Pressure and perfectionism: a phenomenological study on parents' and teachers' perceptions of the challenges faced by gifted and talented students in self-contained classes

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This qualitative study sought to examine the challenges of pressure and perfectionism among gifted and talented students in self-contained class settings at the primary level, based on the experiences of their teachers and parents. To obtain comprehensive details and complete descriptions from the participants, a phenomenological design was used to collect data from 13 participants, including 10 parents and 3 teachers of gifted and talented students through semi-structured interviews. The major findings indicate that while self-contained classes help to raise the academic potential of gifted and talented students, teachers and parents were concerned about challenges related to the pressure of a competitive environment along with the pressure of high expectations and perfectionism in these selective class settings that may hinder the student's academic development and negatively affect their social–emotional wellbeing. Using full-time ability grouping practices in self-contained settings for gifted learners was quite challenging and could hamper their talent development. This study recommends that pressure and perfectionism can be overcome if educators use flexible grouping practices, motivational strategies and encourage feedback in such settings. Consequently, educators and policy makers in gifted education should plan and implement educational provisions that help to meet the academic as well as social emotional needs of highly intellectual learners.

KEYWORDS

gifted and talented, ability grouping, pressure, perfectionism, challenges

Introduction

Despite rigorous efforts in the field of gifted education, the needs of the diverse minority group of gifted and talented students (GTS) remain unmet. Identification of gifted children is challenging due to the complexity of the phenomenon and the difficulty in clearly defining them. Earlier researchers believed that giftedness is inherited intelligence that can be measured by instruments (National Association for Gifted Children, 2015). However, identifying GTS by their ability to secure high marks on IQ tests is a concept of giftedness that can be likened to a century old magic bullet that does not hit its target. Societies' belief that individuals with exceptional performance in more than one domain are gifted is based on the context of their

cultural values; therefore, such individuals may be considered gifted in one culture but not in another (Huang, 2008). The assessment of GTS is a major issue, especially with respect to the provision of educational programs and support to meet their unique needs (Nisbett, 2009; Renzulli, 2013). New trends in identification whereby particularities of cognitive functioning, such as the individual's ability to process and organize information, synthesize, plan, and solve problems, completely negate earlier identification approaches based on securing high scores on IQ tests, which failed to provide an adequate measurement of children's abilities. In addition to the above-average level of abstract reasoning, talented students may also demonstrate high-level vocabulary, good reading skills, high-level information, strong motivation, cognitive flexibility, independent and self-disciplined work, or an open personality (Dean, 2011). Several studies in the gifted field have recognized that students with higher academic abilities require higher levels of service exceeding the minimum proficiency learning standards set for most students. In gifted and talented education (G/T education) programs, gifted students receive additional educational services, advanced courses, professionally trained teachers, and a more challenging learning environment than non-gifted students (Slavin, 1990). Schools use differentiators such as age, interests, language, and intellectual ability to tailor customized programs and services to the needs of advanced learners. The long-lasting debate on the provision of education for GTS is still unresolved. Questions remain concerning whether such students should be placed in regular classrooms to act as role models, to help other students, and to ensure equity or in special education provisions to meet their needs and maximize their academic potential. The reason for the existence of G/T education programs is that regular programs cannot meet the needs of such students. However, several studies have revealed that special academic provisions for GTS can adversely affect their social–emotional and academic development as well.

Advocates of G/T education programs have argued, based on empirical research, that a high level of educational services, advanced curricula, challenging and stimulating learning environments, and professionally trained teachers are required to raise the academic potential (Van Tassel-Baska and Johnsen, 2007) of individuals who possess self-regulation and independence in work. The educational curriculum required by GTS is different from the regular curriculum provided to them by regular schools.

