Different Strokes:

Perceptions of Social and Emotional Development Among Early College Entrants

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Abstract

The University of Washington's Early Entrance Program (EEP) enables intellectually advanced adolescents to enter college without attending high school. The program has a demonstrated, positive effect on gifted students' academic development. What is less clear is the social and emotional impact of early college entrance. Thirty-one Early Entrance students participated in one-hour focus group discussions in which they discussed their social and emotional experiences as young college students. Although participants expressed varying degrees of comfort in diverse social situations, all believed themselves to be more mature than they would have been had they gone to high school, and all reported themselves to be well-socialized. According to participants, the principle socio-emotional strengths of the EEP are its acceptance of individual differences, its encouragement of excellence and personal responsibility, and the solidarity and sense of belonging it offers students.

Adolescence is a critical developmental period for young people in contemporary Western culture. Adolescents' sense of self, their relationships with parents and friends, their personalities, values, sexual identities, and coping skills undergo rapid and unprecedented change. At the same time, "they must also consider how they are going to deal with the varied intellectual, social, and vocational demands of adulthood that lie directly ahead" (Conger & Petersen, 1984, p. 7).

The psychosocial context of people's lives has a profound effect on the ways they respond to these challenges, particularly with regard to talent development. Arnold, Noble, and Subotnik (1996) documented the extent to which contextual factors shaped gifted women's perception and development of their potential. These factors included race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, geography, gender, sexual orientation, familial education and achievement, and culture (Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1996). Although these factors affect gifted adolescents as well, even more salient is the proximal social milieu in which they learn to recognize their talents and take them seriously or, conversely, learn to abandon talents and aspirations (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993).

During no other developmental period does the peer environment exert as powerful or pervasive an influence on self-concept (Conger & Petersen, 1984; Erikson, 1968). Identity is extremely fluid and highly responsive to social cues during adolescence. In order to take risks, develop a strong sense of self, and cultivate their intellectual and creative abilities, people must feel a sense of security and belonging (Maslow, 1972). For adolescents, this feeling derives from having one or more close friends, peer acceptance, and a sense of group identity. Social isolation easily leads to apathy and depression, and it can severely compromise a teenager's motivation and aspirations (Conger & Petersen, 1984).

Finding a network of supportive peers is a challenge for many young people. It can be especially daunting for gifted teenagers who do not fit easily within the mainstream secondary school environment (Alvino, 1991; Ford, 1994; Kerr, 1995; Kunkel, Chapa, Patterson, & Walling, 1992; Lovecky, 1992; Noble & Drummond, 1992; Noble & Smyth, 1995). High school, the traditional context in which adolescents develop socially, emotionally, and intellectually, is not an environment in which all bright students thrive. Not only can their interests and aspirations make it difficult to find sympathetic friends, but so can the psychological characteristics that generally comprise "giftedness": sensitivity, intensity, empathy, loquacity, drivenness (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993; Robinson & Noble, 1991).

The University of Washington's Early Entrance Program (EEP) has been carefully crafted to nurture students' intellectual and socio-emotional development. Each year, students are recruited from a wide variety of cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Sixteen are admitted to the year-long Transition School (TS), which compresses four years of high school into one. This number is chosen in order to provide a peer group that is small enough for cohesion and large enough for variety. Most students have completed seventh or eighth grade when they enter Transition School, and all must be under 15 years of age. During this transition year, students study English, history, mathematics, and physics, and they learn the critical thinking, writing, reading, and study skills they will need to be successful university students. At the end of the year most complete TS and become matriculated students at UW; those who do not (typically, one or two) return to high school.

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Previous studies about early college entrance have demonstrated the positive effect acceleration can have upon gifted students' academic development and their general perceptions about the experience (Brody & Stanley, 1991; Janos, Robinson, & Lunneborg, 1989; Noble & Drummond, 1992; Noble, Robinson, & Gunderson, 1993, Noble & Smyth, 1995; Olszewski-Kubilius, 1995). What is less clear is how students perceive its social and emotional effects. Many adults assume that high school is not only desirable, but necessary to the psychosocial soundness of an adolescent's life. But, is this assumption an accurate reflection of the reality experienced by Early Entrance students? To answer this question, we invited currently enrolled Early Entrance students to reflect upon their social and emotional experiences in the EEP.

