

Enhancing Elementary School Counselors' Work with Gifted Students:
Recommendations for Professional Practice

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Abstract

Elementary school counselors play an integral role in the academic, personal/social, and career development of all students, including gifted students. The training and continuing education needs of elementary school counselors in relation to counseling the gifted learner, however, is relatively nonexistent in the professional literature and is nonexistent in most training programs. This article explores the theoretical and empirical support for the need of counseling services for students identified as gifted at the primary level and the challenges in training for elementary school counselors. Recommendations for enhancing professional practice for elementary school counselors are offered, and future research and continuing education needs are examined.

keywords: school counselor, professional practice, gifted students

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Early identification and appropriate counseling interventions of gifted students within an educational setting increases the probability of future extraordinary achievement and success over the life space and reduces the risk for later personal, social, emotional, and/or educational issues (Gross, 1999; Harrison, 2005; Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty, 2008). The social, emotional, behavioral and intellectual development of gifted children, through an elementary school counseling lens in particular, has received little attention outside the journals that deal specifically with gifted children. The net result is that [elementary] school counselors are often uninformed or misinformed regarding the social, emotional and behavioral needs of gifted children in relation to intellectual development and educational needs (Wood, 2010a).

Although students identified as gifted are repeatedly being overlooked in terms of support services (Ziomek-Daigle & Land, 2016), the elementary school years, however, are most often the time students are identified as gifted (Silverman, 1993). This is an optimal time to be recognized so differentiated educational and counseling support services can be designed to provide an individual plan that enhances the gifted child's opportunity for growth and success. Therefore, we will explore the theoretical and empirical support for the needs of the gifted

student at the primary level, review the challenges, opportunities, and needs of elementary school counselors to work with the gifted, and offer suggestions to inform and enhance clinical practices of elementary school counselors' work with gifted students.

Elementary School Counselor and the Gifted Student

Theoretical Support

Social, emotional and behavioral development in children is a complex process, and children who are gifted are no exception. "In the earliest stages of talent development, it is important that young children see the world around them as inviting and full of opportunities to learn" (Olszewski-Kubilius, Subotnik & Worrell, 2015, p. 147). As a child gains understanding of his/her surroundings, a significant confluence between environmental experiences and social contexts converge, shaping one's development (Santrock, 2009). Findings in the gifted literature have focused primarily on academic performance rather than the social, emotional and behavioral developmental attributes of students who are gifted (Peterson & Wachter-Morris, 2010; Yoo & Moon, 2006). Consequently, understanding and providing education and services promoting social, emotional, and behavioral development of gifted students is of an increasing imperative in the field of gifted education (Garrett, 2005; Peterson & Moon, 2008).

Examining the developmental milestones of a gifted student through the lens of a developmental theory may be a helpful conceptual framework for understanding any issues as they appear in counseling. There are many broad human development theories such as Freud's Psychosexual Stage theory, Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development, Kohlberg's Moral Understanding theory, and Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory. Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development stages on personality development is especially significant to students identified as gifted as it explains human development through the scope of mental, emotional and social growth throughout the lifespan (Newman & Newman, 2015). Humans are most vulnerable during early childhood through school age as children can experience both typical and atypical developmental trajectories (Newman & Newman, 2012). Typical development usually follows a known and predictable pattern whereas; atypical development does not follow such a probable course. Erikson postulated that a failure to master any of the developmental stages complicates and has a negative impact on the other stages over the life span (Corey, 2012). When development does not follow the normal course, atypical development may ensue. Atypical development appears when a child either falls behind or accelerates ahead of typical peers in physical, cognitive, and/or social skills. Given that the gifted population is more advanced in areas of cognitive development than age-mate peers, it may complicate their development (Robinson, 2008). Historically, early studies regarding the social, emotional, and behavioral development of gifted children by Terman (1925) stated that these individuals had typical personalities and were not more maladjusted than others. In other words, the data indicated they were not any more susceptible to developmental issues or social or emotional challenges as their non-gifted peers (Blackburn & Erickson, 1986; Neihart, 1999). Nonetheless, other researchers contend that some gifted students experience atypical developmental challenges that are related to their giftedness (Lovecky, 2004; Peterson & Moon, 2008; Silverman, 2012).

