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CHAPTER 24

Peer Relationships

JENNIFER RIEDL CROSS

People are social creatures. Learning to live with others is of primary importance to our survival. Relationships begin to form from birth, first in the family, but expanding outward with development. In contemporary Western society, age-graded classes are the norm until high school. Developmental psychologists are well aware of the differential biological, social, and cognitive development of individuals, but schools must serve their students within the system. In nearly all cases, gifted students attend schools with their age-mates, who may or may not be like them physically, socially, or cognitively. The belief that this arrangement is most appropriate for all students has such a high priority that it even impedes the one method found by a wealth of research to be most effective for gifted students: acceleration (Neihart, 2007). Concerns about the social and emotional effects of grade-skipping have kept countless students from an education better suited to their cognitive abilities. Children spend their first years of development, from about age 5 to 18, together in schools. Their relationships with peers help them to understand themselves and how to live in society, regardless of any cognitive exceptionalities they possess. Many children learn to navigate their social world without difficulty, but school counselors can expect to see students of all stripes who face challenges in their peer relationships. Gifted students have unique concerns affecting their peer relationships, which will be discussed in this chapter.

RESEARCH ON PEER RELATIONSHIPS

The Importance of Peer Relationships

There is substantial evidence that humans have a need for social acceptance (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995, for a review). Maslow's (1987) hierarchy of needs includes a need for belongingness just after physiological and safety needs. Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2000) self-determination theory places need for relatedness in equal importance with the human need for competence and autonomy. The need to belong, defined as "a psychological necessity that involves having positive interpersonal interactions and trusting relationships" (Moller, Deci, & Elliott, 2010, p. 754), motivates human behavior and affects individual well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Sociometric Status

Social acceptance is often studied at the group level using sociometric procedures (e.g., Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982). Children in a class or a school are asked to name the peers they "like most" or "like least." Individuals are then categorized by their social status as *popular*, *controversial*, *rejected*, *neglected*, or *average*. Popular students are often physically attractive; possess admired abilities; are fashionable, well-groomed, have poise and evidence of wealth; are involved in prestigious groups and activities; associate with other popular students; and are usually prosocial (Kaplan, 2004), but may be aggressive (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998). In a meta-analysis of 41 studies, Newcomb, Bukowski, and Pattee (1993) found that popular students had significantly higher cognitive abilities than any of the other statuses, and rejected students had significantly lower cognitive abilities. Rejected students on the whole are more at risk for school dropout and later delinquency (Parker & Asher, 1987) than their peers, but it is not clear that this is true for all rejected students.

Some suggest that peer rejection occurs as a result of poor social skills on the part of the rejected child (Newcomb et al., 1993), but other factors may also be at play. Farmer and Farmer (1996) found that classroom dynamics forced students into specific roles (e.g., prosocial, antisocial, shy), overcoming any individual characteristics or abilities. Social skills training has been found to be effective in changing sociometric status of rejected students (Oden & Asher, 1977) and is particularly recommended for aggressive children, who may resort to aggressive behaviors because they fail to recognize social cues (Smokowski, Fraser, Day, Galinsky, & Bacallao, 2004).

Neglected children, those who do not receive many positive or negative nominations, often do not have interests similar to their peers or are not involved in activities socially valued by their peers (Kaplan, 2004). Neglected children are often more adult-oriented and conforming. Wentzel and Asher (1995) found that

neglected children differed significantly from average students on almost every academic characteristic we examined. Specifically, when compared to average children, neglected children reported higher levels of school motivation, were perceived by teachers to be more independent, less impulsive, more appropriate with respect to classroom behavior, and were preferred more by teachers. (p. 758)

Although they may not be noticed by their peers, neglected children may be quite successful in school.

