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Tentative guidelines for the development of an ability-based emotional intelligence intervention program for gifted students

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents a number of general principles and guidelines for the development of an emotional intelligence training program designed to foster emotional abilities in gifted students. The presented guidelines underscore the need for EI theory-driven program planning geared to the needs of gifted students; integrating activities into routine school activities; providing provisions for practice and feedback; careful monitoring of program activities; systematic program impact evaluation; and assuring professional development of program personnel. EI training for the gifted is critically discussed.

Emotional abilities have been recently touted as an important subset of twenty-first Century Skills, essential for social, academic, and occupational success and thriving in modern society (Kyllonen, 2012). In keeping with this “zeitgeist,” educators, policy-makers, and researchers in the field are now giving serious attention and consideration to the emotional abilities and affective development of non-identified as well as high ability and talented students (Brackett et al., 2009). In fact, emotional facets of perception, understanding, and emotion management may play a role in student academic success and classroom adjustment given the myriad emotions they experience in the classroom, ranging from anxiety, anger, contempt, and envy, to happiness, pride, and emotional engagement.

A central issue of gifted education focuses on the appropriate educational settings and programs aimed at training and cultivating the academic and personal development of gifted children and youth (Schwean, Saklofske, Widdifield-Konkin, Parker, & Kloosterman, 2006). In line with this central concern, this paper presents a number of tentative consideration and guidelines for the development of training programs designed to foster emotional abilities in gifted students, based on an ability-based model of EI.
We begin by a brief discussion of the elusive EI construct and its practical utility for school children. We then discuss the importance of EI interventions in general and for gifted students in particular. We move on to discuss a number of tentative guidelines and considerations for program development in the emotional domain, followed by a discussion of training EI in gifted students.

**What is this thing called emotional intelligence?**

Ever since its inception as a scientific construct in the early 1990’s (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), EI remains a popular yet controversial concept, having spawned an impressive body of psychological and educational research and practice over the past quarter of a century. There are currently two prominent conceptual and related measurement models of the EI construct: (a) EI as a cognitive ability, best measured via performance-type tests, and (b) EI as a non-cognitive trait or personality disposition, best measured via self-report inventories.

The first systematic research on conceptualizing EI as a cognitive ability was conducted by Jack Mayer and Peter Salovey in the late 1990s. These psychologists conceptualized EI as a set of hierarchically organized core abilities for identifying, expressing, processing, assimilating, and managing emotions – both in self and others (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 2000). Accordingly, as a cognitive ability, EI is best measured via performance-type tests (e.g. *Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test*, Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002). Under this framework, EI consists of four branches or facets of emotion abilities: Perception (e.g. identification and expression of emotion); Assimilation of Emotion into Thought (e.g. integration of emotions in thought processes); Understanding Emotions (e.g. understanding of antecedents, effects, blends, and transitions of emotions); and Management of Emotions (e.g. emotion regulation in self and others in order to modulate negative emotions and sustain and enhance positive emotions).

As pointed out by Zeidner, Matthews, and Robert (2009), many conceptualizations of EI are theoretically shallow, being little more than lists of positive qualities that are not general cognitive ability (empathy, self-motivation, assertiveness, trustworthiness, resilience, etc.). In our view, the Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey (1999) approach, distinguishing different types of emotional abilities, carries more theoretical heft than other models (e.g. trait or mixed models, Zeidner et al., 2009). The four-branch ability model of Mayer and Salovey is presently the most influential conceptualization of this kind and will therefore serve as the basic conceptual framework for the development of the program delineated below.

EI has gained considerable popularity over the years because it has been claimed to be a robust predictor of a wide array of adaptive outcomes in applied settings (education, health, occupation, marital relations, etc.). The ongoing controversy surrounding the practical utility of EI in educational and other applied settings, including school performance, has made EI a controversial construct in modern psychology (Zeidner et al., 2009). Some rather extravagant claims concerning the
practical utility of EI have created considerable excitement about the potential of applications of EI in education. Thus, EI has been touted as a major predictor of educational outcomes and even a stronger predictor than existing measures of ability or personality (e.g. Goleman, 1995). Furthermore, amid the growing public efforts to promote the development and emotional learning in school aged youth, EI has been claimed to be an important protective factor in the process of resilience and adaptation (Brackett et al., 2009).

