Counseling Gifted Children in Singapore:
Implications for Evidence-Based Treatment with a Multi-Cultural Population

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Abstract
Gifted education in Singapore is entering its third decade. However, local research into the gifted is typically undertaken by graduate students and left as unpublished data. Internationally, there is also very little if any research on counseling models that have been empirically validated for use with gifted children irrespective of their country of origin and cultural experience. This paper serendipitously originated from the second author’s visit to Singapore as a consulting scholar and his discussions with personnel at the Singapore Education Ministry’s Gifted Education Branch and interactions with local teachers and parents of gifted children. Drawing on the published wisdom of clinical experts and the second author who have provided counseling for gifted children, and the first author’s knowledge about Asian culture and educational context in Singapore, the paper proposes an evidence-based counseling model that could serve the needs of gifted children in Singapore and possibly other Asian countries.

Keywords
Gifted children, counseling, Singapore, multi-cultural
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Introduction

This article originated in 2012 when the second author, at the time a Visiting Scholar at the National Institute of Education, Singapore, was invited by the Singapore Ministry of Education to lead a workshop on counseling gifted students in Singapore. Although the topics of child counseling, problems unique to the gifted student, and evidence-based treatment (EBT) of childhood disorders were by no means unfamiliar to the second author, the idea of speaking specifically on clinical work with high ability students from a Southeast Asian country with a very different culture and set of customs and values compared to gifted students in the U.S. gave him pause. At the time, he was also co-leading a graduate counseling practicum at a prestigious Singapore university, and supervising cases fraught with multi-cultural issues that challenged his experience as an American psychologist. He invited the first author, a faculty member at the National Institute of Education, noted authority on psychological issues facing students in Singapore, and a native Singaporean, to help him develop a model for best practices in counseling gifted students from another country and very different culture, in this instance Singapore.

This article provides an overview of the clinical model and treatment considerations that were developed as a result of this unique opportunity to work with the Singapore Ministry of Education. The proposed model incorporates a marriage of ideas, research, and experiences of working with gifted children in an Asian context. An empirically-based treatment model is timely as counseling matures as a profession in Singapore. This paper also hopes to contribute to
counseling practice for the gifted as counseling approaches specific to their pertinent needs have received scant attention (Peterson, 2015). We begin with a brief introduction to Singapore and its gifted education program to set the stage for a discussion on treatment options.

**Singapore**

Singapore is a small island nation located between the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia in Southeast Asia. It is a multiracial and multilingual city state where approximately 77% of the population is Chinese, 13% is Malay, 9% is Indian, and one in three workers is a foreigner. There are four official languages: English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. English is, however, the official language of business, administration, and education. At the time of this writing, Singapore was celebrating its 50th year of independence from British rule in 1965.

Singapore is hailed as one of the world’s most competitive economies and financial centers. According to Forbes, “Singapore thrives as a technology, manufacturing and finance hub with a GDP (PPP) per capita of nearly US$56,700 (S$71,200)” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2012). It is in third place behind Hong Kong and the U.S. in the 2015 annual world competitive ranking (The Straits Times, 2015). Singapore’s swift transition from the Third World to First in just three decades of nation building is fueled by the decision to make education an urgent strategic necessity. The development of human resources is imperative for survival owing to a lack of natural resources.

Singapore invests heavily in education. Its education system has been rated as one of the finest performing school systems in the world that has sustained its excellent improvement (Ministry of Education, 2010). In May 2015, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ranked Singapore schools first amongst those of 76 countries based on test scores in Math and Science (Goy, 2015). Education features very prominently in Singapore’s success
story that is founded on the government’s value complex that emphasizes far-sighted planning, pragmatism, high standard achievement orientation, communitarianism, and the highest degree of determination (Chang, 2003).

**Singaporean Culture**

Singapore is at heart an Asian society bound by Confucian values that emphasize collective interests, education, and pragmatism. Regardless of ethnicity, Singaporeans subscribe to the traditional value of communitarianism; the foremost priority is to the nation, the second to the family or organization, and the last to the individual. Therefore, responsibility is defined on three levels – community, family, self – in a linear, decreasing order of importance.

Singapore’s national identity is encapsulated in five shared values. They were introduced in 1991 to preserve her Asian identity as the country progressed into the 21st century amidst rapid globalization (National Library Board, 1991). Singapore’s multicultural population shares five key communitarian values: (i) Nation before community and society above self, (ii) Family as the basic unit of society, (iii) Community support and respect for the individual, (iv) Consensus, not conflict, (v) Racial and religious harmony.

