

UNPACKING THE EXPERIENCES OF FORMER GIFTED CHILDREN: A QUALITATIVE  
STUDY ON IDENTITY, ACHIEVEMENT, AND WELL-BEING

By

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This dissertation is dedicated to all my fellow former gifted kids.

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We did it!

## ABSTRACT

In elementary school, I was pulled out of class and taken into a room with a man, a table and chairs, papers, puzzles, and a timer. I had no idea who he was or what he wanted; I just needed to perform the random tasks he asked me to do. I remember doing these weird puzzles, spelling words, and reciting passages from memory. These activities went on for what felt like hours. I met with this man a few more times, but then I never saw him again. I had no idea what these meetings were about until I was pulled out of class and labeled “Gifted.”

My mom said she saw my advanced abilities from a very young age. I was bored in class and was assigned extra work. I could talk and tie my shoes early on. I could read at a level higher than average at five years of age. She believed I had a solid potential to be gifted; these assessment results validated her point. I knew I was different; I always felt that way. Having these thoughts in my mind was a constant occurrence. Why was I different? Why did I feel so left out? These thoughts remained with me until I was invited to the Gifted Program at my school. This is when I realized there were people like me, and some of them were my best friends.

I was in the Gifted Program for a few years; we aged out once we left middle school. I do not remember much, but I do remember doing many puzzles that challenged me and my thinking. I would feel so bright when I figured out a complex puzzle or equation. I knew I was smart. This mindset carried on with me throughout middle and high school. I was a math whiz. I could solve any equation you put before me, and was encouraged to major in accounting. I graduated high school as a Salutatorian and was set to attend a four-year institution that fall. I thought my academic successes would continue into college, but then my first year began, and an extremely rude awakening came along.

I was enrolled in MA 100 – Intermediate Algebra – because my ACT score was not high enough for me to start in College Algebra. On my first test in the class, I got a C. A Biology test came next...another C. The list goes on and on. I was so defeated. I was taught and told that I was a genius, and I did not take this 'failure' lightly. I had never made below an A, and to have made multiple C's in my first semester, I felt like my academic career was over. Over time, I continued to struggle but felt too proud to ask for help. I stopped studying, eating, and socializing. I was burned out.

Looking back on who I was ten years ago and who I am today, I now know that I was a victim of self-sabotage. This form of self-sabotage associated with gifted child burnout is a widespread phenomenon that has inspired numerous studies and even TikTok videos. It took me a while to accept the fact that I was just maybe not as exceptional as people had told me I was. I am still dealing with that realization today.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Studying gifted children is gaining attention in the world of education. However, studies on this group of students usually discuss cognitive developments and ignore aspects of their social and emotional needs (Rorlinda et al., 2016). Most of the research discovered over the years has been devoted to gifted children. A gifted child can be defined as a student with gifts and talents performing at higher levels than others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains (National Association for Gifted Children, 2018). Gifted children are frequently characterized by their strong sense of curiosity (Davidson Institute, 2023), persistence in pursuing tasks (Klein, 2023), rapid learning, etc. These gifted children's qualities and characteristics do not just disappear once they grow up and enter adulthood (Tolan, 1994); they stick around and can create some unique experiences and challenges. Some may become more pronounced as they navigate the complexities of adulthood, including career choices (Holland & Holland, 1977), relationships, and self-identity (Hirsch, 1999). Still, unfortunately, these gifted individuals' adventures beyond their school years are relatively unexplored.

Former gifted children (FGC) can be recognized by their achievements post-schooling. The transition from being a gifted child to a talented adult is a period that can significantly affect the individual's career (Brooks, 2015) and educational choices. Some gifted individuals go on to achieve all the successes and achievements, while others struggle to advance their personal and professional growth. Through qualitative interviews and reading into the stories of former gifted children, this study seeks to discover factors contributing to their post-schooling outcomes. This dissertation hopes to not only fill a gap in the existing literature but also shed light on the experiences, challenges, successes, and narratives of these former gifted children as they journey through adulthood.

## Statement of the Problem

Research regarding gifted education has historically been quantitative, but the NAGC (2009) has acknowledged a need for added qualitative research in gifted education. Qualitative research is a mode of inquiry. Qualitative research methods seek to understand how giftedness impacts self-perception, relationships with others, and coping strategies about societal pressures and expectations. Coleman et al. (2007) state that within the past two decades, qualitative research has gone from being a novelty to being an accepted part of the literature in the education of gifted and talented children. The specific study of giftedness and its nurture has occurred in relatively modern times, and organized attempts to stimulate these abilities through education were developed even later (Gallagher, 1994). Despite the numerous amounts of literature on gifted education, there is a gap in the literature that looks at the long-term effects of being gifted beyond grade school. There is research regarding the curriculum for gifted children (Joyce VanTassel-Baska, 2021), the social-emotional challenges of gifted children (Renati et al., 2022), and even the emotional and behavioral characteristics of gifted children (Eren et al., 2018), but limited research about gifted children as adults.

Though they may exhibit exceptional abilities during childhood, former-gifted children face some unique challenges in adulthood. These challenges can range from underachievement to mental health problems or even difficulty adapting in an educational setting. Dutkewich (2024) stated that former gifted children, as adults, frequently find themselves grappling with a pervasive sense of doubt and uncertainty. This self-doubt, rooted in the pressures of perfectionism, the burden of expectation, and the weight of past achievements, can manifest in various aspects of our lives. The problem addressed by this qualitative research is the lack of in-depth understanding regarding the long-term experiences of former gifted children as they

transition into adulthood. This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of former gifted children, examining how their early identification as gifted has shaped their identity, relationships, career paths, and overall well-being as adults.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore and understand the lived experiences of former gifted children as they transition into adulthood. It will also examine the factors contributing to their successes and challenges outside the classroom. Through in-depth interviews, personal narratives, and a focus group, the research seeks to examine how former gifted children make sense of their childhood experiences in light of their adult lives. By prioritizing their voices, the study will allow participants to share their stories. Giftedness can often be perceived through a reasonably narrow lens that revolves around the emphasis on academic achievement. However, these experiences can be multifaceted. Ultimately, the purpose of this study is not only to fill a significant gap in the literature but also to offer a comprehensive and empathetic view of the adult experience of gifted individuals.

### **Research Questions**

To understand the former gifted children's perspectives on what it is/was like to be gifted and how the following questions will guide this study:

1. How do former gifted children recognize and reflect on their lived experiences regarding their personal development, identity formation, and the life challenges they have faced post-gifted education?
2. In what ways do former gifted children see the influence of their giftedness on their career paths?

By engaging with the voices of former gifted children, this study hopes to contribute to existing literature and foster a deeper understanding of the diverse paths taken by former gifted children.

### **Significance of Study**

The concept of giftedness has been an intriguing subject for a long time. How gifted students are defined, how they are educated, and how society receives them varies considerably across time and across differing cultures (Gallagher, 1994). Generations of gifted children have come and gone, moving through and beyond the educational institutions where they have or have not been identified, have, or have not been appropriately served (Tolan, 1994). Gifted children are characterized by their exceptional abilities (Davidson Institute, 2023), which leads them to a world of potential and greatness. However, this narrative can be highly overshadowing. While there has been research on identifying and caring for gifted children, there is still a significant gap when trying to understand the lived experiences of former gifted children (Baccassino & Pinnelli, 2023).

This research will hold significance for several parties, including educators and mental health professionals. By studying the psychological outcomes of gifted individuals, the study can provide valuable insights into the long-term development of these individuals, whether that be emotional, social, or psychological. The significance of this research is further explained by the increasing mental health struggles within the gifted population (Lavrijsen & Verschueren, 2023). As former gifted children move through adulthood, they may encounter unique mental health challenges that stem from perfectionism (IEA Staff, 2022), social isolation (Gross, 2009, p. 344), and pressure to meet high expectations (Noor et al., 2023). Ultimately, this study seeks to elevate

the conversation around giftedness, providing a platform for the voices of former gifted students and fostering greater awareness of their diverse experiences.

### **Role of Researcher**

As the primary researcher in this study, I find it necessary to recognize my role, background, and experiences, as these things can influence the research process. To answer the research questions in the best possible way, I became the primary instrument for the data collection. This was made known initially because my personal experiences have shaped my perception of giftedness. My interest in this topic comes from both an individual and academic context. Having been identified as gifted, I have experienced the complexities of giftedness firsthand. This personal connection helps drive my passion for understanding the variety of experiences that others who have similar backgrounds have faced. Research shows that these experiences sometimes have the potential to be useful rather than detrimental to the research (Locke et al., 2014).

My giftedness is an important part of my life, as it has made me who I am today. I was a gifted child, and my best friends in grade school were also gifted. I have witnessed the struggles. I have seen former students grow, but I have also seen them fall. In light of my background in the topic, I know the biases I can bring to the study. Efforts were made to help alleviate those biases by:

- Listening with a clear mind
- Practicing the art of reflexivity
- Considering all the data
- Member checking

I aim to create a safe and open environment for these gifted individuals to share their stories. I can accomplish this by building rapport early on. I will come into each interview with empathy and understanding because although we share similar academic backgrounds, our experiences and viewpoints may differ vastly.

Sutton and Austin (2005) state that the role of the researcher in qualitative research is to attempt to access the thoughts and feelings of study participants. This role is characterized by a combination of personal experience and academic knowledge. My role as a researcher was to effectively collect data, which would be used later to analyze the problem. This role is critical, consisting of research design, data collection, data interpretation, reflexivity, communication, and ethical behavior.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that guided the study was the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) theory of social-emotional learning (SEL). Founded in 1994, CASEL is a nonprofit organization that works to advance the development of social and emotional learning in schools worldwide. CASEL is a team of educators, researchers, child advocates, and practitioners who banded together to make social and emotional learning (SEL) part of a high-quality and equitable education for all (*About CASEL - CASEL, 2024*). The primary goal of SEL is to teach the necessary skills to be successful in life. This has only sometimes been the case. However, ideas around SEL have existed since ancient Greece, and the term "social and emotional learning" is a relatively new concept (*America Succeeds, n.d., pg. 4*). SEL is beginning to gain more and more traction in the world of education. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2020) provides a framework that identifies five core competencies of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness,

relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Table 2 defines the five core competencies identified by CASEL (2020). Each CASEL competency was explored in the findings as they relate to gifted education, gifted students, and implementation of the framework.

**Table 1**

Five Social-Emotional Learning Core Competencies

SEL Core Competency	Details
Self-Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Maintain self-confidence</li> <li>- Strong self-esteem</li> <li>- Awareness of triggers</li> </ul>
Self-Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Controls emotions to manage stress</li> <li>- Setting personal and collective goals</li> <li>- Using planning and organizational skills</li> </ul>
Social Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Taking others' perspectives</li> <li>- Recognizing situational strengths and demands</li> <li>- Demonstrating empathy and compassion</li> </ul>
Relationship Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communicating effectively</li> <li>- Developing positive relationships</li> <li>- Showing leadership in groups</li> </ul>
Responsible-Decision Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Demonstrating curiosity and open-mindedness</li> <li>- Recognizing how critical thinking skills are valuable both inside and outside of school</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identifying solutions for personal and social problems</li> </ul>
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Although CASEL is a leader in SEL promotion, this research would be lax to not disclose limitations to the CASEL framework. These limitations arise from the framework's structure, its applicability across different populations, and challenges in implementation. While a CASEL-based program may not be as culturally responsive, this can be explained by the research-driven desire to construct an evidence-based and generalizable framework (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). For example, the framework assumes a baseline level of emotional understanding and does not account for the varying ways emotions are expressed and understood across different cultures.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

An initial limitation of this study is transferability. In qualitative research, transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to or have relevance for other contexts, settings, or populations (Drisko, 2024). One key limitation of transferability in qualitative research is the use of purposefully selected samples. These samples are often chosen based on specific criteria, such as particular characteristics or experiences, which makes it difficult to generalize the findings to larger or different populations.

For this specific study, the identification process for the participants can be seen as a limitation. Giftedness is not a uniform concept and can be defined in various ways, which introduces variability in how gifted students are identified. The criteria vary across schools, regions, and even generations. Gifted students in this study were identified by IQ test scores, the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), and achievement testing. The current identification process has changed and may not pertain to this specific generation of former

gifted students. As a result, the sample of gifted students selected for qualitative studies may not fully represent the diversity of gifted individuals, limiting the scope of the research.

A second limitation is self-reporting. Qualitative research requires interpretation and is based on the personal views of the researcher (Creswell, 2012). Solely relying on self-reporting data from former gifted children could introduce certain biases. Speaking on bias, former gifted children may have a difficult time accurately remembering or reflecting on their experiences. Their memories could potentially be influenced by current perspectives or even emotional biases. Ethics can also come into play when discussing limitations. Studying former gifted children may raise ethical concerns, particularly around privacy, consent, and the interpretation of personal, often sensitive, experiences. The idea of "giftedness" can carry a stigma or undue pressure to succeed, potentially affecting how participants feel about their past and present. These limitations, as well as others, highlight the complexity of researching former gifted children.

## **Definitions**

**Gifted:** The federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act defines gifted and talented students as “Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.” [Title IX, Part A, Definition 22. (2002)].

**Twice-exceptional (2e):** Students who simultaneously show evidence of high performance or potential in a domain of talent and also have a disability that impacts their ability to achieve and learn (Missett, 2017)

Self-handicapping: This occurs when individuals engage in maladaptive, self-sabotaging behaviors that allow them to attribute failure to their self-defeating behavior rather than their abilities (Jones and Berglas, 1978).

*\*For this study, I will use self-limiting instead of self-handicapping. While both terms refer to behaviors where individuals create obstacles or conditions that hinder their own performance, self-limiting is used here to emphasize the broader range of self-imposed limitations that may not necessarily be tied to intentional avoidance of failure (as self-limiting often implies).*

### **Abbreviations**

CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

FGC: Former Gifted Children

MI: Multiple Intelligences

NACG: National Association for Gifted Children

SEL: Social-Emotional Learning

2e: Twice Exceptional

WISC: Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children

### **Summary**

In summary, this study aims to look into the experiences of former gifted students as they journey through adulthood. Gifted children will be faced with challenges as they continue to progress in life. Gifted students look at the world through an intensified lens that allows for inherent differences in comparison to their nongifted peers (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). Gifted students are diverse and have significant abilities that are advanced compared to their peers.

