

**INFORMED SOURCES  
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**SUPPORTING THE CAREER CHOICES OF GIFTED STUDENTS, PRODIGIES,  
AND TWICE EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS**

**Research shows that gifted students face a different set of challenges to the general student cohort when mapping out their futures. It is important to put appropriate supports in place.**

Jae Yup Jung is an Associate Professor at UNSW Sydney's School of Education, Director of UNSW's Gifted Education Research and Resource Centre (GERRIC), and an expert on the needs of gifted students. Recently, he published [a book](#) on the career decisions of gifted students, prodigies, geniuses, and students who are gifted and have a disability (twice exceptional students).

**Gifted students**

As for most students, the interplay between ability and interests has an important role in gifted students' career decisions. However, certain factors play a larger role for this group. One of these is multipotentiality: many gifted students show high potential and interest in multiple areas – such as verbal, spatial, or mathematical abilities – giving them a grounding to succeed in very different fields.

While this may sound enviable, it can sometimes lead to difficulties, such as indecision and chopping and changing between different courses of study. A student may struggle with “a fear of making an incorrect decision, a reluctance to forgo feasible career options, and an inability to identify a career option that provides a satisfactory outlet for all of the gifted student's abilities and interests.”

Gifted students are also more likely to have perfectionistic tendencies. While healthy perfectionism can manifest as a continual striving for improvement, unhealthy perfectionists “may focus on weakness, have a fear of failure, engage in task avoidance, and feel anxious”. When it comes to career choice, says Dr Jung, this can make it difficult for perfectionistic students to choose a career: “unhealthy perfectionists may experience anxiety and stress, as they devote substantial time and effort to the identification of a ‘perfect’ career.”

Other factors playing into career indecision for gifted students may include “a fear of success, a conflict of values, an external locus of control, and a lack of decision-making self-efficacy”. A major factor in career indecision is a lack of motivation: “gifted students who are amotivated about the career decision,” says Jung, “may lack autonomy, feel incompetent, and/or feel helpless about making the career decision.”

For many gifted students, another major consideration in their career decision is a desire for intellectual challenge and stimulation. “Unlike many in the general student population,” said Dr Jung, “the attributes of challenge and mental stimulation may be what gifted students find interesting and enjoyable in a career.”

In some cases, a gifted student's desire for intellectual stimulation is also paired with a desire to fulfil their potential. Sometimes, though, the idea that they need to live up to their potential is externally imposed by family members and other important people in their lives, creating stress and anxiety, or leading students to “compromise their interests”. Conversely, parents and others can play a positive role by supporting gifted students' autonomy and providing “strong emotional support, practical guidance, and opportunities for a genuine discussion of the possible future career option.”

In cases where gifted students' career aspirations seem too low, Dr Jung notes that telling them they need to fulfil their potential “may not be particularly useful, and may even be detrimental”. Instead, he advises career counsellors to highlight “the interesting, enjoyable, and by association, intellectually stimulating, aspects of the desired alternative careers.” Meanwhile, factors that helped students overcome amotivation and indecision were strong social interactions with their families, and a forward-looking attitude about their own future as individuals.

Gender role expectations can also be limiting. Dr Jung notes that “while gifted male students continue to aspire to careers in fields such as engineering, medicine, and architecture that tend to have high levels of

prestige, income, and educational requirements, gifted female students appear to have a stronger likelihood of aspiring to family-friendly careers that match their interests in fields such as teaching, pharmacy, and nursing.”

At the same time, he notes that gifted girls are more likely than boys to cross gender boundaries, and says the pattern may indicate that gendered expectations can limit gifted boys’ imagination in their career choices, meaning they often opt for conventional options rather than taking more creative paths. Gifted students in general seem less likely than non-gifted students to consider careers in the social and enterprising realms, such as social work, counselling, business, and management.

For gifted students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the decision-making process is more complex, as demonstrated in [a recent paper](#) by Dr Jung with over 900 participants. In addition to interest, ability and intellectual challenge, stability and perceived chances of success were identified to be major considerations; meanwhile, they were less likely to base their decision on a need to live up to their potential.

According to Jung, this group needs tailored career support. “There’s not much attention given to gifted students from disadvantaged backgrounds. There’s an assumption that all gifted students (including those from disadvantaged backgrounds) will make it on their own, that they’ll be able to find their careers by themselves,” he says, “But it’s actually a very difficult process.”

