

Social Support Networks and Mental Health in Gifted Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the impact of social support networks on the mental health of gifted students. The study utilized a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of gifted students. Twenty-seven participants aged 12 to 18 were recruited from diverse educational settings through purposive sampling. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which provided in-depth insights into the participants' perceptions of social support and its impact on their mental health. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically, with themes emerging through iterative coding and constant comparison until theoretical saturation was achieved. The findings revealed that emotional, academic, and peer support are critical for the mental health of gifted students. Family support, characterized by parental encouragement and emotional reassurance, and peer support, through empathetic friendships and social inclusion, were particularly significant. Teacher support also played a crucial role in addressing both academic and emotional needs. However, several barriers to support were identified, including stigma, lack of resources, overemphasis on achievement, peer competition, and reluctance to seek help. These barriers exacerbate feelings of isolation and stress, impacting the overall well-being of gifted students. Social support networks are essential in mitigating the challenges faced by gifted students and promoting their mental health. Creating inclusive and supportive environments in educational settings, addressing barriers, and providing targeted interventions can enhance the well-being of gifted individuals. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies and the intersectionality of giftedness with other demographic factors to develop comprehensive support strategies.

Keywords: Gifted students, social support networks, mental health, emotional support, academic support, peer support.

1. Introduction

Gifted students, often characterized by their exceptional intellectual abilities and talents, face unique challenges that can significantly impact their mental health and well-being. While their cognitive capacities set them apart from their peers, the social and emotional landscape they navigate is complex and often fraught with difficulties (Ayoub et al., 2021; Backhaus, 2023; Billah et al., 2023).

Social support networks are crucial for the mental health of students, providing emotional, informational, and practical assistance that can buffer against stress and enhance well-being. Elmer, Mepham, and Stadtfeld (2020) highlight that social networks play a significant role in students' mental health, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Ghafari et al. (2021) found that social support is closely linked to better mental health outcomes among Iranian students during the pandemic, underscoring the universal importance of supportive relationships (Ghafari et al., 2021).

For gifted students, who often experience heightened sensitivity and intense emotions, social support can be especially critical. Oğurlu, Sevgi-Yalın, and Yavuz-Birben (2016) emphasize the relationship between social-emotional learning abilities and perceived social support in gifted students, suggesting that those with strong support networks are better equipped to manage their social and emotional challenges (Oğurlu et al., 2016). This connection is vital, as gifted students frequently encounter issues such as social isolation, peer pressure, and unrealistic expectations, all of which can adversely affect their mental health (Kitsantas et al., 2017).

Gifted students often struggle with social integration and may feel isolated due to their advanced intellectual abilities. West (2019) discusses how the curricular networks designed for gifted students can sometimes lead to a sense of isolation, as these students may not relate to their peers or find common ground in typical social interactions. This isolation can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and contribute to mental health issues (West, 2019).

Bullying and victimization are also significant concerns for gifted students. Peters and Bain (2011) report higher rates of bullying and victimization among gifted and high-achieving students compared to their non-gifted peers. This bullying can stem from jealousy, misunderstandings, or the perceived differences between gifted students and their

classmates, leading to increased anxiety and depression (Peters & Bain, 2011).

Despite these challenges, gifted students often demonstrate remarkable resilience. Alexopoulou, Batsou, and Drigas (2019) examine the factors contributing to resilience in gifted students, identifying strategic methods of prevention and intervention that can help mitigate academic underachievement and its psychological consequences. These strategies include fostering a supportive environment, encouraging positive self-concept, and providing resources for emotional and academic support (Alexopoulou et al., 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the resilience and coping strategies of students. Billah et al. (2023) investigate the mental health challenges and coping strategies of university students during the pandemic, revealing that supportive relationships and adaptive coping mechanisms are crucial for maintaining mental health. These findings are relevant for gifted students, who may have faced similar disruptions and stressors during the pandemic (Billah et al., 2023).

