

[Special Topic: *Youth Counseling*]

## **Immobile, Slowly Moving, Moving Forward: Youth in Transition**

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The author uses clinical examples to epitomize developmental “stuckness” during adolescence, noting struggles of pupils along a continuum of ability level, circumstance, and socioeconomic status, including gifted individuals. By regularly using a developmental template, counselors may ascertain which tasks are contributing to presenting issues. Just as with individual counseling, counselors who convey nonjudgmental, respectful attention, and a one-down posture in development-oriented small-group work can help adolescents move forward.

In the United States, and probably in many other developed nations as well, there are few or no clear rituals for children and adolescents to mark entry into new levels or stages of development. There are indeed legal markers of entrance into adulthood, as well as sociological and psychological, but generally the transition is not clear-cut. Adolescence

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This article is based on an invited keynote address by the author at the 2006 International Conference on Counseling that was held in Hong Kong on May 2006. The theme of the conference was “Counseling Youth in Transition: Innovation in Research and Practice.” Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jean Sunde Peterson, Department of Educational Studies, 100 N. University Street, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2098, U.S.A. E-mail: [jeanp@purdue.edu](mailto:jeanp@purdue.edu)

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can be quite protracted, particularly if higher education is involved, with a long financial dependence on parents (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 1998). When developmental rituals are part of a culture, they are prepared for with information and guidance and followed by new roles and clear expectations. When these rituals are not part of the culture, some individuals flounder, perhaps unsupported and unmentored by significant adults, unclear about direction, and “stuck” — at least for a while. If there is stuckness, it might last a while — and be potentially dangerous.

Floundering adolescents may take social and behavioral risks, including gravitating toward high-risk peers who also lack direction and support. Feeling ungrounded, they may use illegal substances, engage in promiscuous sexual activity, run away from home, bully others, or become involved in delinquent behavior, for example. Their classroom behavior may be disruptive, and they may be expelled from school — for a short time, a long time, or even with re-entry impossible. Teachers and school administrators might understandably expect that the future will be bleak for these teens. For some, these unproductive patterns continue into adulthood, with marital difficulties, sexually transmitted diseases, and employment-related difficulties, and possibly with time spent in treatment centers and corrections facilities. In the United States, counselors are busy responding to these issues, although also aware that there are many troubled individuals who do not seek the services of counselors.

Other individuals, even those from high-functioning families, may become paralyzed in spirit — so overwhelmed by developmental challenges, the prospect of change, and fear of future responsibilities that they experience impasse and depression instead of moving forward. Perhaps highly intelligent adolescents perform poorly academically, tensely anxious and unable to concentrate. Parents may wring their

hands in distress and may even “over-function” for these adolescents, rescuing and assuming responsibilities that should be the teens’. Parents who are concerned about their son’s or daughter’s higher education may fear a catastrophic future. Much of the author’s research is actually focused on underachievement among the highly able, perhaps a particularly visible kind of stuckness. However, it is often difficult to *see* stuckness, since it may be buried under social ease and solid academic performance.

Certainly there are youth at other places along a continuum of behaviors reflecting struggle with transitions — between acting-out behaviors and paralysis of will. They may or may not underachieve academically. They may simply display passive-aggressive responses to the school culture through tardiness and excessive absences (Peterson & Colangelo, 1996). They may drop out of school. They may be referred to counselors or seek counseling themselves. Ideally, they see a counselor *before* they are in crisis. In fact, counselors might be able to provide crucial nonjudgmental support, including giving them an opportunity to discuss developmental struggles. Counselors may actually be able to provide the missing “ritual” for moving from adolescence to adulthood. Most adolescents move forward successfully and at a pace perceived as “normal” in their various cultures (Papalia et al., 1998). However, they are not the focus of this article. The focus is on youth in transition, especially adolescents. This article will focus on challenges related to development.

### **A Developmental Focus**

The author advocates applying a developmental template immediately when working with youth. This article will present her perspectives about individuals and populations seen in the United States who appear to be having problems moving forward. It is the youth in the United States that she knows best. She has been a teacher and counselor

in schools and has also worked in treatment facilities, in alternative schools for expelled pupils, and in institutes for pupils with high ability. However, it is assumed that there is much common ground in international conversation about youth needs and services.

Among many basic tenets, counseling is about helping people to reflect, make positive changes, move forward, and live more effectively (Peterson, 2007). Therefore, paying attention to developmental transitions is important and appropriate. This article will focus on what are assumed to be somewhat universal developmental challenges during early to late adolescence — for example, forging an identity (Erikson, 1968), differentiating from parents (Bowen, 1978; Fasick, 1984) and siblings, finding career direction (Super, 1990), developing relationships with family, peers, and adult society and a mature relationship with a significant other (Papalia et al., 1998), resolving conflict with family, moving toward autonomy (Sherrod, 1996), and being launched into adulthood (Fasick, 1984; Sherrod, 1996). The author will sometimes refer to her own research about adolescent development and to her clinical work with youth. She will explore factors that impede development and offer strategies for accessing the inner world of youth in transition in order to help them progress.

