

The Role of Teachers when Gifted Students Experience Negative Life Events

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Editor's note: *In order to connect current research with quality classroom practice, each issue of THP contains a complementary article to one found in the pages of Gifted Child Quarterly (GCQ).*

Jean Sunde Peterson's Winter 2009 Gifted Child Quarterly article, A Longitudinal Study of Negative Life Events, Stress, and School Experiences of Gifted Youth, found that teachers can offer crucial support when sensitive, intense gifted youth are unsettled by negative life events. In this article, Dr. Peterson offers advice on how the role of teachers can contribute to gifted students' resilience by responding effectively as role models and mentors and by providing environmental buffers. Her discussion and insight provide a wealth of ideas for educators faced with the social and emotional characteristics of their students.

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Life happens. When negative life events happen in the lives of gifted students, inner turmoil is likely. However, in the study of life events presented in the *Gifted Child Quarterly* article, school-related challenges were retrospectively the most unsettling for graduates, not deaths, illnesses, accidents, or family upheaval. But that finding should not suggest that teachers be unconcerned about students experiencing negative events. Characteristics associated with giftedness may exacerbate distress: sensitivity, excitabilities, intensity, and perfectionism, for example. Suddenly being unable to control situations by applying intellectual nimbleness, feeling pressure to problem-solve, being reluctant to ask for help, and not feeling permission to express negative emotions may also contribute.

I offer some thoughts about the role of teachers when in contact with high-stress students, as well as some perspectives about assumptions, resilience, and loss. Teachers, activity directors, and coaches may actually spend more time with students than parents do, sometimes with sustained contact for several years. Those relationships give teachers opportunities to be supportive.

Common Assumptions

I once made a videotape of a panel of gifted underachievers, which I use

when training school counselors. These adolescents did not fit common stereotypes of either gifted kids or underachievers. Each time I watch the tape, I am reminded how idiosyncratic underachievers are. I also hear, once again, one sensitive girl's story about how a teacher humiliated her in fifth grade about her unorganized desk and changed her attitude toward school "forever." One severe underachiever tells about fourth grade, when his teacher "thought I should have more friends." He said his teachers' percep-

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tion that he was a "loner" with depression, and the uncomfortable "fuss" that followed, contributed to his negative attitude. His comment was that "everyone is different in what they need in friends."

It is unwise to assume that gifted students have fewer problems than other students or that high-ability means being able to make sense of interpersonal and emotional complexities. Change and loss occur for

everyone. It is important to remember that school transitions, family relocation, parental unemployment, family reconfigurations, tension at home, or having a sibling leave for college may be particularly stressful for sensitive, intense gifted students. Those life events may not seem "traumatic," but such situations may feel disorienting and represent significant loss. Yet gifted students may project a positive image by hiding uncertainties and emotions. In spite of smiles and success, some may be quietly experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Trauma is not limited to war or abuse. Trauma might be related to an acrimonious parental divorce, chronic bullying, witnessing violence, a horrific accident or fire, or the death of a classmate, for example. Symptoms of PTSD are pervasive fears and feelings of powerlessness, anger, humiliation, intrusion, emotional confusion, and lack of trust. PTSD, regardless of age, may be reflected in a frantic need for control, possibly manifested in disordered eating, self-medication with illegal substances, self-mutilation, a violent temper, or dominating social behaviors. It can also mean isolation, depression, physical complaints, an impaired sense of self, and interpersonal difficulties. However, none of these might be ob-

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vious to a parent or educator.

Teachers may assume that smiling, pleasant, handsome, organized, high-performing students are comfortable with themselves and others and are happy and satisfied. Teachers may therefore miss opportunities to validate gifted students' complexity, distress, and worth. During the years I facilitated over a thousand small-group discussions with gifted students about non-academic concerns, I learned that few felt confident in all contexts. Many felt inferior to peers. They had no problem naming situations where they felt inept. Many believed that adults and peers did not understand that they were more than just performers or non-performers.

High achievement may actually be the one controllable component in a life that otherwise feels chaotic and uncontrollable. Furthermore, academic achievers may not feel satisfaction in their work. Academic *underachievers* may be happy and satisfied, although my own research has found that underachievement can also reflect distractions, negative life events, difficult family situations, or a learning disability—and a consequent inability to concentrate in school. Underachievement may also reflect “developmental stuckness” related to incorporating giftedness into their identity, finding direction, developing a mature relationship, incrementally increasing autonomy, and coming to grips with sexuality and even sexual orientation. High achievers may also struggle with any or all of these areas, of course.

Change and Loss for Gifted Students

Change is constant. Nothing, bad or good, stays the same. That idea may offer hope when despair feels permanent. However, in the midst of life-altering events, change can be frightening. Change means loss. Something is left behind. There may be grief for “the way it used to be.”

Gifted youth may have losses that others do not, and they may experience these losses differently from other similarly aged peers. For example, being able to consider many options for university, major course of study, and career may be stressful, especially when

any choice means the loss of all other options. Relationships might be lost when a gifted adolescent pursues interests in extra-curricular activities and finds new friends. Embracing giftedness may mean losing a mainstream identity. Perhaps more than others, they may grieve the loss of childhood, of familiar roles as siblings arrive or families blend, of no longer having “one main teacher.” For a target of bullying, a sense of safety may be lost. Awareness of peers' extreme circumstances may mark a loss of innocence. When parents are preoccupied, children miss nurturing. If a parent is deployed overseas or becomes unemployed, changes at home may be huge. When natural disasters “take everything,” the sense of loss may prevail. If there is a break-in or vandalism, a sense of privacy and security may be lost. With asynchronous development, young gifted children may struggle with existential questions when “events” happen, without the wisdom of age and experience to put them into perspective.