The intersection of giftedness and socio-economic status adds another layer of complexity to the experiences of gifted students. Ayoub, Alabbasi, and Plucker (2021) explore the supports available for gifted students from low-income households, noting that these supports are correlated with academic achievement. Providing targeted assistance to low-income gifted students can help close excellence gaps and ensure that these students have the resources they need to thrive both academically and emotionally (Ayoub et al., 2021).

Peer support networks are particularly beneficial for the psychological well-being and social integration of students. Wu (2024) emphasizes the enhancement of international students' psychological well-being through peer-to-peer support networks, highlighting the importance of these relationships in fostering a sense of belonging and reducing feelings of isolation. This peer support can be equally beneficial for gifted students, who may find solace and understanding in connections with similarly gifted peers (Wu, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the mental health of students worldwide. Neu, Rode, and Hammer (2024) examine the social support and mental health of nursing students during the pandemic, illustrating the critical role of supportive relationships in navigating the challenges posed by the crisis. Similar impacts are likely to have been felt by gifted students, who may have experienced

disruptions in their educational and social environments (Neu et al., 2024).

Elmer et al. (2020) compare students' social networks and mental health before and during the COVID-19 crisis, finding that the pandemic significantly altered students' social interactions and increased feelings of loneliness and anxiety. These changes highlight the need for robust social support systems to help students, including those who are gifted, manage their mental health during such unprecedented times (Elmer et al., 2020).

Understanding the unique social and emotional needs of gifted students is essential for promoting their mental health and well-being. Social support networks, encompassing family, peers, teachers, and professional counselors, play a pivotal role in helping these students navigate their complex experiences. By addressing the challenges they face, such as isolation, bullying, perfectionism, and the pressures of socio-economic status, we can develop targeted interventions that foster resilience and support the holistic development of gifted individuals.

This study aims to contribute to this understanding by exploring the lived experiences of gifted students and the impact of their social support networks on their mental health. Through semi-structured interviews, we seek to uncover the nuanced ways in which these supports influence their well-being and identify strategies to enhance their social and emotional functioning. By highlighting the voices of gifted students, this research underscores the importance of creating supportive environments that recognize and address their unique needs, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and nurturing educational landscape.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative research study was designed to explore the impact of social support networks on the mental health of gifted students. The study utilized a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of these students. The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of gifted students across different age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, and educational settings.

2.2. Measure

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, allowing for in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and perceptions. An interview guide was developed, focusing on key areas such as:

- The nature and sources of social support available to gifted students.
- The perceived impact of these support networks on their mental health.
- Challenges and barriers to accessing social support.
- Personal strategies for maintaining mental well-being.

Interviews were conducted in a setting convenient for the participants, ensuring their comfort and privacy. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning no new themes or insights were emerging from the data.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a thematic approach, consistent with the phenomenological methodology. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the data.

The analysis proceeded through the following steps:

- Initial Coding: Transcripts were coded line-by-line to identify significant statements and meaningful units of information related to the research questions.
- Development of Themes: Codes were grouped into broader categories and themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences. This process involved constant comparison, where new data were continuously compared with existing codes and themes.
- Refinement of Themes: Themes were refined through iterative review and discussion among the research team. Any discrepancies were resolved through consensus to ensure the credibility of the findings.
- Member Checking: To enhance the validity of the findings, preliminary themes and interpretations were shared with a subset of participants for

feedback. Their input was incorporated into the final analysis.

Throughout the analysis, strategies such as reflexive journaling and peer debriefing were employed to minimize researcher bias and enhance the trustworthiness of the study. The final themes were then used to develop a comprehensive understanding of how social support networks influence the mental health of gifted students.

