

Emotional Development – The Spiritual Anchor in the Life of a Gifted Student

Wan Safuraa Wan Osman¹⁺, Suriani Kiflee² and Melor Md. Yunus²

¹ Pusat Teknologi Kounikasi dan Pembangunan Insan, Universiti Malaysia Perlis, 02600, Jejawi, Perlis, Malaysia.

² Pusat PERMATApintar Negara, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600, Bangi Selangor, Malaysia.

Abstract. This study explores the spiritual element and necessity in the holistic development of emotional aspect in gifted students. While past studies have relate academic achievement to motivation as well as emotional intelligence, this study re-focus the general perspective towards spirituality as the anchor of emotional intelligence alongside general and specified-domain intelligence. This qualitative study implements the use of open-ended questionnaire, interviews as well as classroom observations and document analysis. The data will be collected with the intention to pool from two different resources; (1) to study the students' spirituality as well as emotional development, and another (2) is the students' understanding towards their own religion and how they connect it to their lives.

Keywords: Emotional Development, Spiritual Development, Gifted Students, Intelligence, Gifted Education.

1. Introduction

Historically, research and education of the gifted has focused on cognitive variables with less attention given to the social and emotional needs of these students (or at least what matters). In the West, the trend took a sudden up-turn due to a publicize case about the suicide of a gifted high school student, Dallas Egbert. The incident raised the public awareness about the unique vulnerabilities often faced by gifted students because of their advanced cognitive abilities.

Some have proposed that the characteristic of giftedness and resiliency overlaps in many ways (Bland, Sowa, & Callahan, 1994). Various risk factors – external and internal – makes gifted students at increased risk for psychosocial adjustment problems because, among other things, they are overly perfectionistic (Nugent, 2000), are highly sensitive to interpersonal conflicts with family and peers, and are more socially isolated because of their advanced cognitive abilities (Neihart, 1999). Adolescents may respond to these changes in maladaptive ways developing psychosocial adjustment problems, such as depression, in response to the increases in stress associated with the many developmental changes taking place during the transition (Meadows, Brown, & Elder, 2006). Depression is potentially damaging or destructive to adolescent development, with MacPhee and Andrews (2006) noting, “Depression is considered by some to be one of the most serious forms of childhood psychopathology due to the prevalence, chronicity, comorbidity, and pervasive consequences associated with this disorder” (p. 435). Problems often associated with depression include low self-esteem, negative body image, and poor academic achievement (Lehtinen, Raikkonen, Heinonen, Raitakari, & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 2006; Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2006). In extreme cases, depression can lead to suicide, with Modroin-McCarthy and Dalton (1996) reporting that suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15- to 24-yearolds. Further, Kovacs noted, “By adolescence, depressive disorders and suicidal behavior generally go hand in hand” (210: 1989).

Furthermore, depression is usually characterized by persistent sadness or loss of interest or enjoyment in day-to-day activities (Baker, 1995; Kendall, Cantwell, & Kazdin, 1989). Garland and Zigler (1999) suggested that advanced cognitive ability coupled with heightened sensitivity often work together to put gifted students at increased risk for negative psychosocial outcomes. Gifted students may evaluate their

⁺ Wan Safuraa Wan Osman. Tel: +604-9798703
E-mail address: wsafuraa@yahoo.com

social skills negatively, which then may make them feel that peers have negative views of them as well (Dauber & Benbow, 1990). Therefore, to put it simply, the main purpose of this research is to prevent any more happenings such as the case of Sufiah or any tragedy as those of Egbert's in the future. It has become a matter of urgency to help gifted students to build resiliency or protective barrier against risk factors – internal as well as external – apart from their efforts in becoming better cognitively. Thus, this study explores the spiritual element and necessity in the holistic development of emotional aspect in gifted students. While past studies have relate academic achievement to motivation as well as emotional intelligence, this study re-focus the general perspective towards spirituality as the anchor of emotional intelligence alongside general and specified-domain intelligence.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design, Procedures and Sample

This qualitative research implemented the use of methodology such as observations and interview sessions. The research participants consist of 10 form 5 students (five girls and boys) from the Program Pendidikan Tinggi PERMATApintar Negara. The sampling was done intentionally with only form 5 students, for the purpose of collecting richer data on their education achievement thus far. Additionally, the selected participants were also chosen for their efficiency in using English language (to aid with the data collection process).

3. Results and Discussion

There is a significant different in answers given by two groups of student among the respondents – those of high-achievers as well as those seen by teachers as much matured in nature when compare to their peers. Their answers reflect well on the categories they are in and it appears spirituality in most parts anchors their emotional development and has influence on how they view themselves and life in general.