The concept of atypical development is similar to what is known in the gifted literature as asynchronous development. Simply, *asynchrony* means uneven development, (Silverman, 2012) and asynchronous development is based on the different rates of cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral growth in gifted children compared to their non-gifted peers (Silverman, 2002, 2012). Because of this atypicality or uneven development, it is suggested by Peterson (2006) that gifted traits and characteristics may make coping with life events more difficult, and may cause gifted students to experience life events qualitatively different than their non-gifted peers. This developmental asynchrony creates distinct challenges for gifted children as their cognitive development generally outpaces their social, emotional and behavioral development (Robinson, 2008; Silverman, 1993, 2012).

Perhaps, most important to understanding how developmental challenges impact gifted children is a recognition of these unique social, emotional and behavioral experiences of these individuals. Manaster and Powell (1983) described the imbalance of such developmental needs as being *out of stage* (cognitive development), *out of phase* (social discrepancies), and *out of sync* (feelings of not fitting in with non-gifted peers). Lovecky (2004) echoed the interplay of imbalances between developmental issues and cognitive issues as the following:

Not only do many gifted children go through stages of emotional, social, moral and spiritual development at earlier ages than more average children, but also they experience crises within each stage in a qualitatively different way because of their exceptional intensity and sensitivity (p.12-13).

It is also true that developmental theories such as Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental perspective may need to be accelerated for the gifted child as they move through some of the stages more quickly (Van Tassel-Baska, 2009) which could result in imbalances (Tucker, & Lu Haferstein, 1997) or even crises (Corey, 2012). These imbalances and crises in development often create a myriad of potential social, emotional and/or behavioral difficulties for gifted students (Gilman, 2008). The end result of not resolving these developmental crises will reduce the likelihood of being identified gifted in the primary grades and beyond (Cross, 2011). Building upon this assertion, the psychological development of gifted children needs to be an educational imperative in our elementary schools. Therefore, gifted students need an elementary school counselor to aid in supporting their social, emotional, and psychological well-being (Silverman, 2012).

Empirical Support

The majority of research on services, interventions and best practices for counseling gifted children remains largely conceptual (Buescher, 2004; Kwan & Hilsen, 2009; Milgram, 1991; Moon, 2002; Moon, Kelly, & Feldhausen, 1997; Silverman, 1993). The majority of the extant research on the social, emotional and behavior issues of gifted students retains its foundation in gifted education (Moon, 2002) and in clinical settings (Cross & Cross, 2015; Peterson, 2009). To date, there are only a small number of studies related to school counselor involvement with gifted students (Carlson, 2004; Dockery, 2005; Earle, 1998; Minor, 2015; Peterson, 2013; Wood, 2010b). Given the greater demands for accountability faced by elementary school counselors, the distinct social, emotional and behavioral needs of the gifted population and the scant research for supporting such needs, it is necessary to better understand

the experiences and practices of elementary school counselors in their leadership, advocacy, and counseling work with students who are identified as gifted. Although the information regarding elementary school counselors' work with gifted students is minimal in the literature, the evidence supports that these students are at risk for underachievement, dropping out of school, poor peer relationships, high stress levels, and depression (Colangelo, 2003; Kerr, 1991; Robinson, 2008; Wood, 2010a).

Gifted education scholars have established activities and service delivery models that professional school counselors could employ with their gifted students (Mendaglio & Peterson, 2007; Moon 2002; Silverman, 1993; VanTassel-Baska, 1998) though few have made it to the professional school counseling literature nor to the hands of the school counselor practitioner (Wood, 2010b). Myers and Pace (1986) summarized this conceptual theory-to-practice disconnect as:

Significant information is starting to accumulate on the needs of gifted persons, but there is very little experimental documentation of effective counseling and guidance strategies. What knowledge is available about counseling this population is based mostly on clinical experiences and descriptive research (p. 550).

