

HIGH ABILITY, FACILITATING NEEDS: THE G&T LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

Gifted and Talented (G&T) provision is a critical component of inclusive education that often receives less attention compared to other Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) categories. Guenther (2006, in Piske et al., 2014) found that students with needs “significantly above average” make up about 3–5% of a school’s population. While G&T students are typically high-achieving, they still face unique challenges that require tailored educational responses. This paper critically analyses G&T provision in two international schools in Dubai—School A (American curriculum) and School B (British curriculum)—while integrating feedback from G&T students themselves. The aim is to explore how policy and practice align with student needs, drawing conclusions on how to develop effective provision that supports their academic and emotional well-being.

Literature Review

Research into G&T education highlights a longstanding but often neglected need for tailored provision. Foundational models from Renzulli (1977) and Gardner (1983) have long informed definitions of giftedness, encompassing academic, creative, and intellectual abilities. However, as Chaya (2021) and Matthews and Kitchen (2007) suggest, G&T education has been marginalised due to assumptions of privilege and the small percentage of students it serves.

Studies by Clindenbeard (2012) and Gilson and Lee (2023) emphasize the dual challenges G&T students face: insufficient academic challenge and social-emotional stress, including perfectionism, masking disabilities and imposter syndrome. Teacher training, curriculum differentiation, and access to counselling are frequently cited as key enablers of effective G&T provision (Piske et al., 2014; Reis et al., 2021). International comparative studies (e.g., Heuser et al., 2017) stress that successful G&T provision depends not only on national policy but on successful policy implementation at the school level. In the UAE, while national inclusion frameworks exist, they lack specific directives for G&T learners, placing the onus on schools to interpret what best to do for this population, (AlGhawi, 2019; Ismail et al., 2022).

Methods

The aim of this research is explore the similarities and/or differences to the G&T provision at two schools in Dubai. In addition, the G&T student experiences in School A were studied. Action Research through a Microsoft Form questionnaire and randomly selected students for semi-structured interviews allow for the assessment of the G&T student experience. 26/29 secondary students completed the questionnaire and a 8 of those students were interviewed.

Results

Findings from student surveys in School A—collected from G&T students in Grades 6–12—reveal a nuanced picture of how these learners experience education. While students generally reported high levels of enjoyment in learning (ratings between 4 and 5 on a 5-point scale), they also identified consistent areas of concern. These include:

A need for clearer communication and individualized feedback from teachers.

This was echoed by one student who stated, *“I like to know exactly where I went wrong so that I don’t make those mistakes again.”* The desire for specific, actionable feedback aligns with Gubbins et al. (2021), who emphasize the role of targeted teacher input in promoting growth for advanced learners. When feedback is vague or delayed, these students may feel their learning is stalled or unchallenged.

Preference for quiet, independent workspaces, with some flexibility for small group collaboration.

Another student emphasized, *“A classroom with less distraction allows me to concentrate more.”* This supports the finding that many gifted students value environments that allow deep focus and independent thought. While collaborative learning can be enriching, these students often thrive when given uninterrupted time and space to engage intellectually.

Frustration with heavy workloads and unclear instructions, especially during test periods.

Two students highlighted this theme:

“When the instructions are clear, I have less questions about the work” and “End of quarter deadlines can be stressful because there is a lot to do in a short amount of time.”

Both comments underscore a need for clarity in task design and more thoughtful pacing of assessments. For gifted students who often self-regulate and internalize expectations, ambiguity or overload can lead to significant stress and underperformance, despite their high capabilities.

Ambitious personal goals and high academic expectations that contribute to stress.

This theme runs through several responses, including the concern around end-of-quarter stress. It suggests that gifted students may benefit from more structured support in managing workload and navigating their own high standards. The presence of stress does not necessarily indicate disengagement but rather reflects the pressure they place on themselves to meet or exceed expectations.

These themes resonate strongly with the literature. As noted by Gubbins et al. (2021), the mismatch between curriculum pace and student ability can lead to boredom or anxiety. The students' preference for more dynamic instructional approaches, such as project-based learning, stresses the need for differentiated, student-centred pedagogies. Furthermore, their mixed responses on when and how they need support highlight the importance of responsive, emotionally intelligent teaching.

The lack of national policy specific to G&T education in the UAE compounds these inconsistencies. Without statutory direction, schools are left to interpret broad inclusive frameworks on their own. This leads to variability in the quality, depth, and creativity of provision, often resulting in cautious and conservative program development. The UAE should look to countries with already established G&T initiatives like Singapore for guidance on how future G&T provision should look.

Discussion and Reflections

Comparatively, both School A and School B demonstrate formalized yet evolving G&T provision. Each uses standardised assessments like the Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT4) and the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) test for identification, with School B additionally employing the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-V IQ) assessment to reinforce the data they already have. However, identification still leans heavily on academic metrics in core subjects, excluding areas such as the arts or humanities—an oversight identified in both practice and policy.

Implementation varies across the two schools. School B has developed a Primary-level enrichment programme, including an AI club, while School A has begun incorporating student voice into G&T learner passports. The learner passports are a tool to support teachers in how best to support the individual student. School B's development of an internal G&T website shows initiative in teacher guidance, whereas School A's cross-phase lead allows for a more unified approach. Still, both schools fall short in addressing students' social and emotional wellbeing, a critical issue raised in the literature (Glass, 2004; Alelyani, 2021).

In both contexts, professional development (PD) is recognised as essential but it is not consistently applied. School A has delivered G&T PD through whole-school sessions, while School B relies on external input from the National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE). Literature stresses that without adequate PD, teachers may lack the confidence or strategies to meet G&T learners' needs effectively (Kronborg & Cornejo-Araya, 2018; Tirri & Margrain, 2023). Ideally both settings will combine inhouse PD about G&T in their own context and with external specialist training to provide school leaders and teachers with strategies to better integrate and support G&T students in schools academically and socially.

Reflections

Efforts are made to support and accommodate for G&T students in both schools, however without there being explicit guidelines and expectations schools are left to do what they think is best for their given setting. Additional guidance from the government would support schools to know that they are doing right by their students.

It is encouraging to see that students enjoy school and learning, and it was somewhat soothing to learn that their learning experience is inline with common issues within G&T education found in the literature. That gives a firm foundation for schools to improve the G&T learning experience with academia to support change. Initial areas for improvement must ensure wellbeing for the G&T students, making sure that their needs are not forgotten amongst those with more explicit needs than theirs. In addition PD for teachers would help support the accommodation of G&T students in the classroom.

Conclusion

The synthesis of student voice and critical analysis of G&T provision in two international schools illustrates a pressing need for clearer policy, better training, and more holistic support strategies. Students articulated a desire for independent, quiet workspaces, teacher clarity, and manageable workloads—needs that are not always addressed in current practice. The comparative school review shows that while both settings have made strides in developing identification systems and raising awareness, there remains an implementation gap, particularly around enrichment and wellbeing.

For future development, schools should:

1. Broaden identification processes to include non-academic talents.
2. Provide consistent, ongoing PD that addresses academic and emotional needs.
3. Incorporate regular student feedback to refine programs.
4. Establish structured enrichment opportunities across all age groups.
5. Advocate for a national G&T policy in the UAE that supports consistency and innovation.

Ultimately, recognising and nurturing the complex needs of G&T students requires a systemic, compassionate, and evidence-informed approach. The insights gathered from students themselves make it clear: giftedness is not simply a privilege– it is a profile with its own unique vulnerabilities, deserving of careful, considered support.

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