Popularity with peers is a function of social competence and is, early on, associated with an ability to recognize what is happening in a social situation (Grusec & Lytton, 1988). According to Crick and Dodge's (1994) social information processing model, the following steps occur in any social situation: "(1) encoding of external and internal cues, (2) interpretation and mental representation of those cues, (3) clarification or selection of a goal, (4) response access or construction, (5) response decision, and (6) behavioral enactment" (p. 76). There are opportunities for difficulty in any of these steps of social information processing and learning where difficulties lie can aid in understanding social rejection and acceptance.

Development of Peer Relationships

Friendship research differs from sociometric research in its focus on dyadic relationships. Children who are socially accepted at the group level tend to have more or better quality friendships than their rejected peers (Bukowski, Pizzamiglio, & Newcomb, 1996). A high-quality friendship is one in which members have positive feelings toward one another and engage in prosocial behaviors, including a certain level of intimacy (Berndt, 2010). Such friendships are associated with greater peer acceptance. Low-quality friendships, on the other hand, "are high in conflicts, dominance, rivalry, and other negative features" (Berndt, 2010, p. 10). Having friendships high in negative features increases disagreeable and disruptive behaviors.

As children mature, they do so in a social context. Individuals tend to choose friends who are socially and demographically similar to them (Farmer & Farmer, 1996) and their expectations of friends differ with their own developmental stage (Parker & Asher, 1987). As they develop cognitive abilities allowing for greater

perspective taking, children's interactions become more cooperative (Grusec & Lytton, 1988). The constructive and pretend play of early childhood, which is rarely with the opposite sex, teaches children to take the perspective of others and leads to opportunities for negotiation and cooperation. Such play gives way to more organized games, with formal rules that can sometimes be quite complex. As children move from middle childhood to adolescence, they spend increasingly more time with friends than family, including friends of the opposite sex, and friendships become a place to explore one another's feelings, to seek and give emotional support, and to learn the social norms of the group. Friends are attracted to one another through shared interests and activities.

Especially in early adolescence, we see these dyads merge into larger cliques, groups of about 3 to 10 friends who interact somewhat regularly. Cliques differ from crowds, which come into evidence in middle school, when the cognitive challenge of a new social environment is eased by the ability to categorize peers according to their behaviors (e.g., dress, music preferences, academic achievement), particularly as these lie on the dimensions of informal (peer) and formal (adult) orientation (see J. R. Cross, *in press*). Students with a strong desire for the formal rewards within schools, such as grades or adult attention, and a low desire for the informal rewards conferred by their peers, such as friendship and student attention (popularity), differ noticeably from peers with a low desire for formal rewards and high desire for informal rewards. The former might be seen in the academic crowd and the latter in a more anti-establishment crowd; the punks, perhaps. Rebel crowd members have a reputation as being oriented toward neither reward system (Stone & Brown, 1999). Understanding adolescents' crowd affiliation is helpful in understanding their search for identity and how they relate to their peers.

GIFTED STUDENTS AND PEER RELATIONS

A number of researchers have focused on the relationship of gifted students and their peers. In a discussion of this research, the reader must be aware of the cultural bases of our current knowledge. Nearly all of the research on this subject has been conducted in the U.S. or Australia. What is known about gifted children's and their peers' attitudes toward giftedness has been learned through a Western lens. Cross-cultural research in societies that may hold very different attitudes about student achievement are much needed before we can claim universality of these findings.

The Popular Gifted

Taking a sociometric perspective, gifted children appear to do quite well among their peers. Several studies of gifted children as a group find them to be popular. A number of studies from the 1950s found that academically gifted students were more popular than their nongifted peers (Gallagher & Crowder, 1957; Grace & Booth, 1958; Miller, 1956). These results have been replicated in more recent studies. Luftig and Nichols (1990) found gifted boys were considered most popular (although gifted girls were least popular) in their sample of gifted ($n = 64$) and nongifted ($n = 432$) elementary students. In a study of students in 16 classrooms, both gifted boys and girls were more likely to receive nominations of positive descriptors such as “Leader” or “Popular” than their peers in Farmer and Hollowell’s (1994) study. Peers nominated fifth-grade gifted students who were integrated in regular classes and not in a self-contained class as socially competent and having leadership skills more frequently than their peers in a control group (Schneider, Clegg, Byrne, Ledingham, & Crombie, 1989). In Newcomb et al.’s (1993) meta-analysis, it was the popular children who had stronger cognitive abilities than average, neglected, or rejected children.

