

How do Gifted Student Burnout and Common Academic Burnout Differ?

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Abstract

Gifted student burnout is a form of chronic exhaustion that stems from a discrepancy between the individual and their current educational environment. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness about burnout syndrome, specifically gifted student burnout syndrome, which is a frequently overlooked mental illness and seldom discussed in schools. How do gifted student burnout and common academic burnout differ? One of the top environmental conditions harming the well-being of adolescents is an excessive pressure to excel, and the very phrase "gifted student burnout" was constructed by gifted students themselves to describe their feelings of perfectionism and low self-esteem. The paper consists of two main parts: the first, a description of an online survey conducted on the topic, in which participants were asked to specify their labelled level of giftedness, and subsequently asked questions about their level of burnout. The second part is literary research, conducted using already existing material written about gifted student burnout (in opposition to common academic burnout). As the paper discovers, the gifted student is constantly striving for unreachable perfection, so much so that they develop such an extreme fear of failure which they do not know how to cope with, thus turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms. The gifted student feels that they must live up to the expectations set before them, so the pressure to perform well academically manifests itself not only in a typical fear of failure that most people have, but in a fear of disappointing those who believe in them by not living up to the potential that they are so constantly reminded they possess.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) warned educators of the fact that over half of gifted students do not match their tested ability with academic results. According to The Davidson Institute (2021), gifted student burnout is a form of chronic exhaustion that stems from a discrepancy between the individual and their current educational environment. The label given to children at a young age (whether it be positive or negative) stays with the child perhaps their entire life, particularly if the child is constantly reminded of that label (Peck, 2022).

According to a study conducted by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, one of the top environmental conditions harming the well-being of adolescents is an excessive pressure to excel. The very phrase "gifted student burnout" was constructed by gifted students themselves to

describe their feelings of perfectionism and low self-esteem (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009).

At this stage, this paper hypothesises that gifted students have a higher chance of experiencing burnout in their adolescence compared to less gifted and average students and that gifted student burnout and common academic burnout differ in cause and severity of certain symptoms. The first part of this research paper will discuss the results of the conducted survey and then subsequently draw a conclusion based on the survey results. The second part, however, will focus on literary research of previous studies conducted and connect these results to those of the survey. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness about burnout, which is a frequently overlooked mental illness seldom discussed in schools.

Method

Questions and Methodology

Participants were presented with nine questions regarding gifted student burnout. They were first asked their age and level of education. The majority of participants were aged 17 (36%) and 18 (28.8%), followed by those aged 16 (14%), 19 (8%), 20 (4%), 15 and 21 (2%), 13 and 22 (2%), and 14 and 24 (1%). As for their level of education, 75% were high school students, 12% were university students, 9% were high school graduates not enrolled in university, 2% were university graduates, and 2% were elementary school students. Participants were subsequently asked to rate four statements in accordance to how much they agree with them on a scale of 1 to 5; 1 being “Completely disagree” and 5 being “Completely agree.” The statements, in order, were: “*Others (family members, teachers, etc.) have frequently referred to me as academically gifted from a young age,*” “*I myself grew up perceiving myself as academically gifted,*” “*I put a lot of pressure on myself to do well in school,*” and finally, “*I determine my self-worth in accordance to my academic success.*”

They were then asked to select all of the mentioned symptoms connected to academic burnout that they often experience, the symptoms being: feeling exhausted regardless of the amount of sleep they get, lack of motivation to attend classes or do their schoolwork, taking their frustration out on their loved ones, experiencing low self-confidence regarding their intelligence and/or academic abilities, difficulty concentrating, headaches and/or muscle pain, insomnia, anxiety, feeling depressed, finding no joy/comfort in activities that they previously used to enjoy, picking up unhealthy habits, such as nail-biting, overeating, and not eating enough.

Following the previous question, they were given the chance to write down some of their experiences that were not mentioned on the list but that they still regard as symptoms of burnout, after which they were asked to write down whether they have any coping mechanisms in dealing with burnout.