Therefore, they require educational services that meet their needs because they have the ability to differentiate themselves from their peers. Mainstream classroom settings sometimes failed to build the capacity of GTS at academic and social emotional level learning (Reis et al., 2007). The goal of the GTS educational program is to enable them to become autonomous, creative, and productive learners in society (Diezmann and Watters, 2000; Kanevsky, 2011; Phillipson et al., 2011).

In an attempt to produce an optimal learning environment for GTS, educational institutions may arrange students in academic groups according to their learning abilities and introduce them to like-minded companions. The aim is to create a more homogeneous learning environment, so that teachers can provide effective, targeted, and layered teaching (Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016) to their learning abilities and introduce them to like-minded companions. A consistent learning environment is desired for teachers to better equip them (Dai et al., 2011). However, this can still lead to academic and

social–emotional challenges for GTS over the years. Considering this situation, the concept of "ability grouping" has created an atmosphere of fierce opposition. Ability grouping means tracking students by placing them in groups based on their academic abilities. According to opponents, the rigidity of ability grouping creates racial and socio-economic inequalities among students. Moreover, it has detrimental effects on the higher education and career choices of disadvantaged students by limiting their access to opportunities. On the other hand, proponents of ability grouping have claimed that the aim of education is not to demand equal opportunities or services for all; rather, it should be fair and just in its provision of special services for the individual (Missett et al., 2014). In the last two decades, different academic programs and services have been introduced to raise their potential. Research has proposed various G/T educational models and strategies, such as accelerated learning, enrichment programs, self-contained classes, club activities, selective schools, and special interest communities (Preckel et al., 2019). Ability grouping, as a widespread academic practice, has been implemented in different forms, such as within-class ability grouping, cluster grouping, full-time ability grouping (homogeneous grouping), and heterogeneous grouping to facilitate G/T education in the United States, Australia, United Kingdom, Singapore, and many other countries. Students in full-time ability grouping classes exhibit higher achievement gains compared with students in regular classes (Lee et al., 2020). G/T programs based on ability grouping can be effective educational services for meeting the needs of GTS and providing teaching and learning with intensive fast-tracking (Rogers, 2007) if they are implemented by professional teachers using flexible approaches (Ireson and Hallam, 2001). However, a study by Neihart (2007) comparing the self-concept scores of students in homogeneous and heterogeneous groups revealed that those who were not grouped by ability exhibited a higher self-concept. Another study conducted by Blaas (2014) on the social–emotional impact of a homogeneous environment on gifted students showed that interaction and social activities with peers of different abilities benefited students more. While such academic arrangements significantly improved academic achievement, they adversely affected students' social–emotional development. As GTS are reportedly from diverse backgrounds, with a range of socio-economic statuses and abilities, they may encounter additional contributing factors to underachievement, such as social–emotional difficulties, involving pressure, perfectionism, anxiety, depression, and isolation (Berliner and Glass, 2014). Further, Vidergor and Gordon (2015) added that ability grouping of students means distancing them from learning and limiting their interaction with peers from diverse backgrounds, which has been observed to create an overly competitive academic environment that forces students to try to outperform their peers to prove their self-worth (Cross and Cross, 2015).

Seaton et al. (2010) reported that perfectionism may lead to negative outcomes for GTS. Another very challenging factor is the pressure faced by high-ability students in ability grouping among like-minded peers. However, there has been limited research on the challenges of pressure and perfectionism among GTS in full time ability grouping. With this in mind, the current study was carried out to identify the challenges of full-time ability grouping practices in special services to GTS from the perspective of their teachers and parents. Educational provisions for GTS have come under scrutiny in recent years because of their detrimental

consequences. Therefore, this study will be helpful for teachers, parents, leaders, policy makers, and curriculum designers in gifted education to better understand the issues and problems of GTS in selective settings. This study focused on the following research question:

What are teachers' and parents' perceptions of the challenges of pressure and perfectionism in self-contained classrooms for GTS?