This disconnect between theory and practice is echoed by Reis and Moon (2002) who state, "While numerous strategies and some models have been suggested for addressing the social and emotional needs of students with gifts and talents, few have been comprehensively implemented by school personnel or even by private counselors who practice with this population" (p. 251).

Nonetheless, research supports that school counseling interventions can have significant effects across K-12 settings (Davis, 2015). As ethical professionals, professional school counselors seek out the most effective interventions to address student need (American School Counseling Association [ASCA], 2016, Standard A.1.h.). ASCA (2012) suggested the professional school counselor could provide individual, small /or large group counseling as a resource for gifted students and their families in meeting their unique social, emotional and behavioral needs. This is supported by Wood's (2010a) study concluding that school counselors need to be aware of a wide array of best practices and implementing such when working with their gifted students. Many researchers advocated for differentiated counseling approaches in which giftedness is centralized within academic, career, and social and emotional interventions (Colangelo, 2003; Moon, Kelly, & Feldhusen, 1997; Silverman, 1993). Specifically, group counseling is suggested as most effective when the participants are homogeneous in ability, Peterson (2006) explained gifted students may be more comfortable and find commonalities amongst group members and make connections with others based on their feelings and experiences.

A sampling of specific counseling strategies noted in the research used to enhance social, emotional and behavioral competence include reclaiming normalcy (Probst & Piechowski, 2012), bibliotherapy (Delisle, 1990; VanTassel-Baska, 2009) journal writing (Hall, 1990; VanTassel-Baska 2007), discussion of gifts and talents (Peterson, 1990; Silverman, 1990), use of affective curriculum (Peterson, 2003; Peterson, Betts, & Bradley, 2009; Silverman, 1993), and playing games focusing on interpersonal, psychological dimensions (Peterson, 2003). Given

these suggestions are presented as counseling strategies in the literature, the question becomes are elementary school counselors prepared to deliver counseling services with students identified as gifted?

Preparing the Elementary School Counselor

The social, emotional, and behavioral development of gifted children has received some attention within gifted education journals (Wood, 2010b). However, not as much information has been published in journals specific to school counseling though school counselors are usually the first line of defense in supporting students' affective and behavioral needs in schools (Adams, 2014; Peterson, 2007). Professional school counselors could benefit greatly not only from research that incorporates a systemic approach, but also from practical applications as well (Myers & Pace, 1986). Building upon that assertion, VanTassel-Baska (2009) suggested in order for human external influences to be productive in children's lives, adults must be trained in relevant skills, select interventions, and ensure that the systems within which they function are attuned to the need for flexibility in implementation.

Despite these assertions, professional school counselors graduating from the education programs accredited by Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Educational Programs (CACREP) are not required to take courses specializing in serving gifted students (Peterson & Wachter Morris, 2010). This graduate preparation expectation is in sharp contrast to the many calls for professional school counselors to have at least some foundational knowledge about the affective and behavioral needs of gifted students. According to the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) position paper, "given the salience of giftedness in social and emotional development, and the likelihood that career and academic concerns have implications for well-being, school counselors need to be prepared to work with highly able students" (NAGC, 2009, p. 3). [Elementary] school counselors should focus their efforts on collaborating with educators in schools to establish the conditions for optimal growth and development in their students (Howard & Solberg, 2006). Yet, professional school counselors are often uninformed or misinformed regarding the social, emotional and behavioral developmental needs of gifted children in relation to intellectual development and schooling (Peterson, 2015; Silverman, 1993; Wood, 2010a). Last, because professional school counselors play such a vital role within the school district, Walker (1982) contended that "the counselor with knowledge of the characteristics of the gifted and talented student will be an invaluable service as programs and curricula are developed" (p. 364). The following are suggestions for how elementary school counselors can begin to inform and modify their comprehensive counseling programs to address the needs of the gifted student.