The survey was conducted online, using Google Forms. It was 100% anonymous and was randomly sampled to avoid biases.

The aim of these questions was to see whether there is a connection between being labelled as gifted early on and experiencing academic burnout in adolescence, as well as how gifted student burnout and common academic burnout differ. After 125 responses, the results were statistically analysed. The Cronbach’s Alpha value for this scale is .11.

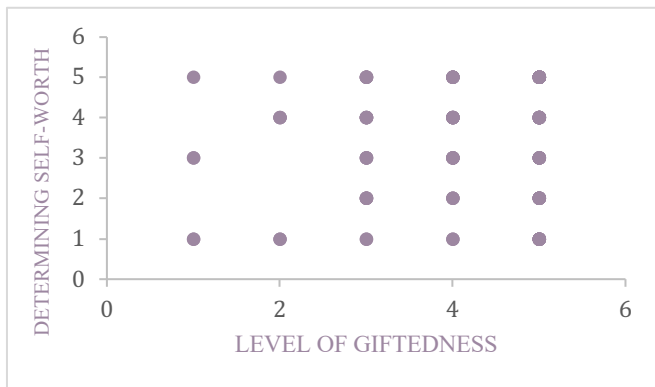
Results

The majority of people that voted that they agree to a great extent (5 or 4) with the first statement (being often labelled as academically gifted from a young age) also voted high that they put a lot of pressure on themselves to do well in school and that they determine their self-worth in accordance to their academic success, whereas the majority of those who voted low agreeance (2 or 1) with the first statement voted considerably lower for the mentioned statements. Those who voted “3” for the first statement voted that they put a lot of pressure on themselves almost in the same extent as the group of 5s and 4s, however voted considerably lower for the latter statement. After running a Pearson’s correlation test for the level of giftedness in correlation to the level of pressure that individuals put on themselves and the level of which they determine their self-worth in accordance with academic success (For the correlation between the level of giftedness and level of pressure the result was $r = 0.12$, for the correlation between the level of giftedness and determining self-worth in accordance with academic success, $r = 0.10$).

Figure 1. correlation between the level of giftedness and the amount of pressure the individual places on themselves.



Figure 2. correlation between the level of giftedness and the extent to which the individual determines their self-worth in accordance to their academic success.



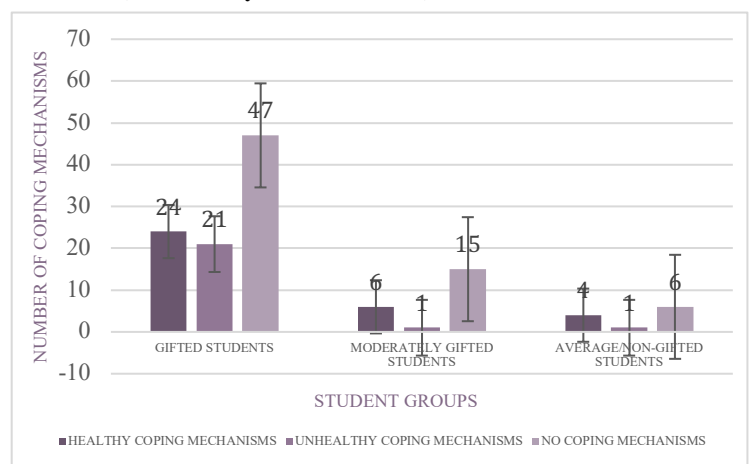
A chi-square goodness of fit test was performed to examine the number of symptoms reported by members of the three groups (the gifted students, who voted “5” and “4,” the somewhat gifted, who voted “3,” and the average or non-gifted, who voted “2” and “1”). The result was not significant ($p = .93$), meaning that the number of symptoms that the members of all three groups checked off was somewhat similar. However, when asked whether participants deal with more struggles that they deem to be symptoms of burnout that were not mentioned on the survey, the majority of the responses on that question were recorded by the gifted students. The responses include, but are not limited to, feeling unable to help loved ones due to own personal struggling, difficulty socialising, physical sickness, having an emotional burnout, feeling drained, feeling detached, alone, isolated, having nervous breakdowns, experiencing self-doubt, having a creative blockage, extreme procrastination, etc.