Concerned parents, aware of developmental impasse, may have difficulty accessing the inner world of their adolescents. If they had access, they might see anxiety, fear of the future, self-doubt, paralysis of will, debilitating self-expectations, depression, difficulties achieving differentiation from family, or problems with peers. Any of these can impede movement forward. In some situations, parents' own personal issues may take precedence over their offspring's, not just because of being distracted by marital, employment, or addiction problems, for instance, but also because of family-system elements, such as emotional enmeshment, disengagement among family members, lack of leadership,

rigid control, chaos, or lack of cohesion (Thomas & Olson, 1993). In addition, cultural values may not fit dominant-culture expectations, with an adolescent suspended between cultures and with cultural values affecting classroom behaviors and academic success (Peterson, 1999). Economic circumstances may also understandably contribute to stuckness in the areas of career direction, especially when mentors are not available, teachers do not recognize potential, and lack of money seems to preclude further education. Even a good level of intellectual ability may not be enough to remove internal and external barriers to achieving successful developmental transitions.

## **Accessing the Inner World as a Researcher**

### ***An Advantage***

The author has done considerable work as a clinician and researcher with gifted individuals. One advantage of studying them is that they are often quite self-aware and also able to articulate complex insights and feelings. Their subjective experience of development may be qualitatively different from others', but at least they can begin to broaden perspectives about how adolescents experience life. Findings perhaps cannot be generalized to other populations; nevertheless, their ability to verbalize provides a window to their inner world, particularly as they experience developmental transitions. What follows here are examples of the author's own research, sometimes following counseling interventions or other contact with the subjects, which provided access to the phenomenon of developmental stuckness.

Researchers often use surveys, of course, to assess prevalence of various phenomena, degree of certain characteristics, and presence or absence of behaviors. They observe, record and analyze data, draw conclusions, and make comparisons between and among groups. Sometimes, the author uses surveys, questionnaires, and checklists in her work.

### ***A Study of Bullying***

For example, Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) conducted a national study of bullying among gifted kids. They found that roughly two-thirds had been bullied sometime during their first through ninth year in school, that grade 6 had highest frequency of victimization, that 16% bullied others in grade 8, that 29% had violent thoughts, and that the most statistically significant relationship between kind of bullying and effect was related to teasing about appearance.

All of those are important findings. Knowing that gifted kids are not exempt from being bullied, teachers and counselors can be alert to symptoms of distress, and to overt and covert bullying behaviors, and work diligently and proactively to decrease bullying behavior.

However, the study was also qualitative, inviting participants at 6 of the 16 research sites to meet with the researchers for an interview. Arguably, the richest and most complex data was related to the inner world these adolescents revealed — the subjective experience of being bullied. These adolescents revealed that “it basically destroys kids, sometimes,” and that victims of bullying feel helpless, hopeless, worthless, depressed, and scared enough to be absent from school often. Few told others of their distress. They suffered in silence. Even during the early school years, they felt stuck.

Unwittingly, they may have been developing resilience through adversity (see Higgins, 1994), but, at the time, friendships, confidence, and a sense of social competence, not to mention comfort in school, eluded them. Interviewees deemed being different to be the most salient factor in vulnerability, and their rare position on a continuum of intellectual ability contributed to inherent “difference.” Nevertheless, for some victims, bullying disappeared when the next school year began, when the bully moved away, when the victim grew taller, or when the

victim became known by peers, for example, these representing school, family, and universal developmental transitions. For others, the feeling of hopelessness and impasse persisted a few more years, with impact on learning, relationships, identity, and even direction. It was difficult for them to move forward — or even to imagine the future.

This study reflects the focus of a large portion of the author's research agenda: accessing the inner world of adolescents through qualitative research methods. At this point, this article will describe a few more of her qualitative studies which have focused on developmental transitions.

### ***A Study of Highly Capable Kids in Bad Situations***

As a substance-abuse evaluator in a middle school, the author became acquainted with 35 significantly at-risk middle-school pupils, whose parents were suspected of abusing substances. These children were distributed among five small groups she facilitated for eight weeks, focusing on developmental topics. All were experiencing, or had experienced in the past, extremely difficult home circumstances — for example, an incarcerated parent, one or more acrimonious divorces, or abuse and neglect. The author soon realized that they were quite alert and articulate. She therefore decided to look at their school records to confirm the hunch that they were actually quite able.

