
Career Counselling for the Academically Gifted Student

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Abstract

This article deals with seven career development and occupational decision-making difficulties experienced by academically gifted students: narrowing the occupational choice, indecision, vocational identity formation, lack of occupational meaningfulness, early occupational choice, pressure from significant others and the need for occupational role models. Each difficulty is discussed with recommendations for counselling interventions. These career development and occupational decision-making difficulties are explained within social learning theory.

Résumé

Cet article étudie les sept difficultés principales auxquelles doivent faire face les étudiants doués lors du choix d'une carrière et son déroulement. Ces difficultés peuvent se diviser comme suit: la sélection des carrières éventuelles, l'indécision, la formation de l'identité professionnelle, l'absence de travail ayant un sens, le choix de carrière précoce, la pression exercée par les personnes-clé dans la vie de l'étudiant et, finalement, la nécessité de trouver un modèle professionnel à émuler. Les auteurs abordent chacune des difficultés et y assortissent des recommandations pour l'orientation professionnelle. Ils utilisent la théorie de l'apprentissage social pour expliquer les difficultés inhérentes au choix et au déroulement d'une carrière.

The myth persists that academically gifted students are able to do anything that they want to do in life (Achter, Benhow, & Lubinski; 1996, Hollenger, 1991). Many believe that academically gifted students should pursue educational and career programs which will enable them to make a contribution to society. Further, they believe that gifted students have a great deal of ability and a wide range of information which equips them to cope with all of life's demands. Perceptions such as these place pressure on gifted students, making their educational and career planning difficult.

Recent research (Emmett & Minor, 1993; Hickson, 1992; Kelly, 1992; Kelly & Cobb, 1991) has suggested that as many as 53% of academically gifted students experience difficulties and want help with their career and educational planning. Herr and Cramer (1996) indicated that the career decision-making concerns of academically gifted students include how values can be used in career planning and decision making, how college major relates to a career choice, how to distinguish between their career aspirations and what others expect of them, how to select careers that satisfy their needs for challenge and continual skill development and generally how to make educational and career decisions.

In this article, the term *academically gifted* is used to denote individuals with a superior general intellectual ability. It does not specifically include or exclude individuals who have abilities in leadership or in the perform-

ing and visual arts. Academically gifted students tend to earn high marks on teacher-made tests. Also, the term *occupational choice* is used to denote a process which is characterized by an optimum degree of fit among personal philosophies, abilities, interests, and evolving vocational, occupational, and work parameters.

The purpose of this article is to review seven career development and occupational choice difficulties which may be experienced by academically gifted students and to suggest strategies for helping them move beyond each difficulty. These seven difficulties were chosen for two reasons: first, as a school counsellor the author worked with academically gifted students who displayed some of these characteristics; and secondly, the author wanted to support these seven difficulties through a content analysis of the literature.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT CHARACTERISTICS OF GIFTED INDIVIDUALS

academically gifted individuals have a wide range of abilities and interests that open a variety of career options to them (Achter, et al., 1996; Fox, Tobin & Brody, 1981; Miller, 1981). Perrone and Van Den Heuvel (1981) suggested that gifted students are more likely to pursue career patterns that are outgrowths of academic subjects in which they excelled during college. Kelly (1992) found that young gifted adolescents tended to choose occupations from the following categories (ranked for their popularity of choice): Applied Physical Science (architect, engineer, system analyst); Writing and Law; Biological and Medical Science; and Research Physical Science.

Academically gifted students explore occupations broadly and with depth at a young age. Kelly and Cobb (1991) and Kelly (1992) reported that gifted 11- to 14-year-olds have more knowledge of factors relevant to career decision-making, the world of work in general, and their chosen occupation than that typical of much older people. Dunnell and Bakken (1991) found that gifted 12th grade students indicated a higher number of occupations they might consider than did 9th grade gifted students.

There appears to be gender differences relative to the breadth and depth of occupational exploration among gifted academic students. Gifted female students complete more extensive career planning (Gassin, Kelly, & Feldhusen, 1993) and have higher amounts of information (Kelly & Cobb, 1991), but are more likely to view their giftedness as less helpful in career decision making (Leung, Conoley & Scheel, 1994) than gifted males. During grades 7 to 12, gifted girls tend to demonstrate less career certainty than do gifted boys (Gassen et al., 1993). Gifted boys express a greater need for occupational information than gifted girls and indicate a broader range of occupational aspirations (Kelly, 1992). Gifted boys tend to choose occupations which are higher paying than gifted girls (Kelly, 1992); however, gifted females consider more

occupations than gifted males (Dunnell & Bakken, 1991). Gifted girls are more likely than boys to consider 4-year college and master's degree, however they are less likely than boys to consider doctoral or professional degrees (Leung et al., 1994).