Aside from this, most of the unhealthy coping mechanisms reported in the survey were reported by gifted students (Figure 3). The mentioned coping mechanisms include, but are not limited to, stress-eating or eating unhealthy food, making impulsive decisions regarding changing their appearance (such as getting piercings), avoiding responsibilities, using phone/social media to a high extent, self-harm, and, by far the most reported coping mechanism, substance abuse, including caffeine, nicotine, alcohol and even other drugs.

Conclusion

Judging by the number of symptoms recorded from members of all three groups, gifted children were not found to be more likely to experience academic burnout in their adolescence, contrary to the primary hypothesis. However, common academic burnout and gifted student burnout do differ. Putting pressure on oneself can be positive if it is to a healthy extent, however, the gifted student puts so much pressure on themselves that they start to see their self-worth and their academic success as one and the same. They experience most of the symptoms of common academic burnout, but also some more intense symptoms that the somewhat gifted and average student will seldom face. Desperate times call for desperate measures, so the gifted student will turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms to try and deflect from the overwhelming reality they exist

Figure 3. Coping Mechanisms Reported by Average Non-Gifted Students, Moderately Gifted Students, and Gifted Students



Literary Research

At this stage the paper hypothesises that it is most likely the very high amount of pressure that gifted students put on themselves to perform well academically that is the main differentiator between gifted student burnout and common academic burnout.

Causes of Gifted Student Burnout

The core stress component of burnout syndrome is the emotional exhaustion (Rahmati, 2015). The gifted student’s self-doubt, which grows

into the imposter syndrome, extremely pressures them to excel in order to prove their giftedness, which is extremely draining and leaves one constantly striving for perfection (Kaplan, 1990). Perfectionism is considered to be one of the main characteristics of gifted students (Alodat et al., 2020). There are two types of perfectionism: adaptive (positive) perfectionism and maladaptive (negative) perfectionism. Those with adaptive perfectionism are motivated to do the best they can and strive towards their goals in a healthy manner, in opposition to those struggling with maladaptive perfectionism, who recognise only complete success and complete failure as the possible outcomes of their work, due to which they try to avoid making any mistakes and set excessively high standards for themselves (Clevenger, 2022). Perfectionism can make one feel unhappy and can lead to serious mental illnesses, such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and even self-harm. The gifted individual becomes tired of dealing with the pressures of perfectionism that have been placed on them at a young age (Peck, 2022). Eventually, perfectionism can lead one to stop trying to succeed.

Similarly, multipotentiality can lead students to put too much pressure on themselves in order to live up to everyone's expectations. Making career and personal choices can become difficult for a student who has many talents, interests, and abilities. The gifted individual feels as though they will disappoint if they do not excel in a particular area, so they try to succeed in everything. This leads to their energy becoming diffused, and then them being less likely to reach their full potential in any area (Blackburn & Erickson, 1986).

Underachievement as a learned behaviour can also be the cause of burnout (Blackburn & Erickson, 1986). During early years of education, the gifted student may exercise using minimum effort, and achieving the desired results. This may lead to the student developing the belief that their giftedness means that they are blessed with the gift of instant and easy learning, and that outstanding achievement just naturally follows, despite the low effort (Kaplan, 1990). When the student reaches their later years of education and the study materials become more challenging for them to grasp, they are met with the need to complete more work and

study harder, which they are not used to doing. This leads to them feeling less confident about their academic ability (Clevenger, 2022) which the survey also showed since almost 60% of gifted students voted that they experience low self-esteem when it comes to their intelligence and academic ability.