She actually found that an amazing 37% of them had had scores at or above the 90th percentile early in their school years (Peterson, 1997). She wondered, of course, what their school years might have been had they had even a modest level of support and stability, and wondered if and how their intelligence had supported them or had been a problem. She therefore subsequently arranged to interview these strong, capable kids at length. These young adolescents appeared to appreciate having a chance to talk with a nonjudgmental adult, who gave them positive

feedback about their strengths and their expressive language. The author learned about their depression, abuse, and resilience.

This study was mentioned because these kids were stuck. They could articulate feelings and narrate ugly situations, but they could not describe even a small glimmer of a vision of the future. In many ways, their lives had stalled, although some seemed to be heading inexorably in the direction of bad educational and personal outcomes. However, they were looking for something. Their sad, earnest eyes conveyed that. The group discussions were helpful to them. They talked readily. It was easy to recognize and affirm their strengths.

### *A Study of At-Risk Adolescents*

Peterson (2002) conducted a longitudinal study of 14 at-risk gifted adolescents after they graduated from high school, treating four of the subjects additionally as case studies (Peterson, 2001a). The author had become acquainted with them when she facilitated small-group counseling in their high school. She had their trust, after meeting with them weekly for at least 50 group sessions, over two or three years, proactively discussing developmental challenges. She had become aware of their depression and suicidal ideation, extreme academic underachievement, and serious conflict with their parents. The underachievers certainly seemed stuck, but so did two flat-affect high achievers, both of whom were in severe inner conflict with their parents. Three had been significantly involved in extra-curricular activities during high school. One underachiever was reputed to have the highest IQ in the large high school.

This study was about developmental impasse — not just during high school, but during the years immediately following as well. What was learned, during the four years these young adults completed surveys and wrote letters to the researcher at least twice each year, was that they

struggled with developmental tasks. Of interest were challenges related to developing autonomy, career direction, and mature relationships, in addition to resolving conflict with parents, which was assumed to reflect an aspect of the process of differentiation (see also Bowen, 1978). Some individuals, who eventually resolved developmental stuckness in these areas, had asked difficult questions of their abusive parents, moved far away from home, or engaged in an unconventional, non-campus academic experience (e.g., Semester at Sea, hitchhiking around the world, working in a fossil dig, participating in ecological work in other countries).

Conflict with parents and family generated the largest amount of written narrative. One important finding was that resolution of conflict always coincided, generally, with convergence of developmental task-accomplishments (e.g., generating a mature relationship, achieving autonomy, and finding direction). Of the subjects who had accomplished all developmental tasks of interest by the end of the study, each had been proactive, had taken risks, had moved away from their hometown, and had been involved in intense conflict with family, which had gradually diminished. By age 22, four of the 14 participants had impressively positive outcomes (developmental task-accomplishment in all four areas of interest), and five more had moderately positive outcomes (i.e., task-accomplishment in at least two areas).

In contrast, four had accomplished one or none of the four developmental tasks of interest. Interestingly, in three of these cases, they had not had overt conflict with their families. Instead, they had been fairly passive at home, although one regularly wrote about *inner* turmoil about family, including about his sexual orientation, which he assumed his parents were unaware of. Those who had been passive and silent about their internal struggles tended to be stuck at the end of the four years. Two others with high conflict had had moderately positive

outcomes. It should be noted, however, that one female, with significant overt conflict with parents, had a highly negative outcome.

### ***A Study of Successful Adults Who Were Once Adolescent Underachievers***

In a study of 31 successful adults, at least 30 years of age, who were underachievers as adolescents, Peterson (2001b) found that the successful females typically had been “feisty” adolescents. That finding is aligned with the finding, in the study above, that the at-risk subjects who had successful outcomes, during their first four years after high school, had initially had overt conflict with parents and/or siblings.

According to Erikson (1968), the period of active exploration of identity, or “identity crisis,” is likely to be pronounced in persons with high ability. Accomplishing developmental tasks related to identity, career direction, a mature relationship, and resolution of conflict with parents had been delayed for many of the subjects in this study. Most subjects became motivated in academic work late in the college years or in graduate school; no males made that change until at least late in college. Most found it in graduate school, with several developmental accomplishments occurring at essentially the same time, including finding career direction and a mature relationship, findings similar to the study of 14 at-risk adolescents mentioned earlier.

### ***A Study of a Beautiful, Brilliant, and Traumatized Adolescent***

The author met a beautiful, brilliant, poised, and high-achieving young woman in the early 1990s, after her gifted-education teacher had selected her to be in a small group of older high school pupils for a workshop demonstration of listening skills and group facilitation. The author was so impressed with her (She discovered after the demonstration that the girl was just 14) that she sought permission from

the girl and her parents to study her development over the next few years, wishing to explore a stereotypical gifted individual's subjective experience of development through letters and infrequent interviews (Peterson, 2006b).

The young woman was followed for the next 14 years. However, when it was discovered, during the initial year of communication, that she had experienced multiple traumas (e.g., physical abuse, sexual molestation within the family, and devastating social experiences at school after her experiences were exposed by a school counselor), the study changed its focus to a gifted girl's subjective experience of trauma.