Methods and materials

A qualitative methodology was used to investigate teachers' and parents' perceptions concerning the challenges of pressure and perfectionism among GTS in self-contained classes at a primary school located in New South Wales (NSW). Self-contained classes are educational provisions that implement full time ability grouping; therefore, in this study, we were especially interested in the challenges of full-time ability grouping experienced by GTS in terms of their academic and psychosocial development.

A qualitative phenomenological design was used to obtain comprehensive details and complete descriptions from the participants, based on open-ended interview questions. Phenomenological research design is used to identify phenomena, focus on experiences, and understand the structure of lived experiences of Participants (Creswell et al., 2007; Thorogood and Green, 2018). Phenomenology is used to describe common characteristics. The phenomena in question in this study were teachers' and parents' perceptions of challenges experienced by GTS in self-contained classes, including pressure, perfectionism, and high expectations.

According to the education policy of the Department of Education (DOE) in New South Wales, GTS potential should be raised by providing appropriate opportunities and addressing the negative risks that hinder their talent development. In this context, the site (NSW public primary school) and participants were selected based on the criterion of providing a self-contained opportunity class (OC) structure for GTS.

Three teachers with complete G/T education qualifications as well as professional training, who were already teaching grade 5 and 6 self-contained classes, and 10 parents of GTS from multicultural backgrounds (Asians, Europeans, Americans, and Africans) were selected. The parents included five from each grade without any work or home commitments who were willing to participate. The participants were selected using purposeful sampling, based on the context of their experience with self-contained classes, given that they were in a better position to explain the challenges faced by GTS during such special provisions. The participants were also selected based on their understanding of the research problem and their ability to answer the research questions, which enabled me to obtain in-depth information from teachers and parents of gifted students. Convenience sampling was used after careful consideration of the costs attached to travelling and the time availability of participants, as the study site was conveniently accessible for the researcher, which further met the inclusion criteria of the research. The school principal helped to invite the parents of GTS by phone and email. All participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the study and gave their consent through written informed consent forms. Information sheets about the research objectives and its potential benefits were distributed to all participants.

To ensure human safety and avoid any potential risk, this study received approval from the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). It also received approval from the NSW Department of Education (SERAP), the agency responsible for approving applications for research. To obtain broad, independent responses from participants concerning their experience of self-contained classes, the researcher used a semi-structured interview instrument to ask about the advantages, disadvantages, academic challenges, and social–emotional challenges of such a setting. Smith and Osborn (2007) advocated using a flexible data collecting approach for phenomenology, such as semi-structured interviews, to engage in a discourse. Using a funneling technique, a interview guide consists of specific to general questions.

The list of interview questions for the teachers and parents is presented in Table 1.1.

As Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasize, qualitative research entails data analysis. This includes using established procedures to analyze notes, as well as establishing, testing, and reverse sampling methods that are successful and feasible. All the processes of data collection, transcription, and data analysis were conducted by the researcher. Data were collected from 13 participants through in-depth interviews with open-ended questions (80% female; 20% male). The interviews were audio recorded by the researcher. Participant confidentiality was ensured using pseudonyms. With the consent of the participants,

TABLE 1.1 Summary of participant's interview questions.

Participants interview questions	
Teachers	➤ What has been your experience of the self-contained classroom setting?
	➤ Do you think self-contained classroom settings are beneficial for gifted and talented students? Why/why not?
	➤ What are the disadvantages for gifted and talented students of being in a self-contained classroom?
	➤ What do you think are the academic challenges for gifted and talented students in a self-contained classroom?
	➤ What do you think are the social–emotional challenges for gifted and talented students in a self-contained classroom?
Parents	➤ What has been your experience of the self-contained classroom setting?
	➤ Do you think self-contained classroom settings are beneficial for your gifted and talented child? Why/why not?
	➤ What are the disadvantages for your gifted and talented child of being in a self-contained classroom?
	➤ What do you think are the academic challenges for your gifted and talented child in a self-contained classroom?
	➤ What do you think are the social–emotional challenges for your gifted and talented child in a self-contained classroom?