Method

Participants

All Early Entrance students who were currently enrolled as UW undergraduates (n = 61) were invited to participate. Thirty-one students (50%) chose to do so, of whom 16 were male and 15 were female. Students' ethnic backgrounds included: Caucasian (n=23, 74%); Asian (n = 5, 17%); Biracial (n = 2, 6%); and Hispanic (n = 1, 3%). Participants, ranging in age from 14 to 19, were evenly divided among all undergraduate classes, and represented a wide variety of academic majors and extracurricular interests.

Procedures

Three one-hour focus groups were held in which participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of their social and emotional development as a result of attending the UW rather than high school. Topics of discussion included:
1. How has the Early Entrance Program affected you, socially and emotionally?;
2. Has it been helpful or harmful?;
3. How have you changed? Give examples; and
4. Have you grown up too fast?
Students selected a group according to the time that best fit their schedules. Each group was facilitated by the first author. Discussions were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the authors, individually and as a group, for content and themes.

Results

Participants' comments fell into three general categories: their social experiences prior to and during Transition School; their affective responses to the intellectual challenges of early college entrance; and their continuing personal growth in the Early Entrance Program.

Social Experiences: "There's more to me than just the smart kid."

Most participants reported that they related better to adults than to their age mates prior to entering Transition School because they had found their interactions with adults to be more stimulating. Yet, some complained that teachers treated them more as student teachers than as learners, a situation that could put a student in an awkward social position. For example, one student explained, "when the teacher's gone ... (and) puts you down on the list for the substitute to ask what to do, that totally alienates you because you're singled out as the teacher's pet and the smart one and the one everybody hates." Most

participants had been branded the token "nerd" by their peers in their previous secondary schools. This situation had been frustrating and isolating to many, and resulted in students overidentifying with the label *smart kid*. Many participants felt trapped by this stereotype, and they said it gave them fewer opportunities to explore or express the less intellectual facets of their personalities.

For all, Transition School was a radically different experience, socially and academically. Whereas most students had few or no friends previously, now they had many. One participant reported:

Middle school was horrible. I didn't fit in at all with people my age. I hated it and I had very, very few friends. It was like image was everything at that school; you know, if you weren't wearing the right shoes or the right clothes or you weren't talking the right way, you were an outcast and people beat up on you and made fun of you ... And then I started coming to TS and all, of a sudden, I was accepted for who I was. It didn't matter if I was wearing last year's Nikes or whatever. I am who I am and was accepted and I felt really comfortable. And I finally allowed myself to be who I am and I have a lot of strong friendships from that. It allowed me to grow much more than I would have in high school because I would have stayed with those same kind of people from middle school and I don't know what would have happened to me.

Although a few students had enjoyed good social lives in their previous schools, TS allowed most participants—sometimes for the first time—to expand their sense of self beyond the "smart kid" mask they had worn for so many years. "After awhile, you realize it's not worth the extra effort to try to parade around as someone you aren't," one participant reported, to the accompanying nods of other students. Letting go of this mask was possible in the Early Entrance environment because conformity to peer groups and cliques no longer dominated students' social lives. Paradoxically, as intelligence became the new academic norm, it became less important socially.

Although there is no explicit social or affective curriculum in Transition School, the support provided by peers, faculty, and staff enabled participants to expand their sense of self. Not only did

their peer group widen, but, for the first time, there were many different opportunities for social interaction. Students could finally "hang out" with other people, doing things just for fun, and they learned to feel comfortable in a diverse social environment. They could stay within completely self-contained EEP programs, such as the student-run EEP Drama Society; they could join one of hundreds of UW clubs along with other EEP and non-EEP students; or, they could branch out further into activities that were completely removed from EEP, such as volunteering for the annual University District Street Fair.

