Building Social and Emotional Mastery in Gifted Education: Moving Beyond IQ

Author

Geraldine Townend, PhD

University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

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Townend, Geraldine, PhD, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

Abstract

This paper synthesizes current research on social and emotional development in gifted education, examining evidence-based approaches that support the holistic development of gifted learners. While cognitive abilities remain important, mounting evidence suggests that social-emotional competencies play a vital role in gifted students' success and well-being.

Introduction

The landscape of gifted education research continues to provide nuanced insights around how we can optimize student outcomes and enhance talent development. Such insights include the notion that social and emotional development is important as, after all, emotionally regulated students learn better (Cross & Cross, 2020; Peterson, 2018). Such shifts in understanding provide opportunities to examine more deeply how educators and families can better support our gifted learners to reach their potential.

Understanding Giftedness and Social-Emotional Development

The corpus of literature reveals that giftedness presents along a spectrum from mild to profound, affecting approximately 10% to 0.001% of the population (Subotnik et al., 2021). Very often the notion of giftedness is considered solely through the lens of cognitive abilities, yet research indicates that social and emotional competencies are critical in influencing developmental trajectories, or talent development (Zeidner & Matthews, 2017; Renzulli, 2020). Environmental influences such as classroom contexts, family relationships, and community support - shape these students' journeys and can be strongly linked to educational and life outcomes (VanTassel-Baska & Hubbard, 2019).

Studies highlight the distinctive social and emotional challenges that can be experienced by gifted learners (Silverman & Golon, 2020; Coleman et al., 2018). Those noted as particularly vulnerable can be gifted students at the higher levels of giftedness, students lacking appropriate academic acceleration, and younger gifted children navigating early educational experiences (Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011; Gross, 2018). Their struggles often manifest through complex patterns of social dysregulation, profound isolation, emotional intensity, and heightened sensitivity to peer dynamics (Peterson & Moon, 2018). These challenges frequently intensify during key developmental transitions, requiring targeted intervention strategies and sustained support systems.

Emerging research positions emotional intelligence (EI) can be a critical determinant of gifted student outcomes (Mayer et al., 2016). Studies by, for example, Casino-Garcia and colleagues (2021) and Alabbasi and colleagues (2021) reveal connections between developed EI and enhanced self-concept among gifted learners. Self-concept is critical for underpinning life outcomes and identity, and is largely influenced during the school years (Townend, & Brown, 2016). However, patterns of emotional challenges are evident in the literature including observations around differences in gender and around how EI manifests and develops (Al-Hamdan et al., 2017; Mathews et al., 2018). Recent longitudinal studies indicate that early intervention in EI development can significantly impact academic achievement, self-concept, social adjustment, and overall well-being throughout a student's educational journey.

The development of social intelligence proves essential for gifted learners' long-term success (Worrell et al., 2019). Key areas demanding attention include nuanced decision-making, effective communication, sophisticated conflict resolution, relationship cultivation, adaptability, and emergent leadership (Pfeiffer, 2018). Evidence increasingly supports targeted interventions in these domains, showing promising results across both academic and social-emotional arenas (Kaya et al., 2016; Yaman & Sökmez, 2020). Successful programs often incorporate peer mentoring, structured social activities, and guided practice in real-world social scenarios, providing students with practical experience in navigating complex social dynamics.

There are common challenges presented in the corpus of literature. Maladaptive perfectionism will often manifest in patterns of task- or social-avoidance and self-sabotage (Stricker et al., 2019; Ozdogon & Akgul, 2023), requiring targeted interventions including realistic goal-setting and

measured risk-taking (Schuler, 2010; Filippello et al., 2018). Similarly, imposter syndrome can affect gifted students (Chandler & Randall, 2021), necessitating targeted support emphasizing authentic self-reflection and the cultivation of a growth mindset (Papadopoulos, 2021; Cheng et al., 2024). These challenges often interweave with academic performance anxiety, social isolation, and heightened emotional sensitivity, creating complexities in presentations and requiring a multi-faceted intervention approach. Effective programs typically combine components that include individual counselling, group support sessions, and family education.

Comprehensive support is required to navigate the challenges such as integrated educational and psychological approaches (VanTassel-Baska, 2021). Educational strategies must encompass refined and developed assessment methods, various peer groupings, and individually tailored learning plans (Rogers, 2020). Psychological support should focus on developing emotional regulation, building resilience, and fostering adaptive coping mechanisms (Neihart et al., 2021).

Implementation strategies require systematic coordination across multiple levels of support. At the institutional level, schools must establish clear protocols for identifying and monitoring gifted students' social-emotional needs, including regular screening and progress assessments to build a portfolio of insights and understandings. Professional development programs are essential to equip educators with specific tools and strategies for supporting gifted learners' both intellectually and social-emotionally, incorporating both theoretical understanding and practical application skills. Parents and educators play pivotal roles in the support ecosystem (Diezmann & Watters, 2020) and need to understand and apply strength-based approaches while providing appropriate support (Little & Foley-Nicpon, 2021).

Successful implementation also requires establishing robust communication channels between all stakeholders. Regular parent-teacher conferences focused specifically on social-emotional development, structured peer support networks, academic support, and ongoing collaboration with school counsellors/psychologists create a comprehensive support framework. Additionally, schools should develop clear intervention protocols for addressing specific challenges such as perfectionism, anxiety, and social isolation, ensuring consistent and effective response strategies across all contexts.

Conclusion

Supporting gifted learners demands moving beyond traditional academic paradigms (Renzulli & Reis, 2021). Success increasingly depends on understanding and addressing the complex interplay of cognitive and social-emotional needs through evidence-based interventions (Cross & Cross, 2020; Peterson, 2021). As our understanding deepens, the field must continue evolving to better serve gifted learners, with particular attention to developing comprehensive support systems that address both academic and social-emotional needs. Future research directions should focus on longitudinal outcomes and the development of integrated support strategies that can be effectively implemented across diverse educational settings.

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