Consequences of Risk Factors in the Development of Gifted Children

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Abstract

There are gifted children within the typical population and within the special population. They face various risk factors that could interfere and inhibit their optimal development. It could be contributed from the aspects of; environmental, emotional, learning disabilities as well as the learning abilities. Risk factors need to be addressed accordingly to prevent gifted children from becoming; underachievers, maladjusted, and live a socially and emotionally deprived life. A conceptual framework on risk factors’ consequences will be presented. Educational implications and aspects on parenting for the sustenance of human potentials and the building of the nation’s asset will be discussed.

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Keywords: Gifted; Risk; Talent; Development; Profiles

1. Introduction

Most of the time, gifted children, as the name infer; tend to be perceived as smart children and free from problems. Parents would be very delighted to be blessed with gifted children. It is like someone winning a lucky draw. Many people would feel that it is somewhat unfair that these gifted children were granted with the “gift”, while most people were not so lucky. Ironically, the “gift” does not only bring “joy and happiness”, but it also brings with it “danger, anxiety and disappointment”. Gifted children may be gifted and talented, but they also face many problems and risk factors. Many gifted adolescents have to go through the battle of depression in their life. As the consequences, parents of the gifted, like many other parents of other children, face challenges and difficulties in bringing up their gifted child. Blakeley (2001) as a mother of a 16-year-old gifted daughter wrote about her own account going through what she regarded as “bittersweet moment”. As the phrase infers, teachers and parents should accept students who exhibit heightened sensitivity or unusual emotional depth and intensity over some events. Gifted students are capable of understanding situations, the issues, and the philosophy underlying it, but they may not be equally capable of handling their emotions that are associated with the situations. In order to be wise adults, parents and educators need to try to understand diverse characteristics of gifted children, their strength as well as their learning and emotional needs. This is to ensure that parents and educators are prepared to handle some “delicate” gifted children accordingly.

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doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.10.010
Giftedness could be within various domains of talents, and academic talent is one of the domains. Academic achievements may indicate that the student has high ability in academic (Renzulli et al. 2002). Most high ability Malay students are selected to attend boarding schools if their performance in a standardized examination is excellence. Though many students in Malaysia can be categorized as high ability based on academic achievement, they remain in daily schools throughout the country. However, teachers in most day schools are not exposed to the knowledge about gifted education. Thus, teachers are not quite prepared and equipped to deal with these students and to contribute in developing their potential to the fullest. There is no procedure of identifying gifted and talented students within the Malaysian system of education. Nevertheless, it was suggested that 15% of the school population could be gifted and talented, but they are unrecognized by the system (Piirto 1999; Renzulli et al. 2002). Teachers need to be aware of this phenomenon to be sensitive towards gifted students’ learning and emotional needs. High ability students need challenges that match their abilities, in order to illuminate their full potential. Teachers also need to be aware of the presence of these students in their classrooms. In addition, teachers need to equip themselves with knowledge regarding gifted children in order to be able to educate these children accordingly. Mishandling these high potential children could lead to a “lost” of potential to the family as well as to the nation. These are some of the contributing factors that interfere and inhibit the development of the gifted children.

2. Giftedness and talent development

The terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talent’ has been used interchangeably in the literature. Since then, there seems to be no obvious difference between the two terms. Nevertheless the concept of giftedness and talent development has gone a long way to evolve into two distinct concepts as put forth by Gagne (1998) and Piirto (1999). Giftedness is the referring to the aptitude one has in a domain that is beneficial to mankind. Talent on the other hand is the product of giftedness that has been successfully developed. A talented person is a person who has managed to reach his true potential at a particular point in his life. Talent development (Piirto 1999) is an integrated process of the nature, that is genetic, cognitive, and emotional predisposition; with the nurture; that is the environment and the talented behavior (refer to diagram in figure 1).

Looking at the concept of giftedness from “talent” perspective, open up one’s talent potentials in many domains other than academic domain alone. One could be talented in art, music, theatre, writing, business, athletics, dance, spiritual, invention, mechanical, interpersonal, and entrepreneurship. In some of these cases, only minimal intellectual cognitive competency is needed to realize one’s potential in the domain of talent. Sometimes talents could be recognized through certain predictive behaviors. A child who is talented in writing is usually very expressive in his communication, and a child who is talented in music can reproduce melodies after just listening to it.

It is obvious to see that the process of talent development of a gifted child could be facing problems at any level in the developmental pyramid. Many aspects in the pyramid could be vulnerable to various threats that would interfere with the development of gifted children. A gifted child may be facing difficulties that act as risk factors at home, in school, or in the community where he lives. Piirto (1999) suggested a list of personality attributes said to be favorable in the development of talent. These include creativity, imagination, androgyny, insight, intuition, openness, over excitabilities, perceptiveness, perfectionism, resilience, risk-taking, self-discipline, self-efficacy, tolerance for ambiguity, and volition or will. The absence of these personality attributes would contribute as risk factors in the development of a gifted child.