Teachers also may consider losses related to achievement. Achievers may “lose” fun, time, play, friends, and opportunities to differentiate themselves from family. Underachievers may lose the approval of parents, scholarships, teacher support, opportunities to validate ability, and academic skills normally honed through challenge. When parents abdicate responsibility and a gifted child moves into a parental role, there may be no real childhood. When children's lives are overstructured by protective parents, again there might be a loss of childhood play, in addition to little chance to learn how to cope with boredom and choice.

Teachers Responding

It is important not to assume that

grief resulting from change and loss has a beginning and an end, and that there is an “appropriate amount of time” for grieving, after which someone should simply be “over it.” Even if children and adolescents do not seem to *stay* in grief, it may be intense, long-lasting, and even hidden. However, “rescuing” children from grief is not the answer. Validating their feelings with statements is important (“This is a very sad time.” “I know you're missing Grandma.” “It's OK to cry. People cry when they're sad.”). When students are given permission to freely express sad feelings,



the ability to cope increases, even as situations bring up feelings of loss. “It's OK to feel” is an appropriate statement of support. It might be appropriate to ask, if there is evidence of severe distress, “Should I worry about you?” A referral to a school counselor is appropriate if the answer is yes.

Teachers can help children to cope and develop resilience, but what they say to distressed students needs to be

credible. A few years ago, my college roommate, a long-time therapist, remarked that shallow cheerleading (“feel-good talk”) by teachers and parents generates “a phony sense of pride and strength”—something she associated with difficult, young-adult clients. She said they speak of being proud of themselves, but may be unable to connect with other people who value this trait. She said, “Life is hard. When kids grow up with a sense of entitlement because they do not receive credible, accurate, observant feedback, they are at a disadvantage when hurt. They are vulnerable when experiencing loss.” A sense of confidence is best when it is well-founded and has humility.

However, she emphasized that teachers and other significant adults should not hesitate to compliment children and adolescents who have exceptional ability. The life-events article attests to the reality that gifted youth may have self-doubt. They need compliments—from people whose opinion matters. When criticized by hard-edged, perfectionistic parents or teachers, they may accept the criticism too harshly and/or accept it as fact. In hearing only criticism, they miss crucial feedback, affecting their sense of self. Their own self-talk may be unrelentingly negative. They need to hear about their desirable qualities, including non-performance-related strengths. They need compliments about their smile, kindness, insights, sensitivity, ability to prioritize, thoughtful comments, sense of style, ability to express feel-

ings, ability to take feedback (e.g., in a talent area), perseverance and steadiness, or creativity. Ultimately, confidence and humility can co-exist. My friend summarized an ideal outlook: “This is what I am and can do, but I know I’m not the most important person in the universe. I need to be respectful of others. We all have something to contribute.”

Informed teachers and school counselors can help students make sense of feelings and behaviors by providing psychoeducational information about social and emotional aspects of giftedness, “normal” responses to change, and resilience. Information about non-academic aspects of giftedness can also counter arrogance and entitlement. Teachers and school counselors can advocate for adding books related to giftedness to the school library—for their own and students’ use.

It is a rare gift when teachers can meet gifted kids, nonjudgmentally, where they *are*. An effective teacher posture when working with gifted students, including during times of high stress, is one that remains open to their humanness. They are developing, feeling, dealing with complex situations, wondering about the future, and perhaps having self-doubt. When teachers are comfortable with giftedness, they can interact with gifted students without positive (being “in awe”) or negative (“needing to put them in their place”) biases interfering.

Teachers can build relationships—with good boundaries, without need-

ing the gifted child or teen to fill a need, and without so much personal investment that objectivity is lost. Teachers can avoid pouncing on mistakes or weaknesses. They can keep the focus on the child, not talking about themselves. They can resist impulses to “fix” the student. They can beware of controlling the conversation, instead being open to what the student has to say.

Being alert to changes in demeanor, attitude, or behavior may provide an opportunity to ask, “You seem kind of quiet lately. How is your life going?” or “You don’t seem to have your usual energy. Is anything getting in the way?” or “You seem to be working hard at getting our attention lately. What’s going on?” or “School is pretty stressful, these days, huh.” Teachers who stay open to complexity can affirm that a gifted child is “interesting and complex.” Even if only for 30 seconds between classes, listening carefully and validating feelings (“It sounds frustrating” or “I can see that you’re angry”) may be a much larger contribution to well-being than is apparent at the time.

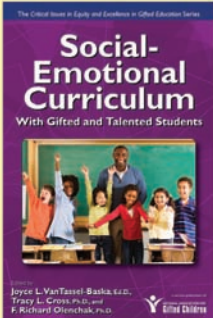
Positive Events

The GCQ life-events article did not discuss the experience of *positive* events, which the study also explored. In short, academic challenges, highly invested teachers with good humor and effective teaching approaches, academic awards, and college acceptances validated students’ efforts and strengths. For many, extra-curricular activities provided social contacts (e.g., “a family of friends,” a “place to belong”), skills, and a sense of accomplishment. Service locally or far away sparked career interests and introduced them to other cultures. Some students mentioned that spiritual growth had led to purpose, peace, and direction. The students who completed the study all mentioned positive experiences, which likely helped to balance the negatives so many had experienced during the school years. In order to achieve a healthy balance in the classroom, teachers, in supporting students during difficult times, should seek to provide positive experiences as well. ■

additional resources on social and emotional issues **from NAGC**



The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What Do We Know? (NAGC Members, \$26.95)



Social-Emotional Curriculum with Gifted and Talented Students (NAGC Members, \$31.45)