These challenges they will face and are currently facing can be detrimental to their personal and professional development. Through their stories, this study hopes to contribute a deeper understanding of giftedness and its implications for personal and social development. A review of the literature relevant to this study will be presented in Chapter Two.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Introduction

The literature on gifted education is extensive. This section provides a review of the literature on gifted children and their development into adulthood and theoretical frameworks relevant to their education. It commences with a brief overview of the history of gifted education, followed by a definition of giftedness and the characteristics that are usually associated with gifted children. Next, the Gifted Children Syndrome phenomenon is explored. Academic, mental health and identity development were then discussed. Finally, the effects on adulthood are evaluated. This section will also explore various aspects such as educational experiences, emotional health, challenges they may face, and the long-term outcomes of being identified as a gifted child.

When most individuals picture a gifted child, specific characteristics are often associated with that image. Gifted children can exhibit some of the following characteristics in their childhood: need for enhanced stimulation, long attention span, excellent memory, early and extensive vocabulary development, curiosity, etc. (Silverman, n.d.). Gifted individuals are a misunderstood population and are often overlooked and underserved in American schools (Mann, 2005). They are often misunderstood due to the stereotypes and misconceptions they face. Ely (2010) says that for many of these students, it is the stereotypes regarding Intelligence that have brought about their struggles or perpetuated them. Gifted individuals are believed to be successful. They must excel in all aspects and should never face any challenges. Misconceptions like this one can eventually cause some serious problems.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Theoretical frameworks are an important aspect of qualitative research (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Theoretical frameworks play a critical role in guiding the research process, shaping the study's design, and providing a lens through which data is interpreted. They inform the data analysis process by offering criteria for identifying patterns and themes. As well as assist in discussions about the suggestions and contributions of the research, paving the way for future studies. The theoretical frameworks are the foundation from which all knowledge is constructed for a research study. It serves as the structure and support for the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and the research questions (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The theoretical framework that guided the study was the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) theory of social-emotional learning (SEL).

### CASEL's Theory of Social-Emotional Learning

In recent years, there has been growing recognition that social and emotional learning (SEL) plays a crucial role in promoting students' psychological well-being, academic success, and overall development (Lawson et al., 2019). The CASEL Framework refers to a structured approach to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework provides a comprehensive approach to understanding and fostering social and emotional learning (SEL) in educational settings. This theory emphasizes the importance of developing essential competencies—such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—among students (*About CASEL - CASEL*, 2024). Social and emotional learning (SEL) has increasingly established its foothold in educational research and practice due to its impact on children's academic, behavioral, and social-emotional success (Frye et al., 2022). As schools across the

nation begin to recognize the impact of SEL on academic success and overall well-being (McMain & Edwards-Schuth, 2024), CASEL's framework serves as a guiding model for integrating these skills into curricula and school cultures.

The CASEL framework, which focuses on social and emotional learning (SEL), is particularly relevant for gifted students. Although originally designed to support all students (*About CASEL - CASEL*, 2024), the CASEL Framework has particular relevance for gifted children who may face unique emotional and social challenges in addition to their intellectual strengths. As mentioned previously, gifted children are typically defined as those who demonstrate exceptional ability in one or more areas. Given these specific characteristics that gifted children possess, the CASEL framework offers a valuable structure to support the development of social and emotional competencies in gifted children. Here's how the five SEL competencies can be applied to gifted students:

#### Self-awareness

Self-awareness, a key component of social and emotional learning, is particularly significant for gifted students as it enables them to understand their unique strengths, weaknesses, and emotional responses. Gifted children may have a keen awareness of their abilities, but they may also struggle with a heightened sense of difference from others. Emotional Intelligence (EI) is an important psychological construct that correlates with becoming more productive members of society (Pfeiffer, 2001). Gifted learners often grapple with heightened sensitivities and perfectionism, which can lead to feelings of isolation or anxiety (IEA Staff, 2017). Enhancing self-awareness supports their overall emotional well-being and academic success, empowering them to embrace their gifts while developing resilience in the face of challenges. For example:

- Identifying emotions: Gifted children can experience more intense emotions. Encouraging reflection on their feelings and thought processes can help them manage frustration and loneliness that may come up from feeling different.
- Understanding strengths and limitations: Gifted children often shine in academic areas, they might struggle with areas such as social interactions or emotional regulation. Awareness of these challenges can foster a mindset that values growth and encourages them to seek help or use coping strategies when necessary.

### Self-management

Self-management is crucial for gifted students as it helps them navigate their unique emotional and academic challenges. Gifted learners often experience intense emotions (Sisk, 2021), perfectionism (Alodat et al., 2020), and a strong drive for achievement (Siegle & McCoach, 2005), which can lead to stress or frustration. Many gifted students may need more self-management strategies, such as time management and study skills. Because gifted students often progress through the early years of school without being challenged, they sometimes fail to develop the self-management skills that other students master (Siegle & McCoach, 2005). By developing self-management skills, these students can effectively regulate their emotions, set personal goals, and create strategies for overcoming obstacles. For example:

- Goal setting: Encouraging gifted children to set realistic and achievable goals in both their academic and social lives can help them focus on progress rather than perfection.
- Impulse control: Gifted children may be prone to being impatient or getting frustrated, especially when plans change. Teaching strategies like mindfulness and time management can help them manage their emotions in situations that may be stressful.

### Social Awareness

Social awareness is essential for gifted students as it helps them navigate complex social dynamics and foster meaningful relationships. Gifted learners often find themselves in situations where their advanced abilities may create a sense of isolation or misunderstanding among their peers. Social skills are one of those competencies thought to be affected by high intellectual abilities. Cross et al. (2014) suggested that social skills bestow abilities to assess experiences in the social context, to evaluate actions in terms of the degree to which they lead to the desired results, and ultimately to adapt behavior accordingly. This skill not only assists in building friendships but also helps gifted students become more familiar with social cues and group dynamics, facilitating teamwork in academic settings. For example:

- Empathy and understanding: Teaching gifted children to recognize and appreciate the emotions and perspectives of others helps them form stronger relationships. By understanding the diverse experiences of their peers, gifted students can reduce feelings of isolation and foster more meaningful friendships.
- Appreciation of diversity: Gifted children may have advanced cognitive skills, but they need support in developing a deeper understanding of social diversity, whether it's cultural, socioeconomic, or based on different abilities. SEL programs encourage gifted children to develop empathy, recognize social inequities, and engage in community building.

### Relationship Skills

Relationship skills, a fundamental aspect of social and emotional learning, are essential for gifted students as they often face unique social challenges. All people need close personal relationships to thrive. Some people develop these relationships easily, and others find it difficult (Cross,

2015). While these learners may excel academically, they can struggle with interpersonal interactions due to differences in interests, emotional intensity, or social maturity.

Relationship skills help gifted children develop healthy, supportive interactions with others. For example:

- **Conflict resolution:** Gifted children might experience conflicts with peers due to differences in interests or personalities. Teaching them how to resolve disputes constructively, by focusing on collaboration and mutual understanding, helps them build lasting friendships and avoid social alienation.
- **Collaboration and teamwork:** While gifted children may prefer to work independently, they must learn to collaborate with others in group settings. SEL programs can teach them how to value group dynamics, practice active listening, and share ideas in constructive ways.

### Responsible Decision-making

Responsible decision-making is a critical component of social and emotional learning that significantly impacts gifted students, who often face unique pressures and challenges. These learners tend to engage in complex problem-solving and critical thinking, which can enhance their ability to make informed decisions. Decision-making is closely related to the ability to measure risk in a situation (Valadez Sierra et al., 2024). However, gifted students may also struggle with perfectionism and high expectations, leading to anxiety about making the "right" choice. Responsible decision-making supports gifted children in making thoughtful, ethical choices:

- Ethical decision-making: Gifted children may be more aware of ethical issues and injustices, but they might struggle with how to act on their values. Teaching them to evaluate potential outcomes, consider different perspectives, and make decisions that align with both their intellect and values is essential for their personal growth.
- Self-advocacy: Gifted students may need guidance on how to advocate for their needs in school or social settings, especially if those needs are not always understood. Empowering them to express their needs respectfully and assertively helps them navigate academic challenges and social situations more effectively.

The principles of the CASEL Framework for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) extend beyond childhood and are relevant for former gifted children—those who have grown into adulthood but may continue to experience unique social and emotional challenges related to their giftedness. Although gifted children often receive support tailored to their exceptional abilities during their school years, giftedness can have lasting effects that carry into adulthood. The skills promoted in the CASEL framework—such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship-building, and responsible decision-making—remain valuable for former gifted children as they navigate the complexities of life beyond school.

#### Self-awareness for Former Gifted Children

As gifted children grow into adulthood, they may experience a continued sense of being different or struggle with heightened self-expectations. This can manifest in perfectionism, imposter syndrome (Cuncic, 2024), or feelings of inadequacy, even in adulthood. Self-awareness, as outlined in the CASEL framework, helps former gifted children recognize and understand these emotional patterns and how they might affect their personal and professional lives. For example:

- Understanding unique traits: Former gifted individuals may continue to manage their heightened sensitivity or intensity, especially in work environments or social contexts. Self-awareness helps them acknowledge these traits and accept both their strengths and challenges.
- Navigating identity: Many gifted individuals face a challenge in aligning their giftedness with their identity in adulthood (Sallin, 2023), especially if they've felt isolated or misunderstood during childhood. Being aware of how their giftedness affects their relationships, careers, and emotional lives helps them develop a healthy sense of self.

### Self-management for Former Gifted Children

As gifted children transition to adulthood, they often face high expectations (Noor et al., 2023) that can lead to stress, burnout, or difficulty managing emotions. The self-management competencies within the CASEL framework remain crucial in adulthood for coping with ongoing emotional challenges and regulating intense feelings, because former gifted individuals often maintain high standards for themselves.

- Managing perfectionism: Former gifted children who experienced perfectionism during their childhood may find that it stays with them into adulthood, particularly in academic, career, or personal life. Practicing self-management techniques such as mindfulness, goal-setting, and managing stress helps them balance their desires with self-compassion.
- Avoiding burnout: Gifted individuals can often push too hard in their pursuit of success, leading to emotional exhaustion or burnout. Learning to recognize signs of stress and taking proactive steps to maintain well-being is essential for long-term success and mental health.

### Social Awareness for Former Gifted Children

Gifted children often struggle to find peers who share their intellectual or emotional depth (Eren et al., 2018), and this challenge can persist into adulthood. Social awareness—the ability to understand others' perspectives, cultures, and emotional states—continues to show importance for gifted individuals as they navigate relationships and work environments.

- **Building empathy and connection:** Former gifted individuals may feel misunderstood or disconnected from others. Developing social awareness helps them foster deeper empathy, connect with others, and appreciate the diversity of experiences outside of their own intellectual or emotional world.
- **Adapting to varied social environments:** As gifted individuals grow older, they may encounter a broader range of social environments (work, family, social circles) in which their heightened cognitive abilities may not be as valued or appreciated. Learning to adapt their communication style and approach based on the social context helps them navigate complex adult relationships.

### Relationship Skills for Former Gifted Children

As children, gifted individuals may face difficulties with social skills, finding peers who understand them, or sharing common interests (Lovecky, 2011). As adults, relationship skills—such as communication, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence—are crucial for building healthy personal and professional relationships.

- **Handling social isolation:** Many gifted individuals report a sense of loneliness or isolation. Developing strong relationship skills helps former gifted children build lasting and meaningful connections, whether in friendships, romantic relationships, or professional networks.

- **Effective communication:** Gifted individuals often have a unique communication style, which can sometimes be perceived as intense or overly intellectual. Developing relationship skills allows them to express their thoughts clearly and empathetically, without overwhelming others, and to better understand others' communication styles.

### Responsible Decision-making for Former Gifted Children

In adulthood, gifted individuals may face significant decisions regarding their careers, relationships, and personal lives. Responsible decision-making in the CASEL framework (2020) provides a foundation for making choices that are not only logical and analytical but also ethical and socially responsible.

- **Balancing intellectual strengths with ethical considerations:** Gifted individuals are often adept at analyzing situations, but they may benefit from honing their ability to make decisions that reflect not just intellectual understanding, but also emotional and ethical considerations. This includes practicing empathy, recognizing the impact of decisions on others, and weighing the long-term consequences of their actions.
- **Managing the pressure of achievement:** Gifted individuals may still feel the pressure to succeed or meet high expectations, and they might struggle to make decisions based on their true passions and desires rather than external pressures. Responsible decision-making skills can help them identify their core values and make decisions aligned with their long-term happiness and well-being.

This research will primarily draw on the CASEL Theory. The CASEL Framework for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) provides a comprehensive approach to developing emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, and responsible decision-making. It is designed to support students in understanding and managing their emotions, interacting positively with others, and

making sound decisions. The integration of the CASEL framework provides a complete foundation for exploring the diverse needs of gifted students in this qualitative dissertation. CASEL Theory (2020) provides a framework for understanding the key competencies in gifted students. This theory will illuminate the nuances of identity formation in gifted and address the importance of addressing both cognitive and emotional dimensions in education, ensuring that gifted students are supported. Despite extensive research on giftedness, there remains to be a gap in understanding how these theoretical perspectives can enhance our comprehension of the emotional and social challenges faced by gifted learners. By employing this framework, this study seeks to bridge that gap. The following sections will provide a broad examination of literature relating to gifted education.

### **History of Gifted Student Education**

Gifted education has evolved significantly over the past century, reflecting changing societal values and educational philosophies. Gallagher (1994) stated that throughout history, there have been instances of cultures paying special attention to children who revealed special talents (p. 83). The roots of gifted education can be traced back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century when researchers like Lewis Terman began to study intellectually gifted children. In 1925, Terman published a book titled *Genetic Studies of Genius* (Ford, 2012). His research helped lay the groundwork for gifted education. After becoming a professor at Stanford, Terman worked on revising the original Binet-Simon scales for use with American populations (Terman, 1916). His updated version of the test became known as the Stanford-Binet and went on to become the most widely used IQ test (Cherry, 2023). He studied children with high IQs and referred to them as the "Termites" (Leslie, 2000). His research started the beginning of an era of a formalized approach to recognizing giftedness.