3.1 Spiritual Understanding Anchors Emotional Development

When asked about their expectations towards religion classes, different groups of student gave different answers. For examples, for high-achievers as well as matured respondents, they see the classroom teachings as an important necessity. In one particular comment by Respondent 7, she said, “Religious matters extend beyond the syllabus”. Among others comment;

“How to be closer to God and know the limits as well as the boundaries in our daily life. Plus, to learn on how to adapt to the social environment and be strong in terms of morale”

Respondent 2

“Through those classes, I learn why I have to do as what my religion says. Sometimes, when you don't know the reason why you are practising something, it just won't make any sense”

Respondent 3

While respondents who gave textbook answers, such as ‘religion classes teach us knowledge about religion and how to behave’ and such, they logically would be much easier to deal with in classroom, but unfortunately, such students are more prone to be involved in social problems, once their school records were cross-checked. It appears certain gifted students who are more adept to thinking, relate religion and theological concept more closely to their lives than their average but also gifted peers. For examples, they see religion as a direction in life.

“Because life isn't always easy. At one point, every person would have experienced the feeling of loneliness and being unwanted somewhere. People without religion would usually just give up and kill themselves. But when you believe in God, you'll believe that everything is going to be fine because He's always watching over for you...By believing in God, people tend to be strong and just move on with their life”

Respondent 3

“Because with God comes hope and with religion comes direction. God is always the one you rely one, if you believe in your God you can believe that you are never alone”

Respondent 5

With respondent 5, her family has history of being pagan. Her ways of developing and maintaining her faith in her religion is by comparing religious teachings with other religions.

“I keep it by learning other religions and beliefs such as Christianity. I compare the two and I always end up believing that my religion is true. I learn the ways of Islam and try to practise it in life”

Respondent 5

There are many other instances such as the case of respondent 5 among gifted students in this particular school. Logically, it is the same for other normal school as well that each individual perceive, react and understand religion differently. It matters most urgently how such differences in perception and understanding be included when planning the appropriate instructions in religion class. It functions as an effective channel to help students but only if it is conducted properly.

“Islam is what keeps me going. I have gone through quite a lot and sometimes feel like giving up. But I know as a Muslim, I should keep on going”

Respondent 3

“Islam is not a concept; it is a way of life. It has its own set of rules, rewards and punishments. Once I start to learn it, I try to follow its rules so I’m set in a confined space safe from the world as long as I obey its rules. Islam moulds me into a better person and I would not be who I am today without it”

Respondent 5

Thus, it falls under the school and educator responsibility to cater to these student’s spiritual needs.

4. Conclusion

Spirituality can be a strong anchor in gifted students’ emotional development. They relate it to every facets of their everyday life. Such aspects should be use to strengthen students’ morality values as well as their general understanding towards social relations with other people in their surroundings.

5. Acknowledgements

Please acknowledge collaborators or anyone who has helped with the paper at the end of the text.

6. References

- [1] Baker, J. A.. 1995. Depression and Suicidal Ideation among Academically Talented Adolescents. *Gifted Child Quarterly*. 39: 218-223.
- [2] Bland, L. C., Sowa, C. J. & Callahan, C. M.. 1994. An Overview of Resilience in Gifted Children. *Roeper Review*. 17: 77-80.
- [3] Dauber, S. L., & Benbow, C. P.. 1990. Aspects of Personality and Peer Relations of Extremely Talented Adolescents. *Gifted Child Quarterly*. 34: 10-14.
- [4] Garland, A. F., & Zigler, E.. 1999. Emotional and Behavioural Problems among Intellectually Gifted Youth. *Roeper Review*. 22: 41-44.
- [5] Kendall, P. C., Cantwell, D. P., & Kazdin, A. E.. 1989. Depression in Children and Adolescents: Assessment Issues and Recommendations. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*. 13: 109-146.
- [6] Kovacs, M.. 1989. Affective Disorders in Children and Adolescents. *American Psychologist*. 44: 209-215.
- [7] Lehtinen, H., Raikkonen, K., Heinonen, K., Raitakari, O. T., & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, L.. 2006. School Performance in Childhood and Adolescence as a Predictor of Depressive Symptoms in Adulthood. *School Psychology International*. 27: 281-295.
- [8] MacPhee, A. R., & Andrews, J. J. W.. 2006. Risk Factors for Depression in Early Adolescence. *Adolescence*. 41: 435-466.

- [9] Meadows, S. O., Brown, J. S., & Elder, G. H.. 2006. Depressive Symptoms, Stress, and Support: Gendered Trajectories from Adolescence to Young Adulthood. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 35: 93-103.
- [10] Neihart, M.. 1999. The impact of Giftedness on Psychological Well-being: What does the empirical literature say? *Roeper Review*. 22: 278-319.
- [11] Nugent, S. A.. 2000. Perfectionism: Its Manifestation and Classroom-based Intervention. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*. 11: 215-222.
- [12] Paxton, S. J., Neumark-Sztainer, D., Hannan, P. J., & Eisenberg, M. E.. 2006. Body Dissatisfaction Prospectively Predicts Depressed Mood and Low Self-esteem in Adolescent Girls and Boys. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*. 35: 539-549.