**Gifted Education in Singapore**

Maximizing the potential of every child is a top priority of the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE). In 1979, ability-based streaming or ability tracking was implemented to enable students to learn at a pace commensurate with their aptitude and to lower the rate of early dropout. In 1984, the Gifted Education Program (GEP) was implemented to develop students’ intellectual potential, creativity, and human qualities and prepare them for future leadership to the country (Ministry of Education, 2008).
Singapore’s GEP is a highly selective academic program that identifies only the top 1% of pupils (i.e., 500 children) in each age cohort\textsuperscript{1}. Whole cohorts of 9-year-old pupils are screened in Primary 3 (3\textsuperscript{rd} grade) and selected based on intellectual giftedness as indicated by outstanding performance in the English and Mathematics screening tests, and Selection Tests for English, Mathematics, and General Ability. Only the best and brightest attend the GEP, which until 2004, is a centrally-run program implemented for 3 years in elementary school (i.e., 4\textsuperscript{th} to 6\textsuperscript{th} grade) and 4 years in secondary school (i.e., 7\textsuperscript{th} to 10\textsuperscript{th} grade). The GEP is essentially an enrichment program wherein differentiation lies in giving depth and breadth to core curriculum content with emphasis placed on critical and creative thinking, inquiry, and problem-solving (Phillipson et al., 2009). Instruction is led by high quality teachers who are specially selected by MOE’s Gifted Education (GE) Branch, provided specialist training in teaching gifted students, and continually mentored by GE specialists.

To keep pace with the increasingly globalized environment, Singapore shifted to an ability-driven approach to education in 1997. Schools were given greater autonomy to make decisions about teaching and learning that best catered to students’ differing abilities and needs. In 2004 subtle refinements were made to the GEP to inject greater flexibility in catering to a wider populace of high ability students whose academic paths led to university. This led to the 6-year Integrated Program (IP) in 2004 that enabled high ability students to skip the “O” level examinations (at 10\textsuperscript{th} grade) and proceed directly to the “A” level examinations (at 12\textsuperscript{th} grade), and more importantly, “to have more time to engage in broader learning experiences and to pursue an area of interest and talent in greater depth” (Phillipson et al., 2009: 1446). As majority

\textsuperscript{1} This compares with countries such as the U.S. which identify the top 5-10% of its academically advanced students as gifted.
of the gifted students opted to be in the IP schools, the MOE eventually phased out the GEP in 2008 at the secondary school level. Other gifted students who prefer not to go to an IP school continue the gifted curriculum in secondary schools that offer a school-based gifted education program. GEP ceased to be centrally run by the GE Branch as IP schools have autonomy to develop their own gifted education curricular and to recruit teachers (Phillipson et al., 2009).

**Concerns about gifted students in Singapore.** In developing the clinical model and treatment considerations for our work with the MOE, we relied on two sources for an understanding of the unique issues encountered by gifted students in Singapore: a review of the extant literature and discussions with Singapore GE teachers.

Like their gifted counterparts in other societies, Singapore’s gifted students encounter stereotyping of gifted individuals, sibling jealousy and rivalry, fear of disappointing parents, the stress of onerous expectations, and a preoccupation with academic pursuits (Freeman, 2005). Teachers interviewed concurred with the findings in the gifted literature but highlighted three key concerns: (i) negative perfectionism, (ii) over-emphasis on performance, and (iii) social immaturity.

The first concern is perfectionism among the gifted. The literature suggests that neurotic perfectionism and the anxiety of not living up to parental expectations seem to carry a heavier charge for children in Asian societies (Chan, 2010; Kwan, 1992) than in other parts of the world. Unhealthy perfectionism affects psychological well-being. Chan’s recent research (Chan, 2012) with Hong Kong Chinese gifted students, aged 10 to 16, found that whereas healthy perfectionists were the happiest and most satisfied with life, unhealthy perfectionists were least happy and least satisfied with life. The latter also appeared to have a fixed mindset that focused on avoiding changes and challenges. Perfectionism in Chinese gifted learners appears to stem
from a collectivistic cultural root and is more socially oriented than in the West (Fong and Yuen, 2014). It is also related to the reverence Asian society accords to academic scholarship and excellence. This experience rings true for gifted students in Singapore. More specifically, parents have an important influence on the development of perfectionism in the Chinese student for whom high achievement or success is never simply an accomplishment meaningful only to the individual but also to his or her family and community (Duan et al., 2011; Fong and Yuen, 2014).

