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Using Life-Story Research in Gifted Education: Part Three: Implications for Practice

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In the Winter 2009 edition of Gifted Children, I introduced the concept of using life story to retrospectively unpack and understand the phenomenon of underachievement by bright individuals. There (Part I of III) I discussed the rationale for this research project and its more than 75 narratives, and how the research tradition of life story told through constructed narratives could help us explain the complex factors related to why some very bright people underachieved or selectively achieved. Portions of one constructed narrative were included to illustrate this narrative product of life-story research.

In the Summer 2010 edition of Gifted Children, a second article (Part II of III) was focused on findings from this research related to: a) individual characteristics, b) educational issues, and c) issues related to families and parenting. Organizing the data this way clarified the mechanisms as to why individuals underachieved and how they subsequently became successful adults.

From this body of research, I derived conclusions and synthesized a preliminary series of focused implications for practice for families, educators, policymakers, and others that could help us better understand and reduce chronic underachievement in bright individuals. In this third article, I discuss what we can do with that knowledge in very practical terms: how interventions in various domains can encourage achievement in students with situations that might naturally result in underachievement and create more positive outcomes for these students, their families, and our society.

Implications for Practice

For Families

In Part II, I discussed how divorce, isolation from extended family, poorly developed or nonexistent social support networks, families in which both parents work, families in survival mode, materialism in affluent homes, and the general speed at which life is lived today can sometimes all result in disunity within the home and family which, in turn, makes it difficult for families to stay connected. This disconnection, and the resultant reduction in family time, can mean that little significant mentoring occurs, leading to a decreased awareness of individual needs and lost opportunities for modeling and teaching survival skills critical for children living with giftedness and the related intensity. Without this connectedness, many bright children will simply flounder and fall into a pattern of chronic underachievement, as did these study participants.

So what can families do to help protect children from underachievement and increase resilience? Time spent teaching survival skills at home is time well spent. Physically and emotionally available parents serve as teachers, and their behaviors, words, and attitudes serve as teaching tools. Children taught to be responsible family members learn their help is required for the operation of their homes. Necessary household chores done as a family create opportunities for togetherness, with parents modeling appropriate work habits and attitudes rather than simply assigning chores and expecting the child to complete them on his or her own. In addition, interdependence, not total self-reliance, fosters development of the social skills needed for successful interpersonal interactions.

Fear of failure and perfectionistic thinking in gifted children can lead to an inability to seek assistance in difficult situations. Parents who calmly model personal struggles, admit to mistakes, and accept their children as they are teach appropriate risk-taking within the safety of the home. These children respond best to authentic behaviors of others, not what people tell them, and such behaviors empower, rather than enable, children. Parents should not accept excuses for avoidance of responsibility such as boredom, or the teacher is not very good, and instead teach social adaptability through role playing, social stories, simulations, and other similar situations for successfully playing The Game. Achievement, rather than ability, should be praised; a gifted child with a strong worth ethic is an unbeatable quantity.

Goal setting is learned by watching parents' efforts and practicing the skills, and by working toward progressively larger personal and family goals. Other survival skills like problem solving and task persistence can be learned in various ways. For example, household chores, challenging games and puzzles, and delaying gratification of desires teach children that not giving up leads to rewarding experiences. Creative problem solving can be taught with genuine household, personal, family, or community problems in mind, beginning with brainstorming and culminating in successful problem-resolution.

High intelligence, creativity, and overexcitabilities (OEs) in the areas of intellect, sensory stimulation, imagination, movement, and emotion (Dabrowski, 1964) are well-known characteristics of gifted people. Highly academic gifted programs that ignore intellectual and/or affective needs can be just as damaging as low-level schoolwork, sometimes creating more problems than they solve. To this end, parents can be strong advocates of appropriate placement for individual students, and engineers and proponents of programs that teach to more than students' academic needs, allowing for acceptance of all students. Parent advocacy groups can work to develop programs that include attention to interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, such as empathy and altruism, metacognition, and self-efficacy.

