January 2001

Doogie Howser, M.D., Ph.D., Ed.D.: The Myths and Realities of Gifted Students in Higher Education

Rosemary J. Perez

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc

Part of the Higher Education Administration Commons

Doogie Howser, M.D., Ph.D., Ed.D.:

The Myths and Realities of Gifted Students in Higher Education

Rosemary J. Perez

This paper seeks to examine gifted student development, specifically regarding academic acceleration. The author will use published literature, observations from the field, and personal communication to: (a) characterize gifted students, (b) address the myths and realities of gifted student development, (c) examine the intersections of identity for gifted students, and (d) examine the interactions between gifted students and student affair professionals. Despite the ageist attitudes of many constituencies within higher education and concerns regarding their development, gifted students are found to be well-adjusted, successful individuals with comparable experiences to those of traditional college-age students.

In the early 90's, Doogie Howser, M.D. entered our homes. The premise of this television show seemed preposterous to most – a child prodigy becomes a practicing physician at the age of 16, following his accelerated high school and college education. Throughout the series, Doogie is torn between the adult world of his profession and the adolescent world of his friends. He continuously struggles to define himself within the bounds of this dichotomous experience. Yet in the end, he consistently resolves these internal conflicts, learns profound life lessons, and affirms his sense of self.

Although Doogie Howser, M.D. was a fictional character, his life is not unimaginable. For instance, Michael Kearney, age 10, graduated with a bachelor's degree in anthropology from the University of South Alabama. In 1998, at the age of 14, he graduated from Middle Tennessee University with a master's degree in biochemistry and was seeking admission to a doctoral program in the same sphere (Reisberg, 1998). Similarly, Jessie Merlin enrolled at Carnegie Mellon University at the age of 14. The 18-year-old graduated in May of 2000 with a degree in biology, and is currently attending the University of Pennsylvania Medical School (J. Merlin, personal communication, March 24, 2000).

With increased identification of gifted students and rates of academic acceleration, more Michael Kearneys and Jessie Merlins are arriving on our college campuses. One may wonder if these students are prepared to be in a college or university setting. Concurrently, one wonders if higher education is prepared for the presence of early college entrants. This paper seeks to characterize gifted students, determine the myths and realities of academic acceleration, examine the intersections of identity for gifted students, and determine the impact of gifted students on the practice of student affairs professionals.

Characteristics of Gifted Students

Personality Traits
Although each gifted student is a unique individual, gifted students as a population tend to share several personality characteristics. It is commonly believed that gifted students differ from "normal," traditional students in three significant ways:

The first has to do with work: gifted children are highly motivated to work and achieve mastery, they derive pleasure from challenge, and at least by adolescence, they have an unusually strong sense of who they are and what they want to do as adults. The second has to do with value structures: they are fiercely independent and nonconforming. And the third has to do with relationships with peers: they tend to be more introverted and lonelier than the average child, both because they have so little in common with others and because they need and want to be alone to develop their talent. (Winner, 1996, p. 212)

Rosemary J. Perez graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in 1999 with a bachelor's degree in biological sciences and an additional major in psychology. She is currently a second-year HESA student working in the Department of Residential Life as the Assistant Coordinator of Residential Programs for Staff Selection and Training and as an Assistant Complex Coordinator.

Gifted students are also characterized as insightful, empathetic individuals, who are extremely self-aware. They tend to be perfectionists who have a deep need for precision and logic. Intellectually, gifted students are described as quick learners with a high degree of curiosity, coupled with exceptional reasoning ability and analytical skills. Many are also extremely imaginative, creative, reflective, and focused (Silverman, 1997).

The fact that many gifted students share these personality and intellectual traits has led to stereotyping of this population. Often, gifted students are portrayed as overly cerebral, socially inept individuals whose passions are solely academic. Although these stereotypes hold true for some students, gifted students are a diverse population, spanning the range of personality characteristics, interests, and developmental concerns (Laycock, 1984).

Family Attributes
Perhaps the most influential factor in gifted student development is the family unit. Although some students are genetically predisposed to developing a high degree of intelligence, the family environment is often critical in ensuring that disposition comes to fruition. Typically, gifted students: (a) occupy "special positions" within the family as the first born or only child, (b) grow up in enriched environments, (c) have child-centered parents, (d) have driven parents who model and set high standards for achievement, (e) have considerable autonomy, and (f) live in environments that combine adequate challenge with support for the development of talent (Winner, 1996). It is important to note that these traits are not exclusive of gifted student families, nor are they exemplified by all of these families.

