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# Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Students: Introducing the School-Based Psychosocial Curriculum Model

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# Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Students

## Introducing the School-Based Psychosocial Curriculum Model

Tracy L. Cross, PhD<sup>1</sup> and Jennifer Riedl Cross, PhD<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This column introduces the school-based psychosocial curriculum model. The model incorporates Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and applies it to a planned program of talent development.

**Keywords:** gifted children, psychosocial development, talent development, curriculum

In the education of our nation's students, we often move from one exciting new idea to the next, hoping to find a magic bullet that can transcend the myriad complexities of the teaching and learning process of tens of millions of students from numerous backgrounds across the 50 United States of America. Just a few of the issues and factors that can influence teaching and learning include opportunity to access literacy materials, preschool opportunities, stability of home, access to opportunities to visit and participate in cultural and scientific endeavors in the community, access to mentors, positive role models, access to appropriately trained professional educators, challenge in school, appropriate pacing, English language needs, and possible disabilities to name a few. As we focus on students with gifts and talents (SWGT), we have also learned that differing organizational structures such as flexible ability grouping, self-contained classrooms, and residential academies can offer positive learning outcomes. Moreover, some instructional strategies like curriculum

compacting and problem-based learning have proven quite valuable in the overall school-based learning of SWGT.

In addition to the factors and variables noted above, the community that is concerned with educating students with gifts and talents is evolving away from IQ and other entity conceptions of giftedness to more talent development models that recognize abilities are developed over time in increasingly more focused talent domains. There are numerous factors and influences that contribute to talent development such as good teaching, practice, role models, and so forth. There is a growing

recognition that there are important psychosocial qualities that are critical to developing the highest-level accomplishment by students within talent domains. While that belief is widely held, researchers and practitioners in gifted education have very few theory-driven models of psychosocial development. Valuable constructs have been offered that tend to be rather focused on one or two aspects of psychosocial development (e.g., "growth mind-set"), but there are virtually no large-scale, developmentally oriented theories of psychosocial development that have been applied to the development of talent among students with high ability.

This column expands on a previous *Gifted Child Today* (GCT) column (Cross, 2001) that provided an

introduction to Erik Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development. The current column provides an application and expansion of Erikson's theory to talent development. More specifically, the new application focuses on schools and is entitled the school-based psychosocial curriculum model

“FOR ALL STUDENTS (INCLUDING THOSE WITH GIFTS AND TALENTS) TO REACH THEIR POTENTIAL, SIGNIFICANT AND ONGOING DEVELOPMENT IN THE PSYCHOSOCIAL DOMAIN IS NECESSARY.”

Table 1. Erikson's (1963) Stages of Psychosocial Development

Approximate age	Crisis	Essential strength
Birth to 1 year	Trust vs. Mistrust	Hope
1 to 3 years	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	Willpower
3 to 6 years	Initiative vs. Guilt	Purpose
6 to 12 years	Industry vs. Inferiority	Competence
12 to 20 years	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Fidelity
20 to 40 years	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Love
40 to 65 years	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Care
65 years and older	Integrity vs. Despair	Wisdom

(SPCM). Schools exist to build academic skills that students cannot achieve without the necessary psychosocial skills. Schools are a social context and only with the psychological foundation to engage in social endeavors will students be successful. Erik Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial development holds the key.

Erikson's theory describes development as proceeding through stages or *crises* that arise from tension between the person and her or his environment as the person becomes capable and aware of new abilities. For example, as a toddler becomes capable of running, tension most certainly arises as parents now have to worry about safety and control. In Erikson's crisis of autonomy versus shame and doubt, the toddler must learn a balance between acting willfully and being ashamed or doubtful about his actions. The environment must impose some restrictions for the child's well-being, but too many restrictions will teach the child to always doubt her desire to act and too few will make the child unbearable to be around and, likely, unsafe. Erikson proposed that a healthy balance in the outcome of each crisis—a *favorable ratio*—would lead to optimal psychological development. Table 1 describes the crises and their approximate ages. We have written about these elsewhere (Cross & Cross, 2017; Cross, Cross, & Andersen, 2017).

Erikson saw the resolution of these crises as contributing to a healthy *ego*, the core sense of the self. As children navigate the psychosocial crises, they develop *essential strengths* that contribute to a strong ego (see Table 1). Ego in the Eriksonian sense is different from the popular conception of ego, which carries a negative connotation. We want everyone to have strong egos, which will come from a healthy balance between the individuals' desires and abilities and environmental support for them. Gifted students arrive in school having passed through several of the stages, but lessons from psychotherapy teach us that we can still have a positive effect and should not limit our programming to the age at which a crisis is first met.

The SPCM utilizes Erikson's crises as a framework, with "Developing Ego Strength" as the theme. There is no research evidence that SWGT progress through Erikson's stages at a more rapid pace than their age mates, but curriculum developers should keep an open mind to that possibility. In general, however, the image in Figure 1 overlays Erikson's stages on the approximate age ranges when they may appear: preschool, elementary, and secondary. Curriculum and professional development can be generated from this model to build ego strength among SWGT.

### Creating a Planned Program of Psychosocial Development

A school-based program designed to support the development of ego strength should address the crises from Trust versus Mistrust to Intimacy versus Isolation, through both professional development for teachers and counselors and direct instruction for SWGT. In Cross and Cross (2017), we recommended that the ideal starting point in planning such a program is in the essential strength of *fidelity*, the outcome of the crisis Identity versus Role Confusion. We offer an example of how we might begin to apply the SPCM. If we desire to help a SWGT in adolescence or early adulthood to view him- or herself as a research mathematician, prepared to take on a challenging college curriculum with the long hours of difficult work that will go into being successful, certain lessons are recommended by Erikson's theory. First, the essential strength of *hope* will be nurtured if the student has learned at some point how to put her or his confidence in others who will have the student's best interest in mind. A lesson in how to recognize those who can be trusted as supporters and those who will be unsupportive or even oppositional will provide an important foundation for gifted students at any age. Self-soothing techniques will help a SWGT learn how to take care of him- or herself during times of stress, which she or he is sure to



Figure 1. Conceptualizing the SPCM.