Recommendation #1: Elementary school counselor's seek to understand their gifted students through the definition of giftedness and identification procedures

Elementary school counselors implementing a comprehensive school counseling model make sure close attention is paid to balancing and meeting the needs of *all* of their students (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Studer, 2015). Similarly, they are responsible for ensuring students with unique gifts and talents receive appropriate academic, career, and personal/social interventions as well (Chen-Hayes, Ockerman, & Mason, 2014). Professional school counselors must understand how the social, political, and historical contingencies have leverage in their

practice (Liu, Fridman,, & Hall, 2008) as this perspective draws attention to the circumstances and challenges gifted learners face within schools (Coleman & Hughes, 2009) in relation to definitions of giftedness and the identification processes within their schools. One point of reference in understanding multiple and unique contextual needs of this population is to be aware of what constitutes giftedness. Educators and researchers have defined giftedness in a variety of ways for many years (Lotta, Kerr, & Kruger, 2008). Clear definitions support common understandings, and foster progress toward a specific goal; however, there is no firm consensus that exists among professionals as to precisely who should be considered gifted, talented, or both. Quite simply, the word *gifted* means different things to different people, authors, researchers, professional school counselors, and the like. Why define giftedness? In countless urban, suburban, and rural school districts a definition serves as both a foundation and springboard for all subsequent decisions for developing, identifying, and funding an appropriate educational program for gifted children: No definition, no program.

Students, who could be identified gifted, are present in schools in all grades, races, genders, and from all socioeconomic levels. Gifted children are usually identified in elementary school (Silverman, 1993) when teachers, professional school counselors or parents, refer the student for a formal educational evaluation. This is an optimal time gifted children should be recognized so differentiated educational opportunities can be lined up to provide an educational path that taps into a gifted child's ability and potential. Moreover, the identification process varies across school districts and amongst states, but the outcome should be centered on the child receiving necessary differentiation and modifications to a school's curriculum so that the child can be challenged in school (NAGC, 2009; Rotigel, 2003). Most schools have some type of screening and selection process so students are not subjectively placed in special programs. It is crucial that the elementary school counselor understands issues of identification and the processes of their specific context in order to advocate for their gifted learners.

Recommendation #2: Elementary school counselors work directly with students from an ecological paradigm

Understanding and providing services in promoting the social, emotional and behavioral development of gifted students is imperative in the field of gifted education (Garrett, 2005; Peterson & Moon, 2008). The gifted learner may have needs that can be addressed by elementary school counselors within their comprehensive school counseling program aligned the ASCA National Model. This model provides professional school counselors with a more comprehensive, systematic approach to working with students focusing on student needs within their school and on the local political context and to use data to document program effectiveness (Lee, & Goodnough, 2014). The ASCA National Model borrowed heavily from the Education Trust in which understanding students in context is articulated by The Education Trust (2009): "School Counseling is a profession that focuses on the relations and interactions between students and their school environment to reduce the effects of environmental and institutional barriers that impede student success" (para. 3). In order to do so, an ecological perspective is a way of informing and enhancing the clinical practices of elementary school counselors within their work with the gifted student in recognizing the nature and scope of the gifted student's social, emotional, and behavioral needs. [Elementary] school counselors will "better identify and understand the complex patterns of interaction that occur within schools and between schools and their communities, and how they affect student achievement" (McMahon, Mason,

Daluga-Guenther & Ruiz, 2014, p. 460). Because ecological models consider and incorporate factors found both within the student as well as within their school, peers, family, and neighborhood, it provides a conceptual framework to understanding the affects and experiences contributing to the behavior of the student. As it relates to giftedness, an ecological perspective recognizes that many types of environmental influences enhance or inhibit identity formation and developmental processes (Moon, 2002). Going back to Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development, he postulated that conflicts do not arise internally from the individual, but rather from the individual's interaction with his or her environment. As such, a school environment that lacks sufficient stimulation may cause a gifted child to become "anxious, irritable, withdrawn, or even explosive" (Probst & Piechowski, 2012, p.71). These types of social emotional, and behavioral issues mentioned emerge from a mismatch of educational experiences and the ability level of the student, the difficulty of finding like-ability peers, and/or a mismatch of self-expectations as compared to others (Neihart, 2002).

