Psychological issues and the need for counseling services among Malaysian gifted students

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Abstract

The study aims to examine: (a) psychological issues, (b) coping mechanism, (c) types of counseling services, and (d) the need to seek counseling services among Malaysian gifted students. Data was collected using a set of questionnaires, informal interviews and CIMR form. One hundred and eighty-students were involved in the study. Data from the study suggested that the students faced psychological issues that need attention and attributed their most effective coping mechanism as getting absorbed in academic work. More than 50% prefer to deal with their issues themselves and to seek help in mainly career and academic work. There is a significant difference in terms of the need to seek counseling services among gifted students with different gender and age group.

Keywords: Psychological issues, counseling services, gifted students

1. Introduction

Gifted students have always been considered as students who are at the upper end of the bell curve in academic abilities. At this upper end, the bell curve tail can continue for a considerable distance representing increasingly extreme difference (Peterson, 2006). These gifted or high ability students who deviated the most from the norms, is the one not likely to have intellectual peers at school, becomes the jokes of the class for being considered as “nerdy” and to feel socially isolated because of their intellectual ability (Gross, 2004; Neihart, 1999; Silverman, 1993). They are always misunderstood, mocked by classmates, resented even by teachers “for being too smart”, held back for being too precocious, the students, lead lives fraught with special challenges and stress. All too often, they are made to feel like misfits, their brilliance mistaken for a troublesome, uncontrolled temperament and their perfectionist behaviour mistaken as procrastinator (Seatter, 2001).

Gifted students grasp complex mathematical or scientific concepts with ease and exhibit creative and innovative work in many ways. They can concentrate for a long periods on topics of their interest. They are not easily distracted, set high standards for themselves and enjoy intellectual challenges. According to Neihart, Reis, Robinson and Moon (2002) gifted students show initiative, originality, and flexibility in thinking, with the ability to consider problems from multiple perspectives, responsive to new ideas and often show social poise or an ability to

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communicate with adults in a mature way. These characteristics along with others placed the gifted students in a learning zone of their own that can create a very lonely academic journey.

Aside from the more positive characteristics mentioned earlier, their dispositions are also dominated by perfectionism (Speirs Neumeister, Williams & Cross, 2009; Chan, 2009; Dixon, Lapsley & Hanchon, 2004), low self-esteem (Vialle, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2007), extreme competitiveness (Tomlinson, 2008) and self-consciousness (Sisk, 2008; Cho-Hee Yoon, 2009), anxiety, excessive self-criticism (Cho-Hee Yoon, 2009; Berlin, 2009) and confused identity formation (Zuo, Li & Tao, Liqing, 2001; Graham & Anderson, 2008) that can trigger intra- and interpersonal conflicts within and outside their learning environment. Many gifted students get bored with routine tasks, resist changing away from interesting topics or activities, or disagree vocally (Bailey, 2007) with peers as well as teachers and many are intolerant of failure. At times, when pushed to the limit, they will ignore details, turning in disorganized assignment, obdurate and non-conforming. Many are emotionally sensitive when overwhelmed with a situation they can’t handled, detach themselves from their peers and seems to not being able to reach their academic potential in school setting. They are then identified as underachievers and labelled as students with academic disability. Many of these challenging tendencies resemble that of attention deficit and related disorders (Nordby, 2002).

In tandem, studies have shown that gifted students are challenged with more affective and psychological issues than other students (Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon 2002; Rimm, 2002; Baker, 1995; Bailey, 2007). According to Cross and Frazier (2010) virtually all students, gifted students included, face the following typical psychosocial issues during adolescence: (a) dating, (b) college career choices, (c) puberty, (d) identity formation, (e) self-esteem needs, (f) friendship building, and (g) extreme self-consciousness. Studies have also shown that students with higher IQ are reported to have intense social isolation in a regular classroom, and this combined with the unchallenging curriculum caused ongoing emotional stress (Rimm, 2002). Social acceptance that leads to maladjustment can also be a problem with these unusually high intelligent and gifted students as shown by Cross, Cassady, Dixon and Adams (2008) in their study on gifted adolescents attending a residential academy. Their study shows that over a long period of residential stay, academically gifted students shows signs of depression (general worry, concentration problems, and apathy), psychomotor retardation (denial of affect, listlessness, and social withdraw), and mental dullness (denial of ability to work as well as before, memory difficulty). However, although the findings were statistically significant, none reached the .20 effect-size cut off which is indicative of minimal change.