3. Multiple exceptionalities

It is quite common to observe special children exhibiting more than one exceptionalities. There are hearing impaired children who are also learning disabled. On the other hand, gifted characteristics could also be observed within children in the special population. There are hearing impaired children who are excellence in academic. Some of the hearing impaired children may not be excellent in academic but they show precocious development in other domains of talents that could be seen as intelligent performance. Some of them are very artistic, and some show excellent leadership quality. This phenomenon is also true within the visually impaired population. Within the learning disabled children, we could find a number of autistic children though face with difficulties in learning and communication exhibits certain gifted characteristics. It is reported that a number of autistic children indicate excellent understanding in music and math related subject (Piirto 1999, Morelock & Feldman 2003).
A number of gifted children from the typical population also face numerous problems as they undergo through the process of development. Although they are considered normal because they look normal physically, some of these children are going through immense psychological and emotional crisis. This includes their problem with self-esteem, which is usually tied to academic achievement, problem-solving ability and success in school (Seeley 2003). There are also cases when the gifted child is considered normal but he is actually going through mental illness such as schizophrenia. One particular such case is John Nash who is a Nobel laureate winner. It is also quite common to see gifted children exhibit talented behavior in more than one domain. They could be both talented in academic and music. Some gifted children have different types of learning styles and they are categorized as spatial learners. Spatial learners typically think in images, holistically and not step by step (Silverman 1998). Thus, although they are normal they have different learning needs due to the different type of learning styles, which they are inclined to

4. Understanding behavioral characteristics of gifted children

Gifted students are also referred as high ability students. Definitions of gifted students include those children who can produce creative products. These students are not without problems. Their problems include boredom and frustration in school and sometimes isolation (Woolfolk, 1998). They may also find it difficult to accept their own
emotions, because the mismatch between mind and emotion can be great. Sometimes they get impatient with friends, parents, siblings, or even teachers who do not share their interest or abilities. Gardener (as cited in Woolfolk, 1998) mentioned that a creative student regularly solves problems, fashion products, or defines new questions in a novel way. This is an indicative of divergent thinking pattern. They may have multiple answers to a question, which may sometimes seem ridiculous. Some gifted students are regarded as different and peculiar (Piirto, 1999; Clarck 1997; Gross 1993). Their thinking pattern does not match with that of their peers.

Certain distinguishable behavioral characteristics have been associated with gifted and talented students. Inderbir (2001) listed nine observable behavioral characteristics of a group of Malaysian’s gifted students. Those behaviors are having variety of interests, unusual curiosity, persistence in attacking difficult mental task, creativity or divergent thinking, leadership qualities, above average language development, unusual emotional depth and intensity, heightened sensitivity, and sense of justice. This information conveys that the educational system should be responsive to these needs. Teaching in the classroom is no longer a process of transcending information from teachers to students. Students need to be given opportunity and guidance to explore their interests and curiosity. In addition, teachers need to give students rooms to think divergently to be creative in their work. High ability students always quest for activities that give room for flexible and divergent thinking. Rosadah et al (2004a) reported that a group of gifted students mentioned their needs to be given the chance to be creative in their learning. Thus, educators need to plan their teaching to meet gifted students’ learning needs.

Teachers, school administrators, and parents also need to work on enhancing gifted behavioral characteristics among the students. There is a serious concern for educators to pay considerable attention in nurturing students’ potentials manifested in gifted behavioral characteristics. Rosadah et al (2004b) has found two behavioral prototypes of academically talented students. The first prototype shows high rating in Dramatics, Artistic, and Musical characteristics, but low ratings in Expressive Communication, Precision Communication, Leadership, Motivation, Learning, Creativity, and Planning characteristics. The second prototype shows high rating in Expressive Communication, Precision Communication, Leadership, Motivation, Learning, Creativity, and Planning characteristics, but low rating in Dramatics, Artistic, and Musical characteristics. These discrepancies in the characteristics of the academically talented students signal that these students need a balance educational approach. Academically talented students who belong to the first prototype need to be helped to improve on the behavioral characteristics that were rated low for them. Teachers need to enhance students on these characteristics: communication, motivation, learning, planning, and creativity. Academically talented students who belong to the second behavioral prototype need to be helped to nurture on their artistic, dramatic, and musical characteristics.

5. Profiles of gifted students

Bets and Neihart (1988) had grouped the profiles of gifted and talented students into six categories. Teachers could easily identify gifted students who belong to the first group. They are creative, autonomous and self-directed in their academic pursuance. These students usually succeed with excellence in schools related activities. The second type of profile is regarded as “challenging”. They are non-conformers but are autonomous and independent. They often feel frustrated and helpless with the school system. It can be debilitating when they are not equipped with the necessary skills to match the school system that demands a certain standard of behavior. Students are expected to adhere to rules and regulations. Parents and teachers may not realize students’ talents. Thus, they neither get appreciated, nor the support. Situations may lead them to misbehave by defying schools rules and regulations.

