GIFTED LEARNERS:

THE ROLE OF RESILIENCE AND HELPLESSNESS IN ACHIEVING OUTCOMES OF SUCCESS OR FAILURE

A belligerent samurai, an old Japanese tale goes, once challenged Zen master to explain the concept of heaven and hell. But the monk replied with scorn 'You're nothing but a lout – I can't waste my time with the likes of you!'

His very honour attacked, the samurai flew into a rage and, pulling his sword from its scabbard, yelled, 'I could kill you for your impertinence.'

'That,' the monk calmly replied, 'is hell.'

Startled at seeing the truth in what the master pointed out about the fury that had him in its grip, the samurai calmed down, sheathed his sword, and bowed, thanking the monk for his insight.

'And that,' said the monk, 'is heaven.' (Goleman, 1995, p 46)

If this story is considered in connection with Ellen Winner's definition in *Gifted Children* of giftedness as characterised by "three atypical characteristics – precocity, an insistence on marching to their own drummer, and a rage to master" (Winner, 1996, p 3) then there is good grounds for considering that many gifted children possibly live a life of "hell". A life where the strength of their own emotions, a desire for perfectionism, pressure from parents and teachers and the envy, taunts, bullying and isolation they may feel from their peers combine to produce within them an emotionally fragile state. The inability of some gifted children to master such emotional impulses can lead to:

neurosis – "a fixation on making mistakes, which resulted in a constant state of anxiety" (Schuler, 2000), "an increased vulnerability to suicide ideation" (Hamilton & Schweitzer, 2000), and can "block achievement, cause anxiety, or may even lead to thoughts of suicide due to perceived pressure to be perfect" (Neumeister, 2004)

Of course not all gifted children suffer in this way, some have protective factors which support them - "these key protective factors are said to be located both externally in the social/environmental life space of the child and internally, as personal attributes and qualities of the individual" (Howard, Johnson & Oswald, 2003). It is the development of this inner strength or ***resiliency*** and its specific applicability in the education of gifted children which is the focus of this study.

Resilience is defined variously as "a set of qualities, or protective mechanisms that give rise to successful adaptation despite the presence of high risk factors during the course of development" (Benard, 1991) and as the "capacity of individuals to overcome personal vulnerabilities and environmental adversities effectively or the ability to thrive physically and psychologically despite adverse circumstances" (Haertel, Walberg & Wang, 1990).

Resilience is most clearly demonstrated in studies of students from impoverished backgrounds who achieve success despite the negative influences in their backgrounds and their environments. In a study of 3981 elementary students from minority and low-socioeconomic-status (SES) backgrounds those who achieved greater academic success (in Maths) also displayed greater resilience. "Greater engagement in academic activities, an internal locus of control, efficaciousness in math, a more positive outlook towards school and more positive self esteem were characteristic of all low-SES students who achieved resilient mathematics outcomes" (Borman & Overman, 2004). The idea of an internal locus of control being a protective factor against helplessness and a support for the development of resilience was also demonstrated in a 1991 study of 144 high risk adolescents.

In comparison to children with an internal locus of control, those with an external orientation showed greater declines in functioning with increasing stress levels. Support for these findings is seen in the learned helplessness paradigm (Seligman, 1975). This paradigm suggests that when people believe they are powerless to control what happens to them, they become passive and restrictive in coping abilities. On the other hand, when individuals believe that events and outcomes are controllable, learned helplessness is avoided, and, instead, active attempts are made to overcome adversive situations (Luthar, 1991).

From the evidence the development of learned helplessness and the development of resilience appear to be antithetical and mutually exclusive constructs and it may be instructive to look at the idea of building resilience through overcoming helplessness.

Since Martin Seligman conceived of his idea of learned helplessness in the early `70s there have been many thousands of studies completed searching out the basis of helplessness and how to overcome it and no-one has contributed more to the field specifically with respect to overcoming helplessness in the classroom and the development of resilience, than Carol Dweck.