The group dedicated to gifted students was founded in 1954 by Ann Isaacs (NAGC, n.d.). The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) is an organization dedicated to advocating for the needs and interests of gifted and talented individuals, as well as their educators and families. In 1958, the National Defense Education Act - an effort by the federal government to invest in gifted education - was passed (Jolly, 2018). This was a pivotal moment as it provided funding for the education of gifted students. The Office of the Talented and Gifted was finally given official status in 1974.

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, gifted education has become increasingly versatile. Throughout the short history of gifted and talented education, there have been significant shifts in emphasis (Ford, 2012). Massive shifts then were made in this area from the 1940s to the 2000s: from purposefully not identifying the hyper-gifted young towards actively seeking them out and guiding them into ‘productive’ careers (Crane, 2022). Today, more and more emphasis is placed on educational provisions for gifted children (Vreys et al., 2016, p. 51). Gifted education programs aim not only to foster academic excellence but also to promote social and emotional well-being among gifted learners (Rimm et al., 2017). The history of gifted education is a story that reflects the understanding of Intelligence, talent, and the needs of exceptional learners.

### **Defining Gifted Students**

Answering the question, “What is a gifted child?” in simple, brief language is not as easy as it sounds (Abraham, 1958, p. 20). In his 1958 publishing, Abraham (1958) tasked a graduate student with defining the word ‘gifted.’ The student discovered more than 113 different definitions of what it meant to be gifted. Giftedness can mean so many other things. It can be someone who excels in creative thinking (Torrance & Paul-Goff, 1990), a person who has a high IQ (Pezzuti et al., 2022), an individual with a high mental capacity (Aubry et al., 2021), or even

someone with a high measure of competency (Penna, 2024). Giftedness or gifted education has many potential possibilities on what makes a student gifted or talented. Sometimes, distinguishing a gifted child can be pretty straightforward, and these students stand out against their peers. These are the children who teach themselves to read at age 3, compute equations in their heads before kindergarten, and express such mature and abstract ideas about the nature of the world and human relations that adults are charmed and surprised (Eby & Smutny, 1990, p.3). These students are known as readily identifiable, but this is not always the case.

Gifted education is a widely researched field of study with diverse definitions of giftedness. Throughout its history, it has been given many possible opinions on what it takes for a student to be gifted and talented. According to the National Association for Gifted Children, the current federal definition was originally developed in the 1972 Marland Report to Congress and has been modified several times. The current definition, which is located in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, is:

Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity or in specific academic fields and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities [Title IX, Part A, Definition 22. (2002)].

Although a definition has been established, only some perceive giftedness similarly. Gifted students have been described as "quick thinking, quick of understanding, and have remarkable memories: they learn easily and remember what they have learned" (Phillips & Lindsay, 2006, p. 59). Although there are differences in opinion, the research agrees on one point: gifted people are different (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009a).

An individual's giftedness is determined by aptitude tests and individual intelligence tests. Their intellectual abilities are also put to the test. Intellectual ability is seen when an "individual evidences or shows the potential for a high level of abstract reasoning, advanced vocabulary, advanced academic performance, excellent memory, and an accelerated rate of learning" (Ford, 2012, p. 91). In America, the educational system focuses a lot on verbal skills. These skills are used to help identify gifted individuals through a multitude of tests. Many of these tests put an immense value on performance speed rather than creative thinking, meaning spatial skills are normally overlooked. Ream (2020) stated that even when gifted and talented students are identified, addressing their academic needs has historically presented additional complications.

### **Childhood Characteristics of Gifted Learners**

What does it mean to grow up gifted? Does it mean reading multiple novels a week? Or could it mean being able to play the piano at age five proficiently? It could mean being bored with schoolwork and being assigned more. In a study conducted almost two decades ago, Gross (2006) explained that "exceptionally gifted children appear to be characterized by the early onset of reading" (p. 412). Abdul et al. (2021) stated that most gifted students love to study, work hard to complete cognitive tasks, and want to have more difficult subjects to enhance their intellectual capability. Growing up gifted can mean any of these things, but for this paper's sake, it refers to children demonstrating exceptional abilities in many areas (academics, art, leadership, etc.) at a level that is significantly above their classmates.

Gifted learners often exhibit distinctive childhood characteristics that set them apart from their peers. These children tend to show advanced intellectual abilities, such as exceptional memory, quick learning, and a deep curiosity about the world around them. They may

demonstrate heightened problem-solving skills and an intense focus and passion for particular areas of interest. Additionally, they may display a high level of emotional sensitivity, often experiencing feelings more deeply than their peers, which can result in heightened empathy or a strong sense of justice. Some researchers argue that these unique characteristics make them particularly vulnerable to the risk of social and emotional problems, such as problems in identity development, career decision-making, and friendship formation (Rinn, 2018). Cross (2023) learned early on in research that "most gifted students feel different from their nongifted peers, mostly about being more serious about learning, and develop social goals for themselves (p. 146).

Gifted children in this situation may feel the need to change the way they present themselves to feel more comfortable in certain situations. Some may say they live double lives. This is where the term code-switching comes into play. Code-switching is the name given to the process of alternating between one linguistic code and another (Britannica, n.d.). Cross (147) defines code-switching as reflective of one person interfacing with another person or persons. These children may code-switch for many different reasons, such as fitting in with social groups, communicating effectively with others, or even expressing their identity better. For example, a gifted student may use informal language with friends while being more sophisticated in the classroom. Code-switching can be mentally exhausting for gifted students. When students face these certain mindsets with every project, test, and assignment, they begin to feel extremely tired. This could eventually lead to a complete lack of motivation and drive for the students towards their schoolwork and other activities (Alodat et al., 2020). Of course, not all gifted children will have these certain characteristics, but these common characteristics seen in gifted students are essential to recognize as possible causes of burnout.

## **Gifted Children Burnout/Gifted Children Syndrome**

While gifted children burnout was brought to light as a joke, there are a lot of students who face this phenomenon. The concept of 'gifted children burnout' has been around for quite some time but has recently found a second wind due to social media – specifically TikTok. It is not a medically known term but something coined by gifted alumni who consider themselves former gifted children. There are a few definitions of what 'gifted children syndrome' consists of, but the alumni of these programs define it as the long-lasting sequelae of adolescent academic pressure, such as burnout, impostor syndrome, and horrendous work habits (Kim, 2022).

The Davidson Institute, a nonprofit established in 1999 focusing on providing programs and scholarships that support the holistic development of profoundly gifted students, offers intriguing insights into the feeling of burnout that many gifted children face. Their definition of gifted child burnout is chronic exhaustion that stems from a mismatch between the individual and their current educational environment (Davidson Institute, 2021). Unfortunately, this experience is not unique to just former gifted children. The concept of burnout is explored in many different professions, but recently, it has turned to students and school-aged children. Research into burnout shifted from the workplace to the school setting as similar indicators were noticed in those pursuing college degrees (Gerber et al., 2015). Burnout, as defined by the World Health Organization, is "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed" (World Health Organization, 2019). For students, gifted children especially, school is their 'work.' Although it affects everyone, gifted children may have more severe burnout due to how their brains work.

If you are a gifted child, how do you know that you are dealing with gifted children syndrome? Battmer (2023) states some signs of gifted children syndrome may include but are not

limited to feeling cynical toward work, school, teachers, or classmates, disengaging from favorite topics, dreading school, anxiety attacks, etc. Burnout in gifted children is an increasingly recognized concern that can arise from the intense pressure to excel academically and socially, and it is important to be aware of the potential implications. The pursuit of perfection can create a cycle of overcommitment, where gifted learners take on too many responsibilities, leaving them feeling overwhelmed and exhausted (Davis & Rimm, 2004).

### **Academic and Mental Health**

Gifted programs feed into a detrimental culture of academic competition that can extend well past the specific class. Gifted students are constantly striving for excellence, and this can cause an increase in stress. This stress can happen to students at every level. Kaplan (1990) states that a variety of academic, personal, and emotional issues can be a student's stressor if it lasts long enough or happens often enough. "During the early years, school may be easy, with minimum effort required for success. If students are not challenged, they conclude that 'giftedness' means instant learning, comprehension, and mastery, and that outstanding achievement follows naturally" (Kaplan, 1990, p.3).

Perfectionism and self-limiting are two concepts that need to be discussed when speaking about the academic and mental health of gifted children. Perfectionism can impact the mental health of gifted children. It is defined as the tendency to set excessively high standards where only total success and total failure exist as outcomes (Alodat et al., 2020). Some common characteristics associated with perfectionism include attention to detail, an innate drive to achieve the highest standards, complete commitment to the task at hand, a fear of never being good enough, and frustration when these goals cannot be achieved (Mula et al., 2017). When perfectionism becomes pervasive and compulsive, it leaves no room for error. It provides little

satisfaction and much self-criticism because the results never feel good enough. Perfectionism becomes unhealthy when it causes stress, pain, illness, procrastination, and underachievement (Colorado Department of Education, 2022).

Gifted children may engage in self-limiting. Schwinger et al. (2014) mention that they sometimes feel a fear of failure in educational tasks or important exams that may affect their self-concept and lead them to use some academic self-limiting strategies. Self-limiting refers to creating excuses that hinder their performance, which is often a defense mechanism. It often occurs in situations where individuals feel uncertain of their ability to put forth a successful or competent performance (Miller et al., 2023). This can be extremely chaotic and leaves the individual uncertain of how to reproduce their successes in the future and uncertain of their abilities, potentially leading them to feel like imposters (Jones & Berglas, 1978). These self-limiting tendencies can be procrastinating, not putting in much effort, perfectionism, downplaying their achievements, and even avoiding challenges. Self-limiting is correlated with lower self-esteem, neuroticism, narcissism, perfectionism, elevated evaluative concerns, lower grade point averages, increased substance abuse, and depression among depressed people who have exaggerated perceptions of control. Self-handicappers are high in public self-consciousness, social anxiety, other-directedness, and depression and are less agreeable, conscientious, extraverted, and less open to experience (Curtis, 2017)

Other factors that come into play are undiagnosed or underlying disability, disorders, or impairments that affect the student's learning. There are some students who are highly proficient in math and reading and others who may struggle with learning challenges. Then you have those who fall somewhere in the middle. The National Association for Gifted Children uses the term "twice-exceptional students" to refer to students who are identified in school as both gifted and

as having one or more disabilities (Twice-Exceptional Students | National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.). The term twice-exceptional, often abbreviated as 2e, has only recently entered the lexicon of educators and mental health professionals (Peters, 2015). These "disabilities" can include ADHD, ADD, OCD, and even being on the autism spectrum (see Figure 2). Students who are gifted but also have learning challenges are sometimes difficult to pinpoint. Gifted children may use their strengths to cover their struggles, making learning issues harder to spot (Arky, 2023). Dr. Wilkes, in an interview conducted by Dr. Peters (2015), stated that once adults are diagnosed with the gifts and challenges of being twice-exceptional, it enables them to better understand the challenges that have held them back from fully realizing their passions.

## Figure 2

*"Disabilities" of the twice-exceptional student*

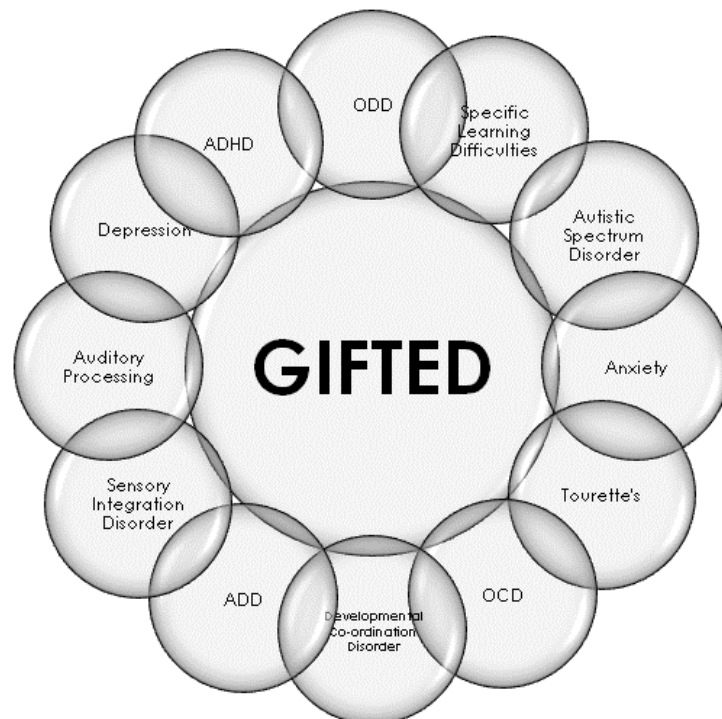


Image: <http://www.lanc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Gifted.png>

Eren et al. (2018) conducted a study to compare the quality of life, areas of social, emotional, behavioral, and mental problems, and family functionality of gifted children and children of normal Intelligence. Their findings indicated that gifted children are at risk for mental health, and educational interventions are needed to prevent that. The mental health of gifted children is a serious issue that requires continuing attention and support. These children often grapple with unique emotional challenges, including heightened sensitivities, perfectionism, and feelings of isolation, which can lead to anxiety, depression, and burnout (Silverman, 2013).

### **Identity Development**

The concept of giftedness is incredibly fascinating, and Armenta (1999) stated that identity and giftedness are widely studied phenomena (pg. 389). Gifted children are often identified by their exceptional abilities in many areas. These abilities can lead to some significant impacts on their identity development. Blending giftedness and identity can be a pretty daunting task, but Armenta (1999) stated that their realms, however, seem naturally overlapping, and mutual enrichment seems to be attainable (pg. 389). Though the task may be difficult, it is essential to explore. Why? As these individuals transition into adulthood, the connection between their giftedness and sense of self evolves. The process of identity development in intellectually gifted children and adolescents is complicated by their innate and acquired differences from their peers (Gross, 1998).

