

Experience of giftedness: Eight great gripes six years later

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This article is based on the original "Eight Great Gripes." (Galbraith, 1985) Research was focused on seventh and eighth graders. The students in the study were asked, "What is it like to be gifted?" The answers were compared to the "Eight Great Gripes" and found to be remarkably similar. Authored by Mark Kunkel, Bea Chapa, Greg Patterson, and Derald Walling.

Building on the foundation of a previous study (Galbraith, 1985) of the "eight great gripes" of gifted children and adolescents, this article describes qualitative perspectives on giftedness among predominantly seventh and eighth-grade students attending a summer enrichment program. Students responded in writing to a probe (i.e. "What's it like to be gifted?") designed to elicit their spontaneous perspectives on their experience of giftedness. Responses were compiled and analyzed as they relate to negative and positive perspectives on giftedness and to the needs of gifted children.

Although considerable research has focused on gifted populations, previous investigations have largely been designed to confirm or refute pre-existing hypotheses. Many studies of giftedness seem to exemplify Patton and Jackson's (1991) distinction between a focus on constructs as defined by researchers and a focus on constructs as experienced within the population of interest. Researchers have rarely sought to understand and appreciate giftedness as an internally experienced phenomenon. In the search for a "comprehensive theory...to provide a research heuristic, unite fragmented practices, and explain the complex relationships underlying the gifted/creative child's developing intelligence" (Cohen, 1988, p. 95), focusing on gifted students' experience as the object of research seems essential.

A notable exception to externally derived formulations of giftedness is found in Galbraith's (1985) exposition of the "eight great gripes of gifted kids". Surveys and interviews were conducted with over 400 gifted children and adolescents (ages 7 to 18) in gifted programs across six states. While little information is provided regarding the nature of inquiry, it is clear that Galbraith's work reflected a focus on the experience of giftedness in her population of interest. She concludes her paper in arguing, "When we are willing to explore the social and emotional needs of the gifted from their viewpoint, we are most effective in leading them to thrive and survive the challenges that accompany high potential" (p. 18).

Galbraith grouped gifted students' responses along eight dimensions (the "eight great gripes") as follows:

1. No one explains what being gifted is all about -- it's kept a big secret.
2. The stuff we do in school is too easy and it's boring.
3. Parents, teachers and friends expect us to be perfect, to "do our best" all the time.
4. Kids often tease us about being smart.
5. Friends who really understand us are few and far between.
6. We feel too different and wish people would accept us for what we are.
7. We feel overwhelmed by the number of things we can do in life.

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8. We worry a lot about world problems and feel helpless to do anything about them.

Each dimension was illustrated with representative first-hand reports of gifted students, the overall perspective suggesting that these concerns are common among gifted young people and may result in emotional distress.

The present study is an extension of Galbraith's efforts and has among its objectives that of clarifying the existence of these themes among a different sample of gifted youth. Our work differed from this precedent, however, in several important ways. First, we wanted to standardize our inquiry process to assure that we were not pulling for a particular response set; we were curious about how students would respond to a consistent and somewhat ambiguous prompt. Second, we wanted to be able to quantify the existence of Galbraith's themes in our population to make some grounded statements about the relative presence of each in the students' experiential field. Last, in that the range of development in Galbraith's sample was large (students 7 to 18 years of age), we wanted to discover how these themes would be manifest in a more age-homogeneous sample.

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were 85 seventh- (n = 40), eighth (n = 41) and ninth-grade (n = 4) students enrolled in TTU/ GTE-PREP, an eight-week summer enrichment program. Sixty percent (n=51) of the students were female and forty percent (n = 34) male. Ethnic membership of the students was: African-American 12 (14.1%), White 33 (38.8%), Hispanic 29 (34.1%) and Other 11 (12.9%). TTU/GTE-PREP, described more fully elsewhere (see Kunkel, Pittman, Curry, Hildebrand & Walling, in press; 1991), offers intensive training in mathematics, computer science, and science, with students specializing in business (n=39, 46%) or engineering (n=46, 54%). Students are referred to the program by public school teachers and qualified as gifted through a combination of criteria including measured intelligence and academic achievement, school performance in focal skill areas, enrollment in other gifted programs, and teacher recommendation.

Procedure

The research was conducted midway through the program during a regularly scheduled class hour. Each student was asked to respond in writing to the following probe: "As if you were writing a letter to a friend, please respond to the following question: 'What is it like to be gifted?'". Students were assured of the anonymity of their responses, from which names were removed and a code number assigned for demographic analysis. Students appeared to invest effort in their responses, almost all of them filling a complete page with their imaginary letter to a friend. Some also embellished their verbal response with drawings or sketches.

Analysis

The authors met and reviewed Galbraith's article, formulating decision rules and operational definitions of each construct. They then independently reviewed each student's response and tallied instances of responses representative of each of the eight categories. Tallies were then grouped, a student response being considered as representative of the category if it was so considered by at least two members of the research team. Means were computed for the number of occurrences per student of each of the eight categories. A series of chi-square analyses was then performed to evaluate distribution of the categories across gender, grade, ethnic group, and area of program emphasis (i.e. Business or Engineering).