Resilience, Attribution and Goal Orientation

In investigating the achievement of specified outcomes by elementary school children Dweck found evidence of helplessness associated with a tendency to attribute failure to a lack of ability which did not appear in children with who attributed failure to a lack of effort (Dweck & Repucci, 1973). This led to the identification of two major patterns of behaviour – "the 'helpless' pattern, characterised by an avoidance of challenge, and a deterioration of performance in the face of obstacles; and the 'mastery-oriented' pattern which in contrast, involves the seeking of challenging tasks and the maintenance of effective striving under failure"(Diener & Dweck, 1978)

These two ideas came together into a framework of goal achievement orientation which identified two distinct classes of goals: *performance goals* which were sought by students in order to gain approval or avoid disapproval, and *learning goals* where students sought to improve their knowledge, ability or competence. (Dweck and Elliot, 1983). Further work revealed that a focus on performance goals was found to be linked to the helpless pattern of response behaviour whereas the pursuit of learning goals in the same situation promoted the mastery-oriented pattern. Particularly striking was the way in which the performance goal orientation in students with low self-perceived ability "produced the same pattern of strategy deterioration, failure attribution and negative affect found in naturally occurring learned helplessness" (Dweck and Elliot, 1988).

Dweck then sought to discover if there was a difference in self concept that was behind an individual's orientation towards helpless or towards resilient response behaviour. Her 1997 study showed that resilience in the face of rejection was predicated by a belief in the student about the malleability of personality. Those who thought personality was malleable and could be changed or developed were found to be more resilient and those who thought personality was fixed were found to be more helpless (Cain, Duma-Hines, Dweck, Endley & Loomis, 1997). Building on this idea work was completed relating to concepts of intelligence and a clear correlation was found with relation to what were then called the "entity" and the "incremental" theories of intelligence. Students who believed that intelligence was a fixed attribute (entity theorists) were found to be less resilient and more helpless than students who believed intelligence was malleable and could be developed who were found to be more resilient and less helpless in the face of negative feedback (Chiu, Dweck, Hong, Lin & Wan, 1999)

In her book "Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality and Development" (1999), Carol Dweck put all her years of research together and described the characteristics of resilience as being an orientation towards setting learning goals, adopting mastery behaviour and believing in the flexibility of intelligence and the primacy of effort; and the characteristics of helplessness as being an orientation towards setting performance goals, adopting challenge avoidance behaviour and a belief in the fixedness of intelligence and the primacy of ability. One of the clearest differences between the two is seen in their behaviours in response to failure where the resilient individuals would attribute failure to a lack of effort and would take effective remedial action the helpless individuals would attribute failure to a lack of ability and tend to give up (Dweck, 1999).

Dweck's ideas are supported by Koestner and Zuckerman (1994) who studied the goal orientations of 60 college students and found that those who were performance oriented often exhibited classic helpless behaviours, including making self-defeating performance attributions and negative self-evaluations. Conversely those who were learning oriented tended to exhibit more adaptive behaviours and were more mastery oriented (Koestner & Zuckerman, 1994). In Australia support has come from a study of 893 college students where the learning oriented students showed a much more positive attitude towards their studies and were more likely to choose a difficult task to complete than their performance oriented colleagues who opted for more easy tasks (Archer, 1994).

The relationship between learning orientated students and adaptive achievement-oriented behaviours was also confirmed by a study of 199 college students ranging in age from 17 to 59 years. In addition it was found that older students were more likely to be learning oriented and younger students more performance oriented (Burley, Turner & Vitulli, 1999).

Gifted and Resilient

Many of the characteristics described here as attributable to resilient children have also been noted as characteristics of gifted children. They include “task commitment, academic achievement, verbal ability, intelligence, the desire to learn, an internal locus of control, risk taking, high self-concept, good self-efficacy and self-understanding” (Bland and Sowa, 1994). Gifted children as young as nine have been seen to spontaneously use cognitive appraisal strategies, including problem focused strategies and emotion focused strategies (only previously seen in adults) to deal with stress (Sowa, McIntire, May and Bland, 1994).

The development of resilience in gifted pre-adolescents as they grow into adolescents was found to be quite different depending on the gender of the gifted child according to Kline and Short (1991). They found that gifted boys showed “a significantly higher level of discouragement and hopeless feeling (as) junior high school students as compared with senior high school boys” indicating that the boys were developing resilience as they matured through the school system. On the contrary “a significant decrease in the self-regard and self-confidence of gifted girls (was found) throughout their school development, (and) levels of perfectionism, hopelessness and discouragement (were found to) rise in the same developmental time block” (Kline and Short 1991a, 1991b). These differences may suggest that the pressures to conform were much greater on the young girls and possibly the pressures to excel were greater on the young boys as they both matured.