Understanding identity development can be frustrating. Identity development begins when individuals identify with role models who provide them with options to explore who they can become. As identity development progresses, adolescents are expected to make choices and commit to options within the confines of their social contexts (Jakobsen & Fischer, 2023). There are a few challenges related to understanding identity issues and development as it relates to

gifted individuals. Mahoney (1998) mentions in his research that we must first understand what goes into the formation of a gifted person's identity and the pragmatics of helping to foster a healthy and relevant identity for a gifted person. (pg. 1). Only then can we begin to dive into a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

The process of identity development is both an individual and social phenomenon (Adams & Marshall, 1996). It refers to the way individuals evolve their identities through interactions and social relationships. Identity development does not happen overnight, and it is not always black and white. There are many different models that we can use to help the development of identity among the gifted population. The one discussed in this dissertation is the Gifted Identity Formation Model. The Gifted Identity Formation Model is a guide for understanding the complexity and nuances of gifted people (Mahoney, 1998). This framework was designed to understand how gifted individuals develop their identities. Most models focus on cognitive abilities, but this model emphasizes a broader aspect. The breakdown of the four key constructs is displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2**

Key Components of the Gifted Identity Formation Model

<b>Component</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Validation	Acknowledgment that one's giftedness exists as corroborated by others or self
Affirmation	Continuous reinforcement of the nuances of an individual's giftedness from learning, experiences, environment, parents, teachers, and enrichment
Affiliation	Forming an alliance or association with others of similar intensities, passions, desires, and abilities
Affinity	Maintain the fire of the self

(Mahoney, 1998)

These four constructs connect with the 12 systems (Table 3) to help shape and influence identity formation.

**Table 3**

Systems that Impact the Identity Formation of the Gifted

Self	Educational
Family	Social
Family of Origin	Psychological
Cultural	Political
Vocational	Organic-Physiological
Environmental	Developmental

(Mahoney, 1998)

The Gifted Identity Formation Model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex phenomenon of how gifted individuals develop their identities.

The journey of identity development is complex. Giftedness has its advantages, but it can also force individuals to feel invaluable. To be valued within a peer culture that values conformity, gifted young people may mask their giftedness and develop alternative identities that are perceived as more socially acceptable (Gross, 1998). The process of solidifying your identity, especially when you feel “different,” can complicate your way of life. Gifted children and adolescents need the opportunity to work and socialize with others of similar abilities and interests if they are to grow toward self-acceptance (Gross, 1998). Encouraging environments that value diversity can assist individuals in their journey to developing their identities, making it a less stressful transition into adulthood.

## **Effects on Adulthood**

Adults who identify as "former gifted children" say they have carried this burnout and stress with them into adulthood. Vreys et al. (2016) stated that giftedness is an inherent part of someone's personality, so it can be assumed that the same needs and pitfalls will still be present in gifted adults (pg. 51). All of these characteristics create a different experience of life for the gifted adult, just as they do for the gifted child (Tolan, 2011). These experiences are shown in various ways in adulthood. Sometimes, the different life experiences are positive, but not always. Sometimes, it is painful or even destructive (Alvarado, 1989).

One is the pressure to live up to everyone's high expectations. This can be being unprepared for the rigors of secondary education and needing to have the necessary study skills to succeed in college. In grade school, gifted children were expected to perform at higher than normal standards. Gallagher (1966) states that this is how they are identified (p. 11). If the performance is not adequate, no reward is given. In adulthood, that sense of feeling like a failure or like "giftedness" has been wasted and can cause burnout.

The journey of gifted students through childhood and adolescence is often indicated by high expectations and acknowledgment from peers and educators (Subotnik et al., 2011). However, when these students shift into adulthood, they may encounter distinctive identity challenges. Identity challenges, such as not knowing who they are or how to measure their self-worth without academic validation, can affect a gifted child well into adulthood. Knowing that gifted children's development is advanced, it is possible, as Gross (1998) suggests, that they begin their development of self-identity earlier than their nongifted peers. The complexity of self-perception, expectations from society, and the pressure to excel can shape their adult identities in some profound ways.

Social and romantic relationships can be complex for former gifted students. Adults who identify as gifted children may find it challenging to connect with their peers who do not share the same intellectual mindset as them. Gross (1993) mentioned that research on social adjustment and development of highly gifted children suggests that the more highly gifted the child, the more likely there will be less than optimal social and emotional adjustment. This can lead to feelings of loneliness (Lovecky, 1995) or a sense of being misunderstood. Several studies have found that gifted children prefer the companionship of older children or other gifted age-peers (Dashvsky, 2017). While they may form relationships with like-minded individuals, the intensity of their interests can sometimes lead to barriers.

Romantic relationships can also play a significant role. The ability to develop and maintain healthy romantic relationships is a key developmental task in young adulthood (Xia et al., 2018). Gifted individuals may possess unique strengths, but they also can face challenges that can affect their romantic partnerships. One of the most significant ways in which giftedness affects romantic relationships is through communication. Gifted individuals normally have advanced verbal skills and may prefer engaging in intellectually stimulating conversations. This makes them seek out partners who can match their cognitive pace (Karnes & Bean, 2017). Young adults who can successfully establish and maintain positive intimate relationships tend to be more satisfied with their lives and better adjusted into later life (Adamczyk & Sergin, 2016).

One final effect of being gifted on adulthood is the possible career trajectory. Gifted individuals often excel in academic settings, leading to opportunities for continued education and special job positions. Gifted children often don't have enough self-confidence or self-esteem to choose their path, so they are likelier to choose a prestigious career path because that is what society expects of people with their labels (Linder, n.d.). They are drawn to professions that

require critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. However, the pressure to perform can lead to burnout and dissatisfaction. A study conducted by Vreys et al. (2016) discovered that many gifted adults are enthusiastic, respected employees with thriving careers. However, they are also prone to potential problems, which may lead to dysfunctional behaviors and emotional distress (p. 56). Because of these barriers, gifted employees may become "unbalanced" and unproductive on the work floor. They may either go in overdrive, taking too much work on their shoulders, or they may become underperformers with little interest in their job (Corten et al., 2006).

In conclusion, the effects of gifted education on adulthood are multifaceted, influencing not only their academic and career paths but also their emotional well-being. According to Tolan (1994), the focus on achievement can make it difficult for gifted adults to recognize and understand their uniqueness; in fact, many gifted adults are unaware of their mental capacities and that they differ from the norm. Tolan further argues that gifted adults who believe in an achievement-bound definition of giftedness will likely deny or misunderstand their giftedness, become restless, bored, frustrated, or unfulfilled, and remain unaware of the real reasons for their dissatisfaction.

## **Summary**

Giftedness is often defined as an exceptional ability or talent in one or more areas, including intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capabilities. While these students may have extraordinary potential during childhood, the effects of their giftedness can drastically affect their adulthood. Once children are labeled as gifted or talented, this often changes how others perceive them as well as how they perceive themselves (Mula et al., 2017). The way giftedness is defined and explained to children and to those peers and adults around them is quite important, particularly as there are both positive and negative messages from society about giftedness (Mula

et al., 2017). Smith (2011) states that while the definition of giftedness is relatively clear, the clearness of services needed to fully develop those abilities is not as clear (pg. 41).

In an interview with Dr. Paula Wilkes, a gifted education consultant, conducted by Dr. Dan Peters (2015), the light was shed on how refreshing it is that adults realize they are twice as exceptional. Dr. Wilkes (2015) states that we are in the midst of a huge shift toward authenticity and self-awareness. There is a greater acceptance of the diversity of what it means to be human. People are becoming more authentic and prouder to embrace who they are.

With this in mind, let us consider the words of Tolan (2011):

*“Mind makes us human; mind makes us individuals. From childhood through adulthood, to be themselves, to value and honor themselves and lead fulfilled lives, gifted adults must understand and come to terms with their own — unusual — minds.”*

### **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this qualitative narrative study. It also includes a description of the population and sample. The present study was grounded in data obtained from interviews of former gifted children conducted by the researcher. It sought to understand the experiences of former gifted children and how these experiences have impacted them in adulthood. In Chapter III, the qualitative research design, participants, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures employed in this qualitative study are described.

#### **Restatement of the Problem and Research Questions**

People tend to think that gifted children grow up to be highly successful, motivated, well-rounded adults who have their lives together in a way that makes them happy (Linder, n.d.). This way of thinking is outdated and can be very dangerous. Approximately 6% of students enrolled in schools in the United States, grades K-12, are classified as 'gifted' (NAGC, 2010). This is estimated to be roughly 3 million children who are of higher academic achievability than their peers. These gifted students grow up to be gifted adults, and these gifted adults have their own unique struggles.

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do former gifted children recognize and reflect on their lived experiences regarding their personal development, identity formation, and the life challenges they have faced post-gifted education?
2. In what ways do former gifted children see the influence of their giftedness on their career paths?

The researcher listened to these gifted individuals as they shared their experiences. This provided an opportunity for them to share information about their personal and professional development post-schooling.

### **Research Design**

This dissertation adopted a qualitative research design to understand the experiences of former gifted children. This design was chosen for this study based on the criteria delineated by Creswell and Creswell (2018). The research aimed to understand how being labeled as ‘gifted’ as a child has influenced personal identity, educational experiences, and emotional well-being in adulthood. This research was based on an interpretivist phenomenological paradigm. The aim of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world, and the main currency for an IPA study is the meanings particular experiences, events, and states hold for participants (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Although other methods were considered, in order to examine the questions of this study, a qualitative approach was chosen as it was best aligned to capture the relevant, significant information needed to understand these phenomena.

### **Population and Sample**

The study utilized purposeful sampling, when a researcher deliberately chooses a specific individual method to recruit participants. This strategy will recruit participants who meet the following criteria:

- Individuals who were identified as gifted in childhood (before age 12)
- Participated in gifted education for at least one year in the state of Tennessee
- Current age is less than 35 but greater than 21

The sample consisted of 15 individuals who were identified as gifted in their childhood during the early to mid-2000s. In the early 2000s, the identification of gifted children typically involved a combination of standardized assessments, teacher nominations, and observations of students' abilities and achievements, though the specific methods varied by school district. For the sake of this study, individuals in this study were identified as gifted through the use of standardized intelligence tests, such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) and the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale (IQ test). Other identification processes consisted of achievement testing scores, teacher observations, parent observations, the Woodcock-Johnson test, and creative thinking skills.

It is important to identify participants who could share the most insight and knowledge on the topic related to the guiding question (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Therefore, I reached out via social media (See Appendix C) to local alums in various gifted programs in the state of Tennessee. Purposeful sampling also allowed the identification of a small population of former gifted children to interview. Before the interview process began, the participants were provided with an overview of the proposed study, which specifically outlined the purpose, procedures, goals, and benefits of the study. Additional participants were identified until saturation was reached.

All of the participants received their gifted education in Tennessee, though they may live in different states today. The years of experience in gifted education ranged from 3 years to 8 years. All participants went to pursue a four-year education. The sample group did not represent former gifted children from various areas and varied backgrounds.

## **Instrumentation**

This study employed both individual interviews and a focus group as the primary methods for data collection.

### *Interview Protocol*

In the context of an interview-based study, this section focuses on the interview protocol, a structured guide that ensures consistency in how the interviews are conducted, facilitating reliable and systematic data collection (Markus, 1996). In qualitative research, the interview protocol serves as a vital tool for ensuring thoroughness in data collection. An interview protocol was developed, including open-ended questions that encouraged the participant to share their experiences. The interview protocol used in this study was designed to gather in-depth qualitative data that addresses the research questions while ensuring a consistent and ethical approach to data collection. The protocol consists of a series of semi-structured, open-ended questions that are aligned with the study's objectives. These questions were crafted to explore participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and insights related to the research topic. The semi-structured format allows for flexibility while still maintaining a core set of questions to guide the conversation.

Before the protocol was finalized, a pilot test was conducted with an individual who shared similar characteristics to the sample population. The pilot test helped to refine the questions, ensure clarity, and assess the overall flow of the interview. Feedback from the pilot led to slight adjustments in the wording of certain questions and helped clarify any uncertainties. See Appendix A.

The interviews were conducted in a one-on-one format via Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. All interviews were video recorded with the participants' permission. Each participant was notified in advance and electronically signed an informed consent form stating that they understood that their interview would be recorded, and they were reminded again before the recording began.

### *Focus Group Protocol*

This section concentrates on the focus group protocol. The focus group protocol was developed to complement the individual interviews and was designed to facilitate group discussions on the central themes of the study. George (2021) states that a focus group is a research method that brings together a small group of people to answer questions in a moderated setting. The group was chosen due to predefined demographic traits, and the questions were designed to shed light on a topic of interest. Focus groups are an effective way to gather data on collective perspectives, social dynamics, and the shared meanings participants attach to certain issues. The protocol ensured a structured yet flexible approach to capturing group insights while encouraging interaction among participants.

Similar to the interview protocol, the focus group protocol was informed by the research questions and the study's theoretical framework. The protocol included a set of open-ended questions that promoted discussion around key themes identified in the literature review. The questions were designed to encourage participants to share their views and also respond to the perspectives of others, creating a productive environment for interaction. The focus group protocol (See Appendix B) has been divided into 3 sections: introduction, core discussion questions, and probing/follow-up prompts.

The focus group consisted of 8 participants and lasted a little over 90 minutes. The focus group discussion was video/audio-recorded, with participant consent, to ensure accurate transcription and analysis. In addition, field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and other contextual details that may not be captured in the audio recording.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The data collection procedures for this study involved the use of two primary methods: individual interviews and focus groups. These methods were selected to gather diverse perspectives on the research topic, allowing for both in-depth, individual insights and dynamic group discussions. The following outlines the steps involved in the data collection process, including participant recruitment and data collection techniques.

#### *Recruitment*

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling to ensure that individuals with relevant experiences and characteristics were included in the study. The target group for this study included former gifted children who received their gifted education in the state of Tennessee. Recruitment was conducted through social media and gifted education forums. A consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, time commitment, and confidentiality measures was provided to all potential participants. Those who agreed were asked via email (See Appendix D) to schedule a time for their interview and focus group session. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and the focus group session lasted around 90 minutes. Participants were reminded of the date, time, and meeting link for their interview and/or focus group at least one week before the session.

### *Interviews*

During the interview, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences and provide detailed responses to the questions posed. A set of eight questions was used to guide the discussion. The interviewer created a comfortable, non-judgmental environment to encourage open and honest responses. The interview began with demographical questions and ended with more in-depth questions. Each question was designed to reflect the CASEL framework's social-emotional core competencies. Table 4 presents an overview of the research questions and how they were addressed through the data collection. An example of one of the probing questions is provided below:

1. What are some challenges you faced as a gifted child?
  - a. How did you navigate those challenges?
    - i. Then? Now?