## Favorable Ratio = Healthy Balance

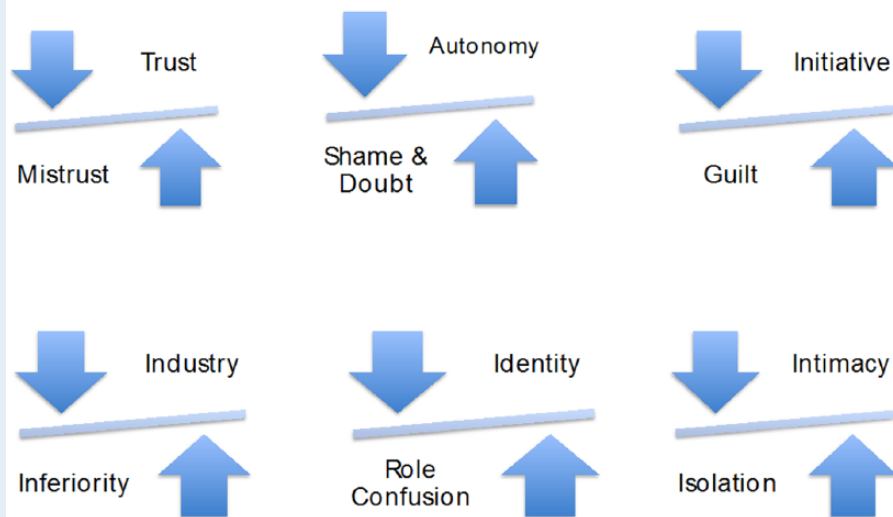


Figure 2. Fostering a favorable ratio of each crisis through the SPCM.  
 Note. SPCM = school-based psychosocial curriculum model.

experience on the road to becoming a research mathematician. Lessons in how to find and talk openly with a counselor will help the SWGT deal with more significant psychological distress, giving her or him the hope needed to be successful.

Professional development that addresses the crisis of Trust versus Mistrust will enlighten teachers to the needs of their highly capable students—that they may recognize and be responsive to them. When students discover they can trust their

Table 2. Possible Lessons From Issues and Themes Suggested by Erikson's Psychosocial Crises

Essential strength	Crisis—Positive	Crisis—Negative
Hope	Trust	Mistrust
	Identify internal resources	Identify resources and barriers (e.g., supporters and nonsupporters)
	Self-soothing	How to participate in counseling
Willpower	Autonomy	Shame and doubt
	Persistence	Letting go
	Creative ways to pursue desires	Recognizing impact on others
Purpose	Initiative	Guilt
	Goal setting	Realistic goal setting
	Self-advocacy	Avoiding narcissism, egotism
	Being yourself	Considering others
	Developing passion	Developing balance
	Working alone	Cooperation/working in groups
Competence	Industry	Inferiority
	Identifying interests	Trying new things
	Your social goals	Others' social goals
	Succeeding	Failing (positive)
	Accepting/pursuing challenge	Big-Fish-Little-Pond-Effect
	Practice	Entity beliefs
Fidelity	Identity	Role confusion
	Knowing own/family/community values	Learning about others' values
	Career development	Multipotentiality
	Authenticity	Possible selves
	Self-concept	Reputation
	Being yourself	Information Management Model (e.g., code-switching)
Love	Intimacy	Isolation
	Identifying opportunities commensurate with one's values	Learning the requirements of one's role in a group
	Leadership training	Servant leadership
	Features of positive romantic relationships	Features of negative romantic relationships

Source. Adapted from Cross, Cross, and Andersen (2017).

teachers to take them seriously, to care about their boredom and give them positive attention, the balance of the lesson will tip toward Trust. To achieve a favorable ratio, they should also know that their teachers will not always understand their questions or their desire to learn more, will be too busy to attend to their boredom, and cannot always respond to their needs. In this example, they can develop hope if they learn to cope with the ways in which their environment *cannot* provide for them. Lessons suggested by this example would include strategies for dealing with a too-busy teacher or boredom in the classroom. Rather than feeling hopeless that the world is against them, the SWGT with ego strength will have hope that she or he can trust that her or his needs will be met, but will know what to do when they inevitably will not.

Each crisis can be examined in a similar way to the example above. How can a favorable ratio, with a tip toward the positive side, be achieved (see Figure 2) in each of the crises? A planned program designed to consider both sides of the crises should include both intrapersonal (within the SWGT; the “Individual” in Figure 1) and interpersonal (with others; the “People near me” in Figure 1) components. The objective is to achieve a balanced perspective, leading to ego strength. At different ages, SWGT will experience different interpersonal issues. For example, young SWGT may enjoy helping their peers, but the expectation that they will help can become burdensome as their own workload increases. An age-appropriate lesson would take such differences into consideration. Table 2 describes possible lessons for each of the essential strengths.

Talent development requires a strong ego. SWGT must be motivated and able to pursue the goals necessary to achieve their maximum potential. The brief description provided here is intended to whet the appetite of those wishing to foster the psychosocial skills of their students. We encourage you to read more in Cross et al. (2017) and Cross and Cross (2017). We hope that the SPCM will provide an easy to use guide for developing curriculum in the psychosocial domain. For all students (including those with gifts and talents) to reach their

potential, significant and ongoing development in the psychosocial domain is necessary.

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