

FACHBEITRAG

How many Canaries? – Thoughts provoked by

Trevor Tebbs, Ph. D., begann seine berufliche Laufbahn als Lehrer in Großbritannien und sammelte Erfahrungen beim Unterrichten dort und in den USA. Bald schon interessierte er sich für besonders begabte Schüler. Schnell fand er heraus, dass es wenig Wissen und Verständnis für diese Klientel gab und so war sein Entschluss gefasst, sich auf diesem Gebiet fortzubilden. Er promovierte an der Universität von Connecticut, wo er bei Dr. Joseph Renzulli zuvor studierte. Seitdem ist er damit beschäftigt, sich um die sozial-emotionalen und pädagogischen Bedürfnisse von hochbegabten Kindern zu kümmern. Zahlreiche Veröffentlichungen zeugen von seiner steten Suche nach optimalen Bedingungen zur Entfaltung der Potenziale von besonders begabten Kindern.

► Author's note: I have no desire to be overly dramatic or inexcusably maudlin, but this narrative is admittedly the direct result of the recent tragedy that took place in an elementary school in a small town in Connecticut, USA.

At one time in history, caged canaries accompanied miners deep below Earth's surface. Canaries possessed a vulnerability that served the miners well. Beyond tolerating dark and dreary conditions miners had to be aware of „dampfs“ – lethal gases that could kill by poisoning or explosion. While a happily chirping canary, active in its cage declared the subterranean environment safe and gas-free, once conditions became intolerable or dangerous, an ailing or dead canary warned miners to immediately seek safer, healthier conditions. Once out of danger, the miners, their families and the community rejoiced for having avoided a disaster. The bird served its

purpose exchanging its life for the lives of others.

Unpacking the metaphor

Clearly this article is neither about mining nor the role of a little canary! The reference is metaphorical but, in my opinion, apposite to conditions often faced by highly-able children day-to-day in schools throughout the world. The „caged canary“ represents them, vulnerable yet at times happy and satisfied doing what is best for their educational and social emotional health. Their happiness and satisfaction signals a wholesome environment – good, healthy and safe, a place where it is pleasant to work, grow and develop one's potential. All are glad they are there and at the end of the day they cannot wait for the next day to begin.

This is not always so. Vulnerability becomes an issue as young people court trouble trying to survive in unwholesome, dreary, even dangerous conditions. Silverman (2013) writes:

Driven by their own passions and curiosity, they may resent expectations that they maintain high grades in subjects that hold no interest for them. These children do not become stars in school. Instead they may be labelled „underachievers“ or simply fail to be noticed. (pp. 4-5)

For these children, steadily deteriorating learning environments become increasingly intolerable. It is not dampfs that threaten life, but deprivation of rich and wholesome air that accompanies exciting and energizing learning opportunities. Insidious creeping tedium of making the grade and challenge-less days, weeks and years replaces inspiration. Silverman¹ (2013) cites Hollingworth who wrote seventy years ago²: In an ordinary elementary school situation children of 140 IQ

waste half their time in school. Those above 170 IQ waste almost all their time. With little to do, how can these children develop power of sustained effort, respect for the task, or habits of steady work?

Sadly, just as a silent canary warned of danger, so do those forced to waste their time, disengaged and marginalized individuals in the grip of apathy and withdrawal from society. In a sense they disappear from the mainstream and become hidden.

A step too far?

What follows may be indeed considered a step too far. However, what if, in a moment of monumental insanity, a sickly metaphorical canary rebels, forcibly taking the lives of children and adults to the bottom the cage?

As grandfather of four little children, a veteran teacher and sensitive to the suffering accompanying such a tragedy, my tears mingled with those shed by millions on the day a class of six-year old children and their teachers were shot. Later, I also asked „Why?“.

For me, the question takes on special poignancy having worked face-to-face



Ein stiller Kanarienvogel warnte die Bergleute vor giftigen Dämpfen. Ein stiller Schüler warnt vor Unterforderung.

a recent school shooting

with highly intelligent and creative young people whose life and experience could – just could – fester and foster the savage violence that took so many innocent lives just before Christmas 2012.