3. Findings and Results

The study involved 27 participants, aged between 12 and 18 years, representing a diverse range of demographic

backgrounds. The sample included 14 females and 13 males, reflecting a nearly balanced gender distribution. The participants were recruited from various educational settings, including public schools (n=15), private schools (n=8), and specialized gifted programs (n=4). Socio-economic diversity was also considered, with participants coming from high-income (n=9), middle-income (n=12), and low-income (n=6) families. Additionally, the ethnic composition of the sample included Caucasian (n=15), African American (n=5), Hispanic (n=4), and Asian (n=3) students.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
Emotional Support	Family Support	- Parental encouragement- Sibling companionship- Emotional reassurance
	Peer Support	- Friendship quality- Peer empathy- Shared experiences- Social inclusion
	Teacher Support	- Teacher empathy- Academic understanding- Emotional availability
	Professional Counseling	- Access to counselors- Emotional coping strategies- Confidentiality and trust
	Online Communities	- Virtual friendships- Emotional expression- Anonymity and support
Academic Support	School Programs	- Gifted programs- Specialized curriculum- Enrichment activities- Flexible scheduling
	Mentorship	- Academic mentorship- Role models- Guidance and advice
	Extracurricular Activities	- Clubs and societies- Academic competitions- Skill development
	Study Groups	- Collaborative learning- Peer tutoring- Study techniques
Barriers to Support	Stigma and Stereotypes	- Misconceptions about giftedness- Fear of judgment- Social isolation
	Lack of Resources	- Limited availability of support- Inadequate school funding- Geographic limitations
	Overemphasis on Achievement	- Pressure to perform- Neglect of emotional needs- Burnout risk
	Peer Competition	- Rivalries- Comparison stress- Jealousy and envy
	Personal Reluctance	- Hesitation to seek help- Fear of vulnerability- Self-reliance attitudes

3.1. Emotional Support

Family Support: Family support emerged as a crucial element in the emotional well-being of gifted students. Participants highlighted parental encouragement, sibling companionship, and emotional reassurance as significant sources of comfort and stability. One student shared, "My parents always encourage me to pursue my interests and are there for me when I need emotional support." Another noted, "Having a sibling who understands my struggles helps me feel less alone."

Peer Support: Peer support played a vital role in the social and emotional lives of gifted students. The quality of friendships, peer empathy, shared experiences, and social inclusion were identified as key aspects. A participant stated, "My friends really understand me and we can talk about anything, which helps me cope with stress." Another added, "Being included in social activities by my peers makes a big difference in how I feel about school."

Teacher Support: The support from teachers, characterized by empathy, academic understanding, and emotional availability, was also significant. One student expressed, "My teacher knows how to challenge me academically while also being there for me emotionally." Another shared, "It's great to have a teacher who understands my needs and is always ready to help."

Professional Counseling: Access to professional counseling provided valuable emotional coping strategies, confidentiality, and trust. A participant noted, "Talking to a counselor helps me manage my stress and emotions better." Another mentioned, "Having a professional to talk to makes a huge difference because I know it's confidential and I can trust them."

Online Communities: Online communities offered virtual friendships, emotional expression, and anonymity, which were particularly beneficial. One student commented, "I can talk about my problems in online forums without feeling judged." Another added, "Being part of an online community

where people understand my experiences is very comforting."

3.2. Academic Support

School Programs: Specialized school programs for gifted students, including gifted programs, specialized curriculum, enrichment activities, and flexible scheduling, were highly valued. One participant stated, "The gifted program at my school provides challenging coursework that keeps me engaged." Another shared, "Having a flexible schedule allows me to explore my interests without being overwhelmed."

Mentorship: Mentorship, including academic mentorship, role models, and guidance, was seen as essential for academic and personal development. A student remarked, "Having a mentor who guides me and offers advice is incredibly helpful." Another noted, "My mentor serves as a role model and inspires me to achieve my goals."

Extracurricular Activities: Engagement in extracurricular activities, such as clubs and societies, academic competitions, and skill development, was highlighted as beneficial. One student mentioned, "Participating in academic competitions motivates me to excel." Another commented, "Extracurricular activities help me develop new skills and interests."

Study Groups: Study groups facilitated collaborative learning, peer tutoring, and effective study techniques. A participant shared, "Being part of a study group allows me to learn from my peers and improve my understanding of subjects." Another noted, "Peer tutoring in study groups helps me grasp difficult concepts more easily."

