

Significant social-emotional influences on the motivation of gifted students.**How can teachers foster healthy 'hearts' and 'minds'?****Lynda Garrett**

We've all met them – those gifted students who exude a love of learning. They approach learning opportunities in their particular area, or areas of special ability, with confidence and purpose. They are able to immerse themselves in a particular task, working independently to achieve a successful learning outcome (Ainley, 2000). What influences such high levels of motivation towards positive engagement in learning? Are ALL gifted students highly motivated learners? This paper examines significant social-emotional influences on the motivation of gifted students. The paper aims to increase teacher awareness and understanding of the critical role that the emotions play in the development of giftedness. While the motivation to engage in learning is very much determined by cognitive, social, emotional, and cultural factors specific to each individual, an understanding and knowledgeable teacher and appropriate classroom and school environments are also key contributing factors. Therefore, some practical teaching strategies and pedagogical approaches suited to fostering the healthy social-emotional development of gifted student are outlined.

Gifted students are generally regarded as cognitively advanced, and capable of thinking in a qualitatively different way in comparison to their same-age peers (Moltzen, 1996). They often demonstrate more complex and abstract cognitive behaviours in their area or areas of special ability at an earlier age. They may also show that they can process information and make connections between ideas more rapidly, as well as retaining new concepts more effectively than their peer groups. Silverman (1993: p.3) argues that gifted students 'feel' in a qualitatively different way, stating that "...giftedness has an emotional as well as a cognitive substructure: cognitive complexity gives rise to emotional depth." Gifted students may be more emotionally sensitive in their own responses, as well as showing great sensitivity and empathy for others' feelings. They may also demonstrate

advanced moral reasoning and an intense interest in national and global issues of an environmental, humanitarian, or political nature (Moltzen, 1996). The level of intensity and sensitivity of emotional response is believed to increase with the degree of giftedness (Piechowski, 1997).

Michael Piechowski translated the original work of the Polish psychiatrist Kasmirez Dabrowski who recognized the extreme sensitivities and intensities of the gifted child's emotional responses, especially those of the highly gifted, as positive attributes (Dabrowski, 1972; cited in Piechowski, 1997). Dabrowski regarded these heightened emotional responses as potential catalysts for further growth and embodied this idea into his concept of 'developmental potential' (Piechowski, 1997). Dabrowski's notion of developmental potential included specific abilities and intelligence, plus five dimensions of psychic experiencing labeled as 'over excitabilities' (Tolan, 1997). These over excitabilities, or intensities of emotional response, are particular ways of experiencing in the psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal and emotional domains. Dabrowski believed these were innate. He hypothesized that the greater the intensity, frequency and duration of these overexcitabilities within a gifted individual, the greater the developmental potential in terms of self-actualization.

Gifted individuals who have surplus energy, drive, enthusiasm, and restlessness are described as possessing *psychomotor overexcitabilities*. Such psychomotor expressions of emotional tension are typically demonstrated through compulsive talking and rapid speech. Individuals may feel the need for physical activity, often act impulsively and will readily 'act out.' They also tend to be workaholics (Tolan, 1997). The motivation to engage in learning within their specific area of ability is physical in nature, but is also strongly linked to a positive self-concept and high levels of personal efficacy within a particular area or areas of aptitude.

Intellectual over-excitability is evidenced in gifted individuals who enjoy questioning, discovery through problem solving, and the search for truth and understanding. They enjoy exploring ideas and theorizing, and are avid readers who are capable of maintaining concentration and effort for lengthy periods of time (Piechowski, 1997). These are the highly curious and persistent students who are able to immerse themselves totally in a talent area, using their particular problem solving and metacognitive abilities to achieve a successful learning outcome (Daniels, 2003). They are driven to engage in learning by strong emotional responses of an intellectual nature, reinforcing the links between emotions, thinking and learning (Jensen, 1998). Gagne (2003) refers to such students as being “auto-pushed” and pursuing their “own schedule.”

Students who show evidence of *imaginational over-excitability* are highly imaginative and enjoy inventing, visualizing, elaborate dreams and fantasizing. There is a tendency for them to mix truth with fiction, and engage in magical and animistic thinking. Animistic thinking involves animating, or giving a personality to toys and other inanimate objects of special significance or sentimental value to a child. Such students also tend to express themselves readily through poetry and creative writing or oral communication. Although fascinated by the unusual, such children may be intensely preoccupied with, and fearful of, the unknown. Piechowski (1997: p.368) describes them as having a “...predilection for magic and fairy tales, creation of private worlds, imaginary companions, and dramatization.” Such students are strongly motivated by their imaginations to engage in learning in their particular area of ability.

Individuals displaying *sensual over-excitabilities* are motivated to engage in learning by their heightened sensory responses. These students “... take pleasure in seeing, smelling, tasting, touching and hearing ...” they delight in beautiful objects, sounds of words, music, form, colour and balance (Piechowski, 1997: p.368). Such strong emotional responses are evident, for example, in the impassioned performances and inspired work of gifted musicians, artists, singers, architects and designers.