Thankfully it is with deep and genuine appreciation I can acknowledge the fact that none of my young clients have (nor hopefully ever will) become so enraged and revengeful that taking life is considered a viable option. The question does not go away however. It persists and expands in its scope.

So ... who pulls the trigger and why?

Firstly: I do not know the answers to my own questions. I can only speculate on the basis of my own experience and the research of others equally anxious for answers. Even the better informed, e.g., U.S. Secret Service investigators and social scientists like Katherine Newman³ and colleagues (Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta and Roth, 2004), admit the reasons are so diverse and complex it is „impossible to profile school shooters“ (p. 268).

However, there do appear to be patterns – commonalities, and by recognizing them we may succeed in averting such terrible events in the future.

Fifty or more school shootings have taken place worldwide where each shooter has been either a current student or recent graduate of the schools involved. While most took place in America, shootings in Germany, e.g., Erfurt in 2002, Emsdetten in 2006 and Winnenden in 2009, are sad reminders that the US holds no exclusive rights to such terror.

Although limited, some information may be gleaned about the American shooter. Apparently he was extremely intelligent and described by one acquaintance as a genius. Others described him as a challenge, very bright, a tech geek – a smart kid. We learn of a „battle“ between his mother and the school which eventually led to him being home schooled. We may never know what initiated such action; however, if I recommend homeschooling, my client is, for various reasons, dysfunctional or in danger of becoming

so. He or she is not fitting into school while experiencing such high levels of stress

as to be susceptible to educational, physical or mental health issues. By observation, I know this often occurs when the environment has become „toxic“ by virtue of poor parent/teacher/peer relationships and the curriculum is badly misaligned⁴.

Returning to Katherine Newman's book (Newman et al, 2004), each chapter is supported by a mass of information. Clearly she and her team examined each event from multiple perspectives. Factors considered significant are presented in a set of tables (pp.308 – 318). Interestingly, given the importance of this detailed study and the fact that Newman⁵ (2012) notes the majority of shooters have been „intelligent, high-performing boys“⁶ cognitive ability levels and, or academic capacities are not reported with respect to the twenty-seven individuals included in the tables.⁷

Parents and teachers of highly able children find phrases such as „high-performing,“ „extremely intelligent,“ „very bright“ or „a smart kid“ evocative. Based on data that was included, specifically about teasing, bullying, depression and counseling, it seems reasonable to assume that of this group of presumably „intelligent, high-performing boys,“ 70 percent were teased, almost 45 percent were physically bullied, 70 percent were depressed but only 30 percent received counseling, most of which was outside of school.

Sometime prior to the Erfurt shooting, Robert Steinhäuser attended Johann Gutenberg Gymnasium. To have done so suggests the advanced secondary education was considered within the range of his intellectual capacity. However, he was said to be lazy, frequently skip classes and fall short academically. Although the fearful rampage was considered as revenge >>>



Foto: Shutterstock

>>> for his eventual expulsion and its consequences, others saw it a statement against the German education system.

Those familiar with highly able and creative youth are perhaps aware of conditions indicative of deeply felt frustrations. At risk of repeating material used on a previous occasion⁸ I would mention the former U.S. Director of Education for the Gifted and Talented, Dr. H. C. Lyon⁹. He comments:

Prevented from moving ahead by the rigidity of normal school procedures ... the gifted youngster typically ... drifts into a state of lethargy and complete apathy ... conceals his ability, anxious not to embarrass others or draw their ridicule by superior performance; or not understanding his frustration, he becomes a discipline problem.

Maybe these conditions remain similar to those Silverman¹⁰ reports. Referring to Marland and his 1972 report to the US Congress¹¹ she writes „A large percentage of drop-outs are gifted students.“

Questions and conclusions

Although living on separate continents was Adam Lanza's and Robert Steinhaeuser's school experience similar? We will probably never know.

Were their cognitive ability levels at, or beyond the 130 mark? I don't know.

Did they join the ranks of gifted drop-outs? May be.