3.3. Barriers to Support

Stigma and Stereotypes: The stigma and stereotypes associated with giftedness, including misconceptions, fear of judgment, and social isolation, were significant barriers. One student explained, "People often misunderstand what it means to be gifted, which makes it hard to fit in." Another stated, "I fear being judged, so I sometimes hide my abilities."

Lack of Resources: The limited availability of support resources, inadequate school funding, and geographic limitations were common challenges. A participant mentioned, "Our school doesn't have enough resources to support gifted students properly." Another shared, "Living in a remote area means fewer opportunities for support."

Overemphasis on Achievement: The pressure to perform and the neglect of emotional needs led to a risk of burnout. One student remarked, "There's so much pressure to achieve that my emotional needs are often overlooked." Another commented, "The constant focus on performance can be overwhelming and exhausting."

Peer Competition: Peer competition, characterized by rivalries, comparison stress, and jealousy, was a notable issue. A participant noted, "Competing with peers creates a lot of stress and sometimes leads to jealousy." Another mentioned, "Rivalries among gifted students can be very intense and stressful."

Personal Reluctance: Some students expressed personal reluctance to seek help, due to hesitation, fear of vulnerability, and self-reliance attitudes. One student shared, "I find it hard to ask for help because I don't want to seem vulnerable." Another stated, "I tend to rely on myself and hesitate to seek support from others."

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate the critical role that social support networks play in the mental health of gifted students. The data reveal that emotional, academic, and peer support are essential components in mitigating the challenges faced by these students, including isolation, pressure, and the pursuit of perfection. These insights are consistent with existing literature and provide a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced experiences of gifted individuals.

The participants in this study underscored the importance of emotional support from family, peers, and teachers. Family support, characterized by parental encouragement, sibling companionship, and emotional reassurance, was identified as a cornerstone for the mental well-being of gifted students. This aligns with the findings of Alexopoulou, Batsou, and Drigas (2019), who highlighted the role of a supportive family environment in fostering resilience and preventing academic underachievement among gifted students.

Peer support emerged as another vital component, with participants emphasizing the quality of friendships, peer empathy, shared experiences, and social inclusion. These elements are critical in providing a sense of belonging and reducing feelings of isolation. Oğurlu, Sevgi-Yalın, and Yavuz-Birben (2016) found a significant relationship between social-emotional learning abilities and perceived social support in gifted students, which corroborates the

findings of this study. The presence of empathetic and understanding peers can significantly buffer against the social and emotional challenges gifted students face (Oğurlu et al., 2016).

Teacher support, characterized by empathy, academic understanding, and emotional availability, was also highlighted as essential. Teachers who are aware of the unique needs of gifted students can provide the necessary academic and emotional support, contributing to a positive educational experience. Kitsantas, Bland, and Chirinos (2017) noted that the perceptions of gifted programs by students are closely tied to their academic and social-emotional functioning, emphasizing the importance of supportive educators (Kitsantas et al., 2017).

The study also revealed that specialized school programs, mentorship, extracurricular activities, and study groups play significant roles in supporting the academic and personal development of gifted students. Participants valued gifted programs that offered challenging coursework, specialized curriculum, enrichment activities, and flexible scheduling. These programs not only cater to the intellectual needs of gifted students but also provide opportunities for social interaction and personal growth. This is in line with the findings of Ayoub, Alabbasi, and Plucker (2021), who emphasized the need for targeted supports to close excellence gaps for gifted students from low-income households (Ayoub et al., 2021).

Mentorship was identified as a critical support mechanism, with participants highlighting the benefits of academic mentorship, role models, and guidance. Mentors provide valuable advice and serve as role models, helping gifted students navigate their academic and personal journeys. This is supported by the work of Alexopoulou et al. (2019), who emphasized the importance of strategic interventions in preventing underachievement among gifted students (Alexopoulou et al., 2019).