When compared to their peers in regular curriculum classes, gifted students are not higher in vocational identity and do not need greater amount of occupational information (Kelly, 1992). On the other hand, gifted students perceive fewer barriers to career achievement than do students not identified as gifted (Kelly, 1992). Gifted boys and girls do not differ in their levels of vocational identity (Kelly, 1992), nor in their likelihood to consider high prestige occupations (Leung et al., 1994).

In summary it appears that academically gifted students are precocious in their career development. They possess a great deal of occupational information and ideas about how to engage in extensive career planning from an early age. One of the difficulties with such literature is the manner in which it treats the gifted population. This literature appears to view the academically gifted population as homogenous. The problem with such an assumption is that the presence of subtypes may be masked. Such possible subtypes may have unique characteristics which hinder their career decision making. While the gifted population have characteristics which may be considered as strengths, these strengths may actually contribute to many of the occupational decision-making difficulties experienced by them. This author contends that there are subtypes within this population and when their career decision-making difficulties are viewed from the perspective of social learning theory (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996), counsellors are better able to help them advance in their vocational decision making.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY OF CAREER DECISION MAKING

The social learning theory of career decision making (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996) identifies four kinds of variables which influence career decision making: genetic endowment and special abilities, environmental conditions, learning experiences and task approach skills. The theory recognizes that individuals are born with unique potentials which include special abilities that affect an individual's ability to acquire certain educational and occupational preferences. The theory also recognizes that individuals are born into a context shaped by social, cultural, political, and economic forces that affect career decision making. These contexts include geographical environments which provide such things as a number and variety of available jobs, and/or opportunities for special training; and human environments which provide such things as economic and social status within a family, and access to an educational system. Learning experiences include two types: instrumental and associative. Instrumental learning includes those experiences in which an

individual acts on the environment to produce certain consequences; while associative learning include those experiences in which the individual perceives a connection between stimuli or events by observing real or fictitious models. Task-approach skills are the result of interactions between learning experiences, genetic characteristics, special abilities and environmental influences. Examples of task-approach skills include work habits, and processes as attending, selecting, symbolic rehearsing, and coding. The use of these skills affects the outcomes of each task and they are modified by the results.

Social learning theory suggests that individuals constantly encounter learning experiences which produce four consequences. The first consequence is termed a self-observation generalization, which is an observation resulting from the evaluation of one's own performance in relation to learned standards, which may or may not be accurate. For example, if an individual places first in a piano recital competition, he or she may aspire to a future as a concert pianist. Further, as a result of learning experiences, people make generalizations about the environment, termed world-view generalizations and use these generalizations to make predictions about the future and other possible environments. For example, individuals may believe that to be successful in life they must have an occupation which matches their interests. Such generalizations may or may not be accurate. Thirdly, task-approach skills are learned abilities that are used to deal with the environment, to interpret it in relation to self-observations and world-view generalizations and to make predictions about future events. Such skills are important in career decision making and include, for example, the ability to recognize an important decision situation, define a task realistically, examine and accurately assess self-observations and world-view generalizations. Fourthly, actions are implementations of behaviour such as applying for a job or changing a major field of study.

One of the advantages of viewing difficulties in career decision making from a social learning perspective is its emphasis on learning. Due to faulty learning, individuals may experience difficulties in their career decision making. From a counselling perspective, interventions aimed at correcting faulty learning will help to remediate the difficulties and enable individuals to make career decisions appropriate to their context.

OCCUPATIONAL DECISION-MAKING DIFFICULTIES AND STRATEGIES FOR INTERVENTION

Narrowing the Occupational Choice

Generally when individuals are seeking to narrow their occupational choices, they begin by processing information about their interests, values and abilities along with information about the world of work (Peterson, Sampson, Reardon, & Lenz, 1996). One difficulty experi-

enced by academically gifted individuals is the presence of many interests and abilities, each characterized by some degree of strength (Pyryt, 1992). Gifted students want to keep their options open and experience stress in making a decision which precludes other attractive options (Emmett & Minor, 1993). Such cognitive and emotional dispositions may influence the development and use of task-approach skills.