Gifted and Learning Disabled

It is clear from the literature that even if most successful gifted children do display characteristics of resilience, not all gifted children are successful and a lack of resilience is often connected with that lack of success. This is particularly noticeable in gifted students with learning disabilities whose characteristics often “include poor self-concept, poor self-efficacy, hypersensitivity, emotional lability, and high levels of frustration, anxiety and self criticism” (Dole, 2000). Unfortunately because of their giftedness a lot of these students go undiagnosed as LD students because they are seen to be performing adequately as their gifts disguise their disabilities. Dole reports that a study of adult rehabilitation clients with high intellectual ability and learning disabilities found that 95% of the 80 participants had not been told of their exceptional abilities either while in school or while receiving vocational services. Studies have shown that college students and adults with learning disabilities who are resilient are knowledgeable about their strengths as well as their weaknesses and so are more self accepting. “Self-knowledge and self-acceptance, in turn, not only help these students develop realistic goals but also to persevere towards fulfilling them, all prominent characteristics of resilient individuals” (Dole, 2000).

Gifted and Perfectionist

Gifted students with learning disabilities often share the trait of perfectionism with their non-LD colleagues. Perfectionists have been described as “those whose standards are high beyond reach or reason, people who strain compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals and who measure their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment. For these people the drive to excel can only be self defeating” (Siegel & Schuler, 2000). If this is the case then they would also share a lot of traits of helplessness with their LD counterparts. Other researchers see perfectionism differently though. Hamachek (1978) described two types of perfectionism – normal ~ those who “derive a very real sense of pleasure from the labours of a painstaking effort and who feel free to be less precise as the situation permits”; and neurotic ~ who “are unable to feel satisfaction because in their own eyes they never seem to do things good enough to warrant that feeling” (Hamachek, 1978). In one study, of the gifted adolescents in a rural middle school who were surveyed 87.5% were found to be perfectionists and of those 58% were found to display ‘healthy' perfectionism while 29.5% were in the neurotic range (Schuler, 2000)

Gifted neurotic perfectionists would seem then to share some of the characteristics of gifted LD students in particular high levels of frustration, anxiety and self criticism (Dole, 2000).

Frost, Marten, Lahart and Rosenblate (1990) developed a scale of perfectionism called the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS). The MPS is based on Hamachek's (1978) perspective of perfectionism and expands that view to include three dimensions of perfectionism - self-oriented, other-oriented and socially-prescribed perfectionism (Siegle & Schuler, 2000; Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein & Dynin, 1994). The distinctions made between these three groups are described by Neumeister (2004) as – “self oriented perfectionists set high personal standards for themselves and evaluate their own

performance against these standards, other-oriented perfectionists are individuals who impose excessively high standards on others in their lives (and) socially-prescribed perfectionists perceive that significant others in their lives hold excessively high standards for them" (p 260). In the face of failure self-oriented perfectionists are often highly critical of themselves, they tend to over-generalise the failure and perceive it as a characteristic of the entire self, (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein & O'Brien, 1991). In contrast other-oriented perfectionists tend to blame other people for their failure and socially-prescribed perfectionists tend to blame factors such as luck and situational context. The common link between other-oriented and socially-prescribed perfectionists is a perceived lack of personal control and a tendency to attribute both positive and negative outcomes to external factors (Flett & Hewitt, 1998). Socially-prescribed perfectionism was also found to correlate with depression and low self-esteem whereas self-oriented perfectionism was associated positively with self control (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein & O'Brien, 1991).

In 2004 Neumeister investigated how these two dimensions of perfectionism – socially-prescribed and self-oriented – develop within gifted college students and influence their achievement motivation and their attributions for successes and failures. All the students studied who scored high for perfectionism attributed that tendency to a lack of experience with failure in their early school years and to actions of their parents. The main distinction came between the socially-prescribed perfectionists who believed their perfectionism developed due to pressure they experienced from their perfectionist parents and the self-oriented perfectionists who attributed their perfectionism to social learning due to their parents modelling of perfectionist behaviours. Also when studying the students' goal setting behaviour and reactions to failure Neumeister using a qualitative interview technique discovered major distinctions between the two types of perfectionists. For the socially-prescribed perfectionists she found themes emerged of:

"fearing failure, setting performance goals, and practising maladaptive achievement behaviours in addition to themes of minimising successes, overgeneralising failures, and making internal attributions for failures."

In contrast in the self-oriented perfectionists she found themes of:

"a desire for self-improvement, setting both mastery and performance goals, and practicing adaptive achievement behaviours as well as tendencies to make healthy attributions for successes and failures, and frustration with coping with failures" (Neumeister, 2004)

Overall, the results obtained with socially-prescribed perfectionism reveal that a sense of personal helplessness is a core feature of this perfectionism dimension (Flett & Hewitt, 1998). Helplessness was also found to be a key feature of "passive perfectionists who procrastinate out of fear of making mistakes (and who) are more likely to be preoccupied with suicide, unlike perfectionists whose strivings produce achievement (Adkins & Parker, 1996).