Or Are They?

In a study of 357 secondary students in the Netherlands, accelerated students had a higher likelihood than nonaccelerated students of being rejected, but most were considered average (Hoogeveen, van Hell, & Verhoeven, 2009). In a study of 14–15 year-olds, Meijs, Cillessen, Scholte, Segers, and Spijkerman (2008) found that popularity could be predicted by an interaction between social intelligence and academic achievement, but not by achievement alone. Because most of the studies that did find a relationship were carried out with elementary school children, these studies indicate an age effect that may have been missed in earlier research. Achievement at an early age may be cause for admiration and liking, but perhaps, as Meijs et al. proposed, with maturity, other variables (including physical attractiveness and appearance) may have greater predictive value.

Gender also plays a role in the popularity of gifted students. In Luftig and Nichols’s (1990) study, gifted girls were the least-liked children. Solano (1976) asked students to check adjectives that described student profiles of gifted boys and girls. Gifted girls were consistently described by their age-mates with negative terms, while gifted boys received positive descriptors. In a review of the literature on academic self-disclosure, Quatman and Swanson (2002) reported that there is significant conflict between academic achievement and social acceptance for girls, leading to a greater desire to hide academic success.

In addition to age and gender as confounds to the positive popularity-achievement relationship, level of giftedness is also relevant. In Schneider and colleagues' (1989) study, peer acceptance of gifted children was lower in classrooms where there was a greater difference in IQ levels between the gifted and control students. In her studies of exceptionally gifted students of 160+ IQ, Gross (1998) reported significant difficulties in finding acceptance among peers who are often far behind them in cognitive and moral development. It is sometimes an insurmountable challenge to find intellectual peers among age-mates; peers who can provide the emotional support that comes from similar concerns about life experiences.

African American and Latino gifted students face an additional challenge when they are identified as gifted and peers may reject them for "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Henfield, Washington, & Owens, 2010) or being a "school boy" or "school girl" (Gandara, 2004). Cultural pressures to be true to one's own racial identity can operate against the desire to achieve academically.

Anti-Intellectualism

In fact, there appears to be a general dislike of those with exceptional intellectual abilities, regardless of their ethnic, gender, or other differences (Brown & Steinberg, 1990; Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995). The strong pressures against being a nerd, geek, or dork, particularly for adolescent boys, are prominently on display in movies, in books, and on TV (Anderegg, 2011; T. L. Cross, 2011). The normative gender roles in many segments of our Western society do not include intellectual pursuits and often openly disparage them. Objections to intellectualism (particularly when sought after by females) are found deep in Western tradition, from the myth of Pandora, whose curiosity about a mysterious box's contents leads to the unleashing of hardship upon the world, to the biblical expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden for eating the fruit of knowledge. Intellectual pursuit can lead to change, which can be frightening. Maslow's (1987) foundational security needs include a need for predictability.

Enforcing social norms, the expectations for appropriate attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of group members, is a large part of building group cohesion. The need for belonging that motivates much of human behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000) is intricately entwined with the recognition of and adherence to the norms of the group. Group norms may be positive or negative, and their enforcement can be through aggression, particularly when such behavior is within the norm (Nipedal, Nesdale, & Killen, 2010). The dramatic increase in homophobic bullying, which has been reported to make up 40%–70% of all bullying (Espelage, 2011), is likely in response to wider acceptance of this previously excluded population; a

changing norm. A norm of average intellectual achievement (“not too” high; T. L. Cross, 2011) persists in many segments of American society.