The final question asked participants to reflect on any suggestions or recommendations for addressing issues related to former gifted children. Interviews were recorded via Microsoft Teams. Each interview was transcribed using Microsoft Teams and cleaned by the researcher. The transcribed interview, a summary of the interviews, and relevant quotes were sent out to the participants for review, allowing them to strike any interview content or provide clarification. This process, known as member checking, helps ensure the accuracy and credibility of the findings. Participants will also be asked if they want to add anything after reflecting.

**Table 4**

## Alignment of Research Questions and Data Collection Strategy -Interview

<b>Interview Question</b>	<b>CASEL</b>
Can you tell me about your experiences as a gifted child – whether that be in grade school or post-schooling?	Self-Management
How do you feel your giftedness has influenced your academic and personal development?  In what ways did being gifted affect your relationships with your family, teachers, and peers?	Relationship Skill  Social Awareness
What are some challenges you faced as a gifted child?  How do you feel your giftedness has influenced your career choices and achievements?	Self-Management
What are some challenges you faced as a gifted child? How did you navigate those challenges? Then? Now?	Responsible Decision-making
Can you share any memorable moments that shaped your understanding of your giftedness? When did it click?  Have you encountered any misconceptions or stereotypes about gifted children?	Self-Awareness  Self-Management

Each column in Table 5 highlights interview questions that align with the theoretical framework utilized in this study. All data collection questions were discovered by research and conversations with professionals in the gifted education field.

### *Focus Group*

For the focus group, the moderator introduced the research topic and facilitated discussion, ensuring that all participants had the opportunity to speak. The moderator guided the group using a set of open-ended questions (See Appendix B) but remained flexible to allow the discussion to flow naturally. If more information or guidance was needed, additional probing questions were asked. The session was video recorded, and the moderator took notes on key points and group dynamics.

**Table 5**

Alignment of Research Questions and Data Collection Strategy -Focus Group

<b>Focus Group Question</b>	<b>CASEL</b>
What do you remember about being labeled as a gifted child?	Self-Awareness
How did being gifted influence your relationships with peers during childhood?	Relationship Skill Social Awareness
How did your academic experiences as a gifted child shape your self-perception and expectations?	Self-Management Self- Awareness
How did your giftedness affect your transition from childhood to adolescence? Did you face any specific challenges during this period?	Self-Management Self- Awareness Social Awareness
Looking back, how do you feel about the label of being gifted now as an adult?	Self-Awareness Responsible Decision-making
What impact do you think being a gifted child has had on your adult life, both personally and professionally?	Self-Awareness Responsible Decision-making Self-Management

## Data Analysis Procedures

In qualitative studies, data analysis proceeds alongside the data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The analysis of interviews occurred at the same time as other interviews. Raw data was transcribed and organized while being prepared for coding. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes in the interview transcripts. The analysis will follow Clarke and Braun's (2006) six-phase process:

1. Familiarization of data.
2. Generation of codes.
3. Combining codes into themes.
4. Reviewing themes.
5. Determine the significance of themes.
6. Reporting of findings.

The first step is to get to know the data by reading through the transcripts and notes to understand the content entirely. In a qualitative study, familiarization of data refers to the initial process of becoming deeply acquainted with the data you've collected before beginning the formal analysis. This step is crucial because it helps researchers gain an overall understanding of the content, themes, and context of the data, which in turn supports more meaningful interpretation and analysis. Since interviews will be the main source of data, familiarization will include reading each transcript several times, taking note of key quotes, and reflecting on each interview.

Once a good understanding of the data is established, generate codes. Inductive analysis is a key characteristic and strength of qualitative research. Inductive analysis involves reading through the data and identifying codes, categories, patterns, and themes as they emerge (Saldaña

& Omasta, 2017). You don't start with preconceived notions of what the codes should be but allow the narrative or theory to emerge from the raw data itself (Fernandez & Rivera-Jiménez, 2024). The researcher will highlight or mark sections of the transcribed text that seem relevant to the research questions. These marked sections will then be assigned a code.

Saldaña (2016), divides coding into two major stages: First Cycle and Second Cycle coding. The first stage of coding that was used was in vivo coding. This specific coding technique uses the actual words or phrases from participants as codes. This assists with making sure the voices of the participants are retained. This form of coding can be beneficial when researchers interact with participants from a particular culture or microculture to help highlight how those participants use specific words or phrases in their interactions that might not otherwise be understood when using other forms of coding (Manning, 2017).

Next comes the combination of themes. With this, we looked for patterns, similarities, and differences. This is when pattern coding – the second phase – comes into play. Miles et.al. (2014), states that pattern codes are inferential or explanatory codes, ones that identify a “bigger picture” configuration (pg. 79). The purpose of pattern coding is to organize and make sense of large volumes of qualitative data by identifying recurring themes, patterns, or relationships that emerge across different sources or participants. It takes the initial codes derived from in vivo coding and groups them based on similarities. Table 6 shows the key differences between In Vivo and Pattern Coding. Although separate, many studies, including this one, use them together. This two-step process allows the researcher to stay grounded in the participant’s language while also generating abstract themes that help address the research questions.

**Table 6**

## Key Differences Between In Vivo Coding and Pattern Coding

	In Vivo	Pattern
Focus	Capturing the exact words or phrases	Identifying patterns or themes across the data
Level of Complexity	Low – direct use of participant’s language	High – involves grouping and categorizing similar codes into larger themes
Purpose	To preserve participants’ voices	To organize data into meaningful categories or patterns

Once the themes were combined, they needed to be reviewed to ensure they accurately reflected the data. Reviewing themes is a crucial step in qualitative data analysis that involves evaluating and refining the themes that have been identified during the coding process. This stage ensures that the themes are well-defined, coherent, and grounded in the data and that they accurately reflect the patterns and meanings emerging from participants' experiences. The following questions can help with this step (Caulfield, 2023):

- Do the themes make sense?
- Does the data support the themes?
- Is the theme too broad or narrow?
- Are any themes missing?

Reviewing themes is a reflective process that requires careful consideration of the data, research questions, and participant perspectives. It ensures that the final themes are coherent, relevant, and well-supported by the data. To ensure the themes were accurate, the researcher opted to utilize member checking. Brit et al (2016) state that member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation, is a technique for exploring the credibility of results (p. 1802). During

this stage, the researcher shares the finalized themes with participants or key individuals to check for consistency and to verify whether the themes resonate with their experiences. This process helps further enhance the credibility and validity of the research findings. Then, the themes were clearly defined by what they each represented. This is a crucial step in seeing how these themes relate to the research questions. Finally, the findings were reported. In thematic analysis, this involves clearly presenting the themes and explaining the significance in relation to the research question.

### **Summary**

Qualitative study findings can be reported in many different ways, but because this study focuses on the voices of the participants, the data are presented in a narrative form using rich explanations to provide an understanding into the minds of these former gifted individuals. The goal of this chapter was to outline the research used to answer the research questions and to understand the experiences of former gifted children to help inform educational practices and support systems for gifted individuals. This methodology section outlines a comprehensive approach to studying the experiences of former gifted children. Provided was a description of the research design, population and sample, instrumentation, data analysis and techniques, and data collection procedures.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from in-depth interviews and a focus group with former gifted children in Tennessee, exploring their lived experiences as they transitioned into adulthood and highlighting the positive and negative aspects of these experiences. This research aims to understand how being labeled "Gifted" has shaped their academic trajectories, self-perceptions, and overall well-being. A complex relationship of advantages and disadvantages marks the experiences of former gifted children. While participation in this program often provided a sense of belonging, intellectual stimulation, and opportunities for advanced learning, it also introduced pressures of perfectionism, identity conflicts, and isolation.

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Eight participants took part in interviews only, three participated exclusively in the focus group, and four contributed to both. While four individuals were involved in both methods, no themes were found to be solely influenced by their contributions. Their narratives, along with those of the other participants, provide valuable insight into the long-term impact of being labeled as gifted. Through thematic analysis, several recurring patterns emerged that highlighted both the advantages and challenges associated with the gifted experience.

This chapter is broken into four main sections. The first section consists of participant profiles that briefly overview each individual's background, education, and occupation. Next, the major themes identified in the data were supported by direct quotes from the participants. Then, any unexpected findings discovered in the data will be discussed. Finally, the chapter ends with a summary of the key findings and insights.

## **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, several strategies were implemented, including member checking, prolonged engagement, and researcher reflexivity. Member checking was used to verify the accuracy of the data by allowing participants to review their interview transcripts and provide feedback, ensuring their perspectives were accurately represented. Prolonged engagement with participants facilitated deeper relationships and helped create an environment of trust, which encouraged honest and open conversation. Additionally, researcher reflexivity was employed throughout the study to ensure that I remained aware of my own biases and assumptions, acknowledging how these could influence the research process. I made sure to be very intentional about acknowledging that influence rather than trying to hide it. Reflecting on personal experiences and maintaining a reflective journal helped mitigate potential biases and kept the focus on the participants' lived experiences. These combined strategies enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, ensuring that the findings authentically represented the voices of the participants.

## **Participant Demographics**

This section introduces the participants in this study who were identified as Gifted during their K-12 education. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion, allowing individual reflections and group dynamics to shape the findings. Some participants took part in both. Pseudonyms are used to protect their identities. Table 9 describes the participant demographics for the interviews and focus groups.

**Table 7**

## Participant Demographic Chart - Interviews

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Data Collection Method</b>
<b>Paula</b>	35	Doctorate	Veterinarian	Interview & Focus Group
<b>Maria</b>	32	Bachelors	SAHM	Interview
<b>Brianna</b>	31	Bachelors	Self-Employed Graphic Designer	Interview & Focus Group
<b>Julie</b>	27	Bachelors	Nurse	Interview
<b>John</b>	34	Bachelors	Manager	Interview & Focus Group
<b>Laura</b>	31	Bachelors	Nurse	Interview
<b>Trey</b>	28	Bachelors	Insurance Agent	Interview
<b>Taylor</b>	32	Masters	Account Manager	Interview
<b>Leeanna</b>	28	Masters	Physician Assistant	Interview
<b>Jamie</b>	24	Masters	Lab Assistant & Scribe	Interview
<b>Ashely</b>	27	Masters	ESL Teacher	Interview & Focus Group
<b>Holly</b>	28	Masters	Licensed Therapist	Interview
<b>Brooke</b>	30	Bachelors	General Manager	Focus Group
<b>Cassie</b>	23	Bachelors	Physical Therapist Technician	Focus Group
<b>Lacey</b>	29	Bachelors	SAHM/Digital Creator	Focus Group

**Participant Profiles****Paula (Interview & Focus Group) – Veterinarian, Age 35**

Paula started the Gifted program at age three by taking reading and enrichment classes. She felt academically gifted but was not truly challenged until veterinary school, which helped reinforce

her confidence in her abilities. Growing up in a family of educators, she was held to high academic standards. However, she did not experience significant social challenges due to her giftedness.

**Maria (Interview) – Stay-at-Home-Mom, Age 32**

Maria excelled effortlessly through grade school but found college a wake-up call, requiring her to develop study habits for the first time. Growing up with high expectations from family and teachers, she appreciated the gifted program's challenges and support. She felt the pressure of being set apart from her peers. Her natural abilities led her to switch from business management to public relations. However, she later became a stay-at-home mom, and societal expectations about her giftedness still follow her.

**Brianna (Interview & Focus Group) – Graphic Designer, Age 31**

Brianna participated in a merit program early in her academic career. She later transitioned to a magnet school, which provided her with daily enrichment. Transitioning to traditional honors and AP classes in high school proved challenging due to struggles with behavioral issues and perfectionism instilled by her early giftedness experiences. Diagnosed with ADHD inattentive at 16, she navigated the overlap between giftedness and anxiety, learning to manage expectations in both academic and professional settings as a business owner. Brianna's giftedness influenced her career choices despite challenges, leading her to pursue a creative and multifaceted career.

**Julie (Interview) – Nurse, Age 27**

Julie was tested for the Gifted program in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and began the program in middle school. She excelled in pattern recognition and read at a reading level that was above average. While she enjoyed the enrichment activities, she sometimes struggled with imposter syndrome and pressure

to excel. Her giftedness influenced her lifelong love of reading, her analytical approach to forming opinions, and her career in cardiology nursing.

**John (Interview & Focus Group) - Office Manager, Age 34**

John was identified as gifted in elementary school, excelling in social sciences. He found schoolwork easy and enjoyed the enrichment activities that Gifted offered. However, transitioning from the ease of grade school to more challenging college coursework was difficult. He initially pursued an education path, intending to become a professor, but later pivoted to Geography. His giftedness influences his interests in geography and history. However, he mentions the pressure to pursue a traditional college path rather than a vocational one.

**Laura (Interview) – Nurse, Age 31**

Laura discovered she was gifted in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. She thrived academically but often felt isolated socially. Coming from a family where academic excellence was expected, she felt the weight of high standards. Socially, she faced challenges with peer jealousy, bullying, and the awkwardness of being pulled out of gifted class, making it difficult to form strong friendships until later in life. While her giftedness did not directly influence her decision to pursue nursing, it shaped her drive and success in the field. After pursuing a career in a demanding nursing specialty, she shifted to a more balanced, less intense specialty.

**Trey (Interview) – Insurance Agent, Age 28**

Trey remembers the gifted testing process vividly. He enjoyed strategy-based games like chess and Othello because they enhanced his problem-solving skills. While he did not feel pressured to be perfect, he did experience the challenge of keeping up with older gifted siblings. Though his

career in ministry is not directly tied to his giftedness, he applies critical-thinking skills learned in the program to his work, balancing big-picture and detail-oriented perspectives.

**Taylor (Interview) – Account Manager, Age 32**

Sara was identified as Gifted in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. She found the program enriching but also isolating, missing its structure in high school and struggling to adapt to college without it. While giftedness fueled her love for learning, she faced social challenges, including bullying. She encountered educators who did not always value the program. She struggled with imposter syndrome, often comparing herself to her brother, who was also Gifted. Though initially pursuing culinary arts, health issues led her to change career paths. However, her intellectual curiosity and adaptability have continued to shape her professional journey.