The second concern relating to the Singaporean gifted students’ preoccupation with academic performance and excellence warrants some discussion. In a national youth survey conducted in Singapore, Ho and Yip (2003) found that a majority of young people ranked education as the most stressful aspect of their lives. The academic stress issues from the desire to excel scholastically in order to fulfil the expectations of parents who value achievement goals (Ang and Huan, 2006; Chong et al., 2014). Since ability tracking serves to optimize students’ learning potential, doing well in examinations determines future academic streams and career path, and understandably becomes stressful. This compulsion to excel is more acutely true of gifted students for whom teachers and parents harbor great expectations. Therefore, it is not surprising that Kwan (1992), in a study that examined the impact of intellectual giftedness on Singaporean adolescents, reported academic work as the most commonly cited reason for depression. Similarly, Kwek (2007), in a survey of gifted students, noted high anxiety as a dominant emotion fueled by intense competition and the need to maintain excellent grades in order to gain social acceptance within the community of gifted peers and to avoid failure. The bar is set incredulously high as failure for the gifted is defined as simply falling short of perfection in tasks assigned to them (Kaiser and Berndt, 1985).
A third concern is the imbalance perceived in the affective development of the gifted child. A cross sectional study that compares GEP with non-GEP graduates found that whereas the former performs significantly better than the latter in the cognitive domain, the difference between these two groups is apparently less discernible in the affective domain (MOE, 2010). Anecdotally, there had been concerns about a seeming lack of sensitivity and an elitist mentality in some GEP students (Wormie, 2006). There is therefore a need to ensure that affective development does not lag behind intellectual development for the gifted (Kwan, 1992). In sum, gifted children in Singapore need support in coping with neurotic perfectionism, academic and social pressures, and social-emotional development.

Evidence-Based Treatments

A pertinent and perhaps inconvenient question is whether a unique approach is required in counseling the gifted. At the current level of scientific knowledge, we do not yet have published research that inform us of counseling approaches and techniques that best efficaciously address the gifted and the specific problems they encounter (Pfeiffer and Burko, 2015). The field of gifted education or counseling currently does not espouse a set of empirically validated best practices for counseling the gifted (Wood, 2010) although models of counseling have been put forward by clinicians experienced in working with the gifted on techniques, strategies, and activities that can be used. A list of frequently cited strategies can be found in Wood (2010). Pfeiffer (2013b) contends there is support for a scientifically defensible approach that integrates the following principles: (a) familiarity with the best and the most up-to-date clinically relevant research on the presenting disorder(s) a counselor might encounter in work with a gifted student; (b) clinical expertise in the context of a deep understanding of the gifted; (c) involvement of parents, the family and the school in therapeutic work with the gifted student; (d)
quality therapeutic alliance that enables the gifted client to feel understood and to gain trust in
the counselor.

The American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice (2006) defined evidence-based practice as “the integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of patient characteristics, culture, and preferences” (273). In light of this definition, the following discussion proposes a counseling model by considering the cultural context of Singapore society within which the gifted children’s needs are to be served and what the research espoused as good counseling practices for gifted individuals.

A Model for Counseling Gifted Children in Singapore

Counseling work with the gifted can benefit from frequently used strategies in the counseling literature: building the counseling relationship, developing awareness of giftedness and implications of coping, and collaboration with parents. Wood’s study (2010), however, reveals that the reality of the counseling experience is very different from the approaches touted to be effective. Half of the 153 gifted high school students reflecting on their counseling experience reported having their concerns dismissed or being misunderstood. Wood also observed that school counselors may know what needs to be targeted but not how to meet them. Likewise, school counselors in Singapore need to access a repertoire of best practices that are differentiated for gifted students and that recognize their special talents as well as limitations. In multicultural Asia, counseling with the gifted ought to factor into the balance consideration for both educational and cultural influences.

