

Emotional Processing of Gifted Children: An Unresolved Matter

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Abstract

Recent studies have demonstrated the strong influence emotions have on the holistic growth of children with conventional development. Moreover, there is an increasing body of evidence suggesting that the affective-emotional component could play a major role in the cognitive and psychological wellbeing of children and adolescents with nonstandard development or atypical skills. In this regard, in the current opinion article we discuss the likelihood that the affective-emotional component is one of the definitory elements of gifted children and teenagers showing high intellectual capacities. While some authors claim that intellectual giftedness is associated with strong social-emotional capacities and relate high intellectual ability with the acquisition and development of techniques to compensate for potential psycho-social issues, other authors suggest that gifted children are potentially more vulnerable and have additional social-emotional needs as compared with their peers. The current uncertainty in the literature is a barrier to adequately inform and orient psychological and educational actions, and empirical data is required to fully comprehend the genuine meaning of giftedness and its relationship with emotional processing.

Keywords: Giftedness; talent; high ability; gifted education; emotion; intelligence.

Introduction

We are more and more conscious of the impact emotions have on the integral development of children with a typical development, and even more so, with those with an untypical development or with differential abilities. In this framework, and considering that untypical development also accounts for outstanding abilities, the following question arises: Is emotional processing of gifted children different from their peers with a typical development?

Far from trivial, this question raises some fundamental issues about the relationship between intellectual capacity and emotional development. To be able to understand giftedness as potential, as well as its impact in education, we need to know certain aspects which still lack clear scientific development. One of which, undoubtedly, is the way gifted children process emotional stimuli in their context, both as children and teenagers. Therefore, the collection of reviewed literature is focused on

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these developing stages, including Primary and Secondary Education. The affective-emotional component has a great importance in the psychosocial variables such as performance, motivation and well-being, and the literature about emotions and giftedness is inconclusive up to now.

For years, the terms “gifted”, “talented” or “more capable” have been considered synonymous, but they refer to different constructs that coercively define the way we approach the issue. For Alesi et al. (2015), the term giftedness refers to an ability in a specific field, whilst talent expresses the result of giftedness, and capability is understood as the capacity to develop. Gagné (2015) also differentiates between giftedness and talent. Hence, the definition of giftedness continues to be an unsolved topic, and in this case, the difficulty in reaching a scientific agreement is not due to the lack of definitions, but to the existence of too many. Researchers such as Pfeiffer (2017, 2001) indicate that the term gifted is a social construct related to the conversion into a productive member of society, and Reis and Renzulli (2018) understand high abilities as a set of behaviours focused on problem-solving (see Tourón, 2019, for a review of current conceptualisations). However, what authors do agree on is that giftedness can be considered as a multidimensional construct which involves cognitive, affective and social variables.

To clarify this article’s targeted population, we will refer to the definition given by the National Association for Gifted Children (2019)¹, who awards a fundamental importance to the different factors that enhance or inhibit the development and self-expression of this group. In this respect, in this article we will elaborate on the possibility that the affective-emotional component is one of those factors.

One of the educational objectives is that children are guided to reach their maximum potential. Thus, states have the responsibility to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, such as those with disabilities. At this point, it is worth considering if gifted children show differential emotional vulnerability than their peers, therefore requiring a specialised psychoeducational response given that the different contexts in which a minor develops influence their individual growth and therefore the grounds for their success (Hébert, 2021). Studies related to emotional and social performance amongst the

¹ “Students with gifts and talents perform - or have the capability to perform - at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains. They require modification(s) to their educational experience(s) to learn and realize their potential. Student with gifts and talents: come from all racial, ethnic, and cultural populations, as well as all economic strata; require sufficient access to appropriate learning opportunities to realize their potential; can have learning and processing disorders that require specialized intervention and accommodation; Need support and guidance to develop socially and emotionally as well as in their areas of talent; require varied services based on their changing needs” (NAGC, 2022, “What is Giftedness?” section).

population of gifted children have resulted in contradictory findings. Whilst authors such as Francis et al. (2016) claim that these children are potentially vulnerable, with social-emotional needs, poor relationships with their peers, anxiety, depression and even self-injury, other studies have suggested that gifted children are more socially adjusted than their peers with typical development (Eklund et al., 2015; França-Freitas et al., 2014; Neihart, 1999; Neihart et al., 2016; Neihart, 2019). On this bottom line, Urben et al. (2018) state that intelligence at high levels is a protective factor towards internalising problems, and gifted children do not manifest either greater emotional adaptation to changes in their environment or increased behavioural difficulties than those presented by typically developed peers, and that only a minority require special attention. In this line, Resche and Komodromou (2021) used standardized tools and observed a lack of correlation between the use of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies and intelligence in gifted children.

