

GRADES 4–7

I'm Not Just Gifted

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL CURRICULUM FOR GUIDING GIFTED CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

As a practicing school psychologist and life coach who specializes in understanding the often hidden social and emotional lives of gifted children, I see the direct impact affective curriculum has on the emotional development of children. It is from this place that I bring to you this book. Gifted children need caring individuals who can help them with self-awareness, emotional intelligence, resiliency, and talent development. Without coaching in these areas, many of our gifted youth grow up believing they are destined to be misfits and outcasts. This is untrue. Gifted individuals can find their place within the world, without sacrificing their cognitive prowess. They can develop strong friendships, reduce the impact of their asynchronous development, and appreciate the more unique aspects of their personality.

This book was designed to develop the social and emotional lives of gifted youth. Written as 30-minute lessons that can be done in small- or whole-group instruction, *I'm Not Just Gifted* joins current research regarding the social and emotional development of gifted children with evidence-based counseling and coaching practices and educational standards from the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC), State Learning Standards to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and Common Core State Standards (CCSS) practices. It is my hope that teachers and counselors alike will find ways to incorporate this affective curriculum into the normal educational experience and enhance the social and emotional lives of our gifted youth.

Understanding the Social and Emotional Lives of Gifted Children

A Primer

Giftedness is more than high performance on a standardized intelligence test (Renzulli, 1978). It is a collection of talents and traits affecting all aspects of a person—from cognition to personality to social-emotional development (Webb, Gore, Amend, & DeVries, 2007). With recent advances in neuroscience, researchers in the field of giftedness have replaced old beliefs about cognition and emotional development as somewhat fixed and static to theories that incorporate a strong developmental aspect to giftedness, influenced by the environment and the development of identity (Renzulli, 2005; Gagné, 2005; Moon, 2009). It is from this perspective that this book was created.

Gifted children have unique social and emotional traits that influence their life experiences. These characteristics can be shaped and influenced by the support we offer (Moon, 2009). And what better place than within the classroom setting?

But more on that in a minute. First, I want to review the most recent research regarding the common social-emotional characteristics of gifted children and how these impact their overall functioning.

Hébert (2011), drawing on the work of researchers over the past two decades, highlights several specific social-emotional traits that most influence a gifted child's life. Development of appropriate supports for their social and emotional lives can not be considered without first having an understanding of these traits.

HIGH PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

Gifted children often hold themselves and others to impossibly high standards. Although having high performance standards is not a bad quality, it can become a problem for gifted children when the need to perform at a high level morphs into an unhealthy perfectionism, resulting in everything from severe procrastination, to extreme mood swings dependent on the gifted child's perception of meeting his or her personal expectations. Teachers can help gifted children learn to embrace their high standards and learn to not hold others to the same, often unrealistic, expectations (Silverman, 2007).

INTERNAL MOTIVATION

Hébert (2011) cited internal motivation as being one of the constants in gifted education literature. Internal motivation is the ability of an individual to overcome personal adversity and stay focused on his or her goals. Strengthening this trait can protect against the negative impact of anxiety and bolster overall resiliency.

EMOTIONAL INTENSITY

I've written much on the topic of emotional intensity. In my view, as well as that of much of the research in this area, emotional intensity and sensitivity is a cornerstone aspect of giftedness. Emotional intensity involves students' deep, sometimes overwhelming emotional sensitivity to themselves and the world around them (Fonseca, 2011b). Characterized by intense highs and lows, gifted children who experience this level of sensitivity can be easily hurt emotionally. Likewise, they will often be overly self-critical if they hurt another person emotionally (Hébert, 2011). Teaching gifted children about the positive aspects of intensity can help prevent the more negative impact of this level of sensitivity.

EMPATHY

In addition to emotional intensity, gifted children often experience high levels of empathy. Current research in the field of gifted education suggests that these levels of empathy are leading to stronger levels of social concern (Reis & Renzulli, 2004). This matches my experience with gifted children, many of whom express concerns with major world issues including war, the global economy, and conservation, to name a few. Researchers including Renzulli (2009) and others are calling on educators to look for more ways to encourage the social awareness present in our gifted youth.

MORAL MATURITY

Researchers have long identified advanced moral maturity with giftedness in children (Hébert, 2011). Gifted people demonstrate the ability to use advanced moral judgment even when faced with peer pressure to engage in acts that compromise their values. This internalization of morals enables gifted youths to conform to their internal code even in difficult situations. Support for the acquisition and strengthening of this moral maturity will only enhance this skill, especially within the school setting.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Although the research in this area is somewhat sparse, there appears to be evidence that gifted youth have a strong desire or need for self-actualization (Hébert, 2011). Certainly my own anecdotal information from working with gifted children over the past two decades confirms this perspective. Gifted children are driven toward self-actualization at a young age and when this need is not met, existential depression can result (Webb et al., 2007).

RESILIENCE

Similar to internal motivation, resilience is a highly researched construct that has been linked to giftedness (Reis & Renzulli, 2004). Often defined as the ability to bounce back after a setback, resilient children often demonstrate similar skills to gifted children, including intellectual curiosity, internal motivation, and strong problem-solving skills (Hébert, 2011). Nurturing and developing resiliency in gifted children can serve as a significant protection factor against not only environmental barriers, but also the negative impact of anxiety and emotional distress.

The traits outlined above represent the most significant and consistent social-emotional characteristics in the literature. Understanding these particular traits opens the door to the development of an affective curriculum that can enhance the lives of gifted children. Moreover, analysis of these traits and more importantly, how to support them, can guide the process of developing appropriate social-emotional curriculum for gifted children.