Differentiated Counseling

Counseling can be an important mechanism for promoting the holistic development of gifted children. According to Peterson (2012), a differentiated counseling approach that is
effective for gifted students employs "appropriate language and level of abstraction during communication, amount and type of psycho-educational information offered, counselor 'posture' and comfortableness with giftedness." (681). The literature offers a few useful pointers. First, build the counselor-client relationship not only on unconditional positive regard, trust, and acceptance but also on knowledge about the nature and development of the gifted student. For example, gifted students in Wood’s (2010) study found asynchrony to be least understood by counselors (Silverman, 1993); hence counselors can become more effective by being better informed about the developmental needs of the gifted. Second, employ more self-disclosure and adopt a role that was “less of ‘instructor’ or ‘doctor,’ and more of ‘mentor’ or ‘fellow traveler’.” (Yermish, 2013: 62). Third, respect the individuality of gifted students. This was a characteristic children in Hong Kong highly value as the most important counselor quality (Chan, 2011). The adaptation of evidence-based treatments to the gifted requires that counselors recognize that gifted children “often have great needs for autonomy and collaboration within the relationship, even at very young ages” (Yermish, 2013: 63). Gifted children in Singapore too are likely to benefit from a mentoring relationship that recognizes their need for autonomy.

**Group Counseling**

Prevention- and development-oriented group discussion is thought to be effective with gifted adolescents in addressing issues related to identity, interpersonal ease, gender, culture, ethnicity, career direction, and atypical issues, such as existential concerns, difficult developmental transitions, and social challenges (Peterson, 2015). Group counseling services enable gifted children to master skills in perspective-taking, boundary setting, and appropriate communication (Wood, 2010). Peterson (2008) advocated using discussion groups for gifted adolescents geared toward affective development in the interest of mental health,
comfortableness in school, and motivation for learning. Through group counseling, gifted students discover that other intellectual schoolmates have social and emotional concerns similar to their own. “Those who are shy gain from social access to peers and support for social and emotional development. Achievers and underachievers can break down stereotypes, find commonalities, and learn from each other.” (Peterson and Moon, 2008: 238).

Group counseling will work well with Singaporean gifted children. Research among Asian gifted students in Hong Kong (Chan, 2005) showed that social-interaction coping mediated the effect of emotional intelligence on psychological distress. Emotional intelligence (i.e., self-management and emotional regulation) was observed to be enhanced through increased social interaction with peers. According to Peterson (2015), “helping them to self-reflect, teach others about themselves, discuss concerns related to giftedness, find common ground, and develop expressive language to convey emotions might help these students feel greater ease socially and within themselves” (159). In sum, group counseling can prove more therapeutic than individual counseling as students can gain personal insight and more support, validation, and understanding from their peers.

**Expressing Emotions**

Gifted children are presumed to have heightened sensitivity, heightened self-criticism, and emotional intensity (Mendaglio, 2007). As such, they need help to incorporate into the sense of self their giftedness and to understand, regulate, and express emotions (Mendaglio, 2007). The need to cope with intense negative emotions is the reason individuals seek help. Negative emotions are thought to drive personality development and require sensitive handling. It is important in counseling the gifted to help them understand their intense emotions so that they can develop greater self-regulation of emotions (Mendaglio, 2007). In an interview with Sal
Mengaglio, Shaughnessy quoted Mendaglio as saying, “It’s all about emotions” (Shaughnessy, 2010). In that interview, Mendaglio highlighted the importance of helping clients know the full impact of their emotions and to get to the root cause in order to come to terms with the situations that elicited them. The first step is to create a trusting atmosphere that is sympathetic or empathetic to encourage gifted youth to express their emotions. Listening and empathic communication may need stronger emphasis in Asian societies where cultural habits may induce an adult counselor, teacher or parent to offer sagely advice instead. Mendaglio offered a different approach aimed at encouraging expression of emotion because that is what we need when we are emotional (Shaughnessy, 2010). “The objective is emotional release, rather than an attempt to change others’ behaviors.” (Mendaglio, 2007: 57).

**Addressing Perfectionism**

In addressing the concerns of gifted children in Asia, counselors will invariably need to confront the dominant quest for perfectionism. Perfectionism particularly among the Chinese is based on Confucian values that emphasize lifelong learning, family obligations, and achievement for the betterment of the community at large (Fong and Yuen, 2014). Chinese gifted learners are more likely to demonstrate perfectionism when there are clear goals for productive learning and active parental support (Chong et al., 2014; Chan, 2010). There are, however, also Chinese gifted learners, albeit fewer in number (Chong et al., 2014), who struggle with maladaptive perfectionism because they are focused on displaying their ability to others and fearful of having their weaknesses revealed. Chan (2012) recommended raising Hong Kong students’ awareness of the relationship between perfectionism and mindsets. This involved “changing mindset from the relatively fixed orientation to a more growth orientation, recognizing that it is natural to have limitations and that one can still derive satisfaction from having performed one’s best despite the
fact that there could still be a discrepancy between desired standards and performance.” (Chan, 2012: 231).