The most impactful trait of these is that the child is encouraged to achieve, rather than being pressured to do so (Laycock, 1984; Winner, 1996). Gifted students express greater happiness with their talents and academic acceleration when they, rather than their parents, make a conscious choice to advance their education (J. Merlin, personal communication, March 24, 2000; Olszewski-Kubilius, 1998). When students are pressured to succeed, they may feel resentment and anger, leading them to underachieve academically and socially. This underachievement can be expressed as intentional handicapping of success, such as failing to complete coursework, or as downplaying of one's talents. Regardless of the mechanism, underachievement is a common method of relieving the stress associated with the pressure to be successful.

Families of gifted students also: (a) tend to be well educated, (b) have a stable source of income, and (c) have good marital relations between the parents (Janos & Robinson, 1985). This leads one to question whether or not gifted children have the same opportunities to fully develop their talents in lieu of family instability. Furthermore, there may be a significant bias in the recognition of gifted students based on socioeconomic status (SES). Adults living with a lower SES may not possess the education necessary to recognize their children as gifted individuals. Even if children are recognized as gifted, their families may not have the ability to finance an accelerated education. Also, some gifted students work to help support their family instead of focusing on an advanced level of education. Thus, it is likely that smaller numbers of gifted students from a lower SES is indicative of the disparity of resources among various social classes rather than an inherent difference in intelligence.

Developmental Concerns for Gifted Students

Academic Issues
Once a student is officially recognized as gifted via standardized testing, they may be eligible to participate in academic acceleration. This process is the advancement of a student through the educational system at a rate faster than that of the average, traditional student. Often, this process is operationalized as grade skipping, curriculum compacting, advance placement tests, credit by examination, and early entrance into a particular level of education (Southern & Jones, 1991).

Rosemary J. Perez graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in 1999 with a bachelor's degree in biological sciences and an additional major in psychology. She is currently a second-year HESA student working in the Department of Residential Life as the Assistant Coordinator of Residential Programs for Staff Selection and Training and as an Assistant Complex Coordinator.

Supporters of academic acceleration argue that it increases the efficiency of the educational system, as well as its effectiveness (Southern & Jones, 1991). Students who are prepared for more challenging material than that with which they are presented often become bored in the classroom, leading to decreased desire to learn and to challenge oneself intellectually. By providing a greater degree of academic challenge and support for students, educational acceleration fosters intellectual development at a level that meets a particular student's ability. Furthermore, it promotes exploration of disciplines of interest that may be too advanced for agemates at the gifted student's current educational level. Pragmatists also argue that academic acceleration is cost effective. By moving some students more quickly through the educational system, resources are freed for others.

Despite the benefits of academic acceleration, many argue that the negative effects of the process are far more significant. Critics fear that accelerated students may be advanced past their level of understanding and ability, leading to failure in the classroom and loss of interest in school. Furthermore, there are concerns that although students are intellectually prepared to be in classes, they do not have the scholastic skills necessary to succeed. Since gifted students have not had the advantage of systematic instruction and assessment of skills over time, they have not fully developed fundamental study skills (Southern & Jones, 1991). It is assumed that students enter upper level instruction with these abilities, so offering remedial study skills training to gifted students seems contradictory. Additionally, most gifted students have never struggled academically, making them less likely to ask for assistance.

Accelerated students may also struggle academically since they do not have life experiences to connect to many curricular topics. This prevents students from gaining full understanding of the curriculum, since it is not relevant to their daily reality. It is also possible that these students will not have a true voice in the classroom since they cannot share their narratives in a meaningful way when addressing unfamiliar topics. This also raises the question of what is more important in education – intellect or experience? In the case of accelerated students, intellect precedes experience, with the hopes that the latter will be gained over time.

Social Development Issues
Those who question the value of academic acceleration argue that gifted students will not develop socially. One concern is that gifted students will not make friendships a priority since they are pushed to succeed academically. In effect, they are sacrificing their childhood for the sake of academic achievement (Noble, Ardnt, Nicholson, Sletten & Zamora, 1998; Southern & Jones, 1991). One wonders if these students are missing out on the enjoyable aspects of a "normal" childhood in order to enter the adult world at an earlier age. Furthermore, one suspects that these students will later regret missing out on a "normal" childhood experience.

