definitions of giftedness is important not only to better understand its nature, but also in order to be able to design better educational provisions'.

Many definitions of giftedness are already available within literature. The term gifted children were first used in 1869 by Francis Galton. He referred to adults who demonstrated exceptional talent in some area as gifted. Children could inherit the potential to become a gifted adult, and Galton referred to these children as gifted children. Today the term gifted has different uses and there are different ways of defining giftedness. Galton's view gave us the idea that a gifted person is one with a gift, a special talent demonstrated in adulthood. In other words, to be a gifted child is to demonstrate an exceptional talent in a particular area. Terman's view led to definitions of gifted, which not only included high IQ, but also the notion that giftedness should be a predictor of adult achievement.

Though there is abundant literature available about gifted children it is difficult to come up with one single definition. A closest definition is given by- US Department of Education, 1993

'Children and youth with outstanding talent who perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment.'

Though there are probably as many varied definitions of giftedness, these definitions share some common features and concerns (Rinard, 2008). For example, a point of agreement among definitions is in defining giftedness as ability superior to age peers.

Mönks and Katzko (2005), citing Hany (1987), have pointed that definitions of giftedness now cluster around four broad groups. The first focuses on psychological constructs such as traits respecting the traditional notions of giftedness as quantitative differences on a global or general ability, the other more domain specific approach to understanding giftedness such as Gardner's Multiple Intelligences who emphasized giftedness as quantitative differences in specific domains.

Renzulli's (1978) three-ring model, defines giftedness as a combination of different cognitive components: high intellectual ability, creativity, and motivation.

A third approach highlights the possible differences between potential and actual achievement among many gifted children. This approach essentially shifts the focus from giftedness as a stable 'product' to giftedness as a dynamic 'process'.

The fourth approach focuses environmental and socio cultural factors that act as inhibitors or catalysts in the expression of giftedness. From these various approaches, together certain characteristics of gifted children can be drawn.

Overall, many of the children show great intellectual curiosity and an ability to learn rapidly and have the capacity to direct their own learning. These children have also mostly shown accelerated language development, particularly reading ability. Many children, particularly those with large academic accelerations or multiple achievements, have shown excellent Meta cognitive abilities.

Research shows that Meta cognition has been less influenced by parental or school influences and is more dependent on internal variables unlike language development or information-processing.

Other common traits of highly gifted children include a capacity for complex reasoning, facility with abstract material and awareness of underlying patterns, ease with use of metaphors and symbols, and early grasp of the essential element of an issue [3]. Other traits such as exceptional speed of processing and a capacity for intuitive knowing may also note.

With respect to personality traits gifted adolescents demonstrate a strong tendency toward psychological introversion [4]. Highly gifted introverts are characterized by a rich inner life, embracing intellectual activity, emotions, sensations, and concept formation. They have a tendency to process information and sensations internally before presenting them to the outside world, therefore seeming inhibited. Introverts are a minority, and their less immediate communicative style may contribute to social awkwardness and isolation [5].

Another characteristic of highly gifted children is heightened sensitivity. Gifted adolescents may have stronger, deeper and more enduring reactions to stimuli than their age peers.

Sometimes this heightened development often places these children at odds with their various contexts. When they develop beyond the conventions and expectations of their family, classmates, and teachers, they may experience periods of great inner disequilibrium and feelings of being out of sync with their environment. Without appropriate support and creative outlets, anxiety states, depressive disorder, eating disorders, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors can result [6]. Such research throws light on the complexity of giftedness in adolescents.

It is commonly believed that gifted students have the edge and advantage in social and academic life. Present research however, suggests that it may not be the case also it is worthwhile to recognize that there exists diversity in giftedness, between the academic and non-academic abilities. Students, who are gifted show advanced development or have the potential for advanced development in one or more areas in relation to their age peers, have innate gifts (untrained, spontaneous natural abilities. They may have gifts in general intellectual ability, specific academic ability (language, music, drama, sport, Mathematics, science, art, technology, etc), creative or productive thinking, leadership, visual or performing arts, psychomotor ability (Marland Report 1972, George, 1997, p. 8).