Cross, Speirs Neumeister, and Cassady (2007) used the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to discern potential overarching psychological types of gifted students attending a residential academy. Their study shows that, in comparison to sample norms, gifted students were equally introverted and extroverted, with more females preferring extraversion and more males preferring introversion. They were more prone to being intuitive, thinkers, and perceivers and therefore were apt to be autonomous, intellectual, imaginative, quick problem solvers, and flexible. Likewise, a predisposition for being a perceiver may make the students more subject to procrastination and disorganization and this can lead to many psychological issues that can trigger stress.

Concomitantly, educators as well as counselors need to be aware and observant of even the slightest behavioural differences from the norms, to truly understand these gifted students’ and provide the best possible services to their specific needs. After all, gifted achievers experience issues associated with schools, family and peer relationship comparable to non-gifted students.

1.1. Counseling Services for Malaysian Students – The Current Scenario

Educators and school counselors may not consider that gifted or high ability students have concerns related to their giftedness, academic prowess, social inept ability, or emotional development because they are supposed to be gifted. Nonetheless, studies have shown that gifted students seek counseling services to come to term with their own giftedness and people’s perceptions towards that giftedness, and to cope with the stress of growing up as a gifted child (Moon & Hall, 1998; Neihart, 1999, Piechowski, 1999). These students also seek or are referred for counseling services for issues related to underachievement, parental and peer relationships, emotional and social adjustment, and stress management (Moon, Kelly & Feldhusen, 1997), inability to express concerns (Peterson, 2003), academic pressure and heavy commitment to activities (Peterson, Duncan & Canady, 2007) where such issues have been shown to impact their well-beings.
Malaysian gifted students are no different from their equivalents in other countries. Although, there is no document to support the statement, it is decent to suggest that they face similar issues on top of the storm and stress of growing up as adolescents in a challenging world. However, because of the lack of provision in counseling services and Malaysian counselors are not trained to provide such service to gifted students, the service is not well received. This is evident in many studies conducted locally to examine the need of such services to school students (Salleh, 1998). Many students who seek counseling do not portray issues pertaining to any psychological issues faced by gifted students (example: extreme self-criticism, perfectionism etc.) even when the students who seek counseling services are academically talented (although not identified as gifted). Many if not all only seek career counseling or academic advising from their school counselors. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the gifted students never seek counseling services, but it could mean that the students shy away from discussing psychological issues unique to their characters. Conversely, as advocated by the American School Counselor Association (American School Counsellor Association, 2005), school counselors are called to proactively serve all students. Thus, to best meet the needs of all students, counselors must be aware of the strengths and challenges inherent to a variety of student populations (Bailey, 2007) including the gifted students.

At present, studies on the counseling needs of Malaysian gifted students are still at its infancy. In effect, at present, there is no body of literature that described the psychological issues and counseling needs of Malaysian gifted students. The study conducted by the researcher can be considered as a pioneer work that seeks to understand: (a) psychological issues presented by identified gifted students who attended gifted enrichment program in University Kebangsaan Malaysia, (b) the students coping mechanism, (c) preferred types of counseling services, and (d) the need to seek counseling services among Malaysian gifted students. It is hoped that such study will bring into light psychological issues faced by Malaysian gifted students, the counseling services and interventions needed to help them cope with the demand of being gifted.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design and Procedures

This study used a combination of quantitative-qualitative approaches. Data was collected using a set of questionnaires to identify psychological issues (perfectionism, extreme competitive behaviors, low self-esteem, identity formation, anxiety, and extreme self-consciousness). Students were also asked to respond to items related to their coping mechanism, the counseling services preferred by the students and the need to seek the services from professional school counselors. Data from the questionnaire was triangulated with the Critical Incident and Medical Report (CIMR) form used to report behaviors that signal psychological issues as well as informal interviews conducted when the students attended a three weeks enrichment program organized by Pusat PERMATApintar Negara, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (PpN-UKM), a Malaysian gifted center that was developed in 2009 by the Malaysian Prime Minister’s Department. CIMR is a form used by Johns Hopkins University – Center for Talented Youth (JHU-CTY) in their Summer Camp program to record any behavioral and medical issues displayed by students while attending the program. Permission to use the form was obtained through a consulting service provided by JHU-CTY to PpN-UKM in 2009 (Noriah, Rosadah & Siti Fatimah, 2009).