Self-contained classrooms, especially designed classrooms where full-time ability grouping is practiced (Classrooms for gifted and talented students where full-time ability grouping is practiced).

TABLE 1.2 Summary of participants' perceptions of challenges for gifted and talented students (GTS) in self-contained settings.

Questions	Participants N = 13	Subthemes	Main themes
Experience	3 teachers	Peer pressure	Pressure of the competitive learning environment
Advantages of self-contained settings	10 parents	Parents' and teachers' pressure to perform well	
Disadvantages of self-contained settings		Competitive environment	Pressure of high expectations
Academic challenges of self-contained settings		Pressure of parents' expectations	
Social–emotional challenges of self-contained settings		Teacher's expectations Performing tasks in a perfect way Fixed mindsets Lack of extracurricular activities	Perfectionism

N = total number of participants in study [Total number of participants (teachers and parents) in study].

TABLE 1.3 Summary of teachers' perceptions of challenges for GTS in self-contained settings.

Themes	No of participants N = 13	Favorable themes	Unfavorable themes
Competitive environment	3 teachers	66.6%	33.3
Teacher's high expectations		50%	50%
Effects on social emotional well being		83.33%	16.66%
Pressure from parents		66.6%	33.3%
Perfectionism		93.33%	6.66%

N = total number of Teachers in study, Favorable themes = no of teachers responded/total teachers*100, Unfavorable themes = no of teachers responded/total teachers*100.

member checking and peer debriefing was conducted to ensure the accuracy and validity of the data (Triangulation, 2014). During the data analysis, the researcher used a highlighting strategy in the transcript to initiate the coding process, and a constant comparative analysis enabled the researcher to develop themes to reach the essence of the study's research question. In Table 1.2, a summary of the themes from the perspective of the participants

is presented in terms of sub-themes, and the main themes were extracted through a comparative analysis.

Results

Teacher's perceptions of the challenges of pressure, perfectionism, and high expectations in self-contained classes for GTS

Results showed that While 66% teachers of GTS favored self-contained classes to cater to the educational needs of highly intellectual students, they believed that full-time ability grouping represented a quiet challenge for students, however 33.3% believed that competitive environment is not the main reason. Teacher A (TA) reported that learning in a self-contained class such as an OC at the primary level with like-minded peers created academic competition among GTS, who experienced peer pressure to move ahead of others. This negatively impacted their performance and created anxiety.

> "In OC, they are at the same level, but they want to be different, they want to stand out, to be better than their peers. This brings down their performance, and that's part of the anxiety."

> "They are expected to apply their knowledge but when they get stuck, it's hard for them. They do not want to be alone. I have lots of students in my class who go through extremes in that setting. They see their peers at an overly high level, and they are below level. They don't handle it very well."

However, 50% of teachers agree that teacher's expectations had a significant effect and 50% were disagreed. Overall, teachers have mixed perceptions about the high expectations of teachers from GTS (Table 1.3).

For example, TA has been teaching GTS for 2 years at the primary level and claims that in class, students are ready to take on academic challenges because of the expectations formed in their surroundings to surpass their peers.

> "I think it's very competitive, so they excel in what is expected of them. They say their peers are up to the challenge and think, 'Right, I stand to do the same' … But, unfortunately, the struggle to keep up to the fast pace and the challenging position such an environment puts them in create pressure on them I find that sometimes in this environment, they feel pressure … The students are capable of understanding and sharing with one another, but sometimes, I feel there is lots of pressure … I do find in my class, there is a lot of pressure … that negatively affects their social-emotional wellbeing."

Almost 83.3% participants reported that the struggle to keep up to the fast pace and challenges created pressure on students which negatively affected their social–emotional wellbeing.

> Teacher B (TB) added that GTS were not very concerned about emotional issues such as peer pressure or work pressure in

mainstream classrooms, but since they had been placed in self-contained classes (full-time ability grouping) they were unable to overcome it.

