

Editorial

Focusing on Strengths of the Heart in Understanding Success and Psychological Well-Being of High-Ability Students

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In our research lab at Florida State University, and previously, in my work at Duke University, my students and I have focused on three related areas of investigation: how to identify high-ability students beyond simply looking at an IQ test score; factors in addition to intellectual ability that help predict the development of talent at the highest levels of expertise; and how and why success in life requires both head strengths and heart strengths. Our various research investigations have been guided by my experiences working with high-ability children and youth in a variety of capacities for more than three decades [1,2]. Trained as a clinician working with troubled children and youth, early in my career I became fascinated with prevention, early intervention, health promotion, resilience and invulnerability [3,4]. This led to a growing interest over the years, first as a practitioner and, later, as a professor and researcher, in understanding strength-based psychoeducational and psychotherapeutic interventions in support of gifted kids at risk for psychological problems.

In my work while at Duke University, I considered Emotional Intelligence (EI) as a possible panacea, potentially helping to protect gifted kids from psychosocial and emotional disorders that all kids are susceptible to [5]. In other words, I thought that just maybe EI might make a real difference in the success, quality of life, and overall well-being of gifted kids. Based as much on clinical experience as on our own and others' research, I came to understand that gifted kids who are successful in life possess more than simply emotional intelligence [1,2]. We came to recognize that successful gifted kids bring to situations, in school as well as in their social lives, well-developed social skills, character strengths such as empathy and compassion, and a well-honed ability to understand, read, and control their own and others' feelings— emotional intelligence. All three of these important prophylactic constructs— social skills, character strengths, and emotional intelligence, help make a huge difference in the lives of gifted kids. We began investigating, and then calling, these three constructs by the almost mystical term, “strengths of the heart.” And the term caught on.

A few research studies that we have investigated in my research lab that has helped us begin to better understand “strengths of the heart” include:

- What are some effective strategies available to ignite the motivational flame among extraordinarily bright students? Some, but not all, gifted students lack motivation or passion for challenges. We explored, for example, how to make homework assignments more enjoyable and challenging. How to emphasize mastery and a “growth mindset”. And we explored ways to identify and use mentors from the community as role models to help motivate and excite high ability adolescents.

- Do emotional intelligence and self-efficacy predict success among psychology doctoral students as therapists? One of our early investigations used an ability model of emotional intelligence – called EI, to help determine whether EI leads to more effective psychotherapeutic performance. We hope to next explore ways in which beginning therapists – and other healthcare providers, can promote and refine their EI abilities. Of course, we also hope to explore just how much can one increase their level of EI if it's truly ability!

- Do level of EI and level of socio-economic status predict subjective well-being? And do age, race/ethnicity, and gender play a moderating role in the relationship between EI and subjective well-being?

- What are the long-term effects of peer victimization and social support on the current level of well-being of high ability college students? Too few studies, in our opinion, have looked at the older gifted student. In this investigation, we examined how Honors College students are doing, and compared their profile of socio-emotional functioning with non-Honors college students.

- Can teachers reliably measure students' level of EI? And if they can, does EI actually relate to any important things in the classroom, and the real social world outside of the classroom?

- Are there effective ways to promote subjective well-being? And if there are, are some individually- and group-administered tactics, techniques, and interventions differentially more effective than others based on gender, race/ethnicity, and age?

- Is there a particular constellation of character strengths (for example, gratitude, open-mindedness, kindness, honesty, modesty) that best predicts to success in later life among high ability kids? We have also explored whether parents and teachers view the importance of developing character strengths differently? For example, we've explored whether parents might have a very different 'top 5' list of most important character strengths, when compared to their child's

teacher's 'top 5' list? And if there are differences, then might these differences inadvertently weaken the impact of each other's efforts—parents and teachers, to maximize character and virtue development in the home and school? Another way of asking this question is this: might there be a uniquely impactful algorithm for promoting character strengths and virtues that we are 'missing the boat' on? To help us understand this fascinating but admittedly complex phenomenon, we have invited teachers and parents to rate the importance of a list of adjectives describing both "strengths of the head," such as 'imaginative', 'curious', and 'brilliant', and adjectives describing "strengths of the heart," such as 'caring', 'generous', 'compassionate', and 'kind.' We ultimately hope that our findings can help influence educational policy decisions.

▪Finally, do gifted students differ from their non-gifted peers in terms of socio-emotional functioning? For example, we have had gifted and non-gifted students, their teachers and their parents, complete measures on motivational mindset, belongingness, loneliness, perfectionism, life satisfaction, and self-esteem.

Taken together, we hope that our research can contribute in a real and meaningful way to furthering the gifted field's understanding of the social and emotional world of gifted children and youth. Our research is, admittedly, applied and action-oriented, by no means bench research. This is because my own early experience working with this population was as a clinician, not an academic. The questions that we ask about strengths of the heart tend to be grounded in clear and concrete implications for translating our research into practice.

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