2.2. Sample and Population

Four hundred and five students were selected from a total number of 4868 who went through two rigorous identification processes, to attend the enrichment program conducted by the national gifted center. The students were identified using two IQ test conducted by the national gifted center (PERMATApintar UKM Test 1, and PERMATApintar UKM Test 2). Of the 405, one hundred and eighty students within the age group of 13, 14 and 15 years old were selected to participate in this study (180 responded to the questionnaire, and 8 were selected for the interview). Sixty-one students were from the 13 years age group, 60 from the 14 age group, and 59 from the 15 age group. However, only 178 subjects indicated their gender in the survey form (male = 77, female = 101).
2.2. Measures, Data Collection and Data Analysis

A set of questionnaires was used to explore psychological issues (56 items on a five-point Likert Scale), coping mechanism (10 items for rank order), preferred person to seek help (5 items for rank order), counseling services (5 items for rank order) and the need to seek counseling services (20 items on a five-point Likert Scale). Section A has demographic information that the students have to fill in (gender, age, ethnicity etc.). Section B explores the psychological issue, while Section C explores coping mechanism. Sections D and E explore individuals that students would likely to seek help from when under duress and the type of counseling services they require to be more fully functioning. Section F explores the need to seek counseling from the school counselors among the gifted students. Descriptive (mean) and inferential analysis (t-Test and ANOVA) was conducted on the quantitative data. Data from the unstructured interview was transcribed and coded using NVIVO 8, a qualitative data software together with data from the CIMR form.

3. Results

3.1. Psychological Issues

Data from Section B was analyzed descriptively using mean to examine psychological issues considered salient among the gifted students in this study. The mean for perfectionism is the highest (94.04), followed by competitiveness (79.30), low self-esteem (78.93), anxiety (77.04), identity formation (75.24) and extreme self-consciousness (73.78).

CIMR form was also analyzed to search for any behavioral indicators that suggest misdemeanors parallel to psychological disturbance among the gifted students attending the enrichment program. The CIMR form was written and submitted by the teachers and their teaching assistant to the gifted center’s administrative staff on a daily basis. Its’ main function was to record any misbehavior or behaviors indicative of psychological or medical issues that need attention and should be addressed by the administrators. It was also used by the counselors to help assess the severity of the issues being presented and developed short-term intervention for the students while they were at the camp.

Throughout the camp, 90 CIMR form was submitted to the administrative staff. Of these, 34 were medical reports, and 56 were report pertaining to various psychological issues. More girls (n=54) were reported through the CIMR form than the boys (n=27), and their issues were mainly psychological in nature (anxiety, low self-esteem and perfectionism). There were also nine repeated reports on three students. These reports were all psychological in nature pertaining to issues of anxiety and low self-esteem.

Data from the CIMR form was analyzed and categorized by themes, and several themes emerged that suggest psychological disturbance among the students. Some of the themes found in the CIMR form were parallel to the psychological issues explored in the questionnaire, and the themes emerged from the CIMR forms are as follows:

a. Low self-esteem (socially isolate oneself because of negative thoughts such as “not as good as the others”)

b. Perfectionism (keep doing the same assignment until everything looks perfect before submitting it to the teachers; procrastinate; “I can’t work in the group because they don’t seems to do it the way I did it”)

c. Competitiveness (downplay others abilities; voted oneself as the best)

d. Anxiety (crying for fear of something, seeing ghost/shadows at night, refuse to enter the class for fear of being ridiculed by friends)

3.2. Coping Mechanism Strategies

The students were asked to rank order 10 different coping mechanisms commonly used by them. These coping mechanisms represent active direct (AD), active indirect (AI), inactive direct (ID) and inactive indirect (II) coping mechanism as suggested by Lazarus and Folkman (1987). Of the 10 coping mechanism, 51 out of 180 students choose to focus on their academic work, and 32 prefer to seek spiritual assistance by praying and 29 prefer to forget
about their problems. The first two strategies are identified as AI (active indirect) while the third is identified as II (inactive indirect). Only 13 gifted students attending the camp single out coping mechanism that stated “Deal with the issue directly”. This strategy was identified as AD (active direct) and was ranked in the sixth place by the students. The least preferred strategy was getting involved in smoking or taking drugs.

Excerpt from the unstructured interviews conducted during the camp posit that the gifted students directed their coping mechanism mostly towards academic work (“When I got upset I just go to my room and study”, “She [my mom] just nags at me for no reason, so I just shut it off and go to my books”, “Friends don’t like me … they think I am a smart Alex, so in class I just study. I don’t care about them”, “I am lonely and nobody understands me. My best friend is my school work. That is where I shine”, “When I am absorbed in my books, I forget about my problems .. mainly problems with friends.”).