More than 90 hours of interviews of her and of significant people in her life, in addition to a large collection of school essays, journal entries, school records, and other materials, provided rich data. The author had certainly been a participant-observer (Patton, 2002) as a qualitative researcher; however, boundaries were set at the outset ("just let me know how your growing up is going"), and geographical distance also helped to allow the subject to develop without the author's interference, with the exception of the invitation to her to communicate first through letters and then by email. Eventually she articulated the importance of the study to her — in its allowing her to have a voice and to process her feelings and experiences, especially because her parents were unable to do that.

Almost all aspects of her development were significantly affected by her experiences. When her secrets were exposed, she lost her identity as a flawless, multi-talented pupil, in addition to social status. Her relationships were altered, and she eventually was in an abusive relationship with a long-term boyfriend. She dropped out of high school in her third year and entered college at age 16, floundering, socially withdrawn, depressed, and low-achieving. She felt undirected

vocationally. Intense conflict with her family continued, to the extent that, at age 24, she eventually cut ties with them. She had come to the conclusion that they could not acknowledge her vulnerability, they were incapable of an appropriate relationship with her, and they essentially invalidated the abuse she had experienced in the home. She perceived that they had been major players in her psychological impasse.

Her feelings of stuckness, according to her later reflections on her adolescence, contributed to an eating disorder, suicidal ideation, and lingering feelings of despair. Her understandable hypervigilance and interpersonal sensitivity affected relationships at the university level as well, including with professors, especially at the graduate level. Her first employment was affected negatively by her trauma-response reflexes. She had success in her second employment, as a high school teacher, and reported that she was able to “finish high school” herself in that position for one year. With new understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder, she made sense of former and current behaviors, including her passion for working with adolescents and her emotional response to working with them. She then decided to take time off to have her second child.

Fortunately, she had more good than bad counseling along the way. She readily sought it when needed and worked diligently as a client — in spite of the fact that her school counselor had precipitated one of her many traumatic experiences.

At this writing, she was doing well, in a stable marriage and with two small children. She seemed finally to be at peace, and appeared to be a wise and good parent. When the children were older, she planned to pursue a new professional career. She no longer felt stuck, and her current poise reflected impressive self-knowledge and a comfortable level of self-regulation. She appeared to have successfully completed the transition into young adulthood, as a result of considerable effort.

***A Study of Young Adults, Gifted and Gay,  
Looking Back at their School Years***

In the late 1990s, Peterson and Rischar (2000) conducted a study of gifted college students who were gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT). To gain access to this population, the author attended meetings of a large GLBT support group twice a month (approximately 50 individuals attended the business meetings and 80 the social meetings) for most of a semester. The author explained that she was interested in learning about them and eventually asking them to participate in a study. Ultimately, most subjects in the study came from that contact, although it was unknown exactly how many questionnaires were sent from other contacted universities.

Participants ( $N = 18$ ) completed a long, open-ended questionnaire which asked them to reflect on their relational, emotional, academic, and counseling experiences during the school years and to list questions that they wished the questionnaire had contained. Most wondered seriously about their sexual orientation prior to leaving elementary school; most experienced depression; many reported being hyper-involved in school academics and activities as “compensation” for their sexual orientation; most found that counselors were helpful; many feared for their safety in school; teachers and coaches of some made disparaging remarks about sexual orientation; and only one-third told their parents about their despair. None told a teacher.

What is pertinent to this discussion about developmental transitions is that these highly articulate subjects wrote comments about not being able to gain experience with dating relationships, as their peers did. A few mentioned that their awareness of their sexual orientation was not a significant concern until puberty. One mentioned fearing he would not find a career context in which he could be comfortable and safe as

a homosexual. Extra-curricular activities were dropped because of homophobic coaches (athletic, debate) or fear that sexual orientation would be discovered. One male described his torment over trying to decide whether he was gay or bisexual, believing he had to come to a conclusion during high school. Even when they were not “out” as homosexual, several male participants believed that their relationship with parents was significantly altered because they could not be honest with them. When told about the sexual orientation, most parents responded negatively or with tears, but most “came around” eventually.

In summary, problems related to adolescent developmental tasks in the areas of identity, career direction, a mature relationship, and resolution of conflict with parents were all mentioned in response to open-ended questions. Even though peers and adults were sometimes threatening and nonsupportive, several individuals were reported to have helped to move the GLBT adolescents forward in their development — peers, counselors (a lesbian counselor was mentioned as crucial), a drama coach, and church leaders. However, a support group at a university (one subject said it “saved my life”) was mentioned most often. There, GLBT individuals could begin to move ahead. A university setting offered a context for developing and affirming identity, exploring relationships, and finding direction — critical developmental transitions.