As opposed to focusing on multi interests and abilities, career planning activities should explore the values, life-goals and leisure activities (including activity commitment and persistence) as a basis for decision making with academically gifted students (Hong, Whiston, & Milgram, 1993; Miller, 1981; Montgomery & McKay, 1992; Perrone & Van Den Heuvel, 1981). Some values gifted students are likely to espouse include the following: self-realization/self-actualization, self-expression, interdependence, and living full lives (Rodenstein, Pflieger, & Colangelo, 1977). One starting point for counsellors is to have gifted students list their values, interests, and leisure activities and highlight the occupations which embody these in their role description (Brown & Brooks, 1991). Next, counsellors could help students identify the occupations which utilize the skills inherent in their abilities and leisure activities. In addition, counsellors could encourage gifted youth to maintain a LifeLong Notebook (Montgomery & McKay, 1992) in which students record ideas, dreams, quotes, questions, goals, people they have met, and experiences. The purpose of the notebook is to gain an understanding through reflection of the values, goals and life-style components gifted youth would like to express in their chosen occupation.

Indecision

Gifted individuals may possess faulty ideas about occupational decision making, such as having to make the perfect choice, and the necessity of pleasing significant others as opposed to self (Emmett & Minor, 1993). These irrational ideas often result in stress and anxiety and may cause gifted students to be indecisive. This perceptual disposition may result from faulty self-observations as well as a cognitive and emotional disposition which influence the appropriate use of task-approach skills.

Career counsellors can help gifted students to correct such faulty learning by using rational analysis (Corey, 1996) and to replace it with more facilitative thinking such as focusing on pleasing themselves, and the realization that there is no one perfect choice. In addition, counsellors should focus on the affective components of decision making to help gifted individuals overcome their anxiety associated with indecision (Marshall, 1981). Counsellors can help gifted individuals to cope with anxiety through relaxation training and self-monitoring techniques. Further, by providing encouragement counsellors can help gifted students

develop self-confidence and autonomy in their occupational decision making (Fox, Tobin, & Brody, 1981).

Vocational Identity Formation

Academically gifted students tend to achieve high grades across the curriculum, which may lead to a difficulty in developing a sense of identity, i.e., a self-observation which includes their abilities and interests and the implications each has for vocational choice (Kerr & Erb, 1991). The resulting vocational identity diffusion may express itself in delayed decision making, experiencing frustration with their multi interests and abilities, and tending to change majors more often than their academically average students.

Counsellors need to focus on both the gestalt of vocational identity as well as its component parts. If counsellors focus on the frustration, the delayed decision making and/or the shifting choice of a major, they might miss the larger picture of vocational identity. Counsellors should plan interventions which utilize value clarification and match these values to occupations which allow for their expression (Kerr & Erb, 1991). For example, holding the value of the dignity and worth of the individual suggests that the decision maker might examine occupations in social work environments.

Lack of Occupational Meaningfulness

Gifted individuals tend to express the desire, i.e., a self-observation for a life style which permits them to raise personally meaningful questions and combine diverse interests (Emmett & Minor, 1993; Perrone & Van Den Heuvel, 1981). Often finding occupations which allow them to express this lifestyle may be difficult. Also, gifted students may not be entrepreneurial enough to create these jobs. Counsellors can help gifted academic to "create" such occupations by having them engage in divergent thinking strategies to combine interests and life-style issues into a meaningful occupational choice (Pyryt, 1992). For example, journalists are able to combine an interest and skill in writing with several other interests such as sport, science, or politics and are able to work out of their homes, maximizing the time spent with their family. Also, counsellors can encourage gifted youth to study megatrends and to discuss the implications of these trends on future careers (Montgomery & McKay, 1992). Such an occupational option might be space medicine.

Early Emerger

Academically gifted individuals may make an occupational decision very early in life and pursue it through a long educational route (Achter et al., 1996; Kelly & Colangelo, 1990). Such an early decision may influence the

development of a well-rounded world-view generalization about the world of work as well as the task-approach skill of communicating with one's peers. Often they pursue accelerated programs and enter advanced programs earlier than their academically average peers (Achter et al., 1996). This pattern often limits exploring other occupational opportunities. Gifted individuals may spend long hours developing a talent, such as music, thus limiting the time spent with their peers. They may identify with adults due to the long hours spent with an adult developing their talent. While gifted and talented individuals may communicate at adult levels, it is important to allow them also to behave in age appropriate ways (Miller, 1981).