"In mainstream classes, they didn't have social-emotional kinds of behavior, yet in my class—not all but most of them—have emotional issues. They get upset. In OC they quiet better to deal it but in mainstream they do accept emotional problems. Sometimes, a same ability grouping might be retrenchment … To maintain their academic progress in future, they start to take extra coaching and tutoring that again creates pressure at a very young age … They are very anxious at the end of term when they have assessments and tests. They have selective high school tests in March, and up until that point, they are much stressed and try to get the best marks they can. I have students who pull out of school to do private tutoring for test preparation; it's become too much pressure for too young kids … Before coming to OC, they were at the top of the mainstream class, but now everyone is at the same level. It becomes like a competition among them, a pressure on them, to be better, to be better, they just get stressed."

The following statements by TB further highlight that self-contained classes were the main barrier to the academic strength of GTS because they crushed their confidence.

"Some students are not good in math. They think they are low in math, but, in reality, they are at level for math. However, they think other students are ahead. Their confidence is crushed. They have strengths in different areas. But it's hard for them to realize, you are good, you have strengths in your areas. They felt like they were the smartest in the class. They thrived on being the best, and their confidence is crushed."

Contrary to the above statements,16.66% claimed self-contained classes has no pressure on the GTS and such settings enhance their further academic performance.

Most of the teachers (66.6%) opined that parent also played a role in creating pressure on primary GTS by expecting high performance among their like-minded peers. They always wanted them to be the best in the class. TA stated that

"There are lots of social-emotional issues when grouped together, as they are clever in their certain areas, yet they are pushed by their parents and by schools to demonstrate the best, so they feel that is pressure."

TB claimed that GTS faced pressure from parents to get high grades but not from school or teachers.

"The pressure from home and the pressure from outside are not necessarily from teachers, but they are expected to do more."

Only one of the participants reported that parents did not pressure their special gifted students to perform well, while two class teachers reported that teachers had high expectations of excellent results. Conversely, TA responded that teachers had high standards for work in special gifted classes. Therefore, they

continuously pushed students to perform well, sometimes beyond their capacity, which obviously led to depression, anxiety, and stress.

"For Work at higher level, sometime in OC, we continue to push, push, push … however, the students see the pressure as coming from the high expectations of the school, teachers, and parents."

The school vice-principal who was currently teaching in special classes and supervising professional development training workshops for teachers in STEM projects for GTS continuously aimed to raise the potential of these high achievers. However, the school vice principal expressed great concern over the perfectionism and pressure of full-time ability grouping.

"Sometimes, the children perceive that they are not doing well when, in fact, they are at a higher level. They really want to be perfect 100% of the time. They have the feeling that they are not at the top of the class, and they are not achieving, so it is sometimes very hard to get through to them, 'Wow, you are actually doing very well, you did your best, you know, scoring 90%,' or whatever … To see those children sometimes walk away with a sad look on their faces because they haven't gotten the top mark can be difficult, very hard. I do feel for the children who are perfectionist in the extreme."

Another statement by T2 reiterated that "they want to be perfect among their peers," and all three of the participants reported that when students did not get 100% in their results, they were sometimes upset.

Parents' perceptions of the challenges of pressure, perfectionism, and high expectations in self-contained classes for GTS

Approximately 90% parents responded that gifted and talented children faced intense pressure from family and school to perform at a higher level because of same-ability peers in self-contained classes, which led to a further question on full-time ability grouping.

Parent 2 (P2) clearly reported that his daughter was free from pressure in the self-contained class, but overall, the situation of other students in OC was different just because of the high expectations of the parents.

"All the kids in OC are smart. They are always under pressure, but not my daughter now. Her peers are under pressure. This extra pressure is sometimes from families. They have high expectations that everything must be at a higher level."