Results

We first sought to formulate a concise definition of each of Galbraith's categories that would capture its essence and permit reliable identification in our analysis. This formulation yielded the following eight constructs which correspond to Galbraith's "great gripes": (a) Confusion, (b) Boredom, (c) Perfection, (d) Ridicule, (e) Loneliness, (f) Uniqueness, (g) Burdened, and (h) Altruistic. Each of these themes was illustrated in students' letters as follows:

Confusion

"I have never really been told I am gifted...people just call me smart."

"I've always been told I was hard working. If I am gifted it doesn't feel any different than being nongifted."

"Everybody's gifted in some way!"

"I don't know exactly what 'gifted' implies. Being smart is part of it, and I suppose it also means being able to

adapt and get along with people, and sticking through with something, not giving up because you are discouraged or angry."

"I cannot judge being 'gifted', for I am confused on the matter myself."

"Being gifted is like being special, but it's also weird."

"I don't think I'm absolutely gifted, I'm just good at some things."

"I don't think 'gifted' is the right word--how about just 'easy learner'?"

"I'll admit I have a few qualities and talents that others don't have, but does that make me gifted? If yes, then everybody is gifted."

Boredom

"Your classes get a bit boring because you already know what you are doing and someone else might not."

"Being gifted makes people lazy...everything is so easy that we procrastinate."

"I'm usually bored out of my skull."

Perfection

"Once you're gifted, you're expected to stay that way."

"Everyone always asks questions and when I can't answer them I feel stupid."

"Other people expect too much of me and sometimes they are disappointed if I don't meet their highest goals."

"I'm constantly being compared to other 'gifted' people by those around me, and people are disappointed and sometimes angered when I do not reach goals that they have set."

"There is a certain shame that comes in failing your own standards."

"Teachers are often frustrated and angry when I don't do well as compared to one who isn't considered gifted..."

Ridicule

"Some people call you a nerd or a geek."

"Everyone is always talking about you."

"People think you're a school girl or a nerd."

"People call you names sometimes or do other things to you."

"Sometimes people call me a 'snob'."

"You're hated or misjudged by others, because of being 'gifted'."

Loneliness

"Other teen-agers are jealous."

"It's hard to make friends, because you're always answering questions in class or maybe you're the teacher's pet. People don't want to associate with a nerd."

"You're separated from others to be with others gifted like you."

"Your friends could decide that they can't stand you, and feel like you are trying to snub them off."

"It's hard to have friends that are not gifted, because you don't understand each other."

"Your friends don't think of you as friends, they think of you as advice givers."

Uniqueness

"I work hard to keep my grades high and wish people wouldn't think of me as a 'know-it-all'."

"Special classes are a privilege, but I'd rather stay along with other students my age."

"I feel just like any other kid. I just learn quicker and more easily and can retain more information given to me."

"We have the same ideas, sorrows and happinesses as others."

"I try to persuade other people I'm not 'special'."

"I don't think people should be put into categories. We are all human and we are all alike."

"I am just an ordinary kid...people always want to know, 'how does it feel to be gifted' and I don't like to talk

about it."

Burdened

"At times it can be challenging to keep up with all the things you need to do."

"Being gifted to me is a lot of work...lots of extra homework and activities."

"It is very hard work to have and keep this reputation and still have a good active life and be really popular in a good way."

"Be quiet about your gift and use it well..."

"A lot of people look up to you...it does take a bunch of responsibility."

"Too much stress and no fun is stupid."

"Gifted people have problems too--you can undergo a lot of stress."

"Sometimes you are assigned more things to do than a person that is not gifted."

Altruistic

"Being able to be helpful to society..."

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"I want to be better, not just for me but for the ones who surround me."

"Being gifted means using your talents for the good of others and then yourself."

Results of the tabulation of students' responses appear in Table 1. More than half of all students (54.1%) mentioned confusion about giftedness at least once. Frustration about perfection and uniqueness was also frequently mentioned, with approximately one in three students including these concerns in their response to what it is like to be gifted. Altruism and concern about world problems were mentioned by only two percent of the students, with boredom and feelings of being overwhelmed and burdened also mentioned relatively infrequently (8.3% and 7.1%, respectively).

Distribution of occurrences of each theme did not significantly vary across ethnic groups. With respect to analysis by gender, males tended to report more concern about boredom than did females (Kendall's Tau-b = .10), and females more frequently mentioned ridicule from peers (Kendall's Tau-b = .12) and loneliness (Kendall's Tau-b = .11) as experiences of giftedness. Eighth-grade students reported more boredom than did the seventh-graders (Kendall's Tau-b = .05), these students also being apparently more concerned about altruism than their younger counterparts. Analysis of distribution of occurrences by area of emphasis suggested a trend for students in the Business area of emphasis to report more sense of ridicule (Kendall's Tau-b = .06) and loneliness (Kendall's Tau-b = .02) than their Engineering counterparts.