Elementary school counselors who use an ecological framework should "not only be trying to identify contributing factors" as mentioned above, "but would simultaneously be looking for possible sources of strength and healing within a child's or adolescent's world" (Abrams, Theberge, & Karan, 2005, p. 286). Elementary school counselors should respond to each student's individual needs along with their characteristics of strengths in efforts to empower and enable all students. When the elementary school counselor can better understand and support gifted students and their ecological contingencies, the experience in school can be different for students.

Recommendation #3: Elementary school counselors counsel with cultural intentionality

Researchers within the gifted community who investigate the social, emotional and behavioral issues of gifted children continue to expand awareness of the need for counseling services (Colangelo, 1997; Mendaglio & Peterson, 2007; Peterson, 2003, 2015; Peterson & Moon, 2008; Wood, 2010a; 2010b); however, little attention has been paid to the professional school counselor's experiences of service and practice in working with gifted children. Elementary school counselors are in a unique position to support the social, emotional and behavioral needs of gifted students within their comprehensive school counseling programs (ASCA, 2013).

Gifted children often express the feeling of being different. In actuality, they really are different in many ways including a difference in ability and motivation compared to their same-age peers (Coleman, Micko, & Cross, 2015). What should elementary school counselors do with this information as most children do not embrace feeling different? Elementary school counselors can employ counseling skills and techniques with purpose and respect to the diversity of the student. They can facilitate student development through counseling with cultural intentionality.

The culturally intentional [elementary school] counselor has ". . . more than one action, thought or behavior to choose from in responding to changing life situations and diverse [students]" (Ivey, Ivey & Zalaquett, 2014, p. 9). The ASCA National Model provides the framework through which individualization and differentiation of student and counselor interaction could be maximized. Elementary school counselors, who counsel with intentionality,

differentiate their counseling services based on the needs of their students. Culturally intentional elementary school counselors are aware that different students, such as the gifted, vary and may respond differently than their typical age peer. While there are several models elementary school counselors could use to provide individual counseling, the Intentional Interviewing Model can be used as it is individually focused, time-sensitive, and uses a narrative stance with students (Ivey, Ivey & Zalaquett, 2010). The five steps of the Intentional Interviewing Model as outlined by Ivey et al. (2010) are: (1) building the relationship, (2) identify story and strengths, (3) goal-setting, (4) restorying, and (5) action taking. This approach provides a flexible and fluid way of moving moment by moment in session by being with the uniqueness of each of our gifted students. This type of intentionality not only demonstrates caring for the unique and specific needs of gifted students, but also encourages their optimal social, emotional, and behavioral development.

Recommendation #4: Elementary school counselors use advocacy and collaboration to promote success for gifted students

Following the ASCA National Model, elementary school counselors are responsible for supporting the needs of all students in their schools in the three domain areas of academic, personal-social, and career. As it relates to students who are identified as gifted, ASCA's position statement states that the school counselor assists in "providing technical assistance and an organized support system within the developmental comprehensive school counseling program for gifted and talented students to meet the extensive and diverse needs of all students" (ASCA, 2013, p. 10). In similar support for the gifted learner, the NAGC position paper stated, "given the salience of giftedness in social and emotional development, and the likelihood that career and academic concerns have implications for well-being, school, and other counselors need to be prepared to work with highly able students" (NAGC, 2009, p. 3).