For example,P5 admitted that they had high expectations of their daughter performing well.

"She wants back, we know, but she would be lazy again. She would be able to lead an easy life. In OC, she is pushing herself, and everyone is performing at a higher level. We want her to perform at a higher level."

Diverse statements revealed that 80% parents perceived in self-contained setting their children are quiet young to face the pressure of challenging work and competitive environment among like-minded peers.

> "In OC, the kids are all the same, but if a kid is a little behind, he has to make an extra effort to catch up to the advanced kids. It's really hard for the kids, very hard."

> "Academics are not a problem. OC is competitive, maybe it's more intense competition."

> "For 10 years old, they do feel the pressure of competition and challenging work … much work to do, sometimes. My daughter feels pressure, but she tries to manage it in a positive way."

However, 20% participants were positive about the academic development of their children in such settings.

> "Some are really gifted and talented in some subjects like Math and English, and if your child is not ready for that subject, then she needs to work hard to achieve that standard."

80% parents believed that such educational provisions made their child overconfident, so that they stopped learning and came under pressure.

> "Sometimes, the school treats them as, 'you have a better understanding, you are special, you had the chance to go to OC,' and they become overconfident. Even kids don't know, why they need to learn more?"

However, on the other side, P7 stated that since her daughter was placed in a self-contained class, she had been struggling with low self-esteem, pressure, and low confidence. However, she had a positive experience in the regular class setting before coming to the self-contained setting.

> "There are bright students in mathematics, and she doesn't feel bright in mathematics as she did in the previous class. She struggles with her self-concept in math. She is fine in OC, but it's lots of pressure on kids. They are too young to deal with this kind of pressure."

P3 added,

> "In the previous class, she did not have academic discussions; they only talked about what was happening on the weekend. Since she has been in OC, they discuss tests, results, they talk about selective school things like benchmarking. She thinks she is not as high as the others. I imagine how it must be hard—lots of pressure on a 10-year-old."

A total 70% of participants were concerned that because of the full-time ability grouping setting, their children had less opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities and had become less social owing to the pressure of such a competitive learning environment.

For example, P5 stated,

> "In OC, there is a little bit of stress because of the lack of extra activities. At the old school, there were lots of extracurricular activities. She is a social person, but in OC, she is quiet, focused on study but stressed all the time. It's difficult mentally."

P9 added that extracurricular activities provided gifted students with the opportunity to explore further study or career options after school, which might help give them a "sense of direction." However, due to the burden of their studies, "they could not take part in any other activities."

Some parents believed that full-time ability grouping was also one of the reasons for GTS having a fixed mindset that they are good at everything all the time, which could be quite harmful to their academic development and social emotional well-being, as stated by P10.

> "In OC, it's kind of a special bubble. Life is not always about a bunch of smart people. Sometimes, it's quite difficult to teach your kids that nothing is fixed."

In summary, the statements of teachers and parents showed a high concern with challenges such as peer pressure, pressure from the competitive learning environment, pressure from parents and teacher expectations to perform at a higher level, and perfectionism associated with full-time ability grouping in self-contained class settings (Table 1.4).

Discussion

The main purpose of this research was to identify the challenges of full-time ability grouping practices in self-contained class settings for academically advanced students. There has been very little research in this area, but many educators are aware of the powerful influence of special educational provisions, which shape the lives of gifted children (Coleman, 2001; Coleman and Cross, 2005). Consequently, schools respond best by producing optimal learning environments.

TABLE 1.4 Summary of parents' perceptions of challenges in self-contained settings.

Themes	No. of participants N = 10	Favorable themes	Unfavorable themes
Pressure from family	10	90%	10%
Peer competition	10	90%	10%
High expectations	10	99.9%	0.1%
Competitive environment	10	80%	20%
Lack of extracurricular activities	10	70%	30%
Fixed mindset	10	60%	40%

N = Total number of parents in study, Favorable themes = no of parents responded/total parents*100, Unfavorable themes = no of parents responded/total parents*100.

