SUPPORTINGTHE PSYCHOSOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ISSUES OF GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS: A MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract - Malaysia has always been interested in educating its gifted population through the introduction of its' various gifted programs since 1960s. However, these programs slowly perished due to lack of directions, training, funding and leadership. Malaysian interest in gifted education re-emerged in 2006 which lead to the formation of few programmes and initiatives to cater for the educational needs of this population of students. One specific provision developed was the psychosocial support system to help these students deal with their unique psychological, social and emotional issues in educational setting. This paper briefly discussed about the requirement to establish this particular provision in Malaysian context.

Keywords - Gifted and Talented, Psychosocial and Emotional, Support System, Malaysia.

I. INTRODUCTION

Giftedness is commonly used to determine gifted behaviours in individuals, namely the three interlocking traits of above average ability, high level of task commitment and high level of creativity (Renzulli, 1978). Regular instructional methods such as chalk and talk are not suitable for individuals who exhibit and able to integrate these three traits. Therefore, these individuals need programmes that can cater and nurture these three traits and able to satisfy their inquisitive nature.Gagné (1999) suggested that giftedness and talent are two distinct but interconnected concepts, whereby he stressed out that giftedness consists of the remarkable natural abilities, untrained and probably genetically inherited, while talent is the proficiency of the systemically developed abilities in at least one discipline of human activity. In Gagné's DMGT framework, remarkable natural abilities can be developed into talent through developmental process that consists of informal and formal learning and practicing. These developmental processes can be influenced in positive or negative manners by intrapersonal catalyst and environmental catalyst. Gagné' also identified chance as the last causal factor in this model. Chance can be linked to environment such as genetic inheritance or the chance of being born in the right family, and at the right time.

However, both Renzulli and Gagné models slightly overlooked the psychosocial and emotional issues that may emerge in these gifted and talented individuals especially in children. Gifted and talented children's cognitive abilities are often higher compared to other children in the same age. Hence, AlfredBinét proposed 'the mental age' concept to explain this phenomenon (Silverman, 1997). From this concept, we can understand that gifted and talented children are asynchronously developed i.e. their mental age is out of sync with their chronological age. Therefore, gifted and talented children will experience multiple issues related to their psychosocial and emotional development (Silverman, 1997).

These psychosocial and emotional issues affecting gifted and talented children according to Ng and Sebastian (2005) were mainly caused by their peculiar traits and environment factors. These peculiar traits such as their own self-concept, phobia and social skills problem are probably due to their high cognitive abilities. Due to these peculiar traits, the gifted and talented children will experience communication problems, discrimination and unable to adapt to the surroundings. This is because their social circle such as parents, teachers and peers unable to understand them. Even though the myth about gifted and talented children do not face any difficulties and are good at everything they do has been debunked (Bakar & Alias, 2009), this stigma is probably still prevalent among unidentified gifted and talented children in the mainstream education system.

Some of the psycho-socio-emotional issues in gifted and talented students that may arises in this institution are perfectionism, overexcitability, and self-harm and suicidal ideation. Moreover, stress and adaptation issues will be anticipated. These issues may arise in students and teachers as well because they have to adapt to different learning, teaching, and management style compared to when they are in previous mainstream education system. Hence, the counselling service provision must be able to cater for the whole educational institution stakeholders including students, teachers, administrators, and support staff. This service also should focus on proactive preventative, and developmental methods apart from prevention and treatment oriented (Lee & Hassan, 2019).

II. DISCUSSION

A systematic psychosocial support system that has to be established in any particular educational institutions for gifted and talented population of students shall consider four main fundamentals described below.

2.1. Developing Students, Healthy Emotions and Behaviours

According to Dąbrowski Theory of Positive Disintegration, gifted children often show heightened intensities, i.e. overexcitability in five areas which are psychomotor, sensory, emotional, imaginational, and intellectual (Dąbrowski, 1972). Due to these characteristics, some of them are quite sensitive to others' feelings and develop sense of justice beyond their chronological age. This shows that the gifted and talented children have a high sense of empathy and according to Dąbrowski (1972) an individual who shows any form of overexcitability perceive reality in a different, stronger and through multiple point of views. However, if overexcitability in these children are excessive and uncontrollable, it will distracts and hampers them from their priorities. Therefore, it is important for counsellors to assist them in developing healthy emotions and behaviours. This is also applies to introvert students who struggle to communicate and express their emotions. Although gifted and talented students display cognitive abilities well beyond their chronological age, emotionally they are still kids. Thus exploratory, tinkering, and mischievous behaviours by these students are anticipated in this institution. It is ineffective when punitive methods such as corporal punishment are being use as consequences for this students. Therefore, the consequences must make senses to the students, i.e. logical, and seek to mend the harm, i.e. restorative.