Participants also saw that individual differences were more accepted in college than in secondary school, and they realized they could speak up and be themselves with less fear of being humiliated or put down. "My mom specifically made a comment about me when I came out of TS," one student reported. "One of the differences she saw between before TS and after TS was that I was much more likely to look people in the eye when I was talking to them, rather than kind of shuffle my feet and look at the floor. To me, that means more confidence." As rigid conformity to peers became less important, students found they could associate with others on the basis of similar interests and learn, as one said, "to be friends without feeling I had to *be* my friends." "This program makes you happy," another participant added, "because it places you with a bunch of people who have had similar experiences and you really open up."

Affective Responses to Intellectual Challenges: "It forces you to care."

Transition School was an exciting and stimulating social experience for most participants, yet it was also humbling. Although many students had resented the stereotype of "smart kid" that clung to them in their secondary schools, each was used to being perceived as the most intelligent member of his or her class. Suddenly, they discovered that they were among many

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equally bright peers, an experience that challenged many participants' self-esteem. Furthermore, most had never felt challenged intellectually prior to Transition School, so they entered the program with an artificially inflated sense of academic competence. For these participants, TS proved to be a daunting experience, emotionally and intellectually. In the words of one student,

> When I came into TS I went from being the best and brightest in my school to being, you know, meagerly average in my TS class, and that really humbled me. I really needed that. I wouldn't have been able to make it through college at the rate I had been going. So now in classes, if I'm not at the top of the list, I'll study a little bit harder.

Although admission to Transition School is highly competitive, it is only the first step in a year-long process that results in most, but not all, students matriculating as UW undergraduates. Students do not compete with each other for a place at the university, but they must learn to compete with themselves and acquire skills and habits of mind that few had needed before entering TS. Transition School challenged students to think deeply and go beyond superficial understandings of complex subject matter. They learned to write and communicate ideas effectively; to prepare essays, research papers, and laboratory reports that would be satisfactory at the university level; and to participate appropriately in college courses and seminars. Most participants reported that they struggled initially to let go of the need to always be right. They had to learn to make mistakes and grow from occasional failures. They also had to learn to ask for help, to interact proactively with faculty, to find and use campus resources, and to take responsibility for their own learning. These were difficult skills for most students to acquire, and participants made the transition from sec-

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ondary student to university student with varying degrees of comfort and grace. By the end of their transition year, however, all had acquired a stronger, more realistic self-confidence. According to one student, "Now I know that I won't always be the smartest person, but I do know what I can do, and I do know I can do something when I put my mind to it."

With few exceptions, participants saw themselves as highly competitive; they wanted to be at the top of their classes, whether to prove to themselves and their parents that they could be academically successful, because they had high ambitions for their lives, or for other, more personal reasons. One student said, "I want to be challenged by what I'm doing. I want to actually have to think every time I go into class. I want to be able to discuss things from all different angles with people I'm going to classes with."

Early Entrance students are expected to accrue an excellent academic record in order to keep open their options for various careers and postgraduate studies. Yet, their diverse interests and personalities, coupled with the supportive and cooperative environment in the Early Entrance Program, enabled many to act as mentors and role models for each other.

One of the best things about early college entrance, participants observed, is that the culture of college differs significantly from secondary school. Intellectual ambition and drive are not only expected, they are prized and rewarded by students and faculty alike. Students are encouraged, in the words of one participant, to "work for a life not just because your friends are going to but because you want to." And, because participants interacted with other highly capable undergraduate and graduate students at UW, they learned to set higher standards for themselves. Some also felt emboldened to seek out research, volunteer, and extracurricular activities. "Last quarter I did an internship and now I'm doing research," one student reported. "I'm doing all these things to advance my career, which I don't think I would have done had it not been for the EEP."

Continuing Personal Growth:
"We're not growing up too fast."

Parents and teachers of prospective EEPers often wonder aloud during admissions interviews whether early college entrance makes young peo-

ple grow up too fast. This concern was shared with participants who were asked whether that had been their experience. No student said he or she had grown up too fast. As one participant observed, "Growing up is a good thing. EEP makes you grow up fast, but not too fast." The ability to interact with people who were intellectually similar in an environment that respected diversity enabled participants to be as boisterous, irreverent, serious, or playful as they chose to be. Such an environment allowed students, according to one participant, "to joke around one minute and be philosophical the next without being thought weird." Both TS and EEP stressed the importance of a safe social context. This meant that students were free to be themselves, but not free to undermine others through negative attitudes or behaviors.

