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Holistic Counselling of Gifted Adolescents in Singapore

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Abstract

Intellectually gifted pupils in Singapore are blessed with supportive parents who are constantly concerned with their development and attainment. In addition, the Gifted Education Branch of the Ministry of Education has provided these pupils with an enriched and challenging curriculum. Nevertheless, individual differences among the gifted are of such a wide range that individual attention needs to be given to the pupils in the form of guidance and counselling in times of stress. Counselling gifted adolescents in this study took the form of a holistic approach of first identifying a possible lack of development in the four areas of heart, body, mind and soul; followed by individualised prescription for self-knowledge and volition for personal development. Counselling vignettes of gifted pupils in the secondary schools are featured in this study.

The Singapore Scene

Gifted pupils in Singapore are blessed with supportive parents who are constantly concerned with their development and attainment. In addition, the Gifted Education Branch (GEB) of the Ministry of Education has provided these pupils with an enriched and challenging curriculum. Nevertheless, individual differences among the gifted are of such a wide range that individual attention needs to be given to the pupils in the form of guidance and counselling in times of stress.

Teachers of the gifted, especially form teachers, are the frontline counsellors. Since 1996, the GEB has appointed teachers to take on roles of "in-house counsellors" or IHCs. These IHCs are given additional on-the-job training by the GEB Counsellor(s) and Educational Psychologist. They are further encouraged to take up advance courses in counselling like the Master of Arts in Applied Psychology (Counselling) at the National Institute of Education, the only teacher training institution in the nation.

Why counsel the gifted?

Counselling and guidance are essential for the full development of gifted children (Silverman, 1997; Colangelo, 1997). All living organisms have their respective degree or stage of maturity. The gifts and graces showered upon the gifted adolescent during the period of youth, though timely and sufficient, could not alone meet the requirements of his or her maturity. The main goal of counselling, therefore, is for parents and teachers, and the gifted themselves, to obtain a complete understanding of the unique personal and educational problems of the gifted, and hence be able to help them devise strategies or coping mechanisms to overcome these perceived problems.

In the first half century of interest in counselling the gifted, Silverman (1983) has noted a concentration of research efforts in the areas of understanding underachievement among the gifted, describing the characteristics of the creative, recognizing the special problems of the culturally diverse, the plight of gifted women, and developing career counselling programs. Although this study has the similar goals of helping the gifted to understand themselves and to solve their problems, it has taken a more positive and proactive approach of the conscious development of the mental, volitional and affective capacities of gifted adolescents. It aims to

hasten the maturation process as in the development of the whole person in the aspects of the heart, body, mind and spirit, and hence allowing the gifted to take care of their own problems.

The results of the use of holistic counselling (Peterson & Nisenholz, 1990) with three gifted adolescents in the Gifted Education Programme (GEP) are documented in the following case studies. Basically, the counsellor first diagnosed the characteristics of the gifted, taking note of any atypical circumstances in each case. She then prescribed and carried out the respective remedial intervention, be it a volitional intervention on moral choice, an educational intervention on self knowledge, or a deliberate inculcation of skills as in time management, stress management or interpersonal conflict management.

Counselling Notes

Case 1: Chin

Chin, a thirteen-year-old Secondary One (Year 7) gifted pupil in one of the premier schools in Singapore, told the counsellor that he would like to leave the Gifted Education Programme as he could not cope with the workload. He had made several appointments with the counsellor, sometimes to brush up his mathematics, and at other times to talk to the counsellor of his problems. For mathematics, the counsellor helped him to perceive the thinking behind the abstract concepts by working through the more difficult questions in his worksheets. The counsellor noticed that Chin sometimes used his left hand to write. This was pointed out to him, and the preferred learning styles of left-handed or right-brained persons were carefully explained to him so that he would be able to identify the teaching styles of his teachers in relation to his personal learning style. With such open discussions, it was hoped that Chin would begin to realise his strengths and weaknesses as his self-knowledge increased. The importance of stimulating the brain with active thinking through the solution of difficult problems was shared with Chin, and evidences of the advantages of mental stimulation were also given to him in biological terms.

As Chin was apprehensive of attending to the differentiated GEP curriculum which appeared to comprise an abundance of higher order thinking, the counsellor had to show him the logical evidence of his potential coping capability. The fact that GEP pupils are selected purely on merit and not by chance, and that being in one of the top schools indicated that Chin was still ahead of many other pupils in the same age cohort was fully explicated. Chin felt more assured of himself towards the end of the counselling sessions. As Chin solved more of the difficult problems in the worksheets on his own, his confidence level rose. In this case, it was mainly the conscious education of Chin on the stringent GEP selection process that enabled him to gain positive beliefs and courage to continue with the upward struggle.

