



Socio-Emotional Concerns of Gifted Children

By Anitha Kurup* and Amita Basu

Asset-Burden Paradox

Are the gifted more susceptible to problems? This topic has long attracted debate and research. On the one hand, we have the view of the gifted creator as eccentric and often tortured possessed by the daemon that both inspires and destabilises. Examples abound of gifted individuals with psychological, socio-emotional, behavioural, academic, or occupational difficulties. Einstein and Edison were mediocre students; Einstein always remained spatially-challenged, occasionally asking passers-by if they could direct him to his hotel. Newton was querulous. Beethoven and van Gogh were intensely sensitive and lonely. But are these examples of the rule or the exceptions? There are numerous gifted individuals with normal or superior socio-emotional adjustment, but they do not capture our attention in the same way.

Peterson (2012) described this debate as the asset-burden paradox. Is giftedness an asset or a burden to the individual's adjustment, or is it neither? There is

research supporting all three possibilities. Generally, research finds that the gifted are at least as well-adjusted as others are if their advanced cognitive needs are met. In other words, where maladjustment exists, it is more accurately thought of as the result of a misfit between the needs of the child (for novelty, for challenge) and the environment (lack of appropriate educational provisions), rather than as the result of something intrinsically abnormal in giftedness itself. On the whole, gifted children are as happy and well-adjusted as their peers are; self-esteem is equally high or higher, except during adolescence when it sinks, particularly in girls. These encouraging findings however, may not be applicable to all gifted children. What is the profile of gifted children in India? Children identified as gifted tend to be those who are doing well academically, which usually also means being well-adjusted emotionally. Thus, it is entirely possible that even in countries with gifted education programmes, many gifted children are never identified because of

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socio-emotional problems and chronic under-achievement. The situation of gifted children, academically as well as socio-emotionally, is most probably even less rosy in India in the absence of a national gifted education programme.

Risk factors for maladjustment

Risk factors for maladjustment among the gifted include:

a) **Asynchrony:** A gap between cognitive and socio-emotional development makes it harder for the child to befriend either age-peers or intellectual peers. As previously discussed, asynchrony is the exception rather than the rule.

b) **Degree of giftedness:** Highly gifted children are less well-adjusted, largely because the more gifted a child is, the more different he is from age-peers and the more unsuitable mainstream education is for him.

c) **Domain of giftedness:** Children with gifts in areas visible in social interactions—e.g. in language—are less accepted by peers than children whose gifts are less visible—e.g. in art or mathematics. Children with visible gifts are more susceptible to bullying, social rejection, or 'going underground' (see below).

d) **Denying giftedness:** Children who are uncomfortable with their giftedness are more likely to hide their gift. This damages the child's identity, self-image, and achievement. Common reasons why children hide their gift include being bullied, wanting to fit in, or because teachers punish or ignore gifted behaviours such as creativity, energy, and asking unusual questions.

Common Socio-Emotional Problems of Gifted Children

In previous articles, we have already discussed the problems of loneliness and disruptive classroom behaviour and how to handle them. Bullying is a third potential problem.

Bullying is much more widespread than most parents realise. Like any other differently-abled group, the gifted may attract particular hostility. Research in the west suggests that gifted children are particularly likely to be targets. Because of cultural differences in values, research needs to establish whether the link holds true in India. (Academic achievement is much more openly valued here, thus high-achieving gifted children in India may not face the same peer problems that their western counterparts do.) Other factors may be involved: introversion may be higher among the gifted, with one estimate at 75% of gifted children (Silverman 1993). In this context, some gifted children's preoccupation with their rich inner life may make them targets of bullying.

Gifted children may also be the instigators. Children who are popular and under-stimulated may divert their energy and sense of humour into bullying less-able peers and involving others in doing so. Here we revisit the dynamic triangular relationship between the environment, cognitive needs, and socio-emotional adjustment. A child, who is chronically under-challenged at school and surrounded by peers of lower ability, tends to develop an unrealistically high self-concept. He's the big fish in a small pond. Teachers often perceive such children as arrogant and proud. Strictly speaking, this is true. These children do have an unrealistic estimate of their abilities, and do not realise that there are other big fish out there. Challenging these children academically by providing advanced activities or occasional opportunities to interact with other bright children, often leads to a revised, more realistic self-concept, addresses boredom, and frustration, and may also reduce undesirable behaviour such as bullying, restlessness, and disruptiveness.

Gifted children who are bullied, rejected, or punished for unusual behaviour may 'go underground,' i.e. hide their gifts in order to fit in. That denying giftedness

is often, in the short-term, a successful coping strategy points to the inadequacy of our educational system in addressing the cognitive and socio-emotional needs of the gifted. Research in the west indicates that girls are likelier to deny giftedness than boys.

Gifted counselling

The National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bangalore is attempting to assemble a group of psychotherapists, child development specialists, and educationists to develop a national counselling programme for gifted children and adolescents. For further details please check our website periodically – www.prodigy.net.in.

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The National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) is conducting a project on the Identification of Gifted Children.

For more information on the project and the NIAS Gifted Identification programme, access www.prodigy.net.in