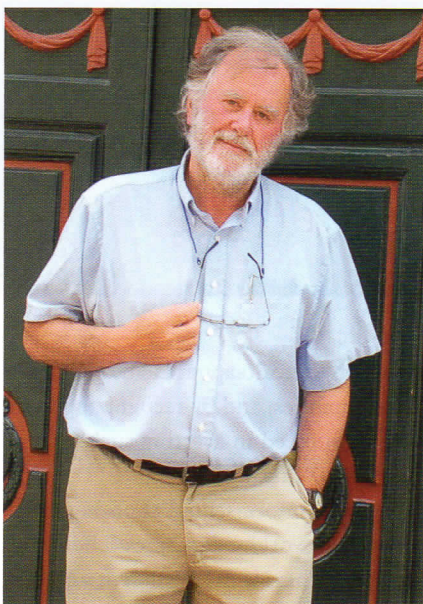
Were they possessed of a developmental potential somehow, for some reason, terribly compromised and therefore underachieving¹²? This may have been the case.

Did they, like fragile and desperately vulnerable canaries, succumb to mind-numbing environments over the years? Perhaps.

Were their needs ever accommodated or their strengths ever recognized? I do not know, but I think not.

Had their young lust for life and learning simply withered away leaving just the shell of a human being bereft of feeling? I don't know for sure, but I think so.

Were warning signs unnoticed, ignored or simply misunderstood? I suspect there were. Do we need more canaries or is their



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sad legacy enough? I hope so. I truly hope so. ■ Trevor J. Tebbs

End Notes

¹ Silverman, L.K. (2013). Giftedness 101. New York, NY: Springer

² Hollingworth, L.S. (1942). Children above 180 IQ Stanford-Binet: Origin and development. Yonkers-on-Hudson, NY: World Book

³ Katherine S. Newman is the James B. Knapp Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Johns Hopkins University and the co-author of „Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings“ (Basic Books, 2004).

⁴ **Example concerns associated with highly able children who are failing.**

Antecedent circumstances and stressors typical during school years and beyond:

Inappropriate curriculum – not aligned to strengths, interests and, or learning styles
Difficulties making friends and other relational issues

Unreasonable expectations of teachers and, or parents

Expectations of self and others especially in terms of the future

Outcomes associated with stressors:

Negative perception of self-worth

Frustration

Anger

Feeling of isolation, disconnectedness, and alienation

Feelings of despair and learned helplessness
Anxiety and depression

Typical behaviors:

Avoidance behaviors

Aggressive responses

Acting out behaviors - immaturity

Absenteeism

Underachievement

Seeking or finding oneself involved with inappropriate peer groups

Procrastination, avoidance of engagement in positive pursuits

Self-medication and, or medication prescribed by others

Found in: The Burnt-out Cycle found in Baum, S.M., Owen, S.V. & Dixon, J. (1991)

To be gifted and disabled. Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press

⁵ Katherine S. Newman (2012) http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/17/opinion/newman-school-shooters/index.html?hpt=hp_t2

⁶ Ibid

⁷ This fact begs further questions, e.g., Why, in both the new DSM –V and the present ICD-10 are levels of intellect (IQ) only considered factors in terms of mental retardation?”

⁸ Tebbs, T. J. (February, 2011). Challenge Deficiency Disorder. Labyrinth, Jahrgang 34 (107), 20 – 22

⁹ Please refer to: <http://cag.affiniscape.com/associations/7912/files/position07GCR.pdf>.

¹⁰ www.gifteddevelopment.com/PDF_files/Myths%20About%20the%20Gifted.pdf

¹¹ Marland, S. Jr. (1972). Education of the gifted and talented. Report to the Congress of the United States by the U.S. Commissioner of Education. Washington, DC: U.S. Government

Printing Office.

¹² Reis, S. & McCoach, D. (Summer, 2000). The underachievement of gifted students: What do we know and where do we go? Gifted Child Quarterly, National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) Vol. 44, No. 3, pp. 152-170

See also discussion on underachievement: www.psychowf.uni-erlangen.de/mitarbeiter/ziegler/publikationen/Publikation06.pdf