Social Development or Socialization?
Linda Silverman, Ph.D.

A major concern of parents and educators is the social adjustment of their gifted children. All provisions for gifted students – ability grouping, acceleration, pull-out programs, full day programs, special schools, homeschooling – are held suspect on the grounds that they will “prevent the children’s social adjustment.” Indeed, the remarkable emphasis on the school as an agent of socialization makes one wonder if anyone really cares about the development of these children’s abilities or if all that is important is whether they fit in!

As a psychologist who has spent over 30 years studying the social and emotional development of the gifted, I believe we need to clearly differentiate between the concepts of social development and socialization. An immense amount of research has accumulated over the last 70 years on socialization of the gifted, indicating that gifted children tend to enjoy greater popularity, social adjustment, and social competence, earlier psychological maturity, and fewer indications of psychological problems than their less gifted peers (Silverman, 1993). In their recent comprehensive review of the literature, Nancy Robinson and Kate Noble report:

Perusal of a large group of studies of preadolescent children revealed [that] …as a group, gifted children were seen as more trustworthy, honest, socially competent, assured and comfortable with self, courteous, cooperative, stable, and humorous, while they were also seen as showing diminished tendencies to boast, to engage in delinquent activity, to aggress or withdraw, to be domineering, and so on. (N. Robinson & Noble, 1991, p. 62)

It would appear obvious from these studies that gifted children are highly socialized. It is interesting that the context of most of these studies was some form of special provision for the gifted, such as special classes or acceleration. Clearly, then, gifted children’s socialization does not suffer the slightest when special provisions are made for their learning needs. Ann Robinson advises parents and educators to

speak plainly on the issue of cooperative learning as therapy for socially maladjusted, talented students. The assumption that gifted children are more likely than others to have a variety of personal and social problems is not supported in the literature. Thus, the pill of cooperative learning may be prescribed for a perfectly healthy patient. (A. Robinson, 1990, p. 35)
Up to this point we have been addressing primarily the issue of socialization. According to the dictionary, socialization is the ability to adapt to the needs of the group. Gifted children are very adaptable, particularly girls. But at what price? If one works very hard at fitting in with others, especially when one feels very different from others, self-alienation can result. And this is exactly what we find in so many “well adjusted” gifted youth and adults. In their desperation to belong, they have given up or lost touch with vital parts of themselves.

Social development, on the other hand, is not the pressure to adapt, but a deep, comfortable level of self acceptance that leads to true friendships with others.

Lasting friendships are based on mutual interests and values, not on age. Individuals with good social development like themselves, like other people, demonstrate concern for humanity, and develop mutually rewarding friendships with a few kindred spirits. Social development goes hand in hand with self-actualization, whereas socialization is merely the desire to conform – often the opposite of self-actualization. The research indicates that special provisions for the gifted foster good social development (Silverman, 1993); this, rather than fitting in, should be our aim for them.

REFERENCES


Linda Silverman, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist and Director of the Gifted Development Center in Denver, Colorado.