The intrinsic motivation of students and their academic performance are both enhanced by positive environmental perceives (Rubenstein et al., 2012; Winton, 2013). According to (Robinson et al., 2002), the most gifted students' social and emotional issues are tied to the setting in which they are serviced. Indeed, this study found that while special educational services are better at meeting the needs of advanced learners, such learning environments significantly affect their academic progress and social–emotional wellbeing. According to Benard (2004)

> From an equity and empowerment lens, no matter what ethnic, social class, geographic, and historical backgrounds gifted children they have, we hold the belief about the impact of buffers on their life courses. (p. 9)

The following themes emerged after comparing and contrasting the data collected from the participants.

Pressure of the competitive learning environment

The findings of this study generally confirmed those of different studies conducted of GTS in full-time ability grouping. In the current study, teachers and parents highlighted peer pressure during full-time ability grouping. The results indicate that students in full-time ability grouping perceived the challenge of peer pressure, as all the students were at the same level of ability, and they constantly felt an intense atmosphere of competition among themselves. Almost all the participants including parents and teachers commented on peer pressure.

To perform better than others, students were under direct and indirect pressure to always stand out. Being academically talented, gifted students face greater emotional challenges in terms of social expectations and academic achievement pressure (Neihart, 1999). Furthermore, the findings confirmed the study of Callahan (2004) by highlighting that major social emotional problems arise when students compare their academic progress to peers to stand out.

The students felt performance anxiety and therefore feared the loss of their academic position, which confirmed the research by Seaton et al. (2011) citing the case of a student who experienced Stuyvesant, a high-pressure environment, as "a place of profound desperation and extreme pressure" (p. 201).

The Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect (BFLPE) is worth noting here, as high-ability students in special gifted programs deal with low self-esteem and self-concept. BFLPE assumes that students' academic self-concept is based on social comparisons between achievement levels. However, the current results contradict many studies that found that high-ability peers receive benefits from one another (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Sehgal, 2017). It is somehow contradictory to the findings of Kulik and Kulik (1992) who documented ability grouping as a learner-friendly atmosphere, without fear of mockery that not only reduced peer pressure, but also reduced the pressure to succeed.

The study by Neihart (1999) raised an interesting point on the relative importance of the effects of labeling versus the effects of daily classroom experience. It suggested that labeling (by placing the student in low-medium-high groups) may have a transitory impact on self-esteem but that the impact may be quickly overshadowed by the

effect of the comparison that the student makes between themselves and others each day in the classroom. Low-ability students may experience feelings of success and competency when in a classroom with others of like ability, and high-ability students may encounter greater competition for the first time.

The participants reported that a high-pressure environment existed for GTS in specially designed provisions, compared with the general learning classroom setting, and that they had less opportunity to be social, compared to their non-gifted peers. However, as suggested by Reis and Renzulli (2004) when examining the social competence of gifted students, they appeared to be a more diverse group consisting of different subgroups with different social and emotional outcomes. She emphasized three major risk factors for the social–emotional development of gifted students: (1) more social and emotional problems than peers, due to their apparently different academic progress; (2) common areas of psychological vulnerability experienced by some gifted students (e.g., perfectionism and underachievement); and (3) the identification of gifted students as twice exceptional (being gifted students with special needs).

Participants in the current study described GTS as perceiving extreme pressure, a finding that is similar to the study by Callahan (2004) reporting that GTS viewed the special school of Stuyvesant as "a place of profound desperation and extreme pressure" and a "uniquely competitive and high-pressure environment" (p. 201). Students in the above-mentioned studies further highlighted that the high-achieving environment "is a culture present in competitive schools everywhere." If teachers adopt cautious strategies, such as appreciating and commenting on the efforts of gifted students, rather than their intelligence, then this competitive environment can be overcome. This can minimize the risk of poor grades, enhance their enthusiasm, and reduce their worries about their own intelligence, so that they will enjoy a more challenging learning environment (Dweck, 2007).