What does the empirical research tell us? With respect to cognitive outcomes, studies have confirmed that ability EI predicts students’ grades, with studies showing this occurs both for broad assessments such as the MSCEIT (Rivers, Brackett, Salovey, & Mayer, 2007) and narrower measures, such as the Situational Judgment Test of Emotion Management (MacCann, Wang, Matthews, & Roberts, 2010). This latter study is especially noteworthy as it suggests that the EI measure remains predictive of grades after controlling for both socioeconomic status and general cognitive ability. Furthermore, Qualter, Gardner, Pope, Hutchinson, and Whiteley (2012) conducted a five-year longitudinal study in the British school system (\( N = 413 \)). Measures of EI, personality, and cognitive ability taken at the beginning of school year 7 (as defined in the British school system) were used to predict academic performance at the end of year 11. The youth version of the MSCEIT at age 11 was used to predict performance at age 16 (approximately). Significant correlations between the MSCEIT branch scores and grades on various examinations ranging from .13 to .28 were found; not surprisingly, cognitive ability predicted more strongly than the MSCEIT scores (\( r_s \) of up to .55). Structural equation modeling suggested that cognitive ability and EI influenced academic performance independently, although the influence of cognitive ability was much larger.

Comparably, with respect to trait measures of EI, meta-analysis of seventy-four effect sizes (total \( N = 10,292 \)) found a small but significant average \( r \) of .20 (Perera & DiGiacomo, 2013). The effect size was larger in younger children. Although trait EI is typically independent of cognitive ability, Siegling, Vesely, Saklofske, Frederickson, and Petrides (2015) confirmed that EI remains predictive of performance with general intelligence controlled. Confounding with personality is a more concerning issue. Trait EI overlaps with factors such as conscientiousness, which is known to promote academic achievement, and studies that have controlled for personality have provided mixed outcomes (Zeidner et al., 2009).

With respect to affective outcomes, the empirical literature provides evidence showing that emotional abilities predict a wide array of outcomes related to adaptive coping with stress, and well-being. Zeidner, Matthews, and Roberts (2006) summarized much of the research linking EI and coping according to this research paradigm, noting that correlations among these constructs range between .20 and .60. Trait EI shows a consistent positive relationship to problem-focused coping, and a consistent negative association with emotion-focused coping. Moreover, trait EI has some incremental validity in predicting coping, with the Big Five controlled (Petrides, Pérez–González, & Furnham, 2007).
Furthermore, meta-analytic data show small to moderate effect sizes \((r_s)\) for the association between EI and mental health: a mean correlation of .23 was reported in the Schutte, Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Bhullar, and Rooke (2007) study versus a mean correlation of .36 reported in the Martins, Ramalho, and Morin (2010) meta-analysis. Both investigations also found that when measured as a trait, EI was more strongly associated with mental health than when measured as ability. Some of the relevant studies have shown that EI remains predictive of mental health with standard personality factors controlled (e.g. Austin, Saklofske, & Egan, 2005; Petrides et al., 2007), although the incremental validity of EI over personality is modest.

**Training emotional abilities of gifted students**

A glance at the giftedness literature reveals a surge of interest in emotional aspects of gifted and talented children (see Shani-Zinovich & Zeidner, 2013 for a review). This is motivated, in part, by the claimed role of affective characteristics of individuals as forces impacting both the talent development and well-being of the gifted. Yet, research on fostering the emotional abilities of gifted and talented students has traditionally been given short-shrift, when compared to the massive amount of research on cultivating the cognitive facets of the gifted. In fact, the gifted education movement and accompanying literature has traditionally been associated with definitions and conceptions of giftedness that mainly focus on extraordinary cognitive abilities and talents in specific domains (Feldhusen, 1998). Because giftedness has traditionally been defined by the child’s cognitive functioning and abilities, this has left open questions of how being gifted might impact emotional abilities. Regrettably, only a modicum of research has directly assessed the role of EI among gifted and talented students. Overall, the findings have been mixed and inconclusive and more research is needed to clarify the relationship between EI abilities in gifted students (see Matthews, Lin, Zeidner, & Roberts, in press, for a review).

A glance at the many EI programs described in the literature (see Zeidner, et al. for a review) suggests that few, if any, have been specifically developed and targeted for gifted children and youth. Interventions designed to foster EI in the classroom fall under the general rubric of social and emotional learning programs (SEL; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). These interventions focus on the various processes through which children enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feelings, and behaving to achieve life tasks.