For Counselors

A bright young school psychology intern recently-graduated from a prestigious university asked his supervisor when he

would have the opportunity to meet with some gifted students. She laughingly explained that he would never see one, as licensed specialists in school psychology are employed to help children in special education and receive no training in working with gifted children. A reserved person, he cautiously shared his discomfort at the fact that we reserve our limited educational resources for students in other special education programs, but do not allocate any for attending to the social and emotional issues faced by gifted children. Few school districts in this country, and only one of which I am personally aware, currently provide in-depth instruction about gifted individuals' social and emotional needs to counselors. If psychologists and school counselors are not informed, and gifted programs are targeted solely at academic needs, where do gifted students with OEs find assistance? Specific information provided to educational counselors during university training and directed staff development would help them and others realize that gifted does not equal perfect, but may mean asynchrony between intellectual and emotional development. Sensitivity of gifted children may signal a need for appropriate counseling techniques during times of emotional overload. Learning disabilities, ADHD, and mental health issues exist in the gifted and talented population at approximately the same rate as in the general education population, a fact recognized by few educators. With counselors increasingly involved in initial referrals for educational interventions, informed personnel could more accurately and readily identify those students in need of additional instruction and services. Thankfully, the National Association for Gifted Children has addressed these needs by offering continuing education credits at its annual convention, as does the organization SENG (Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted, at http://www.sengifted.org/).

For Teachers

Teachers set the tone for their classrooms. When they model appropriate behaviors, accept individual differences, and eliminate rude, disrespectful behaviors, students will follow. Learning of many types occurs in a safe classroom environment; stress inhibits learning and creativity. Gifted students tend to be more internally motivated than their non-gifted peers and, thus, respond more favorably to personally relevant rewards than to external rewards such as grades. Little can entice, encourage, or push students who are internally motivated into working at something they find meaningless.

Teachers can help create internal motivation by deliberately and purposefully building personal relationships with students, as well as establishing the relevance of curriculum to the student. In addition, teachers should be trained to use existing internal motivation to promote students' success. Taking time to humorously or matter-of-factly model motivational processes, especially for unpleasant or dull tasks, can result in great dividends in the classroom. Simple, honest discussion of how the teacher deals with dull meetings, repetitious classes, and onerous tasks can lead to some students' acceptance of the inevitable. Teachers should strive to eliminate power struggles and words like "should," "you can't…," "if you don't I will…," and instead, create student buy-in, give choices, and encourage development of appropriate negotiation skills. By teaching debate skills through their content area, and self-regulation techniques learned along their own educational journeys, teachers equip students with the skills to manage life's challenges. Gifted students do not aim to make life difficult for teachers, but rather to get what they need from school.

Teachers may need to concede that affective needs for very bright children often supersede academic needs. Because they tend to learn easily and quickly with few repetitions, being flexible about setting academics aside during times when important life lessons arise is critical; those times may be used as teachable moments. By being flexible and child-centered in their practice, teachers grow in their skill development as much as children do in their social and emotional development.

For Policymakers & Administrators

Policymakers and administrators should take the time to critically examine the campus climate(s); a school climate that is inviting to parents, teachers, students, and visitors encourages mutual respect. Parents of gifted students tend to be a giving, involved group who willingly contribute talents and time. Thus, being proactive can help channel this energy into schools and programs.

Gifted students can amaze and delight us with their ability to assimilate new information, create products, and solve problems. Policymakers and administrators who allow these students to experience real life problem solving, teamwork, and altruism through authentic opportunities that naturally arise within schools and communities gain future leaders who are headed down a positive path. These future leaders can gain valuable leadership experience when they are asked to contribute their gifts for the good of society.

Investing capital in educating all campus/district personnel regarding characteristics and needs of the 10 to 25 percent of the population who are gifted benefits students and educators alike, in much the same way as resources expended regarding the needs of other special students does. As a result, students are taught more efficiently and appropriately, and with less frustration on the part of either student or teacher.