Gifted and Underachieving

The possible causes of underachievement are many and varied but within this area of research there is some indication, particularly with gifted children, that the influence of intrinsic or personal factors is highly significant. "In general under-achievement (in gifted children) is characterised by such attributes as disorganisation, lack of concentration, perfectionism, low self-esteem, unwillingness to conform, anxiety, vulnerability to peer pressure, and an external locus of control" (Ford, 1993). This view is confirmed by Fehrenbach (1993) who reports that characteristics frequently observed in gifted underachievers include "low self-esteem, perfectionism, procrastination, self-criticism, a feeling of competition where none exists, and an unwillingness to take risks" (Fehrenbach, 1993). One of the recurring themes as in the studies of perfectionism and learning disability in the gifted seems to be the attribution of failure to external control which in turn produces feelings of helplessness particularly in the face of failure. Larry Geffen (1991) in a study of gifted minority high school students found that the high achievers saw high school as a means to get to college, they were loyal to this goal over their peers and they placed causation for success or failure within themselves. In contrast he found that the low achievers saw the purpose of going to school as being with their friends, and they placed causation for achievement or failure outside of themselves (Geffen, 1991).

Gifted Responses to Resilience

In all the studies reported here of gifted children there seems to be common threads which link failure to the attributions of helplessness and success to the attributions of resilience as previously described. For

all gifted students with the potential for failure it would seem useful to be able to teach them the attributes of resilience to help them build internal protective factors which will help mitigate the possibility of failure. Herein of course there is a problem because in order to change attributions for success and failure one has to believe that such "beliefs" can be changed and as we have seen one of the characteristics of helplessness is the belief that personality and intelligence is fixed. For gifted students in particular there are also a number of other barriers to change which must be overcome to install resilient beliefs. Gifted children by virtue of their nature have a vested interest in maintaining the primacy of their intelligence as possibly the mainstay of their self-esteem and the suggestion that intelligence is an aspect of themselves that can be developed may well conflict with a belief in the "concreteness" of their gift or talent and may suggest to them that their special abilities are not so special and in fact may well be lost one day. And lastly gifted children often have had limited experience of failure and so through no fault of their own they may well never have had the opportunity to practice appropriate or resilient responses in failure situations and may find such reactions to be totally foreign to them.

Resilience Skill Building

The attributes of resilience that we are focused on in this review are those internal assets of resilient children that seem to enable them to handle adversity in a positive way and to create success for themselves through their own actions. These assets are described in their manifestation in children as "problem solving skills, autonomy, a purposeful, constructive and optimistic outlook on the future, effective communication and relationship skills (Howard, Johnson & Oswald, 2003); as "perseverance, persistence and optimism" (Floyd, 1996); and as task mastery, self efficacy, achievement motivation, persistence, hopefulness and optimism (Benard, 1995). Most of the literature around the development of resilience focuses on putting in place the protective factors of family, school and community (Haertal, Walberg and Wang, 1997; Wang 1996; Howard et.al., 2003,; Benard, 1995) and there is very little information on the use of metacognitive skill development in the formation of resilience. Empirical support for the importance of the development of metacognitive skills in gifted students has been reported (Hannah & Shore, 1995) and metacognitive abilities in relationship to motivation and perception of failure has been studied (Chan, 1996) but there appears to be very little work done to date on developing what Martin Seligman calls an "optimistic explanatory style" even though the evidence for the efficacy of this approach has been around for over 30 years (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993).

Conclusion

It would appear from the evidence that there are clear connections between:

1a) an orientation towards setting learning goals, adopting mastery behaviour and a belief in the flexibility of intelligence and the primacy of effort and 1b) the characteristics of successful gifted children including those who are self-oriented perfectionists and those with learning disabilities

And also between:

2a) an orientation towards setting performance goals, adopting challenge avoidance behaviour and a belief in the fixedness of intelligence and the primacy of ability

and 2b) the characteristics of unsuccessful gifted children including some of those who are performance oriented perfectionists, those who fail due to their learning disability and all those who chronically underachieve.

The literature on learned helplessness, learned optimism and the development of resilience has within it a wealth of possibilities for further study particularly into the use of metacognitive skill training for gifted children to help build resilience and avoid helplessness.

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