Recent research supports the many positive impacts of soundly implemented SEL interventions in the schools on learning and emotional outcomes.

A meta-analysis performed by Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) was based on 213 school-based SEL programs involving 270,034 kindergartens through high school students. Compared to controls, SEL participants demonstrated statistically significant improved social and emotional skills.
The mean effects reported in this meta-analytic study for academic performance ranged from 0.22 to 0.27 sigma units.

In view of the meaningful empirical link between student EI and academic success and well-being it is not surprising that educators have shown an interest in programs and activities targeting the development and training of various EI abilities in child and youth in both elementary and secondary schools. In fact, the implementation of programs that target emotional abilities has become a priority in many schools, with training programs for individuals to become more emotionally intelligent mushrooming in recent years.

EI training programs may benefit high ability or talented children irrespective of whether they exhibit emotional or behavioral problems; the emotional development of gifted children should not be neglected. Furthermore, gifted children are heterogeneous in emotional functioning. The rather weak associations between giftedness and trait EI reported in the literature (e.g. Schwean et al., 2006) imply that some gifted children will be resilient, prosocial, and well-adapted to the classroom whereas others will not. Indeed, while there are various sources of under-achievement in gifted students, one important source of poor classroom achievement is maladaptive self-regulation and motivation (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Furthermore, giftedness may be associated with subtle forms of emotional maladaptation, or with emotional challenges in specific domains, such as isolation from peers in high school (Vialle, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2007). These authors suggest that gifted children may be skilled in disguising their unhappiness so that it is not apparent to teachers. Indeed, certain teachers may create challenges for gifted students.

A failure to explicitly target the affective and social components characteristic of gifted and talented students may compromise the actualization of their cognitive potential, social adaptation, and well-being. When emotional problems do arise, it is often due to a misfit between the gifted child’s social and emotional needs and the affordances of the child’s familial, social, and educational environment, coupled with a lack of nurture and care for the child.

It is noted that there are many uncertainties regarding designing and implementing EI training programs for gifted and talented students. We now consider and address four such uncertainties.

(1) First, it is presently unclear how we should go about designing training programs tailored to gifted children to be most effective. One reasonable guiding principle is that intervention programs need to consider and address the specific psychosocial characteristics and distinctive emotional needs of the gifted, to assure appropriate talents are developed. Specifically, EI training programs need to address both the potential risk of gifted students (e.g. specific psychological stressors, low social self-concept, feelings of being different, alienation, competitiveness, socially proscribed perfectionism, heightened sensitivity to
others, poor peer relations, and conditional acceptance) as well as key protective factors and mechanisms (e.g. high cognitive abilities, exceptional problem-solving strategies, high academic self-concept, strivings for excellence, grit).

Second, it is less than clear what kind of results we can expect from these training programs and to what extent these programs are likely to be more or less effective than alternative types of social and emotional training. Thus, a comprehensive multi-method assessment should be in place following the intervention, with a variety of impacts assessed, including: students’ keener awareness and understanding of emotions in self and others, perceived effective emotion regulation, and teacher or student satisfaction with the EI program. Furthermore, major goal of future evaluation research will be to compare the effectiveness of specialized EI programs with alternative SEL programs.

Third, it remains uncertain which of the components of EI should be emphasized and which are most malleable and responsive to training. At this stage, we can only speculate that whereas certain “source” personal dispositions may be difficult to change (emotional stability, coping styles, etc.), it may be more possible to target “surface” emotional abilities and behaviors (e.g. learning to manage emotions in stressful encounters, understanding antecedents and consequences of emotions).

Fourth, what type of gifted students would benefit from training? At this time we may suggest EI training may be especially valuable to those high ability students that are vulnerable to emotional deficits. Accordingly, for those gifted students who evidence troubling social, emotional or interpersonal behaviors, the EI construct offers a potentially useful conceptual framework to assist in designing helpful therapeutic interventions. Future training programs might target selected vulnerabilities attributed to gifted students, such as feeling alienated from typical children, maladaptive coping with stress, and threats to academic self-concept associated with big-fish-little-pond effect (Zeidner & Schleyer, 1999), suggesting that the academic self-concept of gifted children is depressed when they are enrolled in homogeneous classes for the gifted compared to heterogeneous classes. Only experience with EI program implementation and evaluation would serve to answer these questions.

