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Overexcitabilities and Psychological Issues among Gifted Learners at Higher Education Level

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Abstract

Gifted learners are more advance as compared to learners of their chronological age. Along with this advancement, these learners faced asynchronous development that makes them has the characteristics of sensitive, perfectionistic, deep reflective thinking and moral issues that affect them more deeply. Apart from the asynchronous development, these learners also showed the high intensity of having overexcitabilities. Overexcitability is the mode of experiencing with heightened sensitivity. Studies found that gifted learners who experience overexcitability are more likely to be misunderstood and alienated than those who do not have these sensitives. Thus, this study aims to discuss gifted learners' overexcitabilities and psychological issues at the higher education level. Past research shows a relationship between overexcitabilities with perfectionism, insomnia, fear of the unknown, death anxiety, and depression. By helping gifted learners identify psychological issues earlier, counsellors should be able to help the student find meaning and purpose in their daily activities. Therefore, future research should focus on how counselling gifted learners about overexcitability will be able to overcome their limitations so they can reach tremendous potential and achieve higher levels of development.

Keywords: Overexcitability, Psychological Issues, Gifted Learners, Higher Education, Counselling

Introduction

Gifted learners learn faster, process information more deeply and require less repetition in order to master a subject as compared to their peers (Coleman & Cross, 2001), yet they face psychological issues just like their peers. Giftedness seems to add complexity to the development of gifted learners who face unique psychological issues (Neihart et al., 2015). Along with the gifted learners' capability, they experience asynchronous development that causes them to have characteristics such as sensitivity, perfectionism, deep thinking and moral issues that affect them deeply. Past study focused on overexcitability (Razak et al., 2021; Zanariah et al., 2019; Mendaglio, 2021) and psychological issues (Cross & Cross, 2015), but no studies have focused on how overexcitability impacts psychological issues among gifted learners especially at higher education level. Thus, this study aims to discuss the overexcitabilities and psychological issues of gifted learners.

Literature Review

Overexcitability

Gifted individuals are often associated with extraordinary excitement (Szymanski & Wrenn, 2019; Alias et al., 2013; Zanariah et al., 2019; Mendaglio, 2012). Kazimierz Dabrowski in his book *Positive Disintegration* (1964) has introduced the Theory of Positive Disintegration which emphasizes on three components namely individual abilities, extraordinary excitement (also use interchangeably with overexcitability in this article) and the third factor that influences the development of an individual's personality. Individual ability is often used in defining a person's intelligence, where it is also seen as the cognitive ability to learn something quickly (Szymanski & Wrenn, 2019). Extraordinary excitement is seen as energising intelligence and talent where the individual is more sensitive to environmental stimuli (Szymanski & Wrenn, 2019) while the third factor is the capacity for a person to direct himself for emotional development (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). According to Dabrowski (1972), there are five domains of extraordinary excitement (OE), namely psychomotor, intellectual, emotional, imaginative and sensory.

Psychological Issues

Several studies have shown that gifted youth experience psychological issues such as mood disorders (Bénony et al., 2007) and anxiety (Harrison & Van Haneghan, 2011). Gifted learners face exciting psychological challenges due to their extraordinary abilities (Cross & Cross, 2015). The life experiences of these gifted learners may be different from the majority of their peers and the community (Coleman, 2012). When professionals are unaware of gifted individuals' social and emotional needs, professionals can inadvertently inflict more harm than good (Cross & Cross, 2015). Cross and Cross (2015) also identified that gifted individuals may be uniquely at risk for issues such as depression, anxiety, suicidality, and unhealthy perfectionism. Procrastination, being perceived as not perfect enough and failing to live up to expectations may cause unhealthy perfectionism (Abu Yazid & Brody, 2021). Studies have not shown linkage of genetic and intelligence causing mood disorders (Webb et al., 2007). While, Cross and Cross (2015) mentioned that gifted individuals faced individual, social and environmental pressures that may contribute to psychological issues. Gifted learners often receive conflicting messages as opposed to the meaning and value of intelligence (Cross & Cross, 2012). As stated by Rimm (2002), being too smart or mastering a concept too fast can cause isolated effect, leaving an individual feels different from their peer as academic achievement is usually celebrated. While, according to Cross (2012), Cross and Cross (2015) and Rimm (2002), affective reactions such as anxiety and/or depression may reach clinical levels when combined with boredom, not well understood feelings, and unable to recognize environment changes. This worsens when the individual feels helpless and constantly hiding their true self, it will then may lead to suicidality (Cross & Cross, 2015). The mixed message of giftedness can also be attributed to perfection, a phenomenon that can bring benefits (i.e., leads to perseverance, resilience, and continuous effort with achievement) or detrimental (Webb et al., 2007).