Discussion

We were interested to find that these students' responses to the "What is it like to be gifted?" prompt were in many respects similar to those in Galbraith (1985), in which more specific prompts were apparently employed. For example, Galbraith found that

when asked whether being gifted had more advantages than disadvantages, the "vast majority" (p. 17) of her respondents stated that "'gifted' is a good thing to be". When pressed, however, students in her sample added many negative associations to giftedness which resulted in the "eight great gripes". Our results also suggest, in response to a neutral probe which was not predisposed to neither positive nor negative associations, considerable ambivalence about the experience of giftedness. Approximately a third of our students spontaneously produced lists of experience aspects organized around positive and negative dimensions. At a time in their lives when they are apparently trying to reconcile these competing awarenesses, gifted adolescents may have unique social and emotional needs to which teachers and counselors might respond (Blackburn & Erickson, 1986; Buescher, 1985).

Negative responses were noted to cluster well around the eight dimensions Galbraith's work suggested. There were very few negative associations to giftedness which could not be categorized along one of these eight dimensions. It is encouraging to note that in many ways the concerns of gifted students may be somewhat general across age and intervention settings.

Students' confusion about giftedness and its implications for their lives was an abiding and overriding theme. Their ambivalence about giftedness manifested itself largely as an apparent eagerness to diminish their own uniqueness, enforce equality (e.g. "Everybody's gifted in their own way") and broaden the definition of giftedness to include all variation in human ability. For adolescents in which the most powerful social imperative is conformity, denial of giftedness may serve an important psychosocial function:

The power of peer pressure and conformity coupled with a young person's wavering sense of being predictable or intact can easily lead to denial of an already recognized ability. The conflict, whether mild or intense, must be resolved by gaining a more mature sense of ownership and responsibility for the recognized talent. (Buescher, 1985, pp. 13-14)

As was the case with Galbraith's group, these students also were apparently still struggling to integrate their perceptions of themselves as gifted with other elements of self-awareness. On an organizational level, supplemental programs for the gifted can serve the important function of acknowledging students' ability and nurturing it within an accepting yet challenging climate. Teachers and counselors working with the gifted also serve an important function as role models (cf. Schroer & Dorn, 1986) and mentors, and can encourage the emergence of a realistic sense of self through their own self-acceptance. Finally, parents can also influence children's self-perceptions. Cornell (1989) has suggested that although approximately 90% of parents of children in a summer enrichment program consider their children gifted, 25-30% of them refrain from using the term in their interaction with their children. The parental attitudes implicit in parents' decisions to refer to their children as gifted may have important implications for the self-concept and anxiety level of their children.

As in other perspectives on gifted students' experience, frustration with the high expectations of others was an abiding theme in our group. The notion of shame in response to not fulfilling one's own or others' performance criteria was strongly and often poignantly evident in many students' material. Also present was discomfort with uniqueness and striving for conformity, perhaps again as a result of defending against the feeling of being different. One student expressed the ambivalence implicit in these dynamics thusly: "Even though I try not to let my gifted light shine, some of my new acquaintances tell me that they could tell from the moment they met me that I was special." Should this be a common perspective, students could be caught on the horns of a dilemma as they try to meet the high expectations of others and blend in with their peers.

Our results also differed from Galbraith's in several important respects. At the level of analysis, we had some difficulty distinguishing among students' sense of loneliness, uniqueness and ridicule, suggesting that in the absence of specific probes, these responses may reduce to isolation or shame. We also noted that while Galbraith indicates that "fully 80 percent of the students interviewed said they are more concerned about world problems than are their peers" (p. 17), very few of our participants mentioned such concerns spontaneously. The egocentrism that is typical in adolescence may have reduced altruistic associations in our sample compared to an older group. Such an interpretation is supported by a slight trend toward greater presence of these themes in our older participants. It is also quite possible that our decision to not specifically probe any content area reduced the presence of some in our sample.

It is interesting that the experience of these aspects of giftedness did not appear to vary significantly by ethnic group. While culturally diverse gifted children may have special counseling and teaching needs (cf. Colangelo, 1985), they may also have much in common with their majority peers.

The relatively greater emphasis on academic excitement in males and on social engagement in females is quite consistent with previous gender-based perspectives (see for example Noble, 1987). Female gifted students have special dilemmas of their own as they try to reconcile social support with academic performance. Male students in our sample appeared to be far more concerned with relevance and stimulation in the curriculum.

Finally, we were curious to find some variation in the experience of these themes by area of emphasis. Some of our previous research (Kunkel et al., in press; 1991) has suggested personality differences between students in business and students in engineering specialty areas. These differences may be mirrored in our findings that business students appeared to be more attuned to social structures and contingencies.

In summary, our results support Galbraith's indication that gifted students, when given an opportunity to do so, describe their experience in ways that reflect both positive and negative elements. The "great gripes" identified previously appeared to rebound in our

sample as well, indicating they may be somewhat common. Specific concerns about a sense of self-as-gifted, high performance demands and the social consequences of giftedness were noted in both groups. As those in intervention roles attempt to anticipate and address the social and emotional needs of gifted adolescents (Barnette, 1989), we encourage additional research based on eliciting students' perspectives. As expressed by an 11-yr. old female in Galbraith's study, "Finally someone is asking us what we think about all this gifted stuff. What took you so long?" (Galbraith, 1985, p. 15).

Author Notes

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