Slowed social development may be intensified by their lack of contact with agemates, as well as their lack of shared, normative social experiences, such as attending the prom (Southern & Jones, 1991). This reduced level of contact decreases the ability to relate to agemates since interests and experiences may differ significantly. Agemates are less likely to accept a gifted student whose interests and experiences they neither relate to nor understand. In some cases, agemates shun gifted students because they feel intellectually inferior or because they believe that the gifted student acts in an elitist manner. Rather than reflecting the gifted student's social development, avoidance by agemates often reflects their own self-esteem issues.

The lack of interaction with agemates does not allow gifted students to develop the social skills necessary to maintain mature relationships. Older, traditional students tend to assume that gifted students are also socially and emotionally mature, and the failure to possess relationship skills may foil their friendships. Furthermore, traditional students may reject younger, gifted students since they cannot relate to their experiences, viewing them as abnormal (Southern & Jones, 1991). Much like agemates, traditionally aged students can ostracize gifted students due to their feelings of intellectual inadequacy.

Emotional Development Issues
The academic and social issues facing gifted students have a significant effect on emotional development,

Rosemary J. Perez graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in 1999 with a bachelor's degree in biological sciences and an additional major in psychology. She is currently a second-year HESA student working in the Department of Residential Life as the Assistant Coordinator of Residential Programs for Staff Selection and Training and as an Assistant Complex Coordinator.

particularly with regard to self-esteem. Struggling academically for the first time can lower self-esteem for gifted students who are accustomed to success in the classroom (Noble et al., 1998). Furthermore, some have difficulty dealing with the fact that they are encountering intellectual equals or superior students for the first time. This loss of status as the best or the brightest can disrupt the identity of the gifted student, leaving them searching for ways to redefine themselves. Furthermore, many of these students never needed to develop the coping mechanisms to deal with failure, so they tend to have greater difficulty than the average student in addressing setbacks.

These self-esteem issues are often compounded by the lack of connection to agemates and classmates. Some gifted students develop low-self esteem regarding their inability to forge successful relationships with others (Southern & Jones, 1991). These students feel emotionally isolated and as though they lack a sufficient support network. This feeling of disconnection makes gifted students less likely to ask for help when they experience emotional difficulty.

Developmental Realities of Gifted Students

Despite the many concerns regarding academic acceleration and the development of gifted students, they appear to be well-adjusted, successful individuals (Solano, 1987). Research on gifted students indicates that they earn higher grades and more academic honors than traditional college-age students. Furthermore, they tend to build closer relationships with faculty members since they are more likely to ask questions and initiate contact outside of class (Janos, Robinson & Lunneborg, 1989).

Gifted students are also likely to have dynamic social lives in college. They participate in a greater number of extracurricular activities than other students, allowing them to build relationships across campus (Janos et al., 1989). Many gifted students who accelerate into college via programs for early college entrants find that they are able to build close, supportive relationships with agemates. Finding this acceptance later assists them in building meaningful relationships with older, traditional college-age students (Noble et al., 1998; Noble & Drummond, 1992; Olszewski-Kubilius, 1998). In these cases, shared interests and respect for intellect have been a more powerful force in friendship than that of chronological age.

Gifted students also appear to be well-adjusted emotionally. Studies indicate that gifted students have a higher self-esteem and self-concept than traditional students (Janos & Robinson, 1985). However, this self-esteem may be dependent on the level of achievement, leaving these students vulnerable upon experiencing failure. High levels of achievement also influence the elevated levels of maturity, self-confidence, ambition, and personal responsibility exhibited by a majority of gifted students (Noble et al., 1998; Olszewski-Kubilius, 1998).

Special Populations of Gifted Students

Gifted Students of Color
Historically, people who claim an African American, Native American, or Latino identity have been significantly underrepresented in the gifted student population (Baldwin, 1985). The lack of academically accelerated students of color feeds into stereotypes regarding the intelligence of minorities. However, there are several factors that may impact the recognition of gifted students of color.

First, many gifted students are "discovered" through the use of standardized tests, such as the SAT. There are concerns that these tests are culturally biased, and are not inclusive of the learning styles that pervade non-white culture. Furthermore, these tests are formatted to recognize a particular type of giftedness, grounded in white cultural standards of intelligence, such as English language proficiency. Studies indicate that these biases are indeed reality, since there are as many gifted minority students as there are gifted white students. However,

Rosemary J. Perez graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in 1999 with a bachelor's degree in biological sciences and an additional major in psychology. She is currently a second-year HESA student working in the Department of Residential Life as the Assistant Coordinator of Residential Programs for Staff Selection and Training and as an Assistant Complex Coordinator.

students of color are gifted along dimensions not considered within the mainstream educational system (Baldwin, 1985).