Gifted children who demonstrate *emotional over-excitabilities* experience intense responses across a broad range of emotions. Such emotional intensity is a characteristic that is readily observable from a young age (Larsen & Diener, 1987; cited in Piechowski, 1997). They have a need to connect in a meaningful and deep way with other people, or animals, and are often highly passionate, compassionate and empathetic in their relationships. They are acutely aware of, and able to describe their own and others' feelings. Such an advanced capacity to think and feel differently can also lead to the demonstration of extraordinary sensitivity in gifted children (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). In critically examining themselves and their lives, they sense the discrepancies between the real world and an ideal world. At such times they may withdraw emotionally, seeking refuge in their own fantasy worlds. However, these emotional intensities and sensitivities can also motivate them in their area of special ability to passionately pursue their goals with independence and determination. In such instances, they appear to possess an inner strength and self-confidence in their approach to learning (Jensen, 1998).

It is clear that the intensity and passionate nature of gifted students' emotional responses to specific experiences determines the quality of their cognitive responses and has a strong influence on their motivation to achieve. At the 15th World Council for Gifted and Talented Children Conference, Gagne (2003) spoke of his intention to add passion to the intrapersonal catalysts of 'motivation' and 'self-esteem' in his 'Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent.' This provides clear recognition of the crucial role of the intensity of emotional responses in actualizing gifts as talents, and acknowledgement that motivation is more intrinsic in nature in gifted individuals. However, self-actualization is also dependent on a number of external factors, including the support of significant people (parents, teachers, same-age peers) in a child's life.

Within a classroom learning environment, the teacher has a vital role to play in maintaining the belief of all students in their continued ability to achieve, as well as maintaining their belief in themselves, their sense of self-worth and self-identity (Greenspon, 1998). A positive self-concept and high level of self-confidence are crucial

in maintaining the motivation to achieve. However, it is important to emphasize that not all gifted students are highly motivated learners. Indeed, a significant number of unmotivated gifted students go unrecognized and therefore underachieve in regular classrooms. Gifted underachievers can be motivated to achieve by teachers who work with parents to understand the many and varied reasons behind a gifted student's lack of motivation and success in learning (Rimm, 2001). Effective teachers and programmes enhance student motivation by acknowledging the whole child and meeting their particular cognitive, social, emotional, spiritual and cultural needs (McInerney, 2000; Taylor, 1996). This could mean helping gifted underachievers to understand and cope with perfectionist tendencies, competition, poor study and/or work habits, aggression, or feelings of loneliness and social isolation (Rimm, 2001).

In the past, there has been a general tendency to ignore the emotional needs of gifted students in schools (Kennedy, 2002). As Sisk (2003) so aptly noted, we often look at gifted students in terms of externals (scores) and what they can do for our school. Not all gifted students require guidance in terms of their social and emotional needs as many are well adapted in these areas (Moltzen, 1996). However, all gifted children will benefit from regular opportunities to explore their emotional selves within a supportive classroom setting.

It is vital that all students feel positive about their immediate classroom environment, the wider school environment, and their ability to be successful within such a setting. Hoekman (2003) highlights the importance of fostering self-reliance in gifted students and encouraging them to become self-supporting and independent in their learning. This is at the 'heart' of self-determination. A supportive classroom environment will be flexible in its design, allowing gifted students to pursue their individual passions either independently or in cooperation with other students who have similar interests and abilities (Silverman, 1993). Gross (1998) maintains that the needs of highly gifted students are better met when they have regular opportunities to work alongside their intellectual peers (Gross, 1998). There should also be some opportunities given for

students to pursue their area of special ability for extended periods of time. Such an environment promotes choice in learning through collaborative and independent learning opportunities, and increases student motivation, interest and control over their learning (French, 1997; Heacox, 1991; Sisk & Torrance, 2001; Siegle & McCoach, 2002). It is clear that encouraging self-reliance in gifted students involves a balance between encouraging autonomy and partnership, independence and support within a responsive learning context (Hoekman, 2003).

Being motivated to engage in learning, and experiencing success in learning, is also dependent on the extent to which the curriculum meets individual student needs. If gifted students are to display optimum levels of achievement motivation within the classroom, it is crucial that learning tasks incorporate optimal challenge and provoke positive responses in students (Hoekman, 2003). Experiencing success in tasks which incorporate appropriate challenge leads to an increase in self-concept, a sense of personal competence, and motivates a positive response in students to similar learning experiences (Sousa, 1995; Ainley, 2002). This is a crucial factor in developing specific talents within students, especially for those students with non-traditional talents. Success, as a result of a task incorporating an appropriate level of challenge, motivates students to take the initiative and set appropriate goals for themselves. Such success tends to enhance personal commitment to talent development (Feldhusen, 1996; Porter, 1997 b).