Guidelines for developing EI training programs

We now present ten broad and tentative guidelines that may prove useful for developing, implementing, and evaluating EI training programs for gifted students. These guidelines stem largely from generic program planning and evaluation
principles as applied to the development of emotional abilities in gifted students, as well as ideas culled from both the EI and giftedness literature.

In developing this program, we adopt an ability-based model of EI, rather than “mixed” or “personality trait” conception of EI. This ability model of EI stresses the importance of a hierarchical series of abilities ranging from input (emotion identification and perception), processing (emotion understanding, and emotion assimilation), and output (emotion management in self and others). These guidelines are aimed mainly at program-planner and evaluators, but should be of interest to other stakeholders, including principals, teachers, and counselors. We begin by presenting a number of considerations during preplanning stage, move on to the planning, development, and implementation stage, and then discuss program implementation and evaluation.

**Preplanning stage**

*Assess environmental resources and potential support for an EI program for the gifted*

Program planners need to establish and assess the resources in the school (or school district) under consideration prior to program planning. The assessment is needed to evaluate to what degree the EI training program is congenial with the existing practice and culture of the school/district, expectations of the administrators, school principal, and teachers (stakeholders), as well as the school's readiness to implement the EI training program. Needed resources (funding, personnel, professional development, and venues for conducting the training activities) also need to be evaluated at this stage, along with possible barriers and additional costs of program implementation (Zeidner & Matthews, *in press*).

*Conduct systematic need assessment among target population*

Prior needs assessment research is necessary as a prerequisite for program planning in order to map out the kinds of emotional abilities gifted students display and to assess those abilities that are both strong and relatively weak in the target population of gifted students, both from an ipsative (intra-individual) and normative (inter-individual) reference framework. EI training programs could potentially focus on enhancing relatively strong abilities of the gifted, strengthening relatively weak abilities, or developing new ones.

**Program planning and implementation stage**

*Base the development of intervention activities on a coherent conceptualization of EI*

Past experience indicates that emotional intervention programs are most effective when they are grounded in sound psycho-educational theory (Zins et al., 2004). The specific model of EI undergirding the program should dictate the objectives
assessed during program evaluation, the specific emotional abilities targeted, along with the relevant measures employed for need assessment and impact evaluation.

When guided by an ability-based model of EI, the program planner would strive to foster such EI facets as emotion identification and expression of emotions, differentiating and monitoring emotions, utilization of emotions in intellectual goals, and regulation and control of emotions – both in self and others. By contrast, interventions based on alternative models (e.g. trait models) might foster abilities, such as empathy, motivation, integrity, and assertiveness. Clearly, different conceptualizations of EI would lead to different intervention programs, techniques, measures, and perhaps even outcomes.

Specify program goals, objectives, and behavioral outcomes

At the planning and development stage, EI programs should identify and specify broad program goals and specific operational objectives. Thus, EI training programs should be based on a coherent rationale for the specification of program goals, representing the desired program outcomes, and objectives, the operational procedures leading to the desired outcomes (Rossi & Freeman, 1993). The eventual behavioral outcome measures employed are empirical indicators of whether or not desired goals are achieved.

Vague or ambiguous program objectives (e.g. “provide talented students with emotional abilities to succeed in school and in life”), often phrased as abstract idealized statements of desired outcomes, need to be clarified and be broken down into specific components or abilities (e.g. “provide talented students with the ability to recognize emotions, express them effectively, understand their antecedents, and adaptively cope with them”). Thus, the desired outcomes of the EI training program should be stated in term of the specific skills to be learned.

Translate program goals and objectives into specific program activities

A wide array of program activities can be employed to achieve specific objectives. For example, an EI ability-based training program with the objective of training emotion regulation or management strategies could include the following student activities:

- Discuss different ways to regulate negative emotions arising from failure to achieve academic goals and the effectiveness of different strategies used (e.g. reappraisal vs. suppression).
- Write about a positive emotional experience you experienced with your peers in the gifted classroom and identify strategies you used to deal with that emotion, evaluating how effective each strategy was. Then brainstorm and record other possible strategies.
- Describe a time when you experienced envy of other gifted children in your class. What triggered it? How did you handle the envy?
• Describe the effects a chosen emotion control strategy had, and how the emotion could have been managed more and less effectively.
• Discuss how different cognitive evaluations of a stressful situation may affect emotional reactions.
• Consider different ways to maintain or increase a positive emotion following success on a difficult learning task.