Secondly, socioeconomic status may play a role in lack of recognition of gifted minority students. There are many gifted students in schools that are not equipped with teachers trained to recognize gifted students. Furthermore, if these students are discovered, neither families nor schools may possess the resources to academically accelerate them to a level where they would be appropriately challenged.

Finally, one's cultural beliefs can influence the likelihood of being recognized as gifted (Baldwin, 1985). In some cultures, humility is a central principle. Being recognized as "special" for one's talents may run counter to this belief, leading gifted students of color to hide or downplay their abilities. Other cultures strongly value family relationships. Academic acceleration may necessitate students to move away from home, causing gifted students to decline opportunities to further their education in favor of family.

Gifted Women
Women who are recognized as gifted can experience developmental issues that are more complicated than those associated with male gifted students. Although most women struggle with the confines of gender stereotypes, gifted women may have greater difficulty since they are already defying the notion that women are less intelligent than men (Eccles, 1985). In response to this gender nonconformity, some women compensate by downplaying their intelligence, attributing it to effort rather than innate skill. Men on the other hand, claim their intelligence as a trait and underestimate the work involved in academic achievement. Women may also attempt to conform to gender stereotypes by pursuing an education in the humanities rather than sciences and mathematics, since the latter are typically associated with men.

Gifted women also tend to have more significant issues in their adjustment to college. Some have lacked the opportunity to build close relationships in the past with peers; consequently, when they find acceptance by others at college, they focus more on socializing than on academics (Ingersoll & Cornell, 1995). This in turn leads to academic difficulty and self-esteem issues. Women are especially vulnerable to this experience because they are socialized to value relationships. The failure to maintain positive relationships may lead gifted women to overcompensate when opportunities for new friendships are presented. In effect, they use relationships to conform to gender stereotypes in order to counteract the ways in which they deviate from them.

Gifted Students and Student Affairs Professionals

Today, many student affairs professionals lack the depth of knowledge needed to work with younger, gifted students. Little information is available to staff members regarding the development of these students, and much of the available literature focuses on students at universities with programs specifically for early college entrants. These students are constantly in contact with others who are sharing similar experiences as an accelerated student. Furthermore, these programs have advising and counseling systems as well as classes constructed to specifically address their needs. Individual students who have chosen to accelerate their education at institutions without such programs are rarely discussed. These particular students may encounter more developmental difficulties, since they may be the only one going through that experience. Consequently, student affairs professionals need to be more sensitive to the experience of the sole gifted student.

Student affairs professionals also need to address their own misconceptions of gifted students, as well as any age biases they possess. The language of higher education itself reflects ageist tendencies. Typically, "non-traditional students" refers to those who are beyond the "normal" 18 to 24-year-old age range. This excludes younger students who are non-traditional students in action, but not by definition. Although unintentional, the language of student affairs marginalizes some students in order to be inclusive of others. In fact, it transforms younger, gifted students into an invisible population.

Rosemary J. Perez graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in 1999 with a bachelor's degree in biological sciences and an additional major in psychology. She is currently a second-year HESA student working in the Department of Residential Life as the Assistant Coordinator of Residential Programs for Staff Selection and Training and as an Assistant Complex Coordinator.

Furthermore, student affairs administrators can experience difficulty shifting their frame of reference for younger, gifted students. Often gifted students are talked down to or treated as children, despite their admission as students into an adult environment. This was exemplified by Jessie Merlin's experience with her "mentor" at Carnegie Mellon University:

…they assigned us a "mentor" from Student Life to provide us with support…Once in a blue moon we went out to lunch, but the experience was terrible. She did not hide her preconceived notions about me – that because I was young, I must have been a maladjusted, awkward kid needing tons of help socially, which was obviously not the case…there is no need to force younger students into a preconceived support system. (J. Merlin, personal communication, March 24, 2000)

In order to effectively work with gifted individuals, student affairs professionals must be willing to shift and expand the student paradigm. This requires that administrators assess whether or not their institution is conducive to the development of a gifted student (Brody & Stanley, 1991). It also requires that institutions revisit and revise policies and practices regarding admission and programming, among other things to make them more inclusive for younger, gifted students.