**Leeanna (Interview) – Physician Assistant, Age 28**

Leeanna recalls the gifted testing process as long and enjoyable and never felt the program was actual work. Giftedness pushed her to pursue higher education, but being told she was bright early on led to a false sense of ease, making the rigorous demands of PA school a wake-up call. While she did not experience significant social challenges, she struggled to adjust from excelling effortlessly in undergrad to merely passing in a demanding medical program.

**Jamie (Interview) – Lab Assistant & Scribe, Age 24**

Jamie was identified as gifted in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. She attended the gifted class once a week but has primarily blocked out those memories despite enjoying them at the time. She set high academic expectations for herself, but upon reaching college, she realized she was on par with her peers, which gave her a sense of normalcy. Limited resources in high school, such as the lack of AP classes, left her feeling behind compared to peers with more academic opportunities. While

giftedness influenced her career choices by pushing her toward challenging roles, she has since learned to let go of perfectionism and focus on personal growth.

**Ashley (Interview & Focus Group) – ESL Teacher, Age 27**

Ashley was tested for giftedness in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. She enjoyed the hands-on projects and creative activities. She did struggle with motivation in subjects that did not challenge or interest her, leading to a pattern of excelling in areas of interest while neglecting others. While giftedness fueled her passion for writing and led her toward an English-focused career, it also created social challenges, making it difficult to integrate into new groups. The transition to college was tough, and she grapples with feelings of inadequacy despite excelling in English. Later, diagnosed with OCD and bipolar disorder, she found relief in understanding herself better but also frustration in how those around her had overlooked her struggles, reinforcing misconceptions about giftedness.

**Holly (Interview) – Licensed Therapist, Age 29**

Holly was placed into the Gifted program in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. She recalls feeling significant pressure and anxiety from being labeled as "Gifted," specifically regarding test performance and academic expectations from teachers. Her giftedness strongly influenced her educational path, leading her to pursue higher education and creating a deep connection between her self-worth and academic performance. As an adult, she continues to deal with the psychological impacts of being in the Gifted program, including perfectionism and anxiety in her professional life.

**Brooke (Focus Group) – General Manager, Age 30**

Brooke, a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader, was relieved when she learned she was Gifted. She described how being in Gifted made school more engaging. However, she did not fully understand the label's significance then. Her transition to college was unique, considering she went to a D1 public

HBCU and then transferred to a private D2 school. As a student-athlete, Brooke felt the challenges of a busy season, but this did not slow her down. Brooke knew she was just as smart as her peers despite them having more academic opportunities in grade school. She enjoyed the gifted program and still holds on to that label today.

### **Cassie (Focus Group) – Physical Therapist Technician, Age 23**

Cassie was in the Gifted program from 4<sup>th</sup> grade until 8<sup>th</sup> grade. She enjoyed the different teaching styles and the challenge of learning in a new way. Initially, being labeled as "Gifted" made her feel self-conscious and put unwanted attention on her due to her shy nature. Still, over time, she grew more comfortable with being different. After graduating in 2020, Cassie faced challenges in adapting to the rigorous study habits required at a more prominent university, especially after having never needed to study in her small town. She spent a year learning how to study effectively. Being labeled as gifted motivated her to push through the difficulties. However, it also made her own hardest critic when things did not go perfectly the first time.

### **Lacey (Focus Group)**

Lacey had a best friend in the Gifted program, which made the experience more enjoyable. Initially, she felt crushed when placed in a different class, but she felt better when she realized what it was. Being an only child, the Gifted program helped her feel a sense of community and provided a sense of belonging. Lacey struggles with a high standard of excellence, feeling pressure to be perfect in everything she does. This leads to tension, especially in math, where she did not perform well due to a lack of interest and possibly ADHD. She was later diagnosed with ADHD at 26 after having her children. The pressure to excel followed her into adulthood, especially balancing work and motherhood.

This diverse group of participants brings a range of perspectives on what it means to grow up as a gifted child and transition into adulthood. While each participant followed a unique path, common themes such as academic pressure, social relationships, and long-term psychological effects of the Gifted label emerged across their narratives. The following section explores these themes and others in greater depth, drawing on participant voices to illuminate their shared experiences.

### **Emergent Findings**

The research for this study involved a combination of in-depth interviews and a focus group to gather rich, qualitative data on the experiences of former gifted children. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, targeting adults who had been identified as gifted in childhood. Initial data collection began with semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share personal stories and insights about their experiences with the gifted label, academic pressures, and long-term development. The interviews, which lasted between 25 and 45 minutes, were video recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in capturing the voices of the participants.

Following the individual interviews, a focus group, that lasted nearly two hours, was conducted to encourage discussion and interaction among participants. This method was chosen to allow for the exchange of ideas and the identification of commonalities or differences in experiences. The focus group, comprised of seven participants, went more in-depth of themes that had emerged from the interviews, such as social isolation, identity struggles, and the long-term effects of giftedness. The group setting fostered a collaborative environment where participants could build on one another's narratives, leading to a deeper exploration of shared themes and nuances. Both the interviews and focus group data were analyzed using thematic

analysis to identify emergent themes, ensuring that the findings were rooted in the participants' lived experiences.

Following the data collection phase, the initial analysis was conducted to identify key themes and patterns that emerged from the participants' shared experiences. The analysis process began with a review of the interview transcripts and focus group discussion, where segments of text were coded to capture significant moments, ideas, and emotional responses. This initial coding allowed for the grouping of similar responses, leading to the identification of recurrent themes such as the pressure of academic excellence, the emotional impact of social isolation, and the challenges of navigating life after leaving the gifted program. From this initial analysis, several emergent themes began to take shape, illustrating the complexities of being a former gifted child. Key themes such as "identity struggles," "imposter syndrome," and "redefining success" were particularly prominent. This analysis laid the foundation for the deeper exploration of these themes, which would later be refined and discussed in the following sections of the dissertation. To illustrate the thematic landscape of participant experiences, each of the following sections will end with a table that presents the primary interview categories alongside representative in vivo codes.

### **Former Gifted Child 1: Paula**

The interview with Paula provided insights into the experiences of a former gifted child and how those experiences influenced her academic and personal development. She started the gifted program remarkably early, at just three years old. Paula remembers the program fondly, recalling special activities like field trips, hands-on projects, and a teacher who played a meaningful role in her life. While being identified as gifted pushed her to meet higher expectations, she didn't feel much social pressure or face negativity from her peers. Paula believes her time in the

program gave her valuable skills that helped her succeed in veterinary school and earn certifications in animal chiropractic and acupuncture. She credits her mother for encouraging her to pursue her goals and feels that her gifted experience played a big role in her academic and career achievements. Paula strongly recommends that parents allow their children to join gifted programs if given the chance.

**Table 8**

Paula's Interview Categories and Supporting In Vivo Codes

<b>Category</b>	<b>Sample Codes</b>
Positive experiences	<p>"I felt challenged in the best way."</p> <p>"I thoroughly enjoyed my time in gifted."</p>
Family Support	<p>"My family members are all teachers, so it was never a family problem. It was all support."</p>
Pressure to Succeed	<p>"Higher accomplishment that I need to live up to."</p> <p>"I do feel like they [teachers] kind of held you to a higher standard."</p>
Impact of Gifted	<p>"Being in gifted provided a broader perspective and opportunities for advancement."</p>

### **Former Gifted Child 2: Maria**

In her interview, Maria recalled that school felt easy until college when she faced a sudden challenge that required her to develop study skills for the first time. Maria described this as a major "wake-up call" that influenced how she approached both academics and personal

growth. She mentioned that her gifted status came with high expectations, which could feel overwhelming at times. However, those expectations also motivated her to push herself. Maria's family, particularly her mother, played a big role in supporting her academically while teaching her to stay humble about her giftedness. She credited this balance for helping her develop self-discipline and confidence. While she now feels her giftedness isn't as sharp since becoming a stay-at-home mom, she still notices the lingering pressure to live up to past expectations. Maria encourages parents and teachers to guide gifted children with loving support, allowing space for mistakes and changes in direction without judgment.

**Table 9**

Maria's Interview Categories and Supporting In Vivo Codes

<b>Category</b>	<b>Sample Codes</b>
Wake-Up Call in College	<p>“You know, the blink of an eye it was just easy, but then the real world. It just kind of hit a little bit differently.”</p> <p>“It was a personal wake-up call of, you know, having to put forth some effort, and that goes into academically.”</p>
High Expectations	<p>“There was always a very high level of expectation that came along with that [being gifted].”</p> <p>“I think I put expectations on myself as well.”</p>
Supportive Family	<p>“She [her mother] was always every step, you know, right there with me helping the education every step of the way.”</p>
Shifting Identity	<p>“So, it changed the way that I took on life and how I applied myself.”</p> <p>“I'm a stay-at-home mom. You know, I'm not doing essays and things like that to get to challenge my brain. So, I fall in a much more average category now brain-wise.”</p>

### Former Gifted Child 3: Brianna

Brianna’s background was unique, as her mother was a school psychologist who actively supported her academic journey. She started in the gifted “merit” program in kindergarten and later attended a magnet school for further enrichment. While she valued these experiences, Brianna struggled with the transition out of specialized gifted programs when she moved states and entered traditional honors and AP classes, which felt less engaging. Brianna faced challenges with behavioral issues tied to boredom and social difficulties, which led to her having an IEP focused on behavior. She attributed some of her struggles to feeling superior to her peers and not respecting authority figures. Over time, she learned to manage her high standards, especially as a business owner where balancing expectations became crucial. She also discussed her ADHD (inattentive type) and anxiety, recognizing how they shaped her need for structure and focus.

Despite her challenges, Brianna’s gifted background helped her develop strong problem-solving skills, critical thinking abilities, and a drive for excellence. She believes that being gifted contributed to her entrepreneurial mindset, creative skills, and adaptability. Brianna encourages parents and teachers to seek help when unsure how to support a gifted child, emphasizing the importance of humility and accessing resources to meet each child's unique needs.

**Table 10**

Brianna’s Interview Categories and Supporting In Vivo Codes

Category	Sample Codes
Transition Struggles	“We weren't taught about what that transition would look like, and so I had a little bit of a hard time, just because even in the honors classes and the AP classes, they didn't feel as enriching as what I was doing previously and what I was kind of like familiar with.”

Behavioral Challenges	<p>“That was a big part of the reason that they ended up putting me in the merit program, because, just because, you know, you get bored and you act out.”</p> <p>“I had an IEP that was rooted in behavior.”</p> <p>“I didn't have a lot of respect for authority.”</p>
Perfectionism and High Standards	<p>“We're pushed to challenge ourselves since we traditionally aren't in the classroom.”</p>
Neurodivergence	<p>“I also have ADHD inattentive. So, my mind is, you know, it's constantly like, firing thoughts.”</p> <p>“There's such an overlap between gifted kids and anxiety.”</p>

#### **Former Gifted Child 4: Julie**

Julie was identified as gifted in fourth grade and participated in enrichment classes during middle school, where she excelled in pattern recognition and reading. She enjoyed her gifted classes, particularly the hands-on projects and field trips. However, she sometimes felt undeserving of her place in the program and struggled with the pressure to excel. Her giftedness influenced her lifelong love for reading, and she now encourages her children to read regularly. She values gathering all the facts before forming opinions, which occasionally causes tension with others. Over time, her perspective has shifted as she's become more empathetic and open-minded. In her career, Julie's interest in cardiology led her to pursue nursing, where she excelled in related subjects and valued the caregiving aspects of her work. She advises parents and teachers to identify and support gifted children early, emphasizing the need for proper educational resources to help them thrive.

**Table 11**

## Julie's Interview Categories and Supporting In Vivo Codes

<b>Category</b>	<b>Sample Codes</b>
Emotional Impact	"It [high expectations] kinda made me feel a little bad about myself. Or, more like, well, maybe I should have studied more. You know, I'm smarter than this."
Career Influence	"It [the gifted program] did teach me a lot, and I think that that's helped me with how I am now."
Growth	"I feel like now, today, before I form an opinion of something, I want to have all the facts."  "I just think I pride myself on being a little more empathetic to certain people, how they feel, and why they might have the beliefs they do, even if I disagree with them."
High Expectations	"I do feel like there has been an expectation, you know you're in this gifted program, so you should be doing well."  "And I think people were kind of surprised about that, too. Anytime I wasn't good at something."
Selling Self Short	"I don't know, they say that I'm smart, but you know, I don't know."

**Former Gifted Child 5: John**

John found schoolwork easy and enjoyed enrichment activities like field trips and Titanic-themed lessons. His giftedness stemmed largely from boredom in regular classes. While he excelled in school, transitioning to college was difficult as he faced academic challenges for the first time and realized he wasn't fully prepared to put in the effort required. John also experienced social struggles, feeling different from his peers and dealing with pressure to meet high expectations. He also reflected on family dynamics, sharing that his academic success

created tension with his sister, who struggled more in school. Throughout his life, John battled imposter syndrome and occasionally regretted not pursuing vocational paths that better aligned with his interests. Despite excelling in subjects like history and geography, he acknowledges the challenge of feeling pressured to pursue a college path based on his gifted status.

**Table 12**

John's Interview Categories and Supporting In Vivo Codes

<b>Category</b>	<b>Sample Codes</b>
Academic Strengths	<p>“I always liked maps, you know, and I had maps stuck up on the wall in my room and would study those.”</p> <p>“I wanted to learn more about, you know, ancient Greece and Egypt and Rome.”</p>
Imposter Feelings	<p>“If the gifted test was all about math, I would probably not be considered gifted.”</p> <p>“Being an adult still feels like some imposter syndrome, sometimes to me.”</p> <p>“I felt like some imposter syndrome, I guess. You know, because, I'd always been the smart kid.”</p>
Transition Struggles	<p>“Things did not come easy anymore. I had to work, so that was, I guess, something I wasn't fully prepared for was having to actually put in more work.”</p>
Pressure and Expectations	<p>“Having those higher expectations can put some stress on a kid.”</p> <p>“I don't even know if we were given much of an option. It was just like, okay, you're smart, you're going straight college path.”</p>

	<p>“It's like, no, no, you're gifted. You're smart. You have to you got to get a degree. You have to become a doctor.”</p>
Enrichment	<p>“I enjoyed the things we wouldn't have normally done in other classes like history, research, and talking about the Titanic and writing papers about the Titanic.”</p> <p>“I think the extra work we did in gifted classes better prepared me to study and do more critical thinking throughout college and professionally, too. Skills I wouldn't have picked up or refined on in in the regular classes.”</p>

### **Former Gifted Child 6: Laura**

Laura recalls excelling in subjects she enjoyed, particularly when her strong memory was triggered by excitement for learning. Growing up as the youngest of five siblings, with two others identified as gifted, she felt a strong pressure to meet academic expectations. Laura faced several challenges as a gifted student. Attending a small public school with limited gifted resources made it difficult to connect with peers, and she struggled with bullying and social isolation. Despite having supportive teachers and family, Laura didn't form close friendships until later in high school and college. These experiences contributed to her dislike for the school environment, even though she loved learning.