A NAGC recommendation for schooling is there should be a social and emotional education both in and outside of the regular education curriculum (NAGC, 2013). Generally, Wood (2010a) stated this type of affective guidance has fallen to the gifted intervention specialist because they tend to be one with the most proximal influences in the day-to-day interactions with students who are gifted. However, NAGC's social and emotional guidance and counseling standards highlight and recognize the school counselor, who is familiar with social and emotional needs, as the one who should be providing such services (NAGC, 2013). Thus, the responsibility in school for helping gifted learners reconcile their social and emotional needs requires a collaboration from the educators with the most proximal influence on their life space (Santrock, 2009). When the elementary school counselor and the gifted intervention specialist use an ecological framework in their collaborative effort, they aim to address both the individual and the systemic influences because the environment shapes or reinforces individual behavior (Conyne & Cook, 2004). The rationale for collaboration is so gifted students can be better served within a comprehensive school counseling when professional school counselors and the teacher of the gifted work together.

As advocates for counseling their gifted students, elementary counselors should maintain collaborative efforts with the teacher of the gifted. Given the risk for emotional, social and behavioral concerns, gifted students need an elementary school counselor leading a comprehensive school counseling program working collaboratively with the gifted intervention

specialist, to address their needs as a team. Carlson (2004) contended school counselors who have a gifted program and/or a gifted intervention specialist are more knowledgeable about giftedness and more likely to advocate on behalf of the gifted student. This assertion can be corroborated as far back in Wiener (1967) where the attitudes and knowledge of the school counselor working in schools with gifted programs were more favorable in quality and service.

A number of scholars and existing research suggest the importance of collaboration when working with students identified as gifted (ASCA, 2012; NAGC, 2013; VanTassel-Baska, 1990; Wood, 2012). Collaboration is simply defined as working with others cooperatively. Although simplistic in its definition, the rationale for collaboration among professional school counselors and gifted intervention specialist is multifaceted. Wood (2012) argued “by working together, school counselors and gifted educators could find themselves in a powerful partnership, a deep professional relationship, and as persuasive advocates in the service to gifted students and their families” (p. 273). Further, collaborative efforts are effective in making systemic, ecological change for a student’s academic, career, and college readiness. Last, collaborative efforts in delivering counseling core curriculum assists in meeting the diverse and unique needs of this population of students (ASCA, 2013). Collaborating with teachers is an essential skill and role of the elementary school counselor within the framework of a comprehensive school counseling program. “If public schools are to make a contribution in this area, two key groups need to collaborate—teachers of the gifted and school counselors” (VanTassel-Baska, 1990, p. 40). That being said, an effective collaborative effort may lead to real changes in school culture, in creating an optimal learning environment for gifted students.

Conclusion and Future Directions

What happens to children in the early years has consequences throughout the course of their lives. While there are many opportunities to intervene and make a difference in the lives of children and young people, research advised that intervening in early childhood is the most effective phase to impact the future development of the child (Harrison, 2005). Investing in the early school years is vital for children who are identified as gifted so they do not lose interest, withdraw from school and peers, develop poor work habits, and fail to participate with effort (Delisle, 1992). Further studies could evaluate the applicability and effectiveness of the recommendations outlined in this article. Studies could explore how the relationship of the gifted individual’s context of peers, school, family, and neighborhood influences identity formation through the lifespan. More exploration on the efficacy of counseling interventions that not only focus on the gifted student’s attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, but also the direct and indirect influences of the student’s proximal environment of peers, family, and teachers would add to the body of literature. Studying the ecosystemic support systems within the gifted student’s life such as the elementary school counselor and the teacher of the gifted may provide information on resiliency and concordance. With additional studies, an even greater understanding of the experiences of the elementary school counselor’s work with gifted students could be gained. The four recommendations outlined in this article can be a blueprint toward to positively modifying an elementary school counselor’s comprehensive school counseling program by ensuring success for all gifted students.

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