When asked to give educators and counselors suggestions, participants wrote that they needed information about sexuality and sexual behavior as adolescents; that they wished teachers had mentioned the sexual orientation of great homosexual literary figures; that a counselor should have informed them they were not the only gay pupil in school; that they needed pertinent material to read; that teachers could have allowed papers and projects focusing on sexual orientation and not

have assumed heterosexuality in class discussions about present and future relationships; that they wished counselors had validated them instead of trying to change them or convince them that they were foreclosing on sexual orientation prematurely; and that a safe environment was needed to explore relationships (instead of through the adult gay culture, for instance). When participants listed questions they wished they had been asked, one subject said they should have been asked about their first sexual experience — whether it was positive or negative and whether it was with the same or other gender. Another participant thought a question about substance abuse should have been asked. Others would have liked more questions about family and sibling responses to their sexual orientation. These questions and concerns relate significantly to identity and relational development, to developmental transitions related to differentiation, and to despair and stuckness.

### ***A “Stuck” Client***

A classic case of developmental impasse from the author’s private practice is discussed here. The author saw the client, a young-adult woman, for one year. During her school years, her father was an alcoholic, her mother was passive and often unwell, and her siblings looked to her for leadership. She was herself an extremely intelligent oldest child, about whom teachers had no concerns: her academic work was good and demeanor was cheerful. What was not known was that, outside of the family, she had been molested as a child and raped as an adolescent and later as a college student as well. There was no financial and little psychological support for her to pursue higher education, but loans helped her to do that. However, she had been a part-time student for many years, unable to focus on a major area and accumulating an enormous number of credits, without earning a degree. She was single, uncertain of her sexual orientation.

She pursued counseling because she felt stuck and wanted to move forward. However, she had no models for doing that. She resisted balancing her checkbook, was behind in paying rent and utilities, had difficulty getting up in time to be properly clean and clothed for work, was overweight, was sexually promiscuous, and had poor boundaries with her several siblings, one of whom had recently become a housemate, with his pregnant wife, several animals, and no employment. She herself was sleeping on the sofa, and the animals had infested the house with fleas. She wanted to know what a healthy family looked like.

She was insightful and easy to work with, letting the counselor know when the process was moving too fast or when she was not ready for the techniques being used. She believed that her father's unique business had interfered with having a predictable family rhythm and having a sense of boundaries between family and non-family. He had not modeled regular hours of employment, punctuality, and sound financial management, but had indeed modeled poor boundaries between family and non-family. She believed her mother's illness had contributed to poor food and meal management. She and her siblings were a strong subsystem, focused on survival. She had learned to put herself last in importance and had continued to do that as an adult.

At times, attention to one area could be sustained, but the multi-layered developmental impasse easily led into unfocused murkiness. She had difficulty focusing on "solution" and envisioning positive goals. Sometimes she would not come in for a month or two, sliding back into old patterns in the interim. However, she was interested in understanding her behaviors, and she had many impressive insights. She worked hard as a client. Eventually she was able to make changes — with the houseguests and other siblings, with sexual behavior, with her father, with relationships, and with money management. She then moved away for several years, found employment that fit her instincts

and accumulated knowledge, experienced a healthy relationship, and then moved back to her hometown as an autonomous, differentiated individual. She had identity, confidence, enough career direction to move forward, a solid sense of self, and reasonable boundaries. She epitomizes the importance of making sense of and embracing the important pieces of the patchwork quilt that life is — in order to make developmental transitions successfully.

### ***Underachievement: Using a Developmental Template***

The author's clinical experience with underachievers, like the woman just described, and research in the area of underachievement (Peterson, 2000, 2001a, 2001b; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996) have led her to apply a developmental template to underachievement as a counselor. Underachievement can be chronic throughout the school years, of course, but it can also be episodic (Peterson & Colangelo). For example, when moving on to middle school in the United States, pupils typically change from being one teacher's responsibility to having multiple teachers. They also experience an altered social milieu and face increased homework, including longer reading assignments, which may be especially difficult for pupils with disabilities related to reading. Those challenges may contribute to underachievement, which may become established at that school level and may continue throughout the school years (Peterson & Colangelo). However, perhaps with the aforementioned also playing roles, underachievement may also occur in response to formidable developmental tasks — that is, “growing up.” Troubling life events may also contribute to inability to focus on school work. Therefore, underachievement is seen as often reflecting developmental stuckness, with time and support being crucial for reversal. The author also contends that academic work perhaps should not be the main focus when counseling underachievers; other aspects of life may be more salient, including accomplishing developmental tasks.

### ***Being a Qualitative Researcher***

In general, the author's work in qualitative research, even though not always focused specifically on developmental transitions per se, has allowed her to consider the effect of various phenomena on how adolescents deal with developmental challenges. Though she no longer does much clinical work, she recognizes that many skills and personality characteristics support both counseling and qualitative research (Mendaglio & Peterson, 2007b). She is also aware that her interest in the inner world of youth led her to both counseling and research.