Subotnik et al. (2019) suggest that the reason for these contradictory results is due to the different conceptualisation of the giftedness. While certain authors consider giftedness as a social and emotional fragility trait, and a greater psychological vulnerability (Bain et al., 2006), others refuse the use of the word trait and defend that the outstanding achievements depend on finding the appropriate opportunity and having sufficient practice, facts indirectly linked to psychological vulnerability (Arnold et al., 1996; Kover & Worrell, 2010; Matthews & Dai, 2014).

Terrassier (1985), Neihart (1999; 2019) and Winner (2000) propose that psychosocial and mental health adjustment deficiencies in this group are due to intellectual-effective asynchronies, intellectual giftedness being a risk factor for emotional or psychosocial development leading to a high stress level, that may eventually result in mental or behavioural problems. This line of research arises from Dabrowski's (1966) early studies, concerning the overexcitement, resulting from a high sensibility towards the emotional information observed in gifted minors, in comparison to other children with an ordinary development. Hence, some authors relate giftedness to academic failure, depression, or loneliness (Baudson & Preckel, 2016), as well as maladaptive perfectionism or low self-esteem (Plucker & Levy, 2001; Plucker & Stocking, 2001; Masse & Gagné 2002; Rinn & Majority, 2018; Abdulla Alabbasi et al., 2020; Algaba-Mesa & Fernández-Marcos, 2021). Bullying has a higher prevalence rate amongst gifted students in regulated academic environments (Peterson & Ray, 2006; González-Cabrera et al., 2019; but see Rondini & Silva, 2021). Opposing this view, harmony theory supporters, such as Lubinski (2016, cf. Terman, 1925), who defined the "gifted" with a balanced personality profile, high motivation for achievements and excellent academic results. In this same harmonic view, Sternberg and Davidson (2005) proposed that gifted individuals, over and above their success at school or in their careers, they are also emotionally and socially balanced (see also Plucker & Callahan, 2008). More recently, Francis

et al. (2016) proposed that gifted children show fewer social-emotional and behavioural difficulties as compared to their typically developed peers, except for children with very high IQ (140-145), and depending on their ethnic groups. Studies regarding extremely gifted minors show a relation between giftedness and difficulties with self-concept, motivation and relationships with their peers (Gross, 2000; 2002).

In sum, while some authors conclude that gifted teenagers show an unbalance between their high intellectual capacities and their low emotional abilities (e.g., Urben et al., 2018), others defend that gifted teenagers have a greater control of their behaviour and better emotional self-regulation abilities (e.g., Geake, 2009). Undoubtedly, gifted minors' population is a diverse group in itself (Zeidner & Matthews, 2017), and the influence of modulator variables in gifted minors' emotional processes is still to be clarified. Gender, for instance, is one of the factors under discussion. While there are studies showing evidence of a positive relationship between certain emotional aspects and female gender (Abdulla Alabbasi et al., 2020; Litster & Roberts, 2010), other studies conclude that this is not a generalized modulator of the emotional processes in gifted minors (Hoge & Renzulli, 1993; Paniagua et al., 2019; Rinn & Wininger, 2007).

Conclusion

Giftedness research is in the spotlight of many psychological, education, and cognitive science professionals. Studies on gifted children's emotional processes are built on unstable grounds where disagreements on definitions and antithetic conclusions exist. Currently, there is a lack of solid scientific evidence to support a measurable difference between gifted and non-gifted students regarding their cognitive processes related to their affective skills. In parallel, professionals working in the areas of applied science, as well as gifted children's families, explicitly refer to these processes as key elements of the observational differences.

Certain authors reveal that gifted children have higher intellectual abilities and lower social-emotional abilities compared to those of their peers. Others, on the contrary, claim that intellectual giftedness is accompanied by high social-emotional abilities, suggesting that a high intellectual capacity allows children to develop strategies which compensate possible psycho-social difficulties.

The emotional-affective component in students is one of the issues that concern schools the most and where no scientifically oriented educational protocols exist. Progressing in gifted children's research will allow us to adapt educational strategies, maximising their talent and their well-being. Awareness

of the potentially different affective-emotional processing characteristics of gifted children will diminish the socio-educational gap between these students and their typical developed peers. The currently existing ambiguity in the literature is an obstacle for helping our youngsters optimising their talent, and scientific evidence is needed to understand the true meaning of giftedness. Stereotyped misperceptions lacking research evidence should be avoided. Gifted minors' population is a diverse group in which each individual has unique characteristics; some show high levels of social-emotional competence, while others show psychological vulnerability. All in all, identifying people with a high capacity will only make sense in a context in which we are fully able to support them in developing their potential.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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