Assure professional development of teachers and program personnel
Once the program objectives and activities are in place, it is important to assure the professional development of teaching and program staff, via training workshops and on-site consultation, which is essential for successful program implementation. Very little in teacher training or in the standard curriculum actually prepares teachers for effectively tackling emotional or social topics – that seem rather foreign to their training. Furthermore, as a rule, teachers, counselors, and health professionals are not adequately trained to recognize the emotional needs of gifted students, nor are they sufficiently trained to help develop emotional abilities of these individuals.

Fully blend and integrate the EI program into the routine classroom curriculum
Ideally, an EI training program should be fully integrated into the classroom curriculum and be considered an ongoing part of gifted children’s education over the course of their schooling rather than a “stand alone” activity. Accordingly, EI training program should be designed to integrate seamlessly into the school curriculum, with lessons on emotions and emotional abilities blended into all subject areas, such as history, language arts, music, science, and math. In this type of integrated program, gifted students can learn how to harness aggressive emotions in gym class; how to handle stress or frustration in math or science class, or how to empathize with one another while reading powerful literature or analyzing fictional or historical persona. It would not be judicious to have social and emotional skills “add ons” or create another “pull-out” EI training program for the gifted.

Provide provisions for practice, feedback, and for generalizing the domain of emotional skills across different classes of behavioral performance
Emotional skills, like cognitive skills, require practice of what is learned as well as environmental feedback on one’s performance to become part of one’s socio-emotional arsenal. Accordingly, for the EI training to be successful, it is necessary to provide opportunities for students to apply emotional skills, both in and out of the classroom, particularly in emotion-laden situations. Homework exercises would be particularly helpful in inculcating these skills at home, in the schoolyard, and in the neighborhood. The program needs to capitalize on informal learning or learning from experience.
Program evaluation stage

Assure process evaluation and monitoring of faithful program implementation

Process evaluations should be in place to determine whether the EI training program is being implemented as planned and to determine to what degree the program is achieving its intended goals. Measuring the accurate delivery of program activities and measuring program intervention is crucial for program evaluation.

Interventions should be accompanied by systematic impact evaluation

Emotion-based interventions are reported to be most effective when they are field tested and evidence – based through systematic impact evaluation (Zins et al., 2004). Evaluation seeks to link the goals and activities of the program to empirical evidence that programs are being carried out as planned and they have the desired effects. Thus, EI intervention programs for the gifted should be backed by rigorous impact assessment, employing the principles and criteria used by evidence-based intervention programs.

Discussion

A number of challenges and fissures involved in the training of emotional skills and abilities in gifted students have implications for the design and implementation of EI training programs. First, given the relative stability of personal traits such as EI and deeply entrenched coping styles, we should not expect EI training to yield rapid changes in gifted student participants. Developing emotional skills takes considerable time, and energy, requiring deliberate effort, repeated practice, and systematic feedback in varying contexts in order to change deeply engrained traits. As noted above, whereas certain “source” personal dispositions may be difficult to change it may possible to change “surface” emotional skills, abilities, and behaviors. Also, EI training can do much to raise awareness about the importance of emotional skills and motivate gifted student to learn from their everyday emotional experiences. Schools may also reap short term benefits if training programs instill in gifted and talented participants a sense of personal growth and motivation contributing to a positive classroom atmosphere.

Second, there are numerous ways people can manage their emotions and handle interpersonal challenges. What works for some people may not work for others, such as the gifted. Likewise, what works in some situations (classroom) may not work in other circumstances (on the basketball court or on a date). This suggests that in training emotional skills, we should respect individual differences, be sensitive to the social or environmental context, avoid simplistic recommendations, and strive to broaden people's coping resources rather than drill a narrow set of skills.

Third, interventions designed to enhance EI are now a major focus for education, but they have tended to neglect the needs of the gifted child. Future training programs might target selected vulnerabilities attributed to gifted students.
Fourth, although many of the currently employed EI programs are promising, few have been systematically modeled upon EI or designed in a way that is likely to lead to long-term change. One-day seminars or workshops can be valuable in educating people about emotions and raising emotional awareness, but they may not by themselves lead to the kind of reprogramming that is required for significant improvement. Thus, it is critical for psycho-educational researchers to continue to establish evidence-based strategies that educators can effectively implement, particularly for the gifted.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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