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GIFTED CHILDREN AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS

JENNIFER RIEDL CROSS

INTRODUCTION

All people need close personal relationships to thrive. Some people develop these relationships easily and others find it difficult. In this way, gifted children are no different from their peers. In popular media, gifted children and adolescents are often portrayed as socially awkward, unable to find friends among the “regular” kids. Some gifted children fit this stereotype, but many find ways to cope with their differences, building high-quality relationships with peers. Adults who better understand the challenges gifted children face can facilitate their efforts to make friends.

Humans are biologically predisposed to interact with cognitively similar others (Almack, 1922; Guo, 2006). Age-grading in schools forces most gifted children into social settings where they have few, or no, intellectual peers. Unless adults intervene to create opportunities for gifted children to be together, their friendship possibilities will require them to cope with their differences (Coleman & Cross, 1988). Self-contained classrooms or out-of-school enrichment programs

allow gifted students to spend time with intellectual peers, maximizing opportunities for appropriate academic challenge and relationship building.

Regardless of the appropriateness of their educational setting, some students will struggle to make friends. Their *asynchronous development* (Silverman, 2012), in which cognitive development outpaces social, emotional, and/or physical development, necessarily means they will be out of step with classmates. This is likely even in an all-gifted setting. Some gifted students are emotionally immature, while others are more mature than peers. Some will evidence great asynchrony between their physical and mental development, with size and motor skills similar to those of their age-mates, but with intellectual abilities far beyond. A degree of asynchrony will be present in all students, but it will be extreme for gifted children. This is especially true for the highly gifted, who will exhibit much greater disparities.

Although many gifted high school students in Cross, Coleman, and Stewart's (1995) study claimed their peers saw them as being the same as other students (6% of nearly 1,500 adolescents), far more believed their peers saw them as different (26%). The "different" group reported being more serious about learning than other students, with a preference for working independently. Citing a number of sources indicating that gifted students prefer to work alone, French, Walker, and Shore (2011) found the gifted students in their sample preferred working alone more often in conditions where they did not feel supported by others. A lack of support—even animosity—from peers is common (Bishop et al., 2004), particularly among older gifted students. Although gifted students are often popular in elementary classes, adolescence comes with rejection by peers for many. Feeling different and not finding similar, supportive peers can lead to a lonely existence.

According to Coleman's (1985) stigma of giftedness paradigm, giftedness is perceived by others as a negative attribute. Wanting normal interactions, gifted students fear they will be treated differently when others learn of their exceptional abilities, so they consciously manage the information others have about them (Coleman & Cross, 1988; Cross, Coleman, & Terhaar-Yonkers, 1991; Swiatek, 2012).

Some social coping strategies may be helpful (e.g., participating in many extracurricular activities), but others (e.g., denying one's giftedness) may be unhelpful and even harmful (Swiatek, 2012), leading to psychological distress and missed educational opportunities.

Exclusive classrooms, asynchronous development, feelings of differentness, unsupportive peers, and stigmatization—experiences such as these can hinder the development of healthy friendships. In the right settings, however, and with effective social skills, none of these factors will necessarily be a barrier to positive peer relationships.

MAJOR FINDINGS

At an early age, giftedness can be an advantage in peer relationships (Cohen, Duncan, & Cohen, 1994), although gifted girls were least liked in one study (Luftig & Nichols, 1990). Adler, Kless, and Adler (1992) found that academic achievement was a positive in peer relationships among young elementary students, but, by the fifth grade, high achievement had become a “potentially degrading stigma” (p. 176), especially among boys, and athleticism had become more desirable. Athleticism was also highly favored among the adolescents in Tannenbaum's (1962) landmark study. When asked to rate their preference for different student profiles, adolescents most preferred brilliant peers who were also athletic and nonstudious. Brilliant students who were studious and nonathletic were liked least. Sixth-grade students in Kiefer and Ryan's (2011) study chose sincerity and responsibility as characteristics leading to social success, but when asked again in the seventh grade, they chose dominance and athleticism. Dominance or, at least, assertiveness, appears to be an important correlate of popularity among high-ability students (Francis, Skelton, & Read, 2010; Gorman, Kim, & Schimmelbusch, 2002).

The gifted student with little interest in physical activity may face particular challenges in developing friendships. Although the lack of interest may be due to a genuine dislike of physical activity, there may be other reasons, such as a fear of failure in an arena with which

the student has had little previous success or anxiety about the social interactions in team sports. Enticing the student to engage in low-cost risk-taking and introducing individual sports may lead to opportunities for developing common interests with nongifted peers. Of course, there is also the danger of athletics detracting from academic achievement. When a gifted student excels athletically, the temptation may be great to spend time in this more socially rewarding activity than in the solitary activity of studying.