Extracurricular activities and study groups were also noted as beneficial. These activities provide opportunities for gifted students to develop new skills, explore interests, and engage in collaborative learning. Participation in academic competitions and clubs fosters a sense of accomplishment and belonging, further enhancing their mental health and well-being. This finding aligns with the research by West (2019), who discussed the positive impact of curricular networks and extracurricular engagement on the social and emotional experiences of gifted students (West, 2019).

Despite the benefits of social support, several barriers were identified, including stigma and stereotypes, lack of resources, overemphasis on achievement, peer competition, and personal reluctance to seek help. Stigma and stereotypes about giftedness can lead to social isolation and fear of judgment, as noted by Peters and Bain (2011), who reported higher rates of bullying and victimization among gifted students. These negative experiences can exacerbate mental health issues, highlighting the need for increased awareness and supportive interventions (Peters & Bain, 2011).

The lack of resources, particularly in schools with limited funding, poses a significant challenge. Participants reported inadequate support services and geographic limitations, which hinder access to necessary resources. This is consistent with the findings of Ayoub et al. (2021), who discussed the challenges faced by low-income gifted students in accessing support (Ayoub et al., 2021).

An overemphasis on academic achievement often leads to neglect of emotional needs and increased risk of burnout. This study also found that peer competition and personal reluctance to seek help contribute to the stress experienced by gifted students. The competitive environment and fear of vulnerability can prevent students from seeking the support they need.

This study, while providing valuable insights into the social support networks and mental health of gifted students, has several limitations. The sample size of 27 participants, although diverse, may not fully capture the broad range of experiences among gifted students. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through semi-structured interviews may introduce biases, as participants may be influenced by social desirability or recall biases. The study also focused on a specific age range (12-18 years), potentially excluding relevant experiences of younger or older gifted individuals. Moreover, the qualitative nature of the study limits the generalizability of the findings, as the results are context-specific and may not be applicable to all gifted students. Future research should consider larger, more diverse samples and incorporate quantitative methods to enhance the robustness and generalizability of the findings.

Future research should explore the longitudinal impact of social support networks on the mental health of gifted students. Longitudinal studies would provide a deeper understanding of how these supports evolve over time and their long-term effects on mental health and academic achievement. Additionally, examining the role of digital and online support networks, especially in the context of increasing virtual interactions, could offer new insights into

contemporary support mechanisms. Further research should also consider the intersectionality of giftedness with other factors such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences of gifted students. Finally, experimental studies investigating the effectiveness of specific interventions designed to enhance social support and reduce barriers could inform the development of evidence-based practices and policies.

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be made to enhance the social support and mental health of gifted students. Educational institutions should prioritize creating inclusive and supportive environments that recognize the unique needs of gifted students. This includes training teachers to provide empathetic and tailored support, developing specialized programs that challenge and engage gifted students, and offering mentorship opportunities. Schools should also foster a culture that reduces stigma and promotes understanding of giftedness to prevent bullying and social isolation. Providing access to professional counseling and mental health services is essential, particularly for addressing issues related to perfectionism and academic pressure. Additionally, encouraging participation in extracurricular activities and study groups can help gifted students build social connections and develop coping strategies. Implementing peer-to-peer support programs and leveraging online communities can further enhance the support network available to gifted students. These practical steps can contribute to a more supportive educational landscape that promotes the mental health and well-being of gifted individuals.

The findings of this study underscore the significant impact of social support networks on the mental health of gifted students. Emotional, academic, and peer support are crucial in helping these students navigate the unique challenges they face. However, barriers such as stigma, lack of resources, and personal reluctance to seek help must be addressed to ensure that gifted students receive the support they need. By understanding the complex interplay of social support and mental health, educators, policymakers, and practitioners can develop targeted interventions that foster resilience and well-being among gifted individuals. This research highlights the importance of creating inclusive and supportive environments that recognize and address the diverse needs of gifted students, ultimately contributing to their overall success and mental health.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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