

Developmental Considerations and Students with Exceptionalities

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Author Note

As far as the author knows, this paper has no considerations or concerns. If you have any questions, email the author at lpuckett10@liberty.edu.

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An exceptional student, also known as neurodivergent, is a student who thinks or functions differently than what is considered the norm in society. Although this term is mainly associated with students who show exceptional academic success, the term also applies to other unique talents and disabilities. A person who has a disability and is specially gifted is considered twice exceptional. When faced with these students in our schools, we as school counselors must understand how to meet their unique needs. This paper will discuss the importance of understanding development and how we can effectively serve those exceptions to the developmental norms.

The Importance of Developmental Theory

A Professional Counselor should be knowledgeable about developmental theories when counseling children and adolescents for three reasons. These three reasons, as stated by Vernon and Shimmel, are: 1. A child's level of development can influence how they respond to getting their basic needs met. 2. Development can influence how children respond to typical development problems. And 3. Development can influence how a child responds to situational problems. (Vernon & Schimmel, 2024).

Maslow defines a child's basic needs as physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. (Maslow 1968). Regarding these needs, children in the preoperational stage will have different basic needs than adolescents with abstract thinking skills. (Vernon & Shimmel, 2024). As a counselor, if we understand the stage of development the student is in, we can identify the basic needs required for those students. We can use this knowledge to assess whether the needs are met or exceed expectations. Secondly, as children

develop, their relationships with their peers and parents, academic requirements, and performance change. For example, preschoolers are more egocentric, so we cannot expect them to understand concepts such as sharing or empathy until middle childhood. We also wouldn't try to use abstract ideas and philosophy with kids in elementary grades because of their concrete thought processes. (Vernon & Shimmel, 2024). Finally, When a student experiences severe situations in their home life or school, their level of development can determine how they react to the event. A child with concrete thoughts may be confused about the reason behind events, while adolescents better understand factors that contribute to the situations.

Professional Work with Exceptional Students

The role of the counselor when working with exceptional students can vary depending on the exceptionality and theoretical technique. For example, counselors working with students with learning disorders are recommended to use a strength-based approach that focuses on building self-esteem and coping skills. (Vernon & Shimmel, 2024). While counselors who work with students who are working with gifted students focus more on the emotional baggage of perfection and anxiety. (Vernon & Shimmel 2024).

Counselors working with exceptional students must know the effective indirect and direct services they should offer. Direct services should be small group instruction or individual counseling when working with these students, as mentioned in the ASCA National Model Framework delivery component. Research shows that small group and one-on-one instruction positively impact on-task behavior (Baker et al., 1990), Literature study (Weiss, 2013), and emotional and academic success with peer modeling (Ledford & Wolery, 2013).

According to the ASCA National Model Framework, the three components of indirect services that counselors engage in are consultation, collaboration, and referral (American School

Counselor Association, 2019). All three are tools that counselors should use when working with exceptional students.

Federal Law Importance

Throughout history, people with disabilities have had to fight hard to receive a fair education. This fight continues today as parents seek to advocate for their children's education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) gives children with disabilities an opportunity to "free appropriate public education." Using this act, counselors can ensure that students can be screened for disabilities and if needed, can get extra support in their classroom. Also counselors can ensure that students with disabilities are getting access to extracurricular activities, advocating for their participation and accommodation because of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Finally, in the school, a counselor can advocate and promote the multitiered system of support (MTSS) framework to bring differentiated instruction into the classrooms (Vernon & Shimmel 2024). This framework is three tiered system, each tier being a different level of support given to the student based on their needs. Tier 1 primary is the whole group support. Tier 2 Secondary is supplemental time, exposure and practice. Tier 3 Tertiary is intensive support from specialized personnel. (Vernon & Shimmel, 2024). Throughout these tiers the counselor can give insight on where the student is at and advocate for the least restrictive environment.

Gifted Students and Counselor Services

Giftedness, as defined by Vernon & Shimmel is when an individual demonstrates an innate ability in one or more areas. (Vernon & Shimmel). Gifted students does not only apply to academically successful individuals, but also students who show outstanding talent in the

creative arts or sports. Although the actual measurements for identifying gifted students is complicated, The National Association for Gifted Children defines the characteristic as a student who have the the gift or talent to exceed their performance above others that are the same age or developmental level in one or more areas. (NAGC, n.d.-b).

Because gifted students are usually above their peers in some develeopmental areas, there are other areas that these students struggle in. Gifted students can have higher struggles with anxiety and depression with the need for perfection and have high expectations for themselves. Social skills and managing emotions may come as a seconary concern for these students, so thay can also struggle to connect with peers or share their emotions with others. (Vernon & Shimmel 2024). Therefore, school counselors should consider using the mutltitiered system known as RTI (response to intervention) to determine the level of support the student may need. Direct services should include small group counseling, and individual counseling. As mentioned above, these direct services have the advantage of helping the students grow their socioemotional development.

Biblical Principals

In the past the biblical scriptures were used often asan excuse to abuse students with exceptionalities, especially those who were considered disabled. However, when the scripture is not construed to fit one narrative, there are many bible verses that teach us about valuing exceptional students. For example in the old testament God calls Moses to be his mouthpeice to Pharaoh, even though he was well aware of his speech impediment. Or When Jesus would interact with the blind and the lepers, showing compassion and changing his disciples mindset while he was at it. (John 9:1-5, Matthew 8:1-3, and Luke 17:11-14).

The bible doesn't just speak on students with disabilities. There are many verses in the bible that talk about the gifted. God reminds us that our gifts come from Him (James 1:17) because he made us and knew us before we were born (Psalms 139: 13-16). Also, those who are gifted can contribute to community as the whole, for they bring another part to the whole body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:18-19) using their gifts to serve others (1 Peter 4:10). We must also remember that just because a student is gifted in one thing, doesn't mean they do not need support in other areas. God gives us all different gifts to be used to help the community grow and to support our fellow man (Romans 12:6). As counselors we must be aware of our bias by testing them against these scriptures. We must also use these principals to guide our gifted and exceptional students towards the path of academic and relational success.

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