

Letters to Themselves: Gifted Students' Plans for Positive Lifestyles

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Hello, cheer up! How are you today?
You should watch that clock of yours.
How much time have you left?
School should be reopening soon.
Have you done your homework?
Don't just laze around reading. Do
something! When you feel that you
have done something, then you
can start playing. Got that! Now,
stand up, march on the double,
go to the toilet, drink a cup of water
now. Don't do it during the time
that you are working. It will
interrupt your momentum. If it is
too late then do it tomorrow but
no more putting off and that's
final.

Journal writing creates a personal dialogue for gifted students, encouraging them to air their views and frustrations, as illustrated by the above excerpt. Writing, in itself, as shown by Britton (1972) and Emig (1977), is a special form of learning. Journal writing has the added advantage of helping gifted students be aware of and understand

their problems. It also offers them a comfortable means for voicing their concerns (Hall, 1990), particularly their personal social concerns (Zaffrann and Colangelo, 1977). Gifted students, as suggested by Sisk (1987), should use daily logs to share their emotions and feelings to understand themselves better and to help be understood by others. Gifted students are likely to vary in interests and abilities (Ganschow, 1985). Farley and Farley (1987) were able to show their behaviours (as outlined by Swassing in Heward and Orlansky, 1980) are compatible with findings on written communications found in journals (Staton, Shuy, Kreeft and Reed, 1982).

This article focuses on the journal writings of gifted students in a pull-out program in an independent all-boys secondary school in Singapore. The independent school with Secondary 1 to 4 classes (equivalent to Grades 7 to 10) initiated this pull-out gifted program in 1993 with this batch of students as pioneers, selected when they entered Secondary 1. Twenty six intellectually gifted students, 12 years of age, selected

through a battery of tests in intelligence and quantitative ability, are provided a specially-designed rigorous enrichment program in mathematics, science and computer science, prepared and taught by teachers specially trained, both locally and in the U.S. (Lim, 1993).

As this is a pull-out program during curriculum time, the 26 gifted students are together only when they are doing the enrichment subjects. They spent the rest of their school time doing the seven other subjects with their own classmates. This ensures that the gifted students are not limited to their own gifted peers but have a chance to interact actively with the other Secondary 1 students in their class.

The gifted students have written 'Journey to Oneself' (Betts, 1985) as part of their journal writings. As part of this 'Journey', there is a section in which the students write a letter to themselves outlining their plans for positive lifestyles. These students wrote on a gamut of issues concerning positive lifestyles, ranging from appearance, personality, organizational skills, interests, fulfilment of talent, family, and to contribution to society. The students did a self esteem instrument, Marsh's (1988) Self-Description Questionnaire 1. It assesses four areas

of nonacademic self-concept, physical abilities, physical appearance, peer relations and parent relations, three areas of academic self-concept, English, mathematics and general-school, and a general-self scale. They also did an open-response survey on their interests and were interviewed individually by the author. The journal writings, together with findings from interviews and questionnaires, are used to illustrate the characteristics of these gifted students.

Perceptions of Appearance and Personality

Many studies have dealt with how sensitive the gifted are. As far back as 1942, Hollingworth, a pioneer in gifted education, reported that many gifted children, while growing up, suffered from feelings of inferiority connected with size and strength. Leroux (1988) found that gifted adolescents are sensitive to their own individual adjustment to the world and to societal pressures. A number of the gifted students in this study, focusing on their appearance and personality, write about their determination to improve certain aspects of themselves. They tend to be self critics, as suggested by Roeper (1982), viewing

themselves critically and finding themselves wanting. One boy, 'Han', is particularly preoccupied with his fatness although he is not really fat:

You say that one of your things that you want to correct is your fatness. One very good, or the best solution, is that you just exercise! exercising can reduce your fats, everybody knows that. You can exercise by playing your favourite sports like swimming or cycling. In this way you can have your diet and play at the same time.