Six of the eight students interviewed also suggested that being smart is difficult and expectation is very high. Therefore, aside from using academic work to cope with their stress, the activity is also used to sharpen their academic potential to meet others expectation. This is echoed by one of the male students who is studying at a very prestigious boarding school in Malaysia (“I come from rural area, so everybody expect me to excel and be role model to others. It put so much pressure on me. I don’t know I am gifted but others thought so. See.. if I slack in my work.. they belittle me. So I get more stressful and study more.. It is like a vicious circle. I hope this will stop so I can rest. I am only 15 and have a long way to go”). Similar sentiment was resonated by another female student who was also studying at a boarding school for the past 2 years (“I hate it.. just because I did better than the rest, they [parents, teachers] put pressure that I perform all the time. So I study.. when I feel guilty of doing other activities .. I stop and study”).

Other coping mechanisms revealed by the students are: finding solace in their spiritual activity (“I just pray at night when everyone is asleep, and tell God how I hate being smart”), eating alone (“I ate my Maggi [in my dorm]. I don’t go to the dining hall. They will stare because I know that they know [of my mistakes]”, journaling in dairy (“my diary is my best friend”), remain silence for a long period of time (“I just sulk and not talk to anyone), venting the anger by crying alone (“I should not get the scolding, that is embarrassing, I am not stupid. It upsets me .. cried all day .. I hid my crying and not in the open”), and disengaged in any social activities (“I gave excuses not to be at the function, they talked about me .. I know”). These are the introverted behaviors displayed by the students when dealing with the storm and stress of everyday functioning.

3.3. Seeking Help From Others

The students were also given a list of individuals that they would most likely talk to when feeling stressful. More than 50% suggest that they would solve their own problem, while 17.22% will talk to their home room teachers or the assigned mentors (academic advisors). Talking to peers was ranked third (11.67%), counselors was ranked fourth (7.23%) and parents was ranked fifth (4.44%).

The gifted students were also asked to rank order counseling services they would like to receive if they were to seek the services from their school counselors. About 63% (62.78%) rank career counseling as the first service, followed by academic guidance (20%), group counseling (10%), individual counseling (6.11%)0 and family counseling (1.11%). Of the five, individual and family counseling are the two least favored counseling services preferred by the gifted students.
3.4. The Need for Counseling Services

Independent sample t-Test was conducted to examine the need to seek counseling among male and female gifted students in this study. The difference in mean was found to be significant (p = 0.002 < 0.05, df=176, F=8.09, t=-3.07) (Table 1). Mean for female students (Mean = 74.99, SD =14.75) were found to be higher than the male students (Mean = 68.87, SD = 10.74).

Table 1: Independent Sample t-Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>MD</th>
<th>SED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>The Need to Seek</td>
<td>8.09</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>-3.071</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>-6.12</td>
<td>1.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The need to seek counseling services was also examined among the gifted students with different age group (13, 14 and 15 years old). The mean was found to be significantly different (p = 0.00 < 0.05, F = 112.38) (Table 2). The 15 year old group has the highest mean (84.61), followed by the 14 year old (72.83) and the 13 year old (60.05) respectively.

Table 2: ANOVA (The Need to Seek Counseling and Age)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>18112.30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9056.15</td>
<td>112.38</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>14263.22</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>80.58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32375.52</td>
<td>179</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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</table>

Pos Hoc analysis using LSD was conducted to examine mean difference between the three groups. The biggest mean difference is between the 13 and 15 years old (MD = 24.56, p =0.00 < 0.05). MD between 14 and 15 years old is 11.78, while the MD between 13 and 14 years old is 12.78. All MD are significant with values less than 0.05.

4. Conclusion

This study has found some conclusive evidence to explain: (a) psychological issues of the Malaysian gifted students, (b) their coping mechanism, and (c) issues related to their need to seek help from others including the school counselors. Exploration on the psychological issues using different means of data collection shows that perfectionism is one of the most salient issues followed by competitiveness, low self-esteem, anxiety, identity formation and extreme self-consciousness.

With regards to perfectionism, the findings supported studies conducted by Seatter (2001) and Cross and Frazier (2010) in their study among gifted students attending a junior high school class in United States and Canada. Although the gifted students in Seatter study have scored well in their examination, there was still a feeling of imperfection and many felt that “they could improve their academic performance… with greater effort” even when they have done the best they could. The need to “strive to achieve more” was prominent among the gifted students. Therefore, there is always a gap for sense of satisfaction towards personal achievement and what has been achieved among these students over a period of time.