Pressure of high expectations

The majority of the participants stated that being in special gifted classes (full-time ability grouping) created more pressure due to the high expectations of parents, teachers, and peers, compared to being in regular classes. Parents and teachers claimed that they expected high performance from gifted students with like-minded peers. The pushy attitude of parents and teachers "to work harder and climb higher" exerted pressure on GTS, which had serious detrimental effects on their psychosocial and academic development (Jiang et al., 2022). It is evidence that a teacher's and parents' attitudes play a substantial role in a gifted student's ability to succeed academically (Altun and Yazici, 2010).

Students feared that they would not fulfil the expectations of parents, teachers, and peers and negatively sabotaged their abilities. Some parents and teachers believed that being gifted and being placed in special gifted programs meant accepting nothing less than regular outstanding performance. Students may begin to internalize these unrealistic standards of perfection and start to believe that not always doing things perfectly is undesirable. In turn, they may become depressed and anxious when they fail to meet unreasonable expectations. The results of this study supported the claim by

Shani-Zinovich and Zeidner (2009) that the role of the family is as important as that of the school in cultivating gifted students' potential. Unrealistic expectations about gifted students' abilities by parents and teachers put pressure on them and undermine their performance; however, if parents and teachers adopt a motivational approach and positive attitude, they can accelerate the progress of GTS.

Perfectionism

Another important finding of this study was that perfectionism among GTS is significantly high when they are placed in full-time ability grouping because the intense competitive learning environment exacerbates the intensity of the drive for perfection. This finding is similar to the studies by Hoge and Renzulli (1993) claiming that high parental expectations for perfection in all areas, high grades, and perfect behavior negatively influence their children's state and trait anxieties and may affect self-concept among gifted children (Adderholdt-Elliott, 1991). This suggests that gifted students have an increased vulnerability to perfectionistic tendencies because they are often influenced by perfectionistic parents, high personal standards, and pressure from teachers and peers to succeed, whether the pressure is real or perceived.

Conclusion

The practice of full-time ability grouping in self-contained gifted classes was found to be quite challenging and to influence the talent development process of GTS. The phenomenological framework of this study allowed me to listen to the voices of the participants and raise issues regarding barriers to the academic progress of advanced learners. Consequently, educators and policy makers in gifted education will be able to plan and implement the proper educational provisions that can help save the future of highly intellectual learners.

As BFLPE Marsh et al. (2013) is observed in self-contained settings, teachers and parents must be quick to respond to the problems of GTS and adopt motivational strategies. Teachers should be professional and develop the use of flexible groupings to deal with social–emotional issues in selective settings. Teachers reported social–emotional issues among the gifted students in the current study, stating that despite making them clear that they were perfect or their performance was outstanding, GTS were not satisfied, and the same concerns were also expressed by parents.

I would suggest that stakeholders in gifted education consider the following points from the study of Marsh and Hau (2003) that educators should expand the basis for selecting students to include criteria other than standardized test scores. Although academic performance may be important, it seems that students of all ability levels are affected by BFLPE. Therefore, educators should try to avoid the typical highly competitive environment of some G/T projects, which encourages the social comparison process behind BFLPE, additionally develop assessment tasks and encourage students to work on projects that are of particular interest to them and based on the performance of other students in the G/T class, provide students with feedback related to the comparison. Moreover, it is important to emphasize to each student that they are very capable and value each student's unique achievements, so that all students can feel good about themselves. Finally, it is recommended that self-contained classes are led by teachers who are trained in gifted education and sensitive to the special needs of G/T students. There should be Mentoring learning programs in school to fulfill the educational and social emotional needs of gifted and talented students (Wechsler and De Feith, 2017).

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). NSW Department of Education SERAP. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardian/next of kin.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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