In later sessions with Chin, the counsellor found that he liked the training given in his extra-curricula activity (ECA) – athletics, except that it took him so much time and energy that it left him tired. Consequently, he was unable to complete his homework afterwards. The counsellor spoke to the Head of the GEP Department in the school concerning this matter, and together with a letter from Chin's mother, Chin's ECA training was reduced to two days instead of three.

The counsellor sought Chin out in the following term as he no longer made regular appointments to see her. Chin said that there was less work that term and the fact that his ECA workload had been reduced made a difference. It was observed that Chin had grown taller and was not getting "too much" attention from the teachers where the handing in of work was concerned. The

counsellor reminded Chin to be “brave” and to learn to negotiate deadlines with teachers whenever he needed to. Chin smiled. He did not say that he would like to leave the GEP anymore. The counsellor checked with Chin to see if he was still stressed on several occasions thereafter. Chin told the counsellor that he was able to cope with work then. He was known to be preparing for his end-of-year examinations the last time the counsellor saw him.

Case II: Pat

Pat was a courteous and easy-going boy. He was a bespectacled and overweight thirteen-year-old with a most pleasant and cheerful smile. He informed the counsellor that he was under “review”, or placed “on probation” by the Gifted Education Branch (GEB). This meant that he would be asked to leave the Gifted Programme should he be unable to pass the tests or examinations satisfactorily. In fact, he needed to obtain a minimum mean score of 60% for promotion to the next grade level.

When interviewed, Pat felt that it was his “laziness” which led to the poor academic performance. In an attempt to activate his volition, the counsellor asked him if he would like to be hardworking. He said, “Yes, definitely. But I sometimes fall asleep while doing my work. I usually lock myself in when I do my work, and once when I woke up, it was already 6 a.m. the next morning!” The counsellor agreed with Pat that he should not be lazy as time does not run in the reverse direction. Pat nodded. The counsellor then taught Pat to write a “to-do” list. He took out his diary and wrote down all the chores for the day. He was also taught to highlight the more important tasks to be completed.

The counsellor gave Pat some help in his mathematics in subsequent meetings. His initial complaint was that the problems given by the teacher were just beyond him. After his thinking processes were discussed, the logic behind the problems became clearer and his remarks were, “O! I see!” When the GEB Officer in charge of the Chinese language programme at the secondary level informed the counsellor that Pat was not doing well in Chinese, the counsellor taught Pat to use the “imagery” or “visualisation” technique.

Pat later told the counsellor that the teachers had been “more understanding”. The counsellor took the opportunity to ask him to work harder in return for the teachers’ kindness; that he should activate his “will” to do good – to complete his assignments as soon as he could. The counsellor wanted Pat to seat himself beside hardworking pupils as this might give him motivation to achieve.

The counsellor had the opportunity to meet Pat’s mum on home visits. Like all parents in Singapore, she was most concerned with Pat’s academic progress. She said that she was so upset with Pat’s poor performance that she had been scolding and nagging him. The counsellor advised her against excessive nagging as this might give Pat even more stress. She told the counsellor that she herself felt very stressed when teachers informed her of the “late work” or “no work” that Pat submitted. She was also worried about Pat having very little sleep while trying to complete his homework late into the night.

The counsellor explained the importance of having a balanced life to mother and son. The constant emphasis on academic performance alone was becoming a source of stress and strain for any healthy development of a gifted adolescent like Pat to be possible. The provision of opportunities for Pat to be more loving and happy (where the ‘heart’ could develop emotionally),

to read other books (where intellectual development of the mind was made possible), to be healthy and clean (where the body could develop healthily), and finally to be truthful, trustworthy, kind, etc (where the human spirit could develop its moral and spiritual qualities) were shared. Being aware of the possible estrangement between mother and child enabled the counsellor to play the peace-making role. Any possible misunderstandings between mother and son were discussed.

Pat's "indulgence" in computer games and Science Fictions – which was probably one of the underlying causes of him being more unrealistic and imaginative than other students, was discovered after several home visits. With collaborative effort of the mother, teachers and himself, Pat was forced to regulate the time spent on such activities.

In the months that followed, the counsellor saw Pat trying to hand in all his work even if it meant staying up till dawn hours. He appeared to have become more honest with his mother and trustworthy to his teachers where the handing in of work was concerned. He also understood why mum was upset with him. He stayed at home to complete his major school project on time. He fell ill after handing it in. Occasionally, Pat was seen rushing a late assignment to his teacher. The counsellor continued to encourage him to work hard for the end-of-year examinations. She also discussed examination techniques, methods of concentration, etc., with him.