At the same time, they may show asynchrony in their intellectual, physical, emotional, and social development. Asynchrony is “being out of sync both internally and externally. Asynchronous development means that gifted students develop cognitively at a much faster rate than they develop physically and emotionally, posing some interesting problems. Advanced cognition often makes gifted students aware of information that they are not yet emotionally ready to handle. “The brighter the child, the greater the asynchrony and potential vulnerability” (Kreger Silverman, 1992, Jacob and Barnsley). This could be noticed at different times during the school years irrespective of race, socio-economic background, geographic areas or physical abilities. These children have their own interests, personality, strengths, and weakness and also abilities which may be seen in any or all of Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences: of Verbal linguistic or Logical mathematical or Musical rhythmical or Visual spatial or Bodily kinesthetic or Interpersonal or Intrapersonal or Naturalist.

To find out more about the concerns of gifted adolescents, the objectives of the study were:

1. To study the social issues faced by gifted adolescents
2. To study the emotional issues faced by gifted adolescents
3. To find coping strategies of gifted adolescents with respect to social and emotional issues

Methodology

Descriptive method of research was used in the conduct of present study.

The Universe of the Study and Sampling: The sample of from each of the four types of school namely Private, Aided, Navyug and Missionary were selected. School selection was on the basis of convenient sampling and identification of gifted students on the basis of merit.

Tools used

Optimism Index 1.1 by Dr. Padmakali Banerjee.

A self-constructed tool to find the perception of selected sample.

Informal interview based on the questions developed by Deeds.

A checklist of coping strategies.

Analysis of Data

The present study brought forth some interesting findings. Though giftedness has its advantages there are many social and emotional concerns as expressed by the sample participants a majority of them go through bouts of depression, anxiety and frustration.

The scores on Optimism were found to be low as compared to the norms. It was seen that these adolescents scored low on positive emotions, relationship network, engagement, meaningfulness and accomplishment. This has important implications for the educational system and society as a whole.

Also there is a fear of failure or not rising to the expectations of self, parents and teachers. Problems also arise when these gifted adolescents try to comply with the existing norms for fear of peer rejection.

Coupled with this is the feeling of social isolation and the anxiety of keeping the deadline. Regarding the label though the response is more or less positive there is still the eagerness to deny it as expressed by some.

Although giftedness is said to have many positive characteristics entwined in their personality, the results show that it is not the case. There are some negative feelings associated with it.

Coping themes were: accepting and helping peers, exploring beyond academics and school settings: maintaining relationships with peers and family; trying to hide talents from peers etc.

It was clear from the results that the giftedness is a multifaceted aspect. Gifted adolescents are swayed by contradictory feelings. While the sample participants affirmed their giftedness as accurate they expressed their concern about social relations and emotional issues.

More future research can be conducted to examine these issues.

Van Tassel-Baska (1989) and Delisle (1988) have offered useful suggestions on how to meet these needs.

- Help each gifted student develop a realistic and accurate self-concept.
- Help each gifted student be a whole person.
- Understand that gifted youngsters are children first and gifted second. While their learning styles may be special, they are individuals with emotions,
- Show patience. Let students select and strive toward their own goals. Do not compare them or their achievements to others.
- Show acceptance and encouragement. Encouragement is a great motivating factor.
- Accept and reward efforts and the process of working on tasks.

- Encourage flexibility and appropriate behaviour.
- Let students live their own lives. Caring adults support, encourage, and celebrate students' efforts and successes,
- Be available for guidance and advice. Gifted students may know more facts about their interest area than do their parents and other adults. However, they have not lived longer; they need loving concern and guidance.