Greenspon (2012) envisioned treatment for perfectionism as a recovery process focusing on building self-esteem that helps gifted students “to feel acceptable as they are, separate from how well they might perform” (Greenspon, 2012: 609). He advocated a dialogue or joint inquiry approach to uncovering with the gifted students answers to questions revolving around their thoughts on failure. The dialogue would examine, for example, what mistakes mean, what others’ expectations are, why being less than perfect is scary, so that counselors, teachers or parents can begin to discover the thoughts and feelings that motivate the gifted student’s perfectionism. The dialogue also becomes in itself an act of bonding and, therefore, an act of acceptance. It can lead to a conjoint search on what new approaches might be useful.

**Working with the Family**

Pfeiffer (2012) observed that work with gifted children must always address the parents, parenting, and families. The family is a powerful context for positive change (Cheung, 2000). Parents of gifted children play a dominant role in shaping their children’s attitude toward their gift and what they make of it and also in providing emotional support when their children encounter difficulties. The effective counselor therefore needs to mediate between the gifted child and his or her parents by opening a lifeline of communication, where perspectives can be shared and understood. School counselors in Singapore are well placed to play a mediating role given the Asian parents’ inclination to respect and accept the counsel of a consulting professional (Yap and Tan, 2011).

Counselors who work in multicultural contexts such as Singapore need to be cognizant of the interpersonal relationship principles that typify an Asian society (Miller, 2009). Generally,
the average Asian parents tend to be very involved in the lives of their children, value education highly as the key to economic security and social mobility, and expect compliance with the standards and plans they set for their children (Huan et al., 2012). The typical Asian child reciprocates by seeking to please his or her parents, which often means living out the parents’ wishes. Understanding the nature of the parent-child relationship helps the counselor to negotiate the counselor-client relationship when providing interventions for the child. Effective work with Asian parents of gifted children should include psycho-education and practical support, which will be well received given their strong desire to be part of their children’s academic career.

Counselors can provide guidance programs (Kwan, 1992), such as seminars for parents on relevant topic areas. Parents will appreciate guidance on developmental issues common to gifted children, their special characteristics and needs, concerns related to the unique aspects of raising one or more gifted children, the impact of giftedness on social-emotional development (Silverman, 1993). Guidance to families in locating access to opportunities that can stretch the child’s gifts will be welcome. Individual counseling can also be offered to parents who will benefit from guidance on specific issues related to their child’s giftedness.

Asian parents in Singapore will benefit from cautionary counsel to avoid becoming over-functioning parents who make decisions for their gifted children. Parents need to be aware that they can unintentionally feed their child’s perfectionism and that over-involvement can handicap their development of problem-solving skills, weaken motivation in school, and lower self-efficacy in decision-making (Sampson and Chason, 2008). Losing sight of the gifted child’s age and emotional development can also cause undue anxiety to the child (Peterson, 2012).

Pfeiffer (2013a), reflecting on a career of working with high-ability students, highlighted that, in addition to high intelligence, children need deliberate coaching, hard work, motivation,
perseverance, and passion in order to be successful. Supporting these work habits are a few Asian values that would resonate with Singaporean parents. The first is the value of honest labor and industry or “chi ku” (literally “eating bitterness”), which parents will recognize as an ingredient for success beyond giftedness. The second and one of the “heart strengths” (Pfeiffer, 2013a: 86) is a sense of reflective gratitude which is pithily summed up in the Chinese idiom: 飲水思源 yin shui si yuan (“When drinking water, remember its source.”). Gratitude as the quintessential affective quality will encourage gifted individuals to remember the less fortunate members of their community. This heart strength is particularly important in the context of nation building in Singapore, which is contingent on the loyalty of its citizenry and the willingness of the best and most able products of the education system to give back to the country what they have received by way of nurturance and support.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper draws on the collective wisdom of experts in both gifted education and counseling of the gifted in its effort to articulate a counseling model that may be appropriate for gifted children in Singapore, a country with Asian roots. In light of the limited indigenous research on giftedness in Asia and even more sparse literature on counseling the gifted in this part of the world, this paper adds value by offering recommendations that counselors in Asia may find useful in supporting the development of Asian gifted learners.
References