Policymakers and administrators can foster a positive climate for gifted learners in the following ways: a) encourage the development of funded mandates for gifted education, or at least help locate such funds; b) encourage those most interested in teaching gifted students; c) gently guide others to an acceptance of individual differences; d) provide resources on campus, such as journals, curriculum units, and out-of-level materials; and e) encourage involvement of gifted instructional and administrative personnel in parent groups, creating shared leadership and participation in gifted parent-teacher associations. When administrators model intelligent behaviors, they communicate that intelligence is socially acceptable.

Many of today's administrators are gifted individuals with firsthand knowledge of the needs of their students, and may be willing to provide affective support to students and their families through parenting classes which include information about gifted children.

Many parents face challenges during these increasingly difficult times in our society, and may have difficulty finding time or emotional resources to provide the parenting they could or should under different circumstances. Given increasingly high standards for academic performance and

the increase in families under stress, it can only benefit us to put affective coping skills and high-level curricular components into our gifted and talented programs, or even in all programs. Whether or not students receive the information they need at home, we, as educators, are often called upon to help our students be successful in ways not necessarily academic. Doing so does not necessarily cost much, but does help ensure that every child receives that free, appropriate public education to which s/he is entitled.

For Higher Education

Competition is fierce among colleges for adult learners, a group which comprises nearly half of today's college population. These students are frequently self-directed, exceptionally motivated, and have substantially different needs from traditional college-age students. They have little patience with bureaucratic organizations that operate under traditional rules, choosing to go elsewhere without qualm when they feel their needs for andragogy (adult learning principles) (Knowles, 1984) are not met. Flexible programs for adult learners, including credit-by-examination, credit waivers, and experiential-learning credit options, facilitate speedy completion of programs. Current adult education research indicates that opportunities for adult learners to be with other adult learners as opposed to traditional-aged undergraduate students in both the physical and virtual classroom, and faculty and staff trained and interested in the needs of adult learners, improve retention and graduation rates (Donaldson, Graham, & Martindill, 2000; Kaufman, Harrel, Milam, Woolverton, & Miller, 1986; Robles, 1998; Taylor, 2000).

Directions for Future Research

Findings from this study suggest several directions for future research. Since little is known about families of gifted students of types other than successful cognitively gifted (i.e., creatively gifted students and underachieving gifted students), future studies could focus on families that produce high achievers and those that produce underachievers. These could also be studied in relation to families without gifted students to examine both similarities and differences, answering the question about whether underachieving gifted students are more like underachievers in general than like other gifted students.

Effective counseling and family therapy for gifted students and their families is still relatively hard to come by. Counseling and effective intervention for dealing with chronically underachieving gifted students is nearly impossible to acquire. Close examination of interventions currently being employed and those that are considered successful, and application of new methods of counseling and interventions, need to be conducted and communicated throughout the educational community.

Since most research on underachieving gifted students has examined White, middle-class males from traditional families, there is very little from which to draw regarding other underachieving gifted populations. Further research could examine families of divorce, underachievement in other racial and cultural groups, and gifted girls. And, with identification of students with other exceptionalities such as ADHD and learning disabilities on the rise, studying the impact of a twice-exceptional child on the family and the family on the child, could help us design specific counseling and academic interventions. Examining interventions, specifically ways in which to increase self-regulation, acquisition of appropriate tacit knowledge, and goal-directed behaviors, are additional potential areas for further study.

Examination of the recently identified phenomenon of gifted underachievers with high intellectual self-concepts also appears to be warranted. Exploring currently underachieving students for overexcitabilities and high intellectual self-concepts, as well as interventions designed to work with these very unique characteristics, rather than using more traditional models, might provide useful insights and opportunities to reverse underachievement before it reaches a chronic level.