In her career, Laura followed her passion for healthcare, eventually transitioning from heart surgery nursing to cardiac and pulmonary rehab for a more rewarding experience. She credits her giftedness for her drive to excel but emphasizes the importance of pursuing careers that align with personal strengths rather than societal expectations. Laura also shared her

experience with depression and anxiety, which she attributes to the pressure of meeting high expectations — a struggle she believes many gifted children face.

**Table 13**

Laura’s Interview Categories and Supporting In Vivo Codes

Category	Sample Codes
Pressure to Excel	<p>“By the time I came along, it was just expected that you were supposed to be that way.”</p> <p>“It was an underlying expectation because my sisters were gifted.”</p>
Social Isolation	<p>“I went my fourth-grade year completely by myself.”</p> <p>“I had friendly people, but I don't really think it was until I was very late in high school, or arguably even college, that I had, like, true friends.”</p>
Struggle Letting Go of the Label	<p>“I do find that maybe that pressure and perception of perfectionism, or constantly being at that level is still very hard for me to accept that I don't have to do anymore.”</p>

**Former Gifted Child 7: Trey**

Trey reflects on his experiences as a gifted child, which were marked by a strong sense of exclusivity and challenge. He enjoyed strategy games like chess and Othello, which helped him develop problem-solving skills. One of the biggest challenges he faced was trying to keep up with his older siblings, who were also gifted. He points out that being gifted isn't just about being smart or getting good grades—it's also about how you approach problems and think creatively, which isn't always recognized in traditional schooling. For him, giftedness wasn't just about excelling academically but about a different way of thinking.

Trey mentions key moments, like impressing his class by reading a book in kindergarten and grasping negative numbers in second grade, which solidified his sense of being gifted. Although his career in ministry isn't directly related to his giftedness, he values strategic thinking and believes the best way to support gifted children is by understanding them as individuals. He suggests not setting expectations based on older siblings or past students and instead focusing on challenging and encouraging each child to grow at their own pace.

**Table 14**

Trey's Interview Categories and Supporting In Vivo Codes

<b>Category</b>	<b>Sample Codes</b>
Giftedness misconceptions	<p>“It wasn't always the smartest kid that was gifted.”</p> <p>“Just because you're smart doesn't mean you're gifted, and just because you're gifted doesn't mean you're smart or make good grades.”</p>
Influence from educators and program	<p>“Like having something built in that always challenged me and pushed me to be better.”</p> <p>“[My teacher], she hated calling it gifted because 'everybody's gifted.’”</p>
Creativity in Thinking and Problem-Solving	<p>“All the games revolved around strategy. I love strategy and trying to think critically in that way.”</p>

**Former Gifted Child 8: Taylor**

Taylor appreciated the enrichment opportunities that kept her engaged and encouraged exploration beyond the standard curriculum. However, the absence of gifted programming in high school left her feeling unprepared for the challenges of college. Despite this, her strong desire to learn has remained constant throughout her life. She faced social difficulties, including

bullying and feelings of isolation, which were worsened by struggles with ADHD and bipolar disorder. While her family was supportive, comparisons to her brother, particularly from teachers, added to her insecurities. Taylor also experienced frustration when teachers placed her in group projects with underperforming students, feeling that her abilities were sometimes exploited. She encourages parents and teachers to continue enrichment activities outside of school, support gifted children without fostering superiority, and create opportunities for hands-on learning. She believes fostering curiosity and acknowledging individual strengths can help gifted children thrive.

**Table 15**

Taylor's Interview Categories and Supporting In Vivo Codes

Category	Sample Codes
Social Challenges/Isolation	<p>"Group work was a nightmare."</p> <p>"My teacher would give us all the worksheets for the whole day and just stick us in the back of the class to complete them on our own."</p>
Teacher Influence	<p>"I had a teacher who was very upset about the gifted program in general, and I could tell that there was some discrimination against us gifted because she said all children are gifted."</p> <p>"I loved being in it, but the outside perspective of it was not always great for the educators who were not participating in the programs."</p> <p>"Probably the biggest challenge, and I'm not sure if it will ever be overcome, is just the educators who don't see value in the program."</p>
Mental Health Struggles/Neurodivergence	<p>"I have ADHD, which I didn't start treating until I was an adult."</p>

Impact of the Gifted Program	<p>“I don't think that my intellectual creativity would be the same if I hadn't been in the gifted program.”</p> <p>“Having the opportunity, like as a child, to do that, I think helps you feel capable.”</p>
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### Former Gifted Child 9: Leeanna

Leeanna recalls the testing process as feeling long and unusual but found the program itself enjoyable and engaging. The gifted program didn't feel like extra work to her, yet it encouraged her to push herself further academically. She credited her gifted background with motivating her to pursue advanced education, including her Master's in Physician Assistant Studies. However, she admitted that being labeled "smart" early on led her to believe she didn't need to put in as much effort as others. This mindset shifted when she entered her master's program and had to develop stronger study habits to keep up with the challenging content. While Leeanna didn't face significant social struggles, she noticed younger students expressing jealousy toward those in the gifted program. Teachers often held her to higher expectations, assuming she would excel in all subjects. She highlighted the misconception that giftedness guarantees success across all areas, emphasizing that some gifted students still struggle academically.

**Table 16**

#### Leeanna's Interview Categories and Supporting In Vivo Codes

Category	Sample Codes
Positive Gifted Experience	<p>"It was fun, not just hard."</p> <p>“It never really felt like work.”</p>

Supportive Family	"My mom was my biggest cheerleader."
Teacher Expectations	"I feel like teachers just kind of expected you to do a little bit more if you were in the gifted program."
Misconceptions About Being Gifted	"I think it kind of was perceived that like you shouldn't struggle in some subjects because you're gifted."  "You know you're not gifted necessarily in everything that you're doing."

### Former Gifted Child 10: Jamie

Jamie participated in special classes once a week that covered various topics each quarter. While she recalls having fun in the gifted program at the time, she later tried to block out much of the experience, despite recognizing its impact. Jamie's gifted background led her to set high personal expectations, which shaped her drive to succeed. However, she faced challenges transitioning to college, where she felt behind compared to peers who had access to more resources and AP classes. This realization was frustrating, as she had always felt ahead in high school. While Jamie's teachers expected a lot from her, she didn't feel excessive pressure from family or peers. She credits the critical thinking skills she gained in the gifted program with helping her succeed in her scientific career. Over time, Jamie learned to let go of perfectionism, recognizing that success doesn't always mean being flawless.

**Table 17**

Jamie's Interview Categories and Supporting In Vivo Codes

Category	Sample Codes
Positive but Complex Gifted Experience	"I'm just literally trying to think I blacked it all out."

	“I tried to remember; I tried to because it was fun, but I don't know.”
High Self-Expectations	<p>“I think that I always tried to do really well. I always wanted to do well in academics and everything.”</p> <p>“I would set high goals for myself. I had high expectations of myself.”</p> <p>“I haven't really wanted to settle for anything and just get like a normal job.”</p>
Perfectionism and Pressure	“I feel like my teachers always expected a lot of me.”
Resource Gaps	<p>“I think that the biggest challenge was not having more resources.”</p> <p>“I think that if we had like AP classes or something, I could have done much better.”</p>
Critical Thinking Skills	“I think I learned how to think critically in gifted.”
Hard Realizations	<p>“When I got to college, I realized that I was just normal.”</p> <p>“I felt behind when I went to college, when I had always felt ahead in high school.”</p>

### Former Gifted Child 11: Ashley

Ashley recalls being the youngest in her class and participating in engaging hands-on projects like clay molds and playwriting. While her giftedness nurtured her passion for writing and English, it also created knowledge gaps in science due to missed class time, which later made her college transition difficult. She faced social struggles throughout her education, often feeling ostracized or perceived as "different." Teachers were not always supportive of her gifted status, and making up missed work added stress. Despite excelling in English, she struggled in

science classes and faced disappointment when she couldn't maintain her previous streak of straight A's.

Ashley's later diagnoses of OCD and bipolar disorder brought clarity to her past experiences but also left her feeling that educators and caregivers had failed to recognize her needs. While her giftedness helped her succeed academically, she found that those achievements didn't always translate into career success, contributing to feelings of frustration and self-doubt. She advises parents and teachers to be informed about neurodiversity, emphasizing the importance of early intervention if signs of perfectionism or obsessive behavior appear.

**Table 18**

Ashley's Interview Categories and Supporting In Vivo Codes

<b>Category</b>	<b>Sample Codes</b>
Creative Learning Experiences	<p>"We would do hands-on projects like making clay molds of something."</p> <p>"I wrote a play that was fun for me."</p>
Gifted Influence	<p>"It specifically influenced me to go down the English path."</p> <p>"I mean, it enhanced my academic and personal development in some ways, being around like-minded people, Creative people."</p>
Social Challenges	<p>"In a way, it ostracized us from our peers."</p> <p>"I never spoke to anyone besides my close friend, and even now, I struggle a lot with integrating into new groups."</p>
Mental Health and Neurodivergence	<p>"Nobody noticed because I was still doing well in school."</p> <p>"I didn't get diagnosed until adulthood."</p>

	“I kind of understood I was on the spectrum in some way, but I, you know, back then no one used the word neurodivergent.”
Validation	“I kinda like got a high off of recognition.”  “I got a high off of being the best.”
Transitioning to Adulthood	“I feel like my hard work and being able to succeed, all that has not translated into the workforce for me at all.”
Teacher Influence	“Specifically, with teachers who, it almost felt like they had a grudge against us.”  “They were not accommodating to us, as if we had like, chosen to be in there.”

### **Former Gifted Child 12: Holly**

Holly remembers being pulled out of class for testing and participating in enrichment activities like chess and computer learning games. In high school, the gifted program’s heavy focus on test preparation and academic performance intensified her anxiety and contributed to feelings of self-doubt. Being labeled as “smart” led to overwhelming pressure to excel, causing test anxiety, depression, and emotional breakdowns. Holly struggled to balance these expectations, tying her self-worth to academic success. While she excelled in college, this pressure persisted into adulthood, influencing her identity and career path. Her family’s high expectations, combined with the gifted label, created additional pressure and tension. Teachers also held her to higher standards, sometimes overlooking her struggles because of assumed intelligence. These experiences reinforced Holly’s belief that giftedness often carries unrealistic expectations that can harm mental well-being. She emphasizes the importance of separating

academic performance from self-worth and encourages parents to foster resilience by allowing children to experience failure without shame.

**Table 19**

Holly's Interview Categories and Supporting In Vivo Codes

Category	Sample Codes
Pressure to Excel	<p>“I think it started my like test anxiety because I was like, I'm a smart kid, I have to do well in this.”</p> <p>“I had to be one of the kids that did the smart stuff. I was in a gifted program.”</p>
Identity Struggles	<p>“I based a lot of my self-worth on my academic performance.”</p> <p>“I was not ready to not be a student.”</p>
Career Influence	<p>“I don't know that I would have applied to so many colleges and went down the academic path that I did, if I hadn't been pressured in that way.”</p>
Defined by the Label	<p>“After I was like, put in the program, I guess I don't know, like I was labeled smart, right?”</p> <p>“We were like the 'high performers.’”</p> <p>“I had to excel. It was not an option. Because I had this label placed on me.”</p>

The table below highlights the main themes that emerged from the interviews, along with sample codes and direct quotes from participants. These themes capture important aspects of their experiences as former gifted children, shedding light on how they made sense of their giftedness, the challenges they faced, and how they navigated their identities. The quotes included give a voice to the participants, helping to illustrate the real-life impact of these themes in their own words.

