Character Strengths and Career Development of Academically Gifted Adolescents

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The purpose of this study is to examine character strengths in gifted adolescents using the Values in Action (VIA) Inventory of Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and to investigate the predictive contribution of strengths (e.g., Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence) to two factors related to students’ career development. Character strengths are new and important topics of inquiry in Positive Psychology. The study revealed that mean scores of 24 character strengths of participants (N = 149) are lower than previous studies in different countries. Measurement of VIA-Youth, career decision-making self-efficacy and career decision-making types did vary by gender, GPA, and annual household income. Courage and Transcendence strengths are significantly and positively associated with career decision-making self-efficacy. Students who showed more Wisdom and Knowledge strength reported higher rational career decision-making style and students with more Humanity strength reported higher intuitive career decision-making style. Implications of the major findings and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Academically gifted student, career counseling, character strengths, career decision-making self-efficacy, career decision-making types

Much of the world has rapidly been moving to a new phase where a knowledge-based industrial society is a mass production-based industrial society. In this new phase, no nation can neglect fostering its talented youth.

During the earlier stages of industrialization when systemic government control was an effective instrument of education and human resource development, the South Korean (henceforth Korean) government had insisted on implementing the High School Equalization Policy since 1974. The High School Equalization Policy is a centralized program which requires that each district follows the same rules and have the same program. However, since then, the government has been granting secondary schools more autonomy and flexibility to design programs by adopting flexible enrollment planning, permitting maximum curriculum selection and choice (1997), requiring diversified schools like vocational schools, special-purpose schools (1998), and implementing Autonomous Private High Schools (2002). Finally in 2003, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources established the 1st Comprehensive Plan for the Promotion of the Education of the Gifted (Lee, 2008).

The history of gifted education in Korea is relatively short, as is the history of pedagogical research on methodology for the exceptionally talented. Within a brief period of time, gifted education research in Korea has been showing notable
According to Ha, Moon, and Park's study (2009), about 390 articles have been published in the field between 1980 and 2007.

However, there are significant concerns about "gifted education studies" since the establishment of the 1st Comprehensive Plan for the Promotion of the Education of the Gifted in 2003. One concern is the limited scope of the research (Ha, Moon, & Park, 2009). The most frequent research topic on gifted education in Korea over the last 30 years has dealt with the cognitive characteristics of the gifted, e.g., creativity, thinking ability, intelligence, achievement, problem-solving and problem-finding ability, and learning strategy. Curriculum, affective characteristics of the gifted, and selection and identification of the gifted rank second, third, and fourth, respectively. The trend is the same beyond the borders of Korea. Dai, Swanson, and Cheng (2011) surveyed 1,234 empirical studies on gifted education written in English from 1998 to 2010. The four main research topics that emerged from the survey were: creativity/creatively gifted, achievement/underachievement, identification, and talent development.

As evident in the statistics on gifted education research presented by Ha and his colleagues (2009), the number of studies on “Counseling for the Gifted” and “Careers of the Gifted” is so small that it is categorized under “Other Topics.” The total number of articles in this “Other” category is only seven out of 390, but 2% in the last 30 years. To a practitioner who has to deal with the gifted students on a daily basis, this shortage of data utilizable in real educational settings is a concern.

Those few articles on career counseling of gifted youth are mainly focused on identifying cognitive characteristics that play an important role in career decision-making (Lee & Choi, 2006). That is, the major trend of previous studies in career counseling of gifted and talented students is a cognitive approach (Kim & Lee, 2007). These studies have focused mainly on uncovering various cognitive factors that influence career development of gifted students. These factors are dysfunctional career thoughts, career indecision, career beliefs, etc.

One of the difficulties with such an approach is that it looks at the gifted population in a reductionist way. That is, this literature views the academically gifted as homogenous. The problem with such an assumption is that it overlooks the differences within the population by generalizing the developmental characteristics of all gifted students (Stewart, 1999). As the demand for specialized counseling for gifted children increases (Seong & Han, 2011; Yu, 2010), building up a research base focused more on individual differences in this field is needed to promote effective daily practice and to foster better policy formation.

The current study extends academic sources for career counseling by switching the focus from a cognitive perspective to affective characteristics that influence career development of the academically gifted. The researcher examined articles about special characteristics of gifted students such as emotional vulnerability, over-excitability, introversion, perfectionism, and existential depression (Choi, 2004; Choi & Lee, 2010; Yoon, 2000).

Career counseling should help students reflect about self and choices, restructure their beliefs, and deepen their personalities to answer the all-important “Who am I?” question (Greene, 2002). Counselors should be able to identify students’ individual characteristics that can help them develop positive self-image, reflect life values, and build strong self-identity in order to foster career development. Knowing personal strengths can be a more effective way to help both counselors and students in career development and counseling. Therefore, focusing more on positive characters of academically gifted students can not only improve the lack of academic information in this field, but also directly benefit gifted students, especially in their career counseling.

Ever since scholars from around the United States such as Martin Seligman created a positive classification system focusing on strengths of character and psychological health in 1999 (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), studies about character strengths have been receiving much attention. Strengths can be understood as a collective entity that share key defining characteristics (Linley et al., 2007). Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004) also described positive character traits as “the subset of personality traits which are considered to be morally valued and expressed in people’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors” (p. 603). These