Despite their apparent popularity, gifted children who deviate too significantly from any norm face exclusion from social groups. Tannenbaum (1962) found that adolescents most preferred brilliant adolescents who were also athletic and nonstudious. Brilliant students who were studious and nonathletic were liked least. Twenty-five years later, Cramond and Martin (1987) found the same results, but this time among teachers. Even teachers preferred nonstudious, athletic gifted children over their more “bookish” peers. In 1954, anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote, “Teachers will tell kids ‘Yes, you can do that, it’s much more interesting than what the others are doing. But, remember, the rest of the class will dislike you for it’” (p. 213). Gifted children are constantly receiving mixed messages to achieve to the best of their ability and not to do so (T. L. Cross, 2011). The forced-choice dilemma between “the pursuit of excellence or the search for intimacy” of which Gross (1989) writes is at least in part brought on by the pressure to submit to social norms. It applies to all members of that highly diverse population of “gifted,” regardless of their other complicating identities. Gifted students become well aware of the social norms in their surroundings, which may or may not be congenial to their exceptional abilities.

CHALLENGES TO GIFTED STUDENTS’ PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Asynchronous Development

As mentioned many times in this volume, one of the primary characteristics of gifted students is that their gifts develop out of synchrony with their other abilities. This may be in a very specific way, such that their math abilities, for example, are highly developed but in all other ways they match their age-mates’ levels of development. Or it may be much more general, with moral and cognitive development far beyond their age-mates. Even in the general condition, however, a child’s body is likely to be similar to that of his or her peers, limiting him or her physically. The 11-year-old may be able to think like a stockbroker on Wall Street, but he or she will be quite noticeable in a group of actual stockbrokers on Wall Street. Creative gifted children who can imagine beautiful images or complex stories may not be able to realize them because their fine motor skills are not advanced equal to their imaginations. Gross (1998) described how this asynchrony can affect the child’s sense of isolation. When her peers cannot empathize with or maybe even understand her, it is difficult to feel that she belongs. Gifted students

are caught betwixt and between, with both adults and peers unable (or unwilling) to engage them as equals. The *belonging uncertainty* (Walton & Cohen, 2007) that ensues can be generalized to any social group.

Social Comparisons

In his social comparison theory, Festinger (1954) proposed that humans strive to outperform others in an effort to feel better about themselves. By comparing oneself to others doing better (upward comparison) and others doing worse (downward comparison), individuals are motivated to feel good about their performance or to try harder. Gifted students are often at the top of their class, with no available peers to look up to and many peers available for downward comparison. The child in this situation experiences his or her social environment differently from nongifted peers. Constantly outperforming peers can strain relationships and being the frequent target of upward comparison (Exline & Lobel, 1999) can lead a child to make unexpected behavioral choices.

The Stigma of Giftedness

According to the Stigma of Giftedness Paradigm (Coleman & Cross, 1988), all people desire normal social interactions. “Normal” is individually defined, as in the case of an extreme introvert whose normal interactions would be with only one person, in contrast to the extravert who may desire many more people to be involved for interactions to be considered normal. Regardless of what is normal for the individual, when possible, he or she will be engaging others with a goal of normal social interactions. As described by the social information processing model (Crick & Dodge, 1994), the child will learn to recognize the cues that signal the presence of the stigma (e.g., comments about nerds) and he will be interpreting what comes next in light of those cues. Students’ goal of a normal interaction must take the stigma into account. Individuals respond in ways that differ according to past experience and their own characteristics. It is important to note that relatedness is only one of three universal needs in self-determination theory. People must also be autonomous—able to act of their own volition—and competent. Sacrificing any of these three needs can be detrimental to one’s psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). How to manage the social latitude one desires with the need to feel in control and competent in a situation is complex enough. Add to it exceptional competence, rejection of deviance by the other, and the controlling environment of most school settings, and the stage is set for feelings of “alienation and ill-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 74).