Friendships are built upon egalitarian interactions and mutual liking is based on reciprocity and shared interests. Gifted students who are popular have likely learned social skills such as reciprocation and negotiation. The adolescent gifted students in Peairs's (2010) study were often more popular than nongifted peers, but a subgroup with poor social skills experienced rejection. The adults in a gifted child's life may overlook his or her lack of self-regulation or poor social skills, when these are critical aspects to developing positive peer relationships. Direct teaching through role-play and analysis of interactions may help gifted students overcome social deficits (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Webb, Gore, Amend, & DeVries, 2007).

One of the most consistent findings in personality research is a tendency for individuals to be oriented toward extraversion—a preference for greater stimulation, including more interaction with others—or introversion—a preference for less stimulation, including less interaction with others (Wilt & Revelle, 2009). Those oriented more toward extraversion are more sociable and happier than their more introverted peers. Sak (2004) found higher percentages of gifted students classified as introverts (49%) than nongifted students (35%) in a synthesis of 19 studies, but not all studies have found this relationship (Cross, Speirs Neumeister, & Cassady, 2007). Recent measures of extraversion correlate negatively with intelligence (Wolf & Ackerman, 2005). Possibly, as a desire to be close to others is greater, time spent in intellectual tasks and, consequently, performance on tests of intelligence decreases. For gifted students who prefer more intellectual than social stimulation, the development of social skills may be similarly stunted.

Research evidence does not suggest gifted children are more likely to be socially inept. More than 1,500 gifted adolescents reported high levels of social competence and satisfaction with their peer relationships (Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Thomson, 2012). Type of giftedness appears to matter in peer relationships, as verbal abilities, but not mathematical, are associated with social difficulties (Lee et al., 2012; Peairs, 2010). Verbal abilities are difficult to mask in peer-to-peer communications, whereas mathematical abilities need never be exposed.

By virtue of their exceptional abilities, we can assume that many gifted students will perform better academically than their peers. According to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, when a gifted student's peers become aware that they have been outperformed, the peers will feel negatively about themselves. Socially aware gifted students will recognize this and may take evasive action to avoid hurting peers' feelings—lying about academic performance (Cross, et al., 1991) or rejecting exclusive academic opportunities, for example. The egalitarian interactions on which friendships depend are threatened by outperformance (Exline & Lobel, 1999). Teachers can unintentionally exacerbate this problem when they try to reward gifted students and inspire others in the class by drawing attention to outstanding products or performances. Mikami, Griggs, Reuland, and Gregory (2012) found that students in classes with teachers who explicitly refer to the academic status hierarchy had fewer friends at the end of the year than students in classes with teachers who did not.

Students do not always want their peers to know how well they have done. Eighth-grade students in Juvonen and Murdock's (1995) study described a successful grade to peers as "lucky," while telling adults about how hard they had worked for it. College students strongly preferred private, anonymous recognition of superior performance (Exline, Single, Lobel, & Geyer, 2004). These preferences, however, depend on students' competitive goals. Some students want to outperform their peers, but such *other-referenced competitive goals* are associated with poor friendship quality and loss of friendships over time, particularly for girls (Schapiro, Schneider, Shore, Margison, & Udvari, 2009).

When gifted students frequently perform better than peers, they may feel threatened in situations where they feel their peers are constantly making upward comparisons against them. The threat may take many forms—physical, social, emotional—depending on the situation and the persons involved. A sensitivity about being the target of threatening upward comparisons (STTUC) will be most distressing to gifted students in competitive situations that draw attention to their outperformance, particularly when they care about their relationship with the outperformed other (Exline & Lobel, 1999; see also Chapter 11 on bullying). Gifted students may perceive their success as humiliating to their outperformed peers (Grobman, 2009). Segregated, exclusive classes can be detrimental to peer relationships (Hertzog, 2003). Gifted programs that are a desirable, but limited, resource can strain or destroy relationships with those unable to gain access. Gifted students in Hertzog's (2003) study "felt a sense of injustice that they had access to better educational opportunities than other students" (p. 141).