Participants universally believed they would be less mature, socially and emotionally, had they stayed in secondary school. According to one student, "You're still going through the same adolescent problems, but it's just an easier environment to face them in." Another added,

> I'd certainly say that we're not growing up too fast because I think we're less afraid to show the children inside of us. When you go to high school that's forcing you to grow fast because everyone tries to act older than they are. Here you don't need to. Here you're not afraid to act a little bit younger sometimes, which is really nice.

The Early Entrance Program encouraged students to develop a degree of independence and assertiveness that few were allowed in secondary school, something most participants relished. "There's a certain outspokenness that comes from a program like this," one participant observed. "You're not afraid to share your opinions, and out in college, the world, a lot of people are afraid to do that." Another student noted:

> In English class the other day I was challenging my professor. Not challenging him like 'oh you're such a loser,' but challenging what he was saying. It was OK to do that, and it's such a big change to just be able to have such a differing opinion from an adult. You learn to see adults not as some omnipotent figures that you're supposed to look up

to, but more as people who aren't untouchables anymore and who don't know everything.

A common complaint among participants was that children are rarely allowed to ask meaningful questions or make important decisions. By contrast, TS and EEP students are expected to be proactive learners, to question their own and others' assumptions, and to express their ideas in a thoughtful and cogent manner. One student recalled an experience from middle school:

> One of the things my teacher said was that she would love to get beyond "read the book, answer the questions," but no one cared. No one wanted to get beyond that. And here it's quite the opposite. I think if in TS history we just read the book and answered the questions, there would have been an uproar because everyone is here because they like getting into discussions. They don't want to just memorize and do the rote things. They want to get into more than that. And it's a very nice change to really be in that situation.

Furthermore, participants learned to take responsibility, not only for setting academic goals, but for initiating social activities inside and outside the program. EEP provided students with what one called "a launching pad" into a larger social world. It was up to each individual to choose how much or how little to participate in that world. Most participants reported this to be an extremely positive experience, although for some it was neutral. No one felt it was harmful, socially or emotionally. "You face the same social challenges here as in high school," one student remarked.

> You have to learn to deal with people who are different from you ... What I've always felt TS and EEP do for us is make us com-

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municate. We communicate a lot more than we would in high school, where a lot of us would have been off in our corners or in our little groups. We put ourselves into more situations here than we would have in high school.

One participant cautioned, however, that "it is still possible to be poorly socialized in EEP as in high school. Sometimes the program can be too much of a buffer, too much of a crutch." A unique feature of the Early Entrance Program is the provision of a lounge where EEPers can study, eat, meet with friends, or just hang out. This same participant noted that "students must actively motivate themselves to leave the lounge in order to meet other people." Another reflected:

> There is a great deal of variation in terms of who we decide to take as our peer group. We all have different populations of peer groups, and there is a lot of variability in terms of who we interact with and the frequency that we come to the lounge and interact with EEPers in place of other groups of people … I can think of a couple of people who probably would be social butterflies in high school, or people who are social butterflies in college but are not at all involved in EEP, and other people who are social butterflies at EEP … I think that academically all of us are pretty sophisticated and that we're well-developed, but going to college at 14, 15, 16, you're not emotionally or socially ready for it at all. Some people probably aren't even emotionally or socially ready to be in EEP, let alone to be out there with college peers.

Thinking about his interactions with regular-aged UW students, another participant added, "There are places that I need to catch up, socially develop. I can't go to parties. I don't know how to interact with people. I don't know what people act like. I still have a lot to learn."

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The comment of one participant was particularly insightful: "The thing is, there's not like one experience. We can use this program to be really well adjusted, to make a lot of friends and go out in the university and really find our niche and grow up in a good way—or not." There are examples of both here.