On the whole, Han's self esteem, as measured by the Self Description Questionnaire I (Marsh, 1988) is quite high, except for the Physical Appearance subscale. Besides this preoccupation with his size, Han is actually a pleasant, affable and fairly well adjusted boy who finds his gifted peers friendly and not arrogant. He looks 'easy going' but has mature views: He does not believe that there are weaker students in the program, but that different gifted students have different strengths. Each subject has different students who are slower and weak. He suggested that the program mates can help each other out.

Another gifted student, 'Ben', writes about being shy:

So you want a better lifestyle, right! So let's sort out your problems. You are shy when you first meet people; you are a little fat All your problems need determination in order to be solved, e.g., you can't be shy forever because you need to meet people when you do business; and you must be determined to get rid of your shyness or you will be the loser in the end.

Ben is actually fatter than Han, but in his writings he appeared to be less sensitive about his size. However, his score on the Physical Appearance subscale of the Self Description Questionnaire I (Marsh, 1988) is lower than that of Han's. Generally he has high self esteem, as shown by his scores on the other subscales of the Self Description Questionnaire I. He has given himself good advice and made a great attempt to reach out to other students. At the end-of-year camp he was one of the program coordinators. He is also a pleasant and mature boy. In his other journal writings, he reveals that he likes 'being smart' and maintains

that other people see him as 'cute'. His strong interests are in the pure sciences and he reads articles on science and nuclear power. Being a typical high achiever, he worries that he cannot catch up with the work in the gifted programme, 'but so far, still OK'. He is very interested in computer science and plays computer games. He hopes to be a computer analyst.

A third gifted student, 'Wah', is concerned about being introverted:

Firstly, you must not be an introvert. Mix more freely with people and choose your friends wisely. They will help you in times of need. You should also go out more frequently and not be studying all the time. Be more tolerant to your enemies.

Generally, Asian students tend to be more introverted than American students. A study on the personality types of Singapore and American students, by Lim (1992a), revealed that about 48.7% of Singaporean male students were introverted compared to about 38.1 % of the American male students. Wah is sensitive enough to feel that peer relationships could be, as pointed out by Webb, Meckstroth and Tolan (1982), a

problem. He exhorts himself to reach out to his classmates. He is aware of his own impatience and intolerance, traits of the gifted pointed out by Frey (1991).

Wah has a brother in the national gifted program in Singapore. He stressed at an interview that there was no rivalry between them. His self esteem, as measured by the Self Description Questionnaire I (Marsh, 1988), is rather high. He has very supportive parents.

This seems to support Cornell and Grossberg's (1986) finding that siblings of those in gifted program would be adjusted if they were perceived well by their parents. When asked to compare the two programs, he said:

I'm not sure, the two GEP programmes about the same. At least I think the teachers are smarter than the normal secondary teachers. Generally, teachers are smart, otherwise they don't teach. Wah, like finding out the other kinds of methods to solving problems.

What does not interact with his brother and he does not feel that this is a problem. His brother was involved in an innovations program but Wah did not know what project the brother was doing.

He claimed that they did not discuss their school work with each other as they were each doing their homework all the time during the week. During the weekends, they would rather talk, about other things.

These gifted students appeared to be sensitive about their appearance, particularly their size and the fact that they may not be reaching out to their peers.

Organizational Skills and Time Management

Competitiveness and wanting to succeed well are typical traits of Singapore students; students want to succeed and to succeed well. Many of the gifted students wrote about wanting to do their best and to be smarter. They and their parents have high expectations. As these gifted students have just entered the secondary school, initially they share similar transition problems with other Secondary I students. In the transition from the primary to secondary level, Lim (1992b) found that, in terms of classroom environment, secondary students appeared to perceive their classrooms as having significantly less involvement, affiliation and teacher support, i.e., the

mean scores on three subscales of the Moos and Trickett (1974) Classroom Environment Scale, Involvement, Affiliation and Teacher Support, of the secondary students were significantly lower than the mean scores of the primary students. In a primary school in Singapore, a class teacher handles most of the subjects and could bring about a better relationship dimension in the classroom environment while in a secondary school, the class would be facing a bewildering number of subject teachers.