Other suggestions are

- Provide a protective and guiding umbrella so as to enhance mental health of adolescents.
- Provided guidance oriented programmers. If possible school institution should have guidance corner/counselor to address to mentally unhealthy students
- Lay emphasis on work ethics and balance in work for healthy living
- Encourage cooperation and collaboration.
- Ensure a safe and healthy social environment in which the children may imbibe desirable values of freedom, equality, integrity, honesty.

Parents and teachers should provide caring and stimulating environment that will minimize the problems of gifted adolescents and motivate them to attain their optimal potential.

Children on their part should understand the expectations of their parents and teachers.

Delimitations

Although the findings reported in this paper are congruent with other research with gifted adolescents, there are some limitations that mean that caution must be exercised when generalizing the findings. The research was conducted solely in schools situated in Delhi and therefore may not be representative of gifted students in other educational settings. The method of selecting the gifted group was also not ideal. Since only academic achievers were considered for the sample, test data may have skewed the sample toward a more highly achieving group of students and therefore missed potentially gifted students who were chronic underachievers. Also reliance on survey research has some limitations with regard to understanding individual differences among the gifted respondents. Gifted adolescents have the potential to make significant contributions to our nation. They deserve appropriate education and guidance to address their socio-emotional needs. parents should be well aware of both the internal and external barriers to gifted adolescents 'academic performances, find out the proper methods to resolve these problems, and help them actualize their superior potential instead of putting pressure on them to excel.

Implications of the Study

The study has implications for teachers, counsellors and parents alike. The gifted adolescents feel let down by the school system as was revealed in their overall Optimism index along with its dimensions of positive emotions, engagement, relationship network, meaningfulness and accomplishment. They somehow are not able to assuage the feeling of chronic emptiness arising out of their mundane experiences in the daily routine of school system which has to rise to the challenge of dealing with the educational, social and emotional needs of these gifted adolescents.

For teachers, too it is an uphill task to equip gifted adolescents with appropriate coping strategies and necessary skills. In actuality this will only exacerbate the dilution of quality of teaching as more time and preparation is required from the part of the teacher.

For counsellors, too there are implications. Because of the social and emotional issues these gifted adolescents may not be using their unique talents and abilities to their optimal potential. Also, there are serious cases of depression, anxiety disorder and other clinical problems.

Parents may indeed rejoice at having a gifted child. At the same time, they have to be very considerate and compassionate with their child instead of being over demanding.

Suggestions from many studies regarding coping strategies have underlined that it is the duty of parents, teachers and peers to help each gifted student understand and cope with his or her intellectual, social, and emotional needs during each stage of development.

Each gifted adolescent should understand how she/he is different from others and how similar in certain respects. There is a strong need to accept own abilities and weaknesses. In order to be a part of the society these children must develop more social skills. Also, there should be clarity about the distinction between pursuit of excellence and pursuit of perfection. This will help in the harmonious development of the personality of the adolescents as they grow into more mature adults.

Suggestions for Further Research

Further research is needed to extend the findings from this study.

The present study was an attempt to study the perception of gifted adolescents belonging to secondary schools of Delhi., affiliated to CBSE It may be replicated on school adolescents of other type of schools such as affiliated with other boards. Similar kind of study can be undertaken on senior secondary students.

Studies of giftedness in other areas could be considered.

A comparative study of male and female adolescents across different regions of country may also be undertaken.

Case studies could be taken up for in-depth study of problems of gifted.

Social coping strategies also may be utilized differently; depending upon the student's background issues such as culture, educational experiences, and ability level.

Despite its limitations, however, the present study provides empirical support for previously hypothesized social coping strategies used by gifted adolescents. Continuing research in this area to further develop our understanding of social coping may allow counsellors and educators to develop interventions to help gifted adolescents attain a high level of social functioning without hindering their academic achievement and motivation. More research in this area if undertaken would benefit all stake holders and gifted students themselves.

Counselling gifted adolescents ideally should begin by first untangling a complex knot of developmental issues, socio emotional concerns and long-standing relationship questions that characterize the adolescent period. Only when social and emotional concerns have been addressed can one hope for the optimal growth of their potential.

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