It was unfortunate that Pat's results for the final examination were not good enough for him to remain in the Programme. He took sometime to come to terms with reality. He requested to go to a secondary school of his liking. The counsellor had to convince his mother that a change to the mainstream school would not impede his progress. The transfer took place eventually and since then, Pat had been reported to be doing well in the new school.

Discussion

In this study, all names used in the case studies are fictitious, as confidentiality of the identity of the pupils concerned needs to be maintained for ethical reasons. It is noted that conscious effort had been made by the counsellor to avoid fault finding with the gifted adolescents. Instead, the pupils were encouraged to acquire greater self-knowledge, to be reflective of their strengths and weaknesses and to develop their "selves" consciously. The promotion of the understanding and the development of the self, according to Schultz and Delisle (1997), are important for self-actualization of the gifted.

In the case of Chin, teaching him about his preferred hemispheric functions appears to have enhanced his self-knowledge, led him to teach himself learning strategies and adjust to the teachers' teaching styles whenever a mismatch of styles occurred. For Pat, the knowledge of his "laziness" did help him to try to overcome it. Self-knowledge, though not quantifiable in this study, appears to be effective in the development of gifted adolescents under study.

The activation of the will, and the execution of will power and moral choices, seems to take a lot of courage for both pupils. Intervention by the counsellor to activate Pat's volition to overcome his "laziness" for instance was too mild for observable effect. For Chin, physical development of the body appears to have helped him cope with the strenuous and demanding tasks of athletic training and mental challenges posed by the differentiated curriculum of the GEP.

Positive emotions of the feeling of parental love seem to have alleviated some stress for the gifted pupils in the study. Positive emotions of relief, delight and joyfulness are known to result in goal-directed actions (Bower, 1992). Conflict between the gifted and family members like the mother, as observed in the study, is certainly not conducive for productive and achieving behaviors of gifted adolescents. It is only when the gifted are happy both at home and in school that they could funnel their energy into achievement.

Theories of moral development of gifted children have indicated that the gifted as a group have greater capacities in universal principles of justice, trustworthiness, selflessness, moral sensitivity and others (Lovecky, 1997; Silverman, 1994; Terman, 1925). High level morality is recently seen as a function of the total person, especially the factors that constitute development potential (Hague, 1998). It is closely related to choice. In the current study, gifted adolescents were made conscious of this aspect of their existence when the counsellor taught them about the development of spiritual or moral qualities when they “will” to be good, to be trustworthy, to replace laziness with diligence, and to lead a balanced and healthy life style.

Implications for practice

Teachers, counsellors and parents of the gifted may like to remind themselves that gifted adolescents, like all other living things, need to grow. They must grow holistically and healthily – specifically in the areas of heart, body, mind and soul. Any unintended imbalance in the developmental process may result in stress in the life of the gifted.

Treatment of “stress” in gifted adolescents, or counselling, first involves diagnosis. The significant adults need to identify the root cause of the behaviour of the maladjusting gifted before prescription for the conscious development of particular capabilities or strengths; spiritual or moral qualities; or skills could be envisioned. The adult could then provide direct feedback, educational theories or logical explanations to help the gifted understand the self and hence the circumstances under which the forces of stress are operating. He or she then sets the goals of change together with the gifted adolescent. It is very important to note that the gifted adolescent must decide to adopt those goals or set his own goals *on his own volition*.

Intervention that follows will take the forms of scaffolding, gentle reprimands or active inculcation and rehearsals of personal skills. It needs to be noted that scaffolding in this case includes giving instructional assistance that helps the gifted adolescent attain greater heights of understanding, taking the gifted through visual solution steps, as well as negotiating with other difficult adults, siblings or peers in the gifted adolescent’s environment. Encouragement, patience and perseverance are necessary characteristics of all care-giving adults involved in helping the gifted adolescent to outgrow his problems.

Conclusion

The fact that gifted adolescents are intellectually able does not preclude them from storms and stresses of maturation. Effective stress management requires a “whole child” approach that addresses the gifted adolescent’s intellect, emotions, morality and physical health. Through the process of encouragement, diagnosis and intervention, the counsellor in the study focussed on strengths, resources and skills of the individual. It appears that this approach has helped the gifted to become more aware of their capabilities and potential. Teachers and parents may tend to look for the magic formulae to rid gifted adolescents of their problems. However, it appears that a

combination of conscious education on self-knowledge, developmental training and behavioral management with respect to the heart, body, mind and soul of the adolescent in a holistic manner works wonders for gifted children.

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