2.2. Promoting Positive Self-Concepts of the Students

Self-concept is the beliefs that an individual hold about him/herself. It involves multiple domains about oneself, such as attitudes, feelings, knowledge, appearances, and etc. It also involves beliefs on how we are being perceive by others i.e. social judgment and social acceptation. Generally, people expected that gifted and talented children have a positive self-concept than non-gifted and talented children because of being labelled as gifted and talented. Moreover, people also believe that academic and social performance of an individual can massively affected by his/her self-concept. Some of the issues that this students may have experienced in their previous mainstream education system are 'tall poppy syndrome' and 'big-fish-little-pond-effect'. In tall poppy syndrome, gifted and talented students tend to hide their intellectual and cognitive abilities in normal school settings to avoid being out casted or mocked by their peers or teachers due to the normalisation of social equality. Therefore, the abilities of high achievers students are often unrecognised and underappreciated since they embrace a highly active and questioning approach toward issues that may cause traumatic experiences for the teachers (Hickson,1992).

2.3. Teaching Stress Management and Coping Strategies to the Students

According to Haberlin (2015), there are four characteristics and situations that potentially trigger stress among gifted students which are perfectionism, overexcitability, social difficulties, and external factors such as bored with unchallenging learning and teaching process. They are more incline to stress that can results destructive effects such as mental and physical exhaustion if left unchecked (Haberlin,2015). Therefore it is foolish to assume gifted and talented students are able to cope and manage stress effectively because of their higher cognitive level. Research found that generally students escape stress through negative coping mechanism such as alcohol, drugs, excessive sleeping, and etc. In addition, to avoid stress, gifted and talented student may reduce their effort or lower their goals. This is a counterproductive coping mechanism since they will not be able to work at their full capability. Moreover, Shaunessy and Suldo (2010) found that gifted and talented students may use laughing and sense of humour as diversions for their negative emotions. For example, dark humour such as suicidal jokes may be an indicator for suicidal ideation.

A structured method when dealing with stress in gifted students was proposed by Galbraith and Delisle in 1996 (Haberlin, 2015). In this method, initially the cause or sources of the stress must be identified. After the responsibility for it has been assumed, positive actions should be used to manage the stress. Various literatures has suggested that positive actions that can help manage stress in gifted students and also can help them in psycho-socio-emotional development are bibliotherapy and movietherapy. In addition, the most crucial way in managing stress is to acknowledge it. Hence, counsellors must take proactive actions by talking to the students about their stress. However, it may be difficult for introvert students who are struggling to open up and express their feelings. To overcome this, teachers or counsellors can help them to express their feelings through activities such as recording their daily journal through writing, drawing or voice note.

2.4. Building Education Programmes for Parents and Teachers

Gifted and talented students come from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, their parents may or may not understand the giftedness in their

children and on gifted education. Every parent wants to do what they think is the best for their children. So, some parents of the gifted children may take drastic actions such as overinvested in their children lives although some parents may become apathetic towards the special needs of their gifted children. Thus, the first thing the counsellors must do is to feed the parents information about giftedness such as the real needs of their children and also demystify the myths and misconceptions surrounding giftedness. Hence, positive views that can lead to a better understanding and communication towards their gifted children can be developed. Next, counsellors can create a support group for these parents where they can share their views and experience regarding their children. Through this group, counsellors can organise workshop sessions to educate parents on giftedness.

According to Hickson (1992), most researchers and practitioners who work with the gifted and talented students believe that proactive preventative methods are more effective when being used to deal with these psycho-socio emotional issues rather than using remedial intervention and reactive approach. This is because gifted and talented students rather not to seek others when trying to solve their problems. Based on the teachers' and parents' perspective, counsellors were ranked third and second respectively in the importance of the main collaborators in gifted and talented education (Ignat, 2011). This is supported by a study done by Ishak and Bakar (2014) which found that almost 60% of gifted and talented students preferred to solve their own problem by themselves, while from the preliminary studies in 2011 pointed out that only 7% of these students will seek out counsellors to help solve their problems. Moreover it was found that the most preferred types of counselling was career counselling which stood at almost 63%.Apart from teachers, counsellors also are essential in the gifted and talented education (Lee & Hassan, 2019).



Fig.1. Five Domains of Counseling System Provision for Gifted and Talented Students

Thus, a support system in term of counselling service provision must be established in any educational settings for population of gifted and talented students. The five main domains of effective counselling service provision that will guide the students to develop competencies in social and emotional aspects holistically which in return can help them in developing good self-resilience qualities are shown in Figure 1. This framework is aligned with the National Education Philosophy.

III. CONCLUSION

All in all, it is important for all stakeholders of gifted education to continuously support this unique population of students to ensure that their potentials can be realized to the optimal state. And one way of doing it is by providing an effective psychosocial support system in terms of educational counselling services, so that the students will have a proper platform to seek for help and guidance especially when dealing with their psychosocial and emotional issues.

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