Possibly in order to try and see if they are still capable of performing well solely on their intelligence, or because they are simply not used to the extra work and never really learned how to efficiently study, students will not put in the work necessary to succeed, and when they are faced with the subsequent failure, they attempt to find an excuse for that failure in a series of external factors (Clevenger, 2022). This practice is known as self-handicapping. Self-handicapping can be defined as any action that used in an attempt to excuse one's failure and draw other people's attention from their low performance to the external factors that stood in the way of success. This way, the gifted student protects their reputation and self-esteem (Alodat et al., 2020). A maladaptive perfectionist and self-handicapping attitude may lead to extreme exhaustion and a lack of drive and motivation (Clevenger, 2022), which could be another possible definition of gifted student burnout.

The Difference Between Common Academic Burnout and Gifted Student Burnout

It was discussed in the previous section of this paper that perfectionism is considered to be one of the main characteristics of gifted students. Gifted students are more sensitive to criticism due to it giving them a feeling of imperfection (Palay, 2021). Many of them become sensitive and depressed when they become aware of their own shortcomings and when they feel they are unable to live up to the expectations set before them (Strang, 1951).

Adolescents who believed that both of their parents valued character traits as much or more than academic excellence exhibited better outcomes at school, better mental health, and less rule-breaking behaviour than their peers who believed that their parents valued their academic achievements over all else (Peck, 2022). Gifted individuals have the potential to be more susceptible to school-related stress because they have a heightened sensitivity to

their surroundings, including expectations that they and others set for them (Kaplan, 1990). The gifted student has a more intense interaction with the environment, which may cause additional conflicts that the average student may not face (Strang, 1960). Stress can become a debilitating factor that can affect the self-esteem and subsequent success of many gifted individuals (Delisle, 1982). Gifted children studied over the course of two years were shown to be less likely to engage in challenging coursework, feel less competent, and exhibit the most reliance on teacher guidance (Delcourt et al., 2007).

Discussion

Most people do not wish to fail, and will try their best to prevent it, so, naturally, they put a bit of pressure on themselves to perform well academically, and to, later in life, perform well in their workplace. However, the pressure that the gifted student puts on themselves is different, stronger. As the survey shows, gifted students are more likely to put a great deal of pressure on themselves, as well as determine their self-worth in accordance to how well they perform academically. The gifted student feels that they must live up to the expectations set before them, so the pressure to perform well academically manifests itself not only in a typical fear of failure that most people have, but in a fear of disappointing those who believe in them by not living up to the potential that they are so constantly reminded they possess. The gifted student constantly striving for perfection most likely does not know how to cope with any negative feelings just as much as they do not know how to accept any imperfections and mistakes in their work, because those feelings are also a form of imperfection and distract them from their goals, so when their stress culminates, they turn to unhealthy habits in order to cope.

Overall Conclusion

The survey and the literary research done in order to execute this paper together show that there is a difference between common academic burnout and gifted student burnout, and that the two should not be treated as one and the same. As mentioned,

someone struggling with maladaptive perfectionism views absolute success and absolute failure as the only two possible outcomes of any endeavour, meaning that anything short of perfection is in their eyes seen as failure (Clevenger, 2022). As self-worth and academic success are often connected in the eyes of the gifted student, failure may lead to disappointment, and ultimately, burnout syndrome.

Students of all levels of giftedness can experience burnout syndrome, however the main factor that differentiates gifted student burnout from common academic burnout is the cause. One of the main causes of gifted student burnout is maladaptive perfectionism and pressure that the gifted student experiences, as opposed to the “average” student. The symptoms are pretty much the same, but the gifted student takes the experience of burnout worse than the average student (thus turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms).

Gifted students must be taught that, despite being gifted and intelligent, making mistakes is alright and normal and that they are not expected to be on top of everything all the time, and that their happiness and mental health and wellbeing is a much more important achievement than the elusive perfection that they are constantly aiming towards.

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