Faced with the transition problems of adapting to a secondary school, as good problem solvers, many of the gifted students in the study worked out that if they want to succeed at the secondary level, they need better organizational skills. When they were surveyed on study skills, over 30% of the gifted students felt that they needed time management and note taking skills. Being typical Singaporean students, about 20% reported that they needed all the skills to study effectively. 'Gerald' writes about time management and other organizational skills in the letter to himself:

You should also improve on your time management. Your present arrangement will not get you

anywhere in secondary school because you have 9 subjects. You should create a new time plan for secondary school..... Firstly you must sort out all your work for the day. Pick out the most important thing to do and do that first ... and cross out the unimportant things. Art and Craft, music, etc., these non-examinable subjects you should cross out because they are very time consuming. If you do them first, you might feel tired and have less concentration on the important things.

This excerpt reflects the importance students in Singapore, gifted and otherwise, placed on doing well in examinations. Actually his primary teacher revealed that Gerald was good in art and that he had won several prizes in art competitions organized by various agencies in Singapore. Elsewhere in his journal writings, Gerald has listed his strengths as Chinese painting and car designing. His parents had encouraged him in car designing since he was five years old. He wants to be an accomplished car designer and to be rich and famous. He shows his maturity in the next piece of advice to himself:

Secondly, after doing these important

things, do those easy work and when you have completed the easier tasks, you will have a sense of serenity because you will feel that you have completed a large amount of work. Take breaks occasionally and you would not feel too much stress.

Another gifted boy 'Ren' gives some good advice to himself on organization:

I heard that in the GEP programme, life's very hard. So, if you are having a secondary school crisis, here's some tips: First, plan your time well. Write down what you want to do at each time. Have a specific time each day for doing work, leisure hours and sleeping hours, if you like Lastly, go to sleep early at night and wake up early in the morning. This is a habit that every student should keep. An occasional late night movie is okay if it is during the June holidays.

Ren's goal is to excel in everything he does. He is a typical gifted perfectionist, as described by Roeper (1982) and Adderholdt-Elliott (1991). Ren does not

give himself permission to fail and he has high ambitions. He is tall, well built, active and energetic and pursued basketball with such intense activity that he wants to be a professional basketball player. He expresses his interests in computer games as well during the interview:

Interested in basketball, videogames, computer games, that's about all ambition, don't have. Become, professional basketball player if possible.

Being a perfectionist, he did not opt for science enrichment because he felt he could not excel in it. His reasons given at the interview are revealing:

I don't like science. I think the GEP science is no different from the special stream, maybe they just do a little bit more enrichment than us. I saw their notes, they go more deeply into a subject than us More interesting, but I do not regret not going into the science enrichment. I think my maths is much more interesting than that in the special stream and should be also more interesting than science.

Computer studies is the same. Far more work is expected.

In terms of organization, Ren again shows his perfectionistic trait:

How to organize? I don't know how, just do till I have nothing else left Yah, I always hand up my work on time unless something turns up like I left my book at home.

Interests and Fulfilment of their Potential

This independent school's pull-out program for the gifted has, like most gifted programs, been set up to take care of the interests of gifted students and to help them fulfil their potential. The following journal excerpts in this section focus more on these interests and the students' perceptions regarding the fulfilment of their potential.

'Zhang' is fascinated with mathematics. He writes:

Exploring Mathematics is not a very easy task. Mathematics is a wonderful and mysterious subject. Many problems and theories await people to solve it. Exploring

mathematics can contribute to society. But always bear in mind that knowledge can never be acquired totally.

Zhang has done well in mathematics competitions and obviously is talented in mathematics but at the interview, he reveals that he gets very anxious during mathematics tests:

Like in the GEP maths test, every maths test, I feel my body temperature rise very high. I discovered that it was just a maths test. After several maths test, I found that it was just my body temperature rising, not actually I have any illness, like fever or what.

When asked how he could lower his test anxiety, Zhang suggested:

Before the examinations, you don't look at the things you learn any more ... you just keep your mind blank. A suggestion is to watch some hilarious things, like comics or you can look at cartoons, then our hearts will be lighter.