Research Methodology

This study uses meta-analysis to analyse research that has been conducted in relevance to overexcitabilities and psychological issues. This method is to comprehensively identify all relevant primary studies by using the terms overexcitabilities, psychological issues, gifted learners, counselling, and higher education through the literature search from 2011 till 2021

using the databases from Journal for the Education of the Gifted, Gifted and Talented International, Gifted Child Quarterly, and Google Scholar.

Results

Research Design

Table 1 shows the frequencies and percentages of research designs and methods used in the 20 studies assessed in this investigation. The articles were analysed systematically to extract information related to overexcitabilities and psychological issues. Majority of the research studies were quantitative (70%), while other designs each accounted for only 30% of the total sample.

Table 1. *Statistics of Research Design*

Research design	n	%
Quantitative	14	70.00
Mixed-Method	1	5.00
Case Study	1	5.00
Meta-Analysis	4	20.00

n = 20

Psychological Issues

The 20 articles obtained from Journal for the Education of the Gifted, Gifted and Talented International, Gifted Child Quarterly, and Google Scholar were extracted according to the type of psychological issues shown in Table 2. Results show that suicidal ideation/depression (26.92%) is the most frequently studied field, followed by anxiety (23.08%), perfectionism (19.23%), and stress (11.53%).

Table 2. *Statistics of Psychological Issues*

Type of Psychological Issues	n	%
Perfectionism	5	19.23
Insomnia	1	3.85
Anxiety	6	23.08
Suicidal Ideation / Depression	7	26.92
ADHD	2	7.69
OCD / Mania / Eating Disorder	1	3.85
Cyberbullying / Internet Addiction	1	3.85
Stress	3	11.53

n = 26

Research Samples

Table 3 shows the research samples that have been studied for both overexcitabilities and psychological issues. A total of 66.68% of studies have been done towards gifted adolescents. However, there is a limited study that combined both overexcitabilities and psychological issues among gifted adolescents.

Table 3. *Statistics of Research Samples*

Research Samples	n	%
Adults from General Population	1	4.76
Creative Adolescents	2	9.52
Gifted Adolescents	14	66.68
Adolescents from General Population	2	9.52
Academically Talented Undergraduate Students	1	4.76
Undergraduate Students	1	4.76

n = 21

Discussion

Research Design

This research produced several important findings in relevance to overexcitabilities and psychological issues based on articles from the Journal for the Education of the Gifted, Gifted and Talented International, Gifted Child Quarterly, and Google Scholar for the period of 2011 till 2021. Based on the results shown in Table 1, it can be concluded that most of the studies in relevance to overexcitabilities and psychological issues are conducted quantitatively. Only 30% of the studies were conducted using research design apart of quantitative. Thus, it is suggested future research should be focusing on methodology apart from quantitative.

Psychological Issues

Results in Table 2 shows the types of psychological issues commonly studied among gifted individuals. Although suicidal ideation/depression is frequently studied, findings were not consistent where some studies found that suicidal ideation was below average (Chen et al., 2020), while some studies show moderate/high depression level (Simin et al., 2020; Yazid et al., 2019). Besides suicidal ideation/depression, perfectionism is frequently studied (Cross et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Olton-Weber et al., 2020; Perrone-McGovern et al., 2015). However, limited studies were done was related to overexcitability and psychological issues among gifted individuals. Hence, it is recommended for future studies to study overexcitability and various psychological issues among gifted individuals.

Research Samples

Of the 20 articles used in this study, 66.68% studied gifted adolescents; however, none of the study relate overexcitability and psychological issues among gifted students at the higher education level. Though some studies discuss overexcitability and perfectionism among gifted adolescents (Mofield & Parker, 2015), the scope of the study for psychological issues is limited. Thus, it is recommended that future studies involve gifted students at higher education level as the study sample.

Conclusion

A part of identifying gifted learners, the psychologist's job is to meet the psychosocial needs, counselling and linking between students, schools and parents (Robinson, 2002). According to Colangelo and Assouline (2000), schools should be aware of the uniqueness of gifted learners in dealing with developmental challenges and school or family environment that is likely to convey misleading information and give high hopes for success. According to Aslan and Yukay-Yuksel (2018), gifted and talented individuals often hide their socio-emotional

issues, and psychologists need to be careful to express their concerns and needs. Furthermore, gifted and talented individuals can be supported through informal counselling approaches such as books and films that focus on gifted and talented individuals, inspiring them to be more enthusiastic and strive to develop their talents. Thus, this study may help gifted educational practitioners in providing support and needs for gifted learners. Future research should focus on how counselling gifted learners about overexcitability will help them break through to higher levels where there is complete self-acceptance, which may help them to reach great potential to move toward higher levels of development.

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