There is no difference in the case of the Malaysian gifted students. This is to be expected because Malaysian defines success by academic excellence, and students who have perfect score in the national exam is rewarded and praised by the society in the media and envisaged to be successful in the future. This high expectation in academic performance only aggravates the perfectionist behaviours as well as the need to compete among the gifted students. For those who are not able to compete, they become insecure and felt less adequate and so develop low self-esteem. This is shown in the study where behaviours that indicate low self-esteem is reported in the CIMR form forwarded by the teachers who observed the students’ behaviours in the classroom.
Findings from the study also show that the students prefer to use active indirect and inactive indirect strategies as compared to active direct strategies when coping with their problems. The most preferred active indirect strategy is getting themselves immersed in academic work (“focus on study”), followed by “spiritual activity (praying)”; and “forget about the problem”. This finding supported a study conducted by Noriah (1999) on Malaysian students who are studying in the United States. The students in her study can be defined as academically talented because they were selected through a very stringent academic process to receive a scholarship to study abroad in various fields including engineering, science, mathematics, and finance. It was evident from her study that the students redirect their problem into academic work, and hope that by doing so, they will forget about their problems. The students also alienated themselves from the host culture for fear of being rejected by members of the mainstream culture. Regardless of the students’ age group, such evidence is very important to academician as well as counselors when developing interventions to help these academically talented students deal with their concerns especially when they are living away from home in another country.

The findings also shows that the students prefer to deal with their own issues than sharing it with others (teachers, peers, parents or school counselors). Although the researcher did not examine any relationship between the gifted students coping mechanism and the need to seek help from others, it can be hypothesized that the gifted students who participated in this study prefer to redirect their problems to academic work as a mean to silence their problems. Inevitably, they might develop anti-social behaviours that can lead to depression and other related mental health problems.

In terms of seeking help, the gifted students also ranked “talking to counselors” as fourth (out of five). This is a very interesting finding, considering that school counselors are available at all times, during and after school hours. However, according to Peterson (2006), school counselors lack training in understanding gifted students, and this might render their services as ineffective. The use of general approaches in counseling might not work with this specific population. School counselors should be part of a continuing process of discovery about the social and emotional development of gifted students and provided with the best approaches to counsel them. Likewise, Malaysian counselors, while in training were never exposed to any issues related to gifted students. None of the curriculum in any counseling programs offered by Malaysian universities covers the topics. As such, exposure on and about gifted students are very minimal, and these counselors when working the gifted students, will use similar approaches that is being used for other students (Plucker, 1996; Wood, 2010). Inevitably, the gifted students perceived the services as being unhelpful. According to Wood school counselors play a vital role in meeting the needs of gifted students. However, because there is a lack of structured, standardized, and empirically tested best practices for counseling gifted students, school counselors may not know how best to serve this unique population.

When the students decided to seek help from the counselors, it is more for career and academic advising rather than personal issues (interpersonal relation, self-growth, family issues etc.). Again, these could be for a number of reasons: (a) more concern about their career and how they perform in academic work, (b) they were not comfortable talking about personal issue for fear of being jeered for being problematic gifted students, (c) standing up to others’ expectation that gifted students do not have problems, and (d) they do not like to disclose their problems to others. This finding is similar to a study conducted by Yoo and Moon (2006) which suggest that as the gifted students grow older, their concern were more on career development and academic achievement rather than any other personal issues.

The study also shows that the female students need to seek counseling are higher than the male students. This could mean that the female students were more willing to talk about their issues than their male counterparts, are more able to self-disclose, and do not shy away from sharing their problems with others. According to Cross et al. (2007) female gifted students are more extroverted, while the male gifted students are more introverted, which means that the earlier are more friendly, and outgoing. When given the chance, an extrovert will talk with someone else rather than sit alone and think, and counseling sessions can be seen as a chance for them to talk to others with regards to their problems. They think well when they are talking, and do it best around other people.

The need for counseling services was also explored among the 13, 14 and 15 years old gifted students. The finding shows that 15 year old students have higher need for counseling services when compared to the younger groups. The Pos Hoc analysis shows a large mean difference between the 13 and 15 years old. Consequently, for this group of gifted students, the older they are, the more likely that they will seek counseling service. Buescher (1987) suggested that as adolescents enter junior high school, they become more sensitive to being labelled gifted and they see giftedness as a disadvantage. In addition, they might have a different issues being in junior high school because the years will be marked with new social life and probably romantic interests that replaced their previous interest in only academic work. These issues warrant counseling services, as compared to only academic issue.
In conclusion, this study was able to bring into light many psychological issues and the need for counseling services among the Malaysian gifted students. This is important because Malaysia is now embarking on its journey to identify and provide the best possible education and psychological supports to this group of students who have been left unattended for the last few decades to mend their own fence. Since these students will be future human capital for the country, it is only fair that some investment be made to support not only their academic needs but also psychological needs to ensure development of a balance well-being.

References