Coping With the Stigma of Giftedness

A growing body of research has identified the strategies that gifted students employ to maintain their relatedness in the school environment. Swiatek's (e.g., 1995; Swiatek & Cross, 2007; see Chapter 40 by Swiatek, this volume) Social Coping Questionnaire (SCQ) has been used to identify the prevalence and correlates of the various strategies. Gifted students deal with the stigma of giftedness by *denying their giftedness, using humor*, increasing their *activity* level, emphasizing *peer acceptance* by hiding their giftedness, *conforming*, using their abilities to *help others*, and reducing their *focus on popularity*. These strategies emerged from students' need to fit in, as opposed to being directly taught. They represent a solution to the problem of the stigma of giftedness, although in some cases they may not be healthy solutions, as in the case of students who deny their giftedness (to satisfy their need for relatedness) and suffer in their feelings about academic achievement (frustrating their feelings of competence; Swiatek, 2001).

Potential Problem Areas

Gifted children in general do not have lower rates of psychological well-being than their nongifted peers (Neihart, 1999), suggesting that most gifted children are able to satisfy their needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence in schools. The average child identified for gifted services, however, has an IQ not very much above average (115 or so; see Chapter 5 by Bracken, this volume). There will be less difference in the intellectual functioning of these children than of their higher IQ peers, leading to less challenge in finding equals in their surroundings. The children and adolescents at greater risk socially are those exceptionally gifted or with multiplicative conditions (i.e., race, gender, language, SES). Other gifted children will have peer relationship difficulties similar to their nongifted peers.

Aggressive children are frequently rejected by peers. Gifted children may be aggressive for many of the same reasons that nongifted students are aggressive, or they may develop an aggressive response as a result of frustrations brought on by their giftedness. Aggressiveness is sometimes rewarded by peers, who perceive aggressive classmates as popular even though they are not liked (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998). Here, too, social norms play an important role. Scholte, Sente, and Granic (2010) reported that bullies were chosen as popular in classrooms with a permissive attitude towards bullying, but not popular in classrooms where aggressive behaviors were not allowed. Peterson and Ray (2006) found that gifted students were victims of bullying at rates similar to their nongifted peers. They also discovered 28% of the gifted students in their eighth-grade sample ($N = 432$) had actually been bullies. Teachers were least likely to name gifted students as bullies, although gifted students who had aggressive friends were most likely to

be named as bullies by their peers (Estell et al., 2009). Simply having high intellectual ability does not make one virtuous (Cross, Ambrose, & Cross, 2007; Tirri, 2011).

Argumentative or frequently disagreeing children are often not liked (Smollar & Youniss, 1982). Children with exceptional intellect may see consequences of actions their peers cannot predict and argue against behaviors for that reason. They may have knowledge about a situation their peers do not share, such as rules of a game, for example. It is easy to imagine how children with greater actual knowledge could come, in time, to believe their opinions are also of greater value than that of their peers, leading to difficulty in peer interactions, although Gross (1998) argued that they are more likely to find fault with themselves for any such difficulty. Counselors may need to teach perspective taking and encourage patience with peers who are less developed. “The highly intelligent child must learn to suffer fools gladly—not sneeringly, not angrily, not despairingly, not weepingly—but gladly, if personal development is to proceed successfully in the world as it is” (Hollingworth, 1939, p. 586).

Emotion regulation is critical to developing social skills, as children poor in emotion regulation are often rejected by peers in early childhood (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007), robbing them of opportunities to engage in social interactions from which they could learn better skills. Parents of gifted children, astounded at their child’s advanced cognitive abilities, may not recognize the need to teach them how to deal with their emotions. Counselors may need to fill this void, especially among younger students.