Teachers and even parents often do not know much about the inner world of kids. Counselors have skills that help them enter and explore that world, but even they may not consider some important points of access. The author's clinical work and research have focused on both academically gifted pupils and those who struggle in the classroom. Here those two extremes will be differentiated in terms of accessing their subjective experience of development.

### **Working with Highly Able Youth**

#### ***Research Attention to Counseling Concerns***

Until recent years, social and emotional development of gifted youth has not garnered much research attention, and the inner world — the subjective experience of high ability and of development — has had little attention, with the research summaries mentioned earlier being exceptions. Other researchers have also illuminated these areas in recent years (e.g., Coleman, 2001, 2002; Hébert, 2000, 2001, 2002; Schultz, 2002). Important to counselors is scholarly work related to perfectionism (Schuler, 1997), depression (Jackson & Peterson, 2003; Neihart, 2002), sensitivity (Mendaglio, 2005), intensity and drivenness (Lovecky, 1992), and psychic overexcitabilities (Piechowski, 1999).

Strategies for addressing affective concerns related to giftedness have included bibliotherapy (Hébert, 1991; Hébert & Furner, 1997), use of film (Hébert & Neumeister, 2001), mentoring for sensitive males (Hébert & Olenchak, 2000), development-focused discussion groups (Betts & Kercher, 1999; Peterson, 2003, 2006d), and collaborative strategies for reversing underachievement (Heacox, 1991; Rimm, 1995). Peterson (2003) proposed an affective curriculum for gifted pupils, including group work and attention to social and emotional development in academic classes and in program activities. Two books continue to offer insights and strategies related to counseling gifted youth (Silverman, 1993; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan 1982), and in a recent edited book (Mendaglio & Peterson, 2007a) several counselors and therapists who worked with highly able youth shared perspectives and strategies. At gifted-education conventions, the inner world and developmental transitions, in contrast to performance, have received increasing attention. In 2005, average attendance at sessions in the Counseling and Guidance Division ranked fourth of 13 Divisions of the National Association for Gifted Children.

### ***Clinical Perspectives***

The author once facilitated approximately 1,200 small groups over five years, meeting with 115 gifted adolescents per week, and they taught her a great deal about their inner world and about social and emotional development. What was experienced in the groups, and what scholarly literature has discussed, is that there are often burdens associated with high ability (Peterson, 1998), not the least of which may be anxiety about the future. In the United States, school counselors are usually available in the schools, but serve 500 pupils each, on average (American School Counseling Association, 2006). Gifted pupils may not seek them out (Peterson & Ray, 2006b; Peterson & Rischar, 2000). Therein lies a danger, especially when they feel despair or need

assistance during developmental transitions, including for career-planning.

In addition, the author observed in clinical practice that high ability in general, and sensitivity and overexcitabilities in particular, can exacerbate difficulties related to expected developmental challenges and transitions throughout the school years, as in the following examples:

- The impressive verbal ability of a five-year-old, whose parents and grandparents are excited by her ability to converse at an adult level, annoys her kindergarten teacher, especially when the girl cries when gently rebuffed. The transition to school is not smooth, and her discomfort with school becomes increasingly negative. She is a cynic by middle school, and social development stalls.
- A serious eight-year-old boy, lying awake at night, worries about the future, especially the heavy responsibilities of adulthood. He is concerned about social justice and distant wars and wrestles with existential questions. His development is asynchronous, with cognitive far outpacing physical, social, and emotional.
- Puberty feels distressingly unmanageable to a girl whose intelligence, talent, and verbal ability normally give her considerable control in her life.
- An impressive visual artist and musician, whose behaviors do not fit society's definition of *male*, is bullied mercilessly. Feigning illness, he often stays home from school, trying to make sense of cruelty and despairing that sixth grade will never end. Growing up this year has become extremely difficult, and his view of the future is no longer clear.
- An adolescent male dares not speak of his homosexuality because he has a "perfect-pupil" image, and because of the threat of

abandonment by peers and family. He will “come out” after he leaves home (see Peterson & Rischar, 2000).

- Identity development and differentiation within and from family are difficult for a young man interested in literature and languages, especially when his interests and talents do not fit his parents’ dreams that he will become a chemical engineer.
- A highly creative musician and composer, feeling pressure from his parents to pursue a “practical” career, becomes depressed and drug-dependent during high school and is in extreme conflict with his parents. All three phenomena continue, and he drops out of college. He and his parents are connected through conflict, and differentiation is difficult.
- A girl’s highly nurturing and protective mother does things for the girl that she should be doing for herself, hindering development of appropriate autonomy, sense of competence, and resilience (see Higgins, 1994), during the school years. The girl returns home after two months at a university, homesick and shaken.
- A high school boy feels family tension related to his lawyer father’s sudden unemployment, due to corporate downsizing, his mother’s breast cancer, his grandmother’s need for nursing care, and the stress of high house payments. When he falls from high academic achievement to severe underachievement, his mother begins to write his assigned essays, wanting to protect his future, the only thing that she can control. Family counseling reveals the boy’s drug use.
- A high school senior tells a teacher that she has done everything her parents wanted her to, including being the top pupil in her class, but she does not know who she is. She wants to address her long-term eating disorder before she leaves for college.