Career counsellors might ask gifted students when they first considered their career choice. If the choice was made early in life, then counsellors should be alert to the possibility of a limited knowledge of the world of work. If gifted students have spent long hours alone, counsellors should attend to their affective needs (Van Tassel-Baska, 1981; Marshall, 1981). Counsellors could use small group or one-on-one counselling to develop communication skills and meet the affiliation needs of gifted students.

Gifted students may choose occupations which could require up to 10 years of post-secondary schooling (Hagen, 1982; Pyryt, 1992). This implies that they delay personal gratification, and engage in long-term planning. Counsellors need to provide gifted students a preview of the milestones which lay ahead as well as help them understand the investment of time and energy inherent in such occupational choices.

Pressure from Others

Gifted youth often sense a conflict between their personal goals and the societal expectations for them. They may experience pressure from their parents and teachers to succeed and excel at everything they do (Emmett & Minor, 1993; Kelly, 1992; Marshall, 1981; Pyryt, 1992). Gifted students are often labelled as the leaders of tomorrow which sets a high expectation to succeed, sometimes focusing on giftedness as a burden rather than something to be developed. These pressures may lead to faulty self-observations. These expectations leave gifted students with the perception that they need to choose careers to satisfy others instead of their personal interests and values (Hagen, 1982).

These attitudes and expectations may cause gifted students to limit opportunities for career exploration. Counsellors should help gifted students determine the criteria they use in making a career choice. To help deal with the expectations from others and the pressure associated with these expectations, counsellors could use group strategies to alleviate the social isolation and perceived pressure of the gifted. One such group activity is termed strength bombardment (Montgomery & McKay,

1992), during which students share self-disclosures and offer feedback about their perceptions of their peers' strengths. Paradoxically, gifted individuals may feel some sense of freedom from their giftedness when interacting with their gifted peers. In the group setting, gifted students have the freedom to explore personal career preferences without undue pressure from other (Miller, 1981). Assertiveness and leadership training may help the gifted select and maintain high levels of career aspirations based on personal criteria and not those coming from significant others (Marshall, 1981).

Lack of Occupational Role Models

Gifted youth have extensive knowledge in many areas but may lack wisdom, i.e., task-approach skills in using this information (Miller, 1981). They need assistance in learning what questions to ask in order to plan and act effectively. Mentorships and internships are helpful in providing them with the opportunity to experience a relationship with an adult who has similar interests and abilities (Beck, 1989; Brown, 1993; Van Tassel-Baska, 1981). This relationship could be a source of realistic information concerning the details about work which are not readily available in printed form. Further, counsellors could have gifted youth study the autobiographies of gifted people (Montgomery & McKay, 1992). From such study, gifted students would learn how the personal interests, hobbies, mental and physical characteristics of famous people influenced their career choice and paths.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This article summarized seven difficulties which academically gifted students may face in their career development and occupational decision making. Most of these difficulties are not unique to the gifted population. All individuals may experience difficulty in narrowing their choice, indecision and pressure from others. They may lack significant role models, knowledge of meaningful occupational choices, as well as clarity in their vocational identity. Perhaps the one difficulty most unique to gifted students is the early emerger. Due to participation in accelerated programs and entry into advanced programs at an early age, such gifted students may have a limited knowledge of the world of work. As with the general population, counsellors should be aware that there is much diversity within the gifted student population. Not all gifted students will experience difficulties in career decision making. Counsellors need to assess the relative influence of these difficulties and use this assessment in planning for interventions both in individual, group and/or program contexts.

It is the author's contention that these seven difficulties can be accounted for within the social learning theory of career decision making.

Gifted individuals may have learned a number of faulty notions that have influenced their self-observations, world-view generalizations and/or their task approach. For example, individuals may have learned that they should begin the decision-making process by matching their self-attributes to occupations and narrow their choices, or that they must make the perfect choice. Further, they may lack clarity in their vocational identity, i.e., self-observations resulting from their multi talents and interests. Also, as a consequence of special abilities and instrumental learning experiences, gifted individuals may have made a decision about their futures early in life without an adequate exploration of other possible occupational goals.

From a contextual perspective, gifted students may not have had access to a variety and number of different occupations, adequate role models, nor educational opportunities to develop certain task approach skills. Consequently, they may lack significant learning which influences their ability to consider all the factors necessary in making appropriate career decisions.

It is evident that more research is necessary on the career development and occupational decision-making difficulties of this population. With a strong empirical base, counsellors will be in a better position to deal with the career development and occupational decision-making needs of the academically gifted student.

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