Discussion

The social context of adolescents' lives is a critical factor in their willingness to recognize and develop their talents. Gifted teenagers need to feel safe within an academic community, and they need to be accepted by peers and adults. They must be encouraged to express both affective and intellectual needs and to engage in a variety of social interactions. The students who participated in this study were unanimous in their belief that their experiences in the Early Entrance Program were central to their positive assessment of early college entrance. According to these young people, the EEP helped them grow socially and emotionally because of its acceptance of individual differences, its encouragement of academic excellence and personal responsibility, and the solidarity and sense of belonging students felt within the program.

Overall, participants in this study said their decision to enter college early produced no negative social or emotional effects. All believed themselves to be more mature than they would have been had they gone to high school, and most considered themselves well-socialized, with both friendships and peer and adult relations as good as or better than they might otherwise have been. Although the students who participated in this study expressed varying degrees of comfort in diverse social situations, they felt confident, independent, and comfortable in their social environments.

Limitations

Generalizations cannot capture the range of individual experiences that participants reported. There were heated discussions within the focus groups and among the students who co-authored this paper about the importance of EEP as a stabilizing force in their lives. For example, one student argued that it was immature to rely too heavily on the lounge for social support. Others disagreed, asserting that the mature thing was to

know where one felt most at home and to cultivate friends within that milieu. Some participants said they were very comfortable interacting with the general UW population; others felt comfortable only within the EEP environment. Some students spent most of their free time in the EEP lounge after they graduated from Transition School, but others returned only for occasional academic advising or socializing. Thus, the degree to which participants felt socially successful within in the EEP cannot be generalized to the non-EEP environment. Social development outside the Early Entrance Program is a connected, but not parallel, process.

The positive impressions of early college entrance expressed by participants cannot be generalized to the entire EEP student body. Only half of the students who were eligible to participate in this study elected to do so. Those who did may be more interested and active in the program than those who did not. Furthermore, the data may not reflect the experiences of students who felt negatively toward early college entrance in general, or the Early Entrance Program in particular. Certain limitations may also result from the method of data collection. All data are from group-based self reports, and an EEP-affiliated facilitator was present during the discussions. The use of self-report data always presents a risk of inaccuracy, and this risk may be exacerbated by the public nature of the reports (i.e., the presence of other students and the facilitator).

Finally, these results cannot be generalized beyond the Early Entrance Program at the University of Washington. This is a unique program that has been carefully designed to meet students' academic and social needs. Students who choose to enter the EEP are carefully selected and self-selected. Most enjoy strong family relationships, most come from middle-class, two-parent families, and all are more focused on intellectual activities than are students in the general secondary or college population. These students also tend to be less interested in traditional adolescent social activities, such as dances and football games (Noble and Drummond, 1992; Noble, Robinson, and Gunderson, 1993). Whether gifted students with more traditional interests would fare as well, socially and emotionally, in an early college entrance program or in one that is less structured than the program at the University of Washington is open to question.

Given these limitations, do the results of this study have value beyond the Early Entrance Program at the University of Washington? We believe they do. Despite evidence to the contrary, the option of early college entrance is often summarily dismissed by educators and parents of gifted secondary students as harmful to students' social and emotional development. But, if one listens to the students themselves, a different picture emerges. More harmful to them are the short- and long-term consequences (e.g., isolation, boredom, and apathy) that result from not being in a supportive social milieu that encourages and delights in their intellectual growth. Gifted teenagers who turn off their minds in secondary school for fear of being rejected by peers may not want, or be able, to turn them on again when they reach adulthood. Those for whom academic success comes too easily and with too little effort may resent and resist the hard work that turns youthful promise into adult achievement, or they may become psychologically paralyzed when faced with intellectually demanding challenges. Those who lack friendships and opportunities for social interaction may fail to develop appropriate social skills and thus be at risk for underachievement, depression, sociopathy, and related ills. When an early entrance program is carefully tailored to adolescents' social, emotional, and intellectual needs, the potential benefits are substantial: increased self-confidence, enhanced resilience, self-discipline, task and goal commitment, a lifelong love of learning, and the possibility of making meaningful contributions to an increasingly complex world.

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