- A 17-year old, sensitive to her parents' marital distress, is afraid to go away to college, fearing that the marriage will dissolve if she is not at home. Her increasing health problems keep the parents together, and she delays being launched from the home for three years, living at home.
- A brilliant, hypersensitive first-year university student fails his courses, overwhelmed by noise and late-night activity in a residence hall, by the perceived arrogance of professors, by large-audience lectures, and by a felt lack of meaning in his academic courses. He has felt adrift since his father left the family several years earlier.

These brief examples reflect that developmental challenges, in one form or another, can impede movement forward — into the next developmental stage — at least for a time.

There is no empirical evidence that gifted individuals have more or fewer mental-health issues than those who are less able intellectually (Neihart, 2002). Most important for counselors to consider, however, is the reality that gifted individuals are not exempt from difficulties in life, regardless of socioeconomic status, school ability, social status, culture, or general conscientiousness. High ability can be burdensome. Extreme talent can feel particularly heavy. Asynchronous development (Silverman, 1997), with levels of development different among the areas of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional, may be problematic. Jerald Grobman (personal communication, November 11, 2005), a psychiatrist in New York City, speculated that “sudden” self-sabotaging, including by a number of clients who were stellar musicians and actors, was somehow related to the great power and attention these individuals had been given before they were able to cope with them socially and emotionally.

Highly able children and adolescents in the United States certainly can experience parental divorce, death of someone close, loss of a friend through relocation, serious illness or accident, or bullying by siblings or schoolmates, for example. A 10-year study (Peterson, 2006a) of life events and their impact on high academic achievers showed that the 48 who returned the questionnaires at the end had collectively experienced 8 serious accidents, 8 serious chronic illnesses, 67 serious family illnesses, 93 deaths of someone close, and 62 other traumas. However, when participants were asked about their most formidable hurdles during the school years, most did not mention dramatic life events, but rather social transitions to new school levels and the high stress of having several Advanced Placement tests over a short period of time.

These situations underscore the importance of using a developmental template when exploring presenting problems. Counselors need to be alert to problems which may be related to life events, of course, but counselors can also benefit from having information about unique developmental challenges of particular populations — including across a broad range of achievement, socioeconomic status, and cultural groups. Being able to identify pertinent developmental tasks and how developmental stuckness can be manifested or hidden can be helpful.

### **Working Other At-Risk Youth**

At various times, the author worked largely with youth who were at great risk for poor personal outcomes. As an example, small-group discussions with 215 severely at-risk middle-school children were facilitated through a program funded by local businesses. Although many adolescents cannot clearly articulate their struggles, their challenges are indeed related to developmental challenges — often within contexts that are unsupportive, neglectful, and even dangerous.

In the groups, parentified young adolescents (Jurkovic, 1997) were seen, like the young woman described earlier here, with inappropriate responsibilities at home, sometimes the result of a parent being left alone and economically vulnerable after a divorce or death or possibly parental impairment from depression or drug use or irresponsible behavior. Because these children, not adults, were ultimately responsible for domestic order, they were anxious about siblings, food, and shelter, often with not enough emotional energy for schoolwork. Group members reported various kinds of abuse and neglect. In other situations, parents who had a rough adolescence themselves had shortened the tether for their own children, with the home responsibilities being connected to tight parental control.

Learning disabilities were also discussed, and there were many group members who had average ability or higher, but had no inclination to write, even on activity sheets requiring only brief responses. Because of their poor-quality classwork, they perceived that teachers did not like them. When adults were brought in from the community to interact with them about career plans, most of the group members had only a vague notion of the future. They appeared to have had little or no wise guidance from significant adults, only poor modeling. The parents of many had dropped out of high school. Group leaders recognized that they had entered a subculture in the national fabric. During weekly debriefing, leaders altered the guidance curriculum (Peterson, 2006d) and devised new strategies that would encourage the pupils to connect with each other during discussions, to feel known and comfortable at school, and to be affirmed for personal strengths and resilience (see Higgins, 1994). Those were the goals of the small groups.