Although the structure of gifted services can come between gifted children and their nongifted peers, it can also provide opportunities to develop friendships among intellectually similar peers. The serious, introverted gifted student may revel in the self-contained class. Even the highly gifted student who faces extreme social difficulties with less intellectual peers (Gross, 1989; Hollingworth, 1942) can find acceptance in programs designed for gifted students. Peers were equally accepting of highly and moderately gifted students in a summer residential gifted program (Norman, Ramsay, Roberts, & Martray, 2000). Schools that support a competitive environment (e.g., posting class rank, grading on a curve) promote antilearning cultures (Bishop et al., 2004). Bullying of studious peers was found in many of the 134 schools of Bishop et al.'s study, but there was less harassment in schools where teachers were motivating and challenging for all students. Bullying is commonplace nationwide and gifted students are not immune or more vulnerable (Peters & Bain, 2011; Peterson & Ray, 2006). Schools with a strong emphasis on success for *all* students foster positive interactions at the individual level (Bishop et al., 2004).

MULTICULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Cultural influence on gifted students' peer relationships is evident in studies of "acting White," the phenomenon of African American students rejecting the dominant group's norm of academic success (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Ford and colleagues (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Ford & Harris, 1996) found that a majority of gifted and high-achieving African American students in their studies had been teased for their academic success. A majority of Ford et al.'s (2008) sample reported putting forth little effort on academics. This underachievement, primarily among African American males, was accompanied by positive White and negative Black stereotypical beliefs. Despite their proven abilities, even the gifted African American students equated "acting Black" with low intelligence and poor academic achievement and many felt pressure to conform to a norm of lower achievement. See also Chapter 5.

Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) challenged the acting White phenomenon, reporting high achievement orientations in their study of African American students. Hamm (2000), however, found African American students chose significantly fewer friends with similar academic orientations than did Asian or White students. High-achieving African American adolescents had smaller friendship networks than equivalent achieving White peers (Fryer & Torelli, 2010). This influence is not the result of greater victimization among African American students (Wildhagen, 2011), and may be a culturally based example of STTUC. In their analysis of high school students participating in advanced mathematics and English courses, Barber and Wasson (2015) found less racial diversity in the social networks of participants than nonparticipants. Without strong motivation to participate in advanced coursework, racial or ethnic minority students may reject these options in favor of more socially attractive settings.

Sociometric studies of gifted students in the Netherlands indicate greater social understanding among children in high-ability classrooms than regular classrooms (Boor-Klip, Cillessen, & van Hell, 2014). Accelerated secondary students in the Netherlands had a higher

likelihood than nonaccelerated students of being rejected, but most were considered average (Hoogeveen, van Hell, & Verhoeven, 2009). Among Israeli children and adolescents, Schechtman and Silektor (2012) found no difference between gifted and nongifted students on a number of social adjustment indicators. Gifted students were *not* more likely to be lonely or have fewer friends or feel less socially competent. They were less confident than their peers, however, in their physical self-concepts and high school students were less willing to self-disclose, supporting Coleman and Cross's (1988) information management model in response to the stigma of giftedness. Asked to rate challenges to twice-exceptional gifted students—those with a coexisting disability—education professionals and parents considered social difficulties with peers to be the primary area of difficulty (Foley-Nicpon, Assouline, & Colangelo, 2013). See also Chapter 9.

Gifted children and adolescents the world over face social challenges. The effects of stigmatization are evident in African American students underachieving to avoid the appearance of countercultural behavior and in Israeli high schoolers, who are less willing to share personal information with others. Despite these challenges, many gifted students around the world have confidence in their social abilities and friendships.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH AND PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE STUDY

Social comparison research among gifted students has been largely limited to its effect on self-concept. Research should be expanded to include the effects of social comparison on other outcomes and in various settings. Longitudinal research of the course of peer relationships and the effects of various factors (i.e., settings, transitions) among gifted students is sorely needed. To accurately study peer relationships, samples should include not only gifted students, but also all peers with whom they interact, or would interact, if not segregated. Research has

not examined the broader effects of segregated programs for gifted students (Cross, 2013). Little is known about the role of empathy and morality in gifted students' peer relationships. Studies are needed of the effectiveness of interventions for older and younger gifted students with inadequate social skills.

IMPLICATIONS

Gifted students are in a unique situation, with the ability to academically or creatively outperform most of their agemates. An emphasis on competitiveness at the individual level can interfere with peer relationships and lead to rejection of these capable students. If competitions are unavoidable, having low stakes and distant competitors (i.e., at other schools) can reduce distress among gifted students. Adults should be aware of their behaviors that create undesirable social environments, such as directing unwanted attention to a child's exceptional abilities. It is critical that gifted children have opportunities to be with intellectual peers, but cognitive similarities are not enough to ensure mutual liking. Effective social skills are necessary and may need to be directly taught, even to the brightest and most accomplished gifted child. Gifted children and those who care for and work with them can take comfort in knowing that with maturity comes a broader network of acquaintances and more frequent opportunities to find others with similar interests.

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