Children who cannot negotiate a compromise with peers are often not accepted (Putallaz & Sheppard, 1990). A heightened concern for fairness and justice, common among some gifted individuals (Piechowski, 1997), may make it difficult for some gifted children to negotiate with peers who have less concern for equitable outcomes. Many social skills, including the ability to negotiate in conflict, develop when children play with their peers. Parents may be so focused on their gifted child’s cognitive development that they downplay the importance of or even deride play with peers who may not be equally advanced. Adults often forget that gifted children are children first and need experiences with peers to develop their social competence. Children learn social skills when parents give them advice about behaviors in social situations. Parents begin by telling children how to behave, but over time they ask the child to think about consequences of his or her behavior (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007). Gifted children who are so competent in other ways may encourage their parents to think that they already know what to do and, thus, might not get instruction that they desperately need.

Giftedness can be a barrier to positive social interactions, but not if one learns how to manage information (Coleman & Cross, 2005). Coping strategies that

address the stressful situation directly (problem-focused strategies), such as hiding one's giftedness from peers or becoming active in extracurriculars, are positively correlated with self-concept (Swiatek, 2001). Emotion-focused strategies, which attempt to reduce the negative feelings brought on by the stressor, are negatively correlated with self-concept. Denying one's giftedness is an emotion-focused strategy. Swiatek (2001) found that students who did not acknowledge an influence of their giftedness on friendships were more likely to say they were not accepted or liked by peers. No matter how much a parent may tell a child that his or her giftedness does not matter in social situations, personal experience must be the guide. Rather than ignoring the likelihood that one's giftedness has an effect in social situations, being aware of potential complications caused by ability differences may lead children and adolescents to look for healthy ways of approaching those situations.

COUNSELING GIFTED STUDENTS WITH PEER RELATIONSHIP DIFFICULTIES

Counselors are likely to see gifted students who have difficulty with peer relations when these are impinging on their academic performance or on their psychological well-being. These students will need help in dealing with few or no friends, poor quality friendships, or bullying. In many cases, the resolution to these problems will be the same as those recommended for all students. Counselors must be aware, however, of the problems described here that face gifted students uniquely.

Despite their outstanding abilities in other areas, gifted students who have difficulty with peer relations may need support in any of the steps of the social information processing model. They may need practice in encoding social cues, in interpreting those cues, in figuring out what their goal is in specific social interactions, in constructing and choosing a response, and in enacting their response appropriately. Direct teaching of these skills, along with practice to help students respond automatically, may be what is required for even the brightest (maybe especially the brightest) students of all ages. Studies of rejected children found that they "begin with waiting and hovering and then move too quickly to high-risk tactics on entering a group of peers" (Newcomb et al., 1993, p. 120). Observation of the child's behavior among peers may be necessary to learn how he is attempting to make friends and where things may be going wrong in that process.

Secondary students exploring their social terrain may test the different crowds, trying on different clothing styles and perhaps different academic values, to the dismay of parents and teachers. Adolescents are motivated by their needs for re-

latedness, autonomy, and competence. As they attempt to make friends, students may exert their independence from parents and teachers and may be satisfied that they *can* perform academically without doing so right at the moment. Counselors can suggest more constructive ways to meet the need for belonging, such as special schools or summer camps for academically advanced students, where greater opportunities exist to meet intellectual peers. Extracurricular activities can give gifted students an opportunity to socialize with peers of varying academic abilities who have common interests. Friends who share common interests need not be of the same age. Older friends can sometimes be a great boon to gifted students, in part because of their more similar cognitive development, but also because of their more advanced social skills. They can act as a guide in social situations with which the younger gifted child has no facility. Grade-skipping has been strongly supported as a method for meeting gifted students' academic needs, without the predicted negative social implications (Neihart, 2007). Younger friends can also be a good match for some gifted students. They may be on equal footing emotionally and may have fewer expectations for social acumen than the gifted student's age-mates.