The author also took her first-year school-counseling students annually to interact with the pupils at an alternative high school for

pupils who had been expelled for infractions such as truancy, fighting, threatening, and other extreme behavior, and some of the students volunteered as counselors during their second year in the program. As with the middle school pupils, these pupils had little or no vision of the future, focusing largely on the present — on survival, in some cases. They distrusted most adults, especially those in authority. When the author's graduate students shared small bits of information in response to the adolescents' questions during the large-group interaction, the self-disclosure seemed to generate trust. However, the author emphasized later that high-risk youth generally need and want undivided focus on themselves, with application of basic and advanced counseling skills especially helpful. Counseling is about *them*, not about the adult counselor, and they need to talk and be listened to without judgment. Many of these pupils were engaged in dangerous behaviors. Many had been in trouble with the law.

The graduate students expected difficult transitions for these pupils during and after middle and high school. Vocational education could be better established and better promoted in the United States, although in some states it was indeed making strides in a positive direction (Burke, 2004). In the large local high school, impressive “academies” allowed pupils considerable choice about academic tracking. However, even there, the pupils who had been expelled reported little connection with teachers, discomfort in large classes and full hallways, and little interest in academic work.

Many of the middle and high school pupils mentioned above showed interest in working with their hands, working outside, and not sitting still. They responded to attention and appreciated the small-group work and the graduate-student counselors. Their school counselors were understaffed, teachers had pressure to meet standards and raise test scores (Kohn, 2000; Neill, 2003), and the school focus was on

academics, not on social and emotional development. Counselors and counselor educators need to argue to administrators that counselors, when they are adequately staffed, can proactively pay attention to social and emotional development, and can help pupils feel comfortable in school and concentrate on, and value, classroom work. Pupils who are at risk for poor social and academic outcomes need a venue for expressing concerns, exploring options, connecting with others, and having support for meeting developmental challenges. It makes sense that their lives feel chaotic and uncertain. Adults need to stand beside them as they navigate important years in their development.

### **Basic Strategies for Accessing the Inner World**

The author advocates developmentally oriented small-group interventions for accessing the inner world of kids, not only in schools, but also in agencies and treatment facilities. In schools, small groups represent a highly efficient and effective way to reach a wide range and large numbers of pupils, and having a developmental curriculum (e.g., Peterson, 2006d) helps to explain and justify the groups to parents, teachers, and administrators. Semi-structured session foci help to ensure that no one dominates, and that all group members have a chance to be heard. Groups can bring pupils together who normally would not associate with each other. Groups can help them to break down stereotypes, helping to build a sense of community within the school.

The author does not believe that individual and group counseling should be solely reactive. Group work can be proactive, helping children and adolescents develop, giving them skills of expression, as well as skills in listening and responding. Groups can help them connect and be known to each other. Regardless of the ability level of members, well-facilitated groups can be valuable. Whether teens are superstars, highly

intelligent, shy, new, or disenfranchised in the school culture, they can benefit from a chance to interact in a small group with an attentive, nonjudgmental adult (Peterson, 2006c). Group work can help pupils move ahead in development — to the next stage — by helping them develop confidence and social competence and by helping them to feel comfortable in school. If they have become developmentally stuck, perhaps counselor attention in the form of individual or group work can nudge them forward, so that they can embrace the next stage and be able to envision a positive future.

Individual work, especially when facilitated with a one-down, non-expert counselor stance, can also help to access the inner world of youth. Then the teens can be empowered. They are the experts on their lives, and they should rightfully be the teachers about their lives. When counselors and other significant adults enter their world respectfully, genuinely interested, and alert to concerns and strengths, they gain credibility and help to generate trust. Underachievers and youth with problematic behavior can feel affirmed for their personal strengths and become more “selfish” — making sure they get what they need in school, instead of sacrificing themselves to it. Basic counseling tenets are appropriate, of course: listening, reflecting, paraphrasing, summarizing, asking open-ended questions. A posture of “needing to fix them” is not. Pathologizing developmental struggles is also often not productive. Sometimes it is sufficient and crucial merely to support youth as they struggle with developmental challenges. However, counselors can also be mindful of the developmental challenges a teen’s family and parents are simultaneously struggling with individually, as a couple, and collectively.

There are usually few or no rituals related to any of these developmental struggles in developed cultures. Counselors may need to provide them. Providing information about development, normalizing

developmental challenges and experiences and helping teens make sense of them, and helping teens to envision the next stage may all contribute to their becoming “unstuck” and moving forward.

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### 停滯不動、徐徐移動、向前邁進： 過渡期的青少年

本文以一些臨床例子，概括青少年成長的「黏滯」，指出學生（包括資優或資弱的、處於各種生長環境和社會經濟地位的學生）所面臨的各種掙扎。輔導人員定期參照青少年成長的模板，便可確定哪些成長或發展過程中的挑戰會導致青少年現有的問題。正如個別輔導一樣，在成長導向的小組輔導工作上，只要輔導人員不持裁決性的態度，事事尊重，且不擺出高高在上的姿態，定能幫助青少年邁步向前。