The third type of gifted students referred by Bets and Neihart (1988) is the “underground”. These students try to conceal their abilities because they are not confident to act spontaneously. The schools’ environment does not encourage the development of gifted and talented behaviors. These students refuse to be regarded as different, and they want to be accepted by their peers. Among the gifted students, there are also those who had dropped out of the school system. This fourth type of gifted students failed to get the necessary guidance and support from the school system. There is also a category of gifted students, who belong to a special population of students with disabilities and special needs. This fifth type of gifted students is sometimes referred to as students with dual exceptionalities. The sixth type of gifted students is referred to as autonomous learners, who have the right attitude, the right skills, and the right understanding to pursue life long learning. Policy makers in the educational systems should realize that if they fail to respond to the special needs of the gifted and talented students, many of these students would inevitably become underachievers. Carper (2002) studied academically talented students who had dropped out of the school system. He found that all students involved in the research felt that they are bored with the classroom lessons.
6. Challenges in developing giftedness

Previous discussions have led us to conceptualize various risk factors that may interfere with the development of gifted children. These challenging factors fall into four categories; environmental, learning disabilities, learning abilities, emotional, and environment (refer to Figure 2). If these factors are not addressed accordingly, it is hypothesized that it could lead to two phenomenon. They are underachievement phenomenon, and social-emotional deprivation and maladjustments phenomenon.

Disability may interfere with the development of gifted learners. This is because disability may limit learning if no effective intervention were carried out. Early identification of disabilities and an early intervention would provide opportunity for the disabled child to develop their remaining abilities to compensate for the disabilities. Early intervention program act as a risk preventive measure, which will lead to a good ground for the child to develop their potential and giftedness to talent. Abilities and strength may become a problem if gifted children go through an advance cognitive development but lacking behind in emotional development. They may go through what Blakeley (2001) mentioned as ‘Shattered Idealism’. This “idealism” in combination with distorted self-awareness could contribute to the development of negative motivations when a gifted child was trapped in disruptive behavior. Fleith (2001) reported studies on gifted adolescents who are vulnerable to social and emotional disturbances associated with perfectionism, super sensitivity, social isolation, and sensory over excitabilities.

The environment at home, at school and in the community may pose a serious threat to the process of gifted development. The interaction between environmental factors with emotional factors may actually affect the developmental process. A non-resilient gifted child brought up in a dysfunctional family may not develop to be a talented person. A non-motivated gifted child in a school that is not aware of concepts on giftedness and talent development and does not have any procedure to identify talents and gift, may fail to develop her/his potential. The culture in the community may regard certain giftedness and talent as valuable to the community, and do not regard other domain of giftedness and talent as valuable. Western societies value drama and music more than the society in the developing countries, where the talent may not get monetary reward. Religiosity also may influence the value each society has on various talents and giftedness.

7. Conclusions

Educators and parents need to be aware of the risk factors and how these factors interfere with the development of gifted children. They could help in minimizing the effect of these risk factors by nurturing the personality characteristics associated with talent development (Piirto 1999). Gifted children need guidance in interpreting good or bad situations or incidence that they have to go through in life. It is hoped that by carrying out this intervention they will develop resiliency, motivation, and other personality attributes needed to develop their giftedness. On the other hand, failure to make the necessary interventions could lead to underachievement as mentioned by Bets and Neihart (1988). Teachers need to plan teaching strategies and interventions that meet students’ needs for challenges. In addition, by knowing that certain behaviors are characteristics of gifted learners, adults will not be surprised or disturbed when the learners exhibit some of those behaviors. This will help to minimize conflict among students with their parents or their teachers. The conflict may occur when adults misunderstand or misinterpret certain students’ behaviors. A student who is engrossed in completing an invention is considered as very motivated and creative, though sometimes he may neglect his other responsibilities and even neglect himself.

The major focus in schools today is to strive for academic excellence. However, developing students’ skills and behaviors related to academic performance alone is not sufficient. Students need to develop supplementary behavioral characteristics such as; Dramatic, Musical, and Artistic (Rosadah et. al 2004b). These behavioral characteristics may work as catalyst to enhance development of other gifted potentials. Teachers and parents have to mould certain behavioral characteristics among the students for a balance development. Creativity and task commitment are behavior variables and are not permanent (Renzulli, 1991). Encouraging suitable practices can develop both behaviors. Both these behaviors excite each other. Task that calls for creativity demand full commitment from the doer. Thus, parents and teachers should be open minded and flexible about students’ quest for creative encounters in science, arts, music, or drama. Adults need to support and guide children in their creative endeavour. Besides, adults should be cautious not to hinder children from being flexible and divergent in their thought. In addition, parents and teachers need to be serious and focus in enhancing students’ behavioral characteristics traditionally being associated with academic development such as learning, motivation, communication, and planning.
Figure 2: Risk Factors and Their Consequences in the Development of Gifted Children

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Mansfield Center: Creative Learning Press.


Figure 2: Risk Factors and Their Consequences in the Development of Gifted Children