Having few or no friends may not be reason for concern. Neglected children in early grades did not have poor long-term outcomes (Parker & Asher, 1987) and were well liked by teachers, perhaps due to their school motivation and adult orientation. Although we do not have research to tell us how many gifted students fall in this category, it is reasonable to assume that some students who are ignored by their peers are gifted. Talented teenagers spent more time with family and in solitude and less time with friends than their average peers in Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen's (1993) large-scale study. The talented teens' time spent alone was significantly higher (5 hours more per week) than their average peers and they enjoyed this time more as well. If these students do not have presenting problems, a lack of peer relationships may not be an issue.

Addressing Anti-Intellectualism

Counselors may be in a position to affect the school-level norms against intellectualism. School-level norms can be effective in countering negative social group norms (Nipedal et al., 2010). Public honoring of high achievers should be done with caution, to avoid what Exline and Lobel (1999) described as the "perils of outperformance" and establishing a competitive rather than cooperative environment. Mead (1954) recommended allowing gifted students to pursue their academic passions inconspicuously and making clear the difficulty of their work. Academic teams can parallel sports teams in their visibility at regional competitions and the honor they bring to the school. Fostering a respect for intellectual

pursuit should be a high priority and as much as possible an integral part of students' daily experience. Epithets that express contempt for either end of the ability continuum should be discouraged. Love of learning; flexibility in thinking; challenge to what is known by authorities, including teachers and administrators—all of these should be encouraged in a school that values academics. Anti-intellectualism should be confronted.

At the same time that anti-intellectualism is being challenged, teachers in particular must be aware of their own attitudes toward the different cognitive ability levels of students in their classroom. Mikami, Griggs, Reuland, and Gregory (in press) found that teachers who emphasized the academic status hierarchy of students in their class (responding positively to prompts such as “I point out students who do well academically as a model for the other students” and “I encourage students to compete with each other academically”) reduced students' liking of one another over the school year. Gifted students who are already challenged to make friends among their peers are not helped by teachers' behaviors that draw attention to their abilities relative to peers. Teachers who have been trained to work with academically gifted students promote a more positive classroom climate (Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994). Teachers were sorely lacking in their understanding of the social and emotional reality of their students in a study of high school freshmen (Vialle, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2007). Although they believed their students were well adjusted with no emotional problems, their students reported feeling intense isolation and sadness, potential precursors to more dramatic emotional difficulties. Teacher training should include a social and emotional component to address the concerns of all students, including gifted students.

Classroom activities also can affect an inclusion norm. In one study, students engaged in a group math task were told in one condition that the purpose was to “learn and improve” (mastery group) and in the other to “see who was ‘best’ at math” (performance group; Yamaguchi, 2001, p. 676). Not only did the mastery condition groups perform more effectively on the task, they also had more prosocial leadership that led to group cohesion and enjoyment. In the groups under the performance condition, one student emerged to dominate the activity, leaving the other members frustrated and resulting in ineffective strategies to solve the task. Teachers should avoid structuring activities for performance and encourage learning for mastery. To encourage peer inclusion in the classroom, SunWolf and Leets (2004) recommended activities such as “(a) storytelling and peer modeling; (b) behavioral journalism; and (c) co-constructing classroom inclusionary rules” (p. 217).

CONCLUSION

Gifted students, especially in their early years, tend to be popular among peers. Those who are exceptionally gifted, females, and students outside the mainstream may have greater difficulties with peer acceptance. Problems with peer relations may be similar to that of their nongifted peers, but gifted children may have missed important opportunities for social skills learning due to their advanced cognitive development. In order to have normal social interactions, they may use coping strategies, including denial or hiding their giftedness, to fit in. To help gifted students in developing positive peer relationships, counselors may need to teach social skills directly, recommend opportunities that allow gifted students to be with intellectual or emotional peers, encourage teachers to be sensitive to the social and emotional needs of their students, and work against anti-intellectual social norms in their schools.

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