Perhaps the most meaningful thing that student affairs professionals can do for gifted students is to treat them as they would other students - with respect for the whole person. At the same time, they should be mindful of the issues facing gifted students. In particular, they need to address the issues of underachievement, self-esteem, academic difficulty, and social adjustment that emerge for some gifted students (Brown, 1993; Kaplan & Geoffroy, 1993). However, these students encounter such difficulties with frequencies and concerns similar to that of the average, traditionally aged college student.

Conclusion

Gifted students are indeed a unique population with their own developmental concerns. However, they are more similar to the traditional college student than one may believe. Both populations struggle with issues of autonomy, identity, relationships, and academic success. Yet, the experience of the gifted student is complicated by the ageist attitudes of some students and higher education administrators. In order for gifted students to fully benefit from college, a paradigm shift must occur, allowing for the flexibility of student experiences of all ages.

References

Baldwin, A. Y. (1985). Programs for the gifted and talented: Issues concerning minority populations. In F. D. Horowitz & M. O'Brien (Eds.), The Gifted and Talented: Developmental Perspectives (pp. 223-249). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Brody, L. E. & Stanley, J. C. (1991). Young college students: Assessing factors that contribute to success. In W. T. Southern & E. D. Jones (Eds.), The Academic Acceleration of Gifted Children (pp. 102-132). New York: Teachers College Press.

Brown, L. L. (1993). Special considerations in counseling gifted students. The School Counselor, 40 (3), 184-190.

Eccles, J. S. (1985). Sex differences in educational and occupational patterns. In F. D. Horowitz & M. O'Brien (Eds.), The Gifted and Talented: Developmental Perspectives (pp. 251-295). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Rosemary J. Perez graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in 1999 with a bachelor's degree in biological sciences and an additional major in psychology. She is currently a second-year HESA student working in the Department of Residential Life as the Assistant Coordinator of Residential Programs for Staff Selection and Training and as an Assistant Complex Coordinator.

Ingersoll, K. S. & Cornell, D. G. (1995). Social adjustment of female early college entrants in a residential program. Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 19 (1), 45-62.

Janos, P. M. & Robinson, N. M. (1985). Psychological development in intellectually gifted student. In F. D. Horowitz & M. O'Brien (Eds.), The Gifted and Talented: Developmental Perspectives (pp. 149-195). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Janos, P. M., Robinson, N. M., & Lunneborg, C. E. (1989). Markedly early entrance to college: A multi-year comparative study of academic performance and psychological adjustment. Journal of Higher Education, 60 (5), 495-518.

Kaplan, L. S. & Geoffroy, K. E. (1993). Copout or burnout? Counseling strategies to reduce stress in gifted students. The School Counselor, 40 (4), 247-252.

Laycock, F. (1984). Bright students and their adjustment to college. Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 8 (1), 83-92.

Olszewski-Kubilius, P. (1998). Early entrance to college: Students' stories. The Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, 10 (1), 226-247.

Noble, K. D., Arndt, T., Nicholson, T., Sletten, T. & Zamora, A. (1998). Different strokes: Perceptions of social and emotional development among early college entrants. The Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, 10 (2), 77-84.

Noble, K. D & Drummond, J. E. (1992). But what about the prom? Students' perceptions of early college entrance. Gifted Child Quarterly, 36 (6), 106-111.

Reisberg, L. (1998, December 18). Child prodigies find a home on campuses. The Chronicle of Higher Education, p. A35.

Silverman, L. K. (1997). Family counseling with the gifted. In N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis (Eds.), Handbook of Gifted Education (pp. 353-365). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Solano, C. H. (1987). Stereotypes of social isolation and early burnout in the gifted: Do they still exist? Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 16 (6), 527-539.

Southern, W. T. & Jones, E. D. (1991). Academic acceleration: Background and issues. In W. T. Southern & E. D. Jones (Eds.), The Academic Acceleration of Gifted Children (pp. 1-28). New York: Teachers College Press.

Winner, E. (1996). Gifted Children: Myths and Realities. New York: Basic Books.

Rosemary J. Perez graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in 1999 with a bachelor's degree in biological sciences and an additional major in psychology. She is currently a second-year HESA student working in the Department of Residential Life as the Assistant Coordinator of Residential Programs for Staff Selection and Training and as an Assistant Complex Coordinator.