Zhang is ambivalent about setting

expectations for himself: he wants to excel but is afraid that he would not be able to achieve it. He feels that he has to accept what he can do:

I was very surprised and happy when I was selected for the GEP.... I have no faith in myself, because I believe that we should not be too proud. If good results are produced then we will be happy, but if our expectations are too high and we fail to complete those expectations, we will be very disappointed..... I don't set very high expectations not all my expectations are fulfilled.

'Vee', on the other hand, is a typical example of a gifted student whose need to be at the top is so great that he throws himself into a sort of competitive overdrive, as described by Bernardo (1990). His competitiveness, as observed by his teachers, appeared to exceed a healthy level. His primary teachers feel that he is always unduly worried about his academic performance and that he does not have any form of relaxation; he 'buries himself in books'. He is socially withdrawn to such an extent that in the primary school, he isolates himself and not even bother to remember the

names of his classmates. In the secondary school, he does not mix with any of his classmates, either in his gifted class or regular class. This is supported by his low scores on the Peer Relations subscale of Marsh's (1988) Self Description Questionnaire 1. Vee's scores on the Physical Abilities and Physical Appearance subscales are also very low: He is at a physically awkward stage and hates physical activities. Although his gifted peers leave him alone, they would take every opportunity to ridicule him, particularly with nonverbal actions. Vee writes about himself:

You have quite some talent and are highly capable but your ambition surpasses all. Ambition may be a motivation and help one attain success but too much of it brings his downfall. If you fail to achieve your goal by a great difference, you may feel downcast and lose hope, eventually suffering numerous defeats and facing total destruction. Thus keep your ambition to a reasonable level.

This excerpt supports the view of Webb, Meckstroth and Tolan (1982), that the gifted are likely to be intense in

their feelings and views. At the interview, Vee feels that as he is not a typical student, he could not give me much views of the program. He speaks in a very mature way and in a superior tone. He feels that the rest of his classmates are 'below' him. At the end-of-year camp, I notice that Vee is making an effort to participate in group activities.

Family Ties and Society

In Singapore, families occupy a central part of the student's life, as we are still a very family oriented society. Thus 'Seng' writes about the family in the letter to himself:

Lastly, you must not quarrel with family members family ties are also important, in fact, the most important. Family is the root of a positive lifestyle. A family of quarrels and unhappiness will do you no good. Therefore, respect your elders and care for your siblings.

Seng's views on filial piety, family ties and a harmonious family come from what he has been taught at home and in school on Confucian values. He has two siblings, a brother in a primary school

and a sister at an American college. He hopes to win a scholarship to an American college like his sister. However, he said at the interview that he would miss his home. Seng has high self esteem as shown by his performance at the interview and his scores of Marsh's (1988) Self Description Questionnaire 1. He is well adjusted, a well integrated student as described by Roeper (1982).

A few boys have written on what it means to them to contribute to society. 'Irwin' is perceptive enough to give a long range view:

When you grow up, you would like to have a successful career and contribute towards the nation and society. You would like to earn more money so that your family would be more comfortable. You would also do some charitable work. You would also try to be a friendly, kind understanding person always.

Irwin's views on helping his own family and society, like Seng's above, reflect the Confucian values that he has absorbed from both home and school. He wants to be a successful mathematician and find new ways of solving problems. He has good relationships with

the students in his class. He considers himself as too quiet and lists one of his weaknesses as "too small a voice". Irwin has a good relationship with his classmates.

Conclusion

While working on the booklet "Journey to Oneself", the gifted students felt that they have learned more about themselves, their strengths and weaknesses. Some have learned to be frank while others found out what things are important to them and how to organize their interests. The diverse topics that they have dealt with in the letters to themselves and in the other sections of the booklet support Farley and Farley's (1987) finding that journals offer gifted students opportunities to discuss a wide variety of topics. These writings provide a rich source of information for the teachers guiding these gifted students, helping them to understand each of the students better and helping the students to achieve their potential. As the students continue in the program, more data will be collected on them, and they will be studied as part of a longitudinal project on gifted adolescents.

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