While gifted students are stimulated by challenge and the knowledge that teachers have high expectations of them, it is important that teachers build positive encouragement, constructive feedback and unequivocal support into the classroom environment (Dalzell, 1998). Teachers need to be enthusiastic about learning themselves and able to infuse a sense of fun and humour into learning. As Jensen (1998: 80) states "...it's important to let children know what excites you." Teachers of gifted students need to be sensitive and responsive to the needs, feelings and particular strengths of their students. This calls for an awareness of every child that goes beyond academic performance and considers them as a whole person (Silverman, 1997).

Gifted students often experience difficulty in reconciling the way they see themselves with their perceptions of their age-related peers. They often base their self-concept on their perceptions of how they think others see them. Therefore, in order to foster the development of a positive self-concept, it is important that teachers encourage students to express their concerns and feelings about themselves (Heacox, 1991). Gifted students need to gain a clear understanding and acceptance of what it means to be gifted, and the nature of their specific area or areas of ability. Teachers have the capacity to facilitate such an open discussion with their students. In mixed-ability classrooms, there is an opportunity for teachers to foster a sense of mutual respect amongst students through such discussion. Gifted students need to understand the nature of the overexcitabilities and reconcile themselves to particular intensities of emotional response. It is ironic to note that the stronger the overexcitabilities are in gifted students, the less they are accepted by age-peers and teachers, unless they themselves are gifted (Piechowski, 1997). In fact, such sensitivity and emotionality may be ignored and even repressed by others (Davis & Rimm, 1998). Teacher awareness of the nature of highly sensitive and intense emotional responses in some gifted students, and how such responses may be exhibited in the classroom and playground environs, could assist quality teacher, peer and student interactions.

Sisk & Torrance (2001) outline a number of motivational exercises aimed at encouraging reflective thinking and self-awareness in gifted students. Such activities are regarded as having the potential to allow children to become more attuned to their emotions, and increasingly able to manage their emotional responses more appropriately. These include strategies such as journal writing, reflective thinking, visualization, affirmations and role-play. Delisle (1992; cited in Davis and Rimm, 1998) recommends the use of bibliotherapy to help gifted students understand themselves and cope with their giftedness. This strategy involves using fictional and non-fictional literature that addresses different social and emotional problems common to gifted young people.

Fraser (2003: p.182) recommends that creatively gifted children be given the opportunity to compose written metaphors as a way of "...bringing to the surface the child's awareness of their inner lives, reinforcing the validity of gifted children's emotional insights." This has a valuable therapeutic purpose as it allows the child to reveal her/his inner thoughts in a non-threatening manner. This is a method that could be readily used by teachers, as it fits well within current understandings of the genre of creative writing. It could serve as a particularly valuable aid to self-understanding for those gifted students who demonstrate heightened emotional, sensual and imaginal overexcitabilities.

McCann & Jewell (1996) and Pohl (2000) advocate the importance of teaching complex thinking within classroom programmes. Such thinking skills programmes involve the specific teaching of critical, creative and caring thinking strategies within meaningful contexts for students. Particular emphasis is placed on the teaching of caring and thinking strategies within special programmes, such as Philosophy for Children, Future and Community Problem Solving, Tournament of the Minds, Community of Inquiry debate and peer mediation (Pohl, 2000). It is believed that such programmes allow gifted children to engage in creative problem solving and moral and ethical decision-making, using their specific emotional competencies or overexcitabilities in a more considered and rational manner.

Mentors are another valuable source of emotional support for gifted students. Typically they are offered to gifted adolescents, as it is felt that this age group is more able to benefit from adults who share similar interests and talents to the gifted students (Casey & Shore, 2000; Porter, 1997a). Mentors may work with a gifted student for an hour, or for a whole day. The latter situation often suits those gifted students who prefer to work continuously on an area of interest. Mentors can also be effective with younger gifted students. However, it is not always easy to find individuals with compatible skills and talents to mentor gifted students. An expert in a field may not necessarily be a suitable mentor for a gifted student. Adult mentors need to be able to relate to children on an emotional and more personal social level, as well as at an appropriate cognitive level in

relation to the specific area of talent. Of particular importance is that gifted students are able to access a significant 'other' who recognizes and values their giftedness and is there to support them in their learning.

The emotional component of giftedness has long been neglected in favour of the cognitive domain of ability. However, there is a growing emphasis on the significant and primary role of the emotions in thinking and learning. Teachers have an important role to play in supporting the healthy emotional and social development of gifted students, through the provision of appropriate collaborative and autonomous learning environments and suitably challenging programming options. Such programmes need to offer students choice and control over their learning, encouraging the growth in self-regulating abilities towards self-actualization. In so doing gifted students will be more likely to demonstrate an ability to "...value and recognize their hearts as well as their heads..." (Tolan, 1998: p.214).

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