### **Child prodigies**

Prodigies are defined as children who attain mastery of a field while still very young. This is most common in particular fields, such as chess, music, and mathematics. In some respects, career decisions for prodigies are similar to those for other gifted children. However, there are also some key differences.

The starkest of these is that prior to any other career decisions, they face a dilemma: should they continue a career in the field in which they have achieved mastery, or pursue something else altogether?

Continuing down the same path can have drawbacks: it may feel like it was never their choice and it may not be what they enjoy; it may not provide good financial rewards, it may have isolated them from their age-peers, and it may create difficult expectations to live up to. At the same time, leaving it may feel like a waste of all the sacrifices they and their parents have made for a long period of time to cultivate their talent.

It is common for prodigies to face a “mid-life crisis” as they approach adulthood. They may find it harder to meet external expectations as they transition from a relatively sheltered existence to being one of many people in the world who share their technical talent. “For older prodigies, it may no longer be enough to demonstrate precociousness, or speedy development through the early developmental milestones,” says Dr Jung.

“Instead, they may need to start demonstrating a level of depth, sophistication and subtlety that characterizes the level of elite adult professionals, and even to make innovative contributions that transform the field. Although prodigies may be able to quickly master the ‘rules’ of the field, they may not necessarily have the ability or motivation to achieve under the new parameters of judgement.”

Dr Jung says it is common for prodigies to leave their field of early mastery, and to do something new. In part, this may reflect the fact that as they enter adulthood the fuller range of potential careers becomes open to them, allowing them to choose a career that better aligns with their abilities, values and interests. Some, for instance, may simply wish to live a “normal” life, and to gain the anonymity and less stringent expectations enjoyed by non-prodigies.

As such, it is essential that prodigies be given the opportunity to consider a full range of career options. “Rather than taking as granted that a career in the area of prodigious ability will be pursued,” says Jung, “the prodigy and his or her family will need to recognize that an adult career in the area is not certain, and that multiple factors other than ability should contribute to an informed career decision.”

“Although the outstanding abilities of any individual do need to be appropriately nurtured, and the achievement of early mastery in a particular field should be celebrated, these early experiences should not necessarily bind prodigies to that field for the remainder of their lives.”

### **Gifted students with disabilities**

The trajectories of twice exceptional students greatly vary, resembling in some cases the trajectories of gifted students, in other cases the trajectories of students who only have disabling conditions. Their outcomes can vary from unemployment, underemployment, and menial work, to success in highly specialised professional fields. On the whole, however, they are often forced to compromise their interests, and are at high risk of unsatisfying careers.

It is invaluable to help twice exceptional students identify or create occupations that make use of their gifts, while limiting the challenges arising from their disabilities. Unfortunately, it is common for teachers and career counsellors to have low expectations of students in this group, and to focus on their areas of need while failing to identify their gifts. This can lead to recommendations they pursue low-skilled work, without any consideration for options – particularly via tertiary education – that might harness their strengths.

While external factors are important, a key determinant of twice exceptional students’ chances of attaining a professional career is their own motivation for success. It is also useful for twice exceptional to develop compensatory strategies: methods that help the student work around their area of disability to achieve their goals, often by drawing on their areas of giftedness.

Related to this is their ability to reframe their disabling condition in a constructive way: particularly to recognise that “the key problem does *not* lie with the disabling condition, but with an inability to confront the challenges associated with the disabling condition,” and to take positive actions to meet these challenges.

Of course, not everything depends on the students or even their educators. Employers can make their workplaces more accessible by making accommodations which allow people with disabilities to work around their areas of need, while still doing their job effectively. “The importance of accommodations on the job,” says Jung, “may be such that for some individuals, greater importance should be placed on the identification of an ideal work environment than on an ideal job or career.”

For all of these groups, Dr Jung emphasises the importance of high-quality career support: both for their sake, and for their potential to have a positive impact on others through their achievements.

“All highly able individuals should be given access to sophisticated career-related information and exposure to a wide range of careers from an early age,” he said. Further, rather than imposing decisions on gifted students or pressuring anyone into specific fields, educators and parents should give each highly able individual “the freedom to make an independent and self-directed decision.”

For more information, see the following:

- Jae Yup Jung (2019), [\*The Career Decisions of Gifted Students and other High Ability Groups\*](#), Routledge.
- Jae Yup Jung (2019), ‘[The Occupational/Career Decision-Making Processes of Intellectually Gifted Adolescents From Economically Disadvantaged Backgrounds: A Mixed Methods Perspective](#)’, *Gifted Child Quarterly*.

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