Other questions my studies uncovered but did not fully answer lie below. Do gifted underachieving males outnumber females or do females just learn to hide it sufficiently so as not to get into trouble? What effect, if any, is the current push to certify teachers, sometimes involuntarily, to teach gifted students having on students, their achievement, and their performance? Will program effectiveness research uncover useful information regarding underachievement, and will it include the students' viewpoints? What is the frequency of stress-related illness in highly academic gifted programs? What is the effect of a gifted program designed to teach only higher academic skills? How can we teach social skills to gifted students? Do we need to? If we examined reformed underachievers later in life, would we find they remained driven to succeed, and do they ever catch up to their peers who started on the path to success earlier in life? Finally, what do the parenting styles and children of formerly underachieving but now successful adults look like?

Since this research shows that chronically underachieving gifted students who became successful adults all experienced crystallizing moments, or moments when they deliberately chose to change, defining what these moments look like and the contexts within which they occurred could help answer several important questions. For example, do the reversals always or only happen after a chronic underachiever hits bottom and has nowhere else to go but up? Like any other research, this study concluded with many more questions left to be examined by future research and researchers.

The Value of Research

While arguments still circulate in the academic world about whether we should engage in pure research versus applied, qualitative versus quantitative, what constitutes scientific research, and the relative value of any of these to society, I have seen immediate benefits from applying what I have learned with real educators, parents, and students. In discussing why we conduct research, Barr (2004, n. page), says:

> At first glance the answers seem clear. We want to learn about effective programs and teaching methods to help students learn. We want to discover relationships between variables in educational settings to plan interventions. We want to understand cultural contexts of schools to create schools that embody justice and reduce prejudice and inequality.
>
> From the individual researcher's perspective we investigate topics about which we are curious or passionate…A researcher's voyage may be long,

> the seas calm or stormy, the tides of circumstance insistent, but the journey is driven at least in part by the winds of ontological longing. Individually and collectively, we do educational research as part of a quest for meaning… to fulfill our individual strivings for meaning through contributing to and connecting with diverse communities of researchers, teachers and learners, and with the disenfranchised.

For some of us the researcher's journey is not just about finding and making meaning, but also about creating change. When, for example, we educate parents about themselves and their children, parents can then work more appropriately and effectively at raising their children. When we conduct staff development for educators and counselors to help them understand how research findings apply to real people, they are then able to use that information to help their students. When we take information out to conferences and conventions and share it with colleagues and families, it becomes part of their knowledge-set, while simultaneously contributing to the broader knowledge base. My own experiences as researcher-practitioner have definitively shown that what we all do makes a difference both in the near and long term, and serves to make me want to continue my research journey. ❖

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*** For the complete reference list from which these conclusions and suggestions were drawn, please refer to:**

Flint, L.J. (Winter, 2009). Using life-story research in gifted education. *AERA SIG e-Journal Gifted Children, 3*(2).

Flint, L.J. (Summer, 2010). Using life-story research in gifted education: Part II: Results. *AERA SIG e-Journal Gifted Children, 4*(1).

If you desire a bibliography that goes far beyond this and the two articles mentioned above, email the author for an even more extensive reading list.

Resources for Parents, Teachers, and Others

While this is, by no means, an exhaustive list, nor an endorsement of any particular entity or website, the sites listed below contain information or products that can help parents, teachers, and others better understand their gifted children. While most are not-for-profit organizations/advocacy groups, three are well-known for-profit publishers of material related to gifted children.

AERA Gifted: http://www.aeragifted.org/

University of Georgia Center: Torrance Center for Creativity: http://www.coe.uga.edu/torrance/

Council for Exceptional Children, Talented and Gifted: http://www.cectag.org/

European Council for High Ability: http://www.echa.info/

Free Spirit Publishing: http://www.freespirit.com/

National Center for Research on Gifted and Talented: http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/nrcgt.html

Great Potential Press: http://greatpotentialpress.wordpress.com/gifted-links-2/

Hoagies Gifted: http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/

The National Association of Gifted Children: http://www.nagc.org/

Prufrock Press: http://www.prufrock.com/

Supporting the Emotional Needs of Gifted: http://www.sengifted.org/

The World Council for Gifted Children: https://world-gifted.org/