**Table 20**

## Interviews Key Themes, Sample Codes, and Representative Quotes

Categories	Sample Codes	Example Quote
Academic Pressure and High Expectations	Perfectionism and Self-Worth	<p>“We had to be perfect.” - Jamie</p> <p>“The pressure to always excel left me anxious, but I didn’t have the tools to manage that anxiety.” - Holly</p>
	Struggle in Certain Subjects	<p>“Despite being a bad test-taker, I felt pressure to excel academically, leading to anxiety and breakdowns.” - Holly</p>
	Self-Expectations	<p>“I had high expectations of myself.” - Jamie</p>
Early Identification	Feeling Defined by the Label	<p>“The label of being 'gifted' created a sense of otherness and different treatment from peers and teachers.” - Holly</p>
	Early Identification	<p>“I was tested in second grade and was the youngest in my gifted class.”- Ashley</p> <p>“They told me I was gifted in fourth grade, but I wasn’t sure what that actually meant.” - Julie</p>
Social and Emotional Challenges	Peer Relationships	<p>“I struggled with integrating into new groups and always felt like I was doing something wrong.” - Ashley</p>
	Teacher Perceptions and Bias	<p>“Some teachers resented gifted students like we were just showing off by being pulled out of class” - Taylor</p> <p>“I was just constantly told that I was too smart for my own good, and that there were people in my family who didn't feel comfortable having conversations with me just because of the way I talked and learned.” - Brianna</p>

	Unsupportive Teachers	<p>“There are some educators who are prejudiced against students who are in special education programs, whether they be for gifted students or for students who need a little extra help.” Taylor</p>
	Imposter Syndrome/Self Doubt	<p>“I sometimes felt like I didn’t deserve to be in the gifted program like I had just gotten lucky.” - Julie</p> <p>“I kept waiting for someone to figure out that I wasn’t actually as smart as they thought I was.” – Holly</p> <p>“I don’t know why they ever thought that I was smarter than anyone else.” Jamie</p>
Neurodivergence and Mental Health	ADHD & Focus Challenges	<p>“When I spaced out for 15 minutes, it wasn’t because I wasn’t paying attention—it was because my brain wouldn’t slow down.” - Brianna</p> <p>“I had the ability to learn quickly, but I couldn’t always get my brain to cooperate.” - Brianna</p>
	Emotional Regulation	<p>“I was never really taught how to handle frustration or failure because things always came easy at first.” - Brianna</p>
	Spectrum	<p>“There’s this idea that gifted kids are either geniuses or have a learning disability—there’s no in-between.” - Ashley</p>
The Gifted Program	Mentorship	<p>“My gifted teacher saw something in me and pushed me to think beyond what was expected.” - Maria</p>

		“My mom, who was also gifted, encouraged me to aim higher and not settle.” - Leeanna
	Friendships within Gifted	“My closest friends were always in the gifted program with me—we just understood each other better.”- Trey
	Creative Thinking	“The gifted program let me think outside the box in a way regular classes never did.” - John  “I credit my ability to problem-solve to those weird logic puzzles we had to do in gifted.” - Trey
	Fun Environment	“The gifted program never really felt like work.” - Leeanna
	Enrichment	“It was nice to have something that held my attention for longer than a few minutes.” - Brianna
College and Career Transitions	Difficult College Adjustments	“I felt behind when I went to college when I had always felt ahead in high school.” - Jamie  “Once I got to college, things did not come easy anymore.” - Paula
	Career Paths	“The gifted program pushed me to do more—I don’t know if I would have thought I could get my master’s and do the PA program if not for it.” - Leeanna  “I always knew I wanted to be in healthcare, but gifted made me feel like I had to aim higher.” - Laura
	Disillusionment with Success	“I thought being smart would make things easy, but I had to learn the importance of work ethic.” - Leeanna
Stereotypes and Misconceptions	Pressure to Follow Traditional Paths	“The smart kids were automatically put on a college path.” - John

	Gifted Means Good at Everything	<p>“I’ve never been good at math. If the gifted test was all about math, I probably would not be considered gifted.” - John</p> <p>“Being gifted does not mean excelling in every subject.” - Trey</p>
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## Focus Group

The focus group of former gifted students shared a mix of fond memories and lingering challenges from their time in gifted programs. Many participants recalled feeling excited and intellectually stimulated by the program, enjoying opportunities for advanced learning and friendships with like-minded peers. However, others experienced isolation and discomfort, particularly when being pulled out of regular classes or placed in environments where they felt different from their peers. Some students struggled with the expectations that came with being labeled as gifted, feeling pressure from teachers, parents, or themselves to perform at a consistently high level. Math was frequently mentioned as a subject of difficulty, and many participants expressed frustration at being placed in advanced courses simply because they were gifted in other areas. Additionally, some recalled resentment from certain teachers who seemed unsupportive or even hostile toward their participation in gifted education.

As they transitioned into adulthood, most participants found that their gifted identity became less relevant, though its effects lingered in different ways. Several reflected on how perfectionism and a fear of failure carried over into college, careers, and even parenting. Time management and real-world skills, such as household organization and financial responsibility, were areas where some felt unprepared. Many also discovered they had ADHD, OCD, or other neurodivergent traits later in life, relating to the concept of being “twice exceptional.” Some

found adjusting to the workplace challenging, feeling out of place in traditional job environments. Despite these struggles, nearly all agreed that the gifted program provided them with a strong sense of community, intellectual engagement, and critical thinking skills that benefited them in the long run. While some wished they had placed less pressure on themselves or balanced academics with social experiences, they remained grateful for the opportunities and personal growth gifted education provided. The key themes that emerged from the discussion included positive experiences, intellectual stimulation, and social connection, as well as social isolation, feeling different, and academic pressure. Table 9 below presents a summary of the key themes, sample codes, and participant quotes that illustrate each theme.

**Table 21**

Focus Group Key Themes, Sample Codes, and Representative Quotes

Categories	Sample Codes	Example Quote
Like-minded Peers	Positive Experience	"The gifted program gave me a space where I could be myself and not feel weird for being different. It was always something I looked forward to every week."
	Intellectual Stimulation	"In regular classes, I had friends, but in gifted, I had people who thought like me."  "I learned how to think critically in gifted—it wasn't just about memorizing facts."
Isolation	Feeling Different	"At first, it did feel like some pressure because I was the first one out of my grade to go into the gifted program. I was with a group that was a grade below me, and it just made me feel different from my classmates."

Neurodivergence and Giftedness	Late Diagnosis	"I later learned that I have ADHD. So, I think some of my struggles in school, especially with math, were not because I wasn't trying, but because I had executive functioning issues I didn't even know about."
	Emotional Regulation	"I used to just rather not do something than do it and have it be imperfect. It was a lot of all-or-nothing mentality for a long time when I was growing up."
Pressure	High Expectations	"If I made anything less than an A, it was like, 'you're in the gifted class. You should be making all As. What's going on?'"
	Academic Pressure	"I always felt like if I wasn't the best, then I was failing. Even if I got an A, if it wasn't the highest A possible, it still felt like I didn't do enough."
Resentment from Teachers	Educational Barriers	"I never felt challenged in English, but I always felt challenged in every other subject. I had to fight to study and keep up, and sometimes I just didn't understand why I was placed in higher-level classes just because I was gifted."
	Negative Teacher Perceptions	"Some teachers resented us for being in gifted. They acted like we were skipping their class on purpose, and they made sure we knew they weren't happy about it."
Adulthood	Career Challenges	"I feel so stupid all the time in the workplace. In school, I felt like I was on top of everything, but now I struggle to fit into a 'normal' job environment."
	College Challenges	"When I got to college, I had to actually study for the first time, and I had no idea how. In high school, I could get by without really trying, but in college, that didn't work anymore."

Sense of Community	Gifted Program Benefits	"Despite all the pressure and expectations, I wouldn't trade my experience in the gifted program for anything. It gave me a sense of community and let me explore things I wouldn't have otherwise."
	Mentorship/Gifted Teacher	"Having a teacher who actually understood how my brain worked made all the difference."
Opportunities & Personal Growth	Reflection & Gratitude	"Looking back, I wish I had placed less pressure on myself, but I'm still really thankful for the opportunities I had. Gifted gave me a different way of seeing the world."

The focus group discussion highlighted several key themes regarding the long-term impact of gifted education. Many participants had positive experiences, recalling the program as a place where they felt intellectually stimulated and connected with like-minded peers. However, this also came with feelings of being different, as some struggled with social isolation or the pressure of standing out academically. The expectation to excel in all areas contributed to high expectations and academic pressures, particularly in subjects like math, where many felt misplaced in advanced courses simply due to their gifted label.

### **Themes**

The results are organized according to key themes from the data analysis. These themes were identified using a thematic analysis approach, which involved coding the data, grouping similar codes, and refining them into broader categories that captured the participants' shared experiences.

Seven primary themes emerged: (1) The Pressure to be Exceptional, (2) The Gifted Label and Identity Formation: Identity Beyond Giftedness, (3) Neurodivergence and Giftedness, (4) Strong Sense of Community & Support, (5) Self-Efficacy and Achievement, (6) Creativity and Divergent Thinking, and (7) Transition to Adulthood. The first three themes reflect more challenging or negative aspects of participants' experiences, the next three highlight more positive elements, and the final theme can be interpreted as neutral. Each theme is discussed in detail below, supported by direct quotes from participants to help better understand the depth and complexity of their experiences.

### **Theme 1: The Pressure to be Exceptional**

One of the most prominent themes from the analysis was the pressure to excel. The internal pressure to excel emerged, reflecting a deep-rooted fear of not living up to their perceived potential. Many participants described how being labeled as gifted set an internal bar for success. They described the weight of their expectations set by themselves as a significant factor influencing their career choices, relationships, and overall well-being. Jamie, a 24-year-old Lab Assistant, says she "set high goals for myself. I had high expectations of myself. I want to do things that sound smart or make me sound smart. Things that make me sound like I have tried hard and worked hard to become successful."

In addition to internal pressures, former gifted students reported experiencing significant external pressures to excel. Many participants described how, from an early age, they absorbed the expectations set by their parents and educators. Parents and educators often reinforced the pressure by expressing disappointment when participants did not meet high expectations. For example, a 27-year-old nurse, Julie, says, "It was unfair that my teachers held me to higher

expectations in all subjects just because I was gifted. Yes, I was smart but not very good at math or science. I loved reading."

Peer and sibling comparisons further intensified these pressures, fostering a belief that anything less was inadequate. Participants who had siblings in the gifted program were expected to follow suit. For example, Laura, Trey, and Taylor all mention the underlying expectations they put on them because of their Gifted siblings. Trey stated, "Being gifted was just common in my family." Taylor mentioned that she constantly compared herself to her brother, which made her have a hard time accepting her giftedness because she perceived that "my brother is smarter than me." Paula had a different experience. She mentioned, "My brother was also gifted, so that made it just like a norm at my house that we did not even talk about."

The constant pressure to be exceptional continues to shape the lives of former gifted children, often leaving them trapped between high expectations and the fear of falling short. This pressure, rooted in early labels, has a lasting impact. The experiences shared by participants highlight a profound need to reconcile their self-worth with a more compassionate understanding of success, one that allows spaces for imperfection and growth. This identification of pressure to excel set the stage for exceptional expectations and significantly shaped participants' core identities. The table below captures the essence of the theme, providing both a broad understanding and a focused analysis of how the pressure to excel affects the lives of former gifted kids.

**Table 22**

## Summary of Theme One: Pressure to be Exceptional

Description of Theme	Sample Codes	Participants Who Relate	Researcher's Summary
This theme explores the societal and self-imposed pressure experienced by gifted children to consistently excel and meet high standards. This pressure often continues into adulthood. Gifted children face expectations not only from others, such as parents and teachers, but also from themselves, leading to a constant drive for perfection. This pressure can create anxiety and self-doubt when they feel they fall short.	Perfectionism High Expectations Fear of Failure Self-Criticism Anxiety Unrealistic Standards	Maria Brianna Julie John Laura Taylor Jamie Ashley Holly Cassie Lacey	The pressure to be exceptional often stems from both external and internal sources, shaping the identity of gifted children. While the desire to achieve greatness can drive success, it may also lead to chronic stress, burnout, and feelings of inadequacy when perfection is unattainable. Many participants reflect on how these pressures impacted their sense of self-worth and personal development, even into adulthood.

**Theme Two: The Gifted Label and Identity Formation**

For many participants, being labeled as gifted during their childhood became a foundational aspect of their identity. The label provided a sense of uniqueness and belonging within the gifted program. It also limited their self-perception to being "the smart kid."

Participants frequently described the gifted label as a double-edged sword. Laura, a 31-year-old Nurse, described the dual nature of being gifted, including academic excellence and associated

stressors, stating, "I think that I have excelled the way I have because I am gifted. However, that does not mean it does not come with hardships."

Participants reported that the gifted label could be seen as synonymous with self-worth. Achievements were seen as proof of being gifted, while struggles or an average performance triggered immense self-doubt. Lacey, a 29-year-old Stay-at-Home Mom and Digital Creator mentioned that she attended a conference with other students of a similar intelligence level. She said, "When I got there, there were people who were genuinely better than me at what we were doing." When she was not the best, she perceived it as an immediate failure. Holly, a 29-year-old Licensed Therapist, had similar thoughts. She said, "If I was not performing well academically, I felt like a failure."

For some, being seen as "average" was daunting. The label of giftedness created a dichotomy: success meant maintaining that status, and failure meant losing it altogether. The need to keep an image of perfection was instilled early on, reinforced by praise for flawless performances with no mistakes. Lacey said, "Perfect is the bare minimum." Participants described how the idea of imperfection often led to procrastination, burnout, and a reluctance to pursue new challenges unless success seemed guaranteed. Ashley mentioned that she "would rather not do something than do it, and it is imperfect. So, it was much all-or-nothing mentality for a long time when I was growing up, and I did not notice."

The label of giftedness has a profound and lasting influence on the identity formation of former gifted children. Participants' reflections reveal how this label became a core aspect of their self-concept, combining their worth and ability to achieve and perform. Holly shared, "I was not ready to not be a student. That was my whole identity. Like that had been my identity since the fourth grade when they told me I was smart, like that, I was gifted." The experiences

shared suggest that the traits associated with giftedness intersect significantly with characteristics of neurodivergence, such as ADHD and OCD, which were often overlooked or misunderstood within the gifted population. Table 11 summarizes how the gifted label plays a crucial role in identity development, highlighting both its empowering and challenging effects.

**Table 23**

Summary of Theme Two: The Gifted Label and Identity Formation

Description of Theme	Sample Codes	Participants Who Relate	Researcher's Summary
<p>This theme examines the impact of being labeled as "gifted" on the development of personal and social identity. While the label can provide a sense of pride and distinction, it can also create challenges related to fitting in with peers, managing expectations, and forming an authentic sense of self. The gifted label can become both a source of empowerment and a burden, influencing how individuals see themselves and how they are seen by others.</p>	<p>Self-Perception External Validation Imposter Syndrome Identity Struggles Pressure to Live Up Fear of Being Average</p>	<p>Maria Brianna Julie Taylor Jamie Ashley Holly Brooke Lacey</p>	<p>The gifted label significantly influences how individuals perceive themselves throughout their lives. For some, it shapes a positive sense of identity tied to intellect and achievement, while for others, it can lead to feelings of inadequacy and alienation. The label often forces gifted individuals to navigate complex social dynamics, as they feel pressure to live up to others' expectations or fear being seen as a "fraud." As adults, many reflect on how the gifted label still plays a role in their personal and professional lives, contributing to both strengths and vulnerabilities in their identity</p>

### **Theme Three: Neurodivergence and Giftedness**

Interestingly, over half of the participants reported being diagnosed with ADHD, OCD, Bipolar disorder, or other psychological variations in adulthood. For many participants, the path to diagnosis in adulthood was prompted by pivotal life changes such as parenthood or career challenges. Lacey was not diagnosed until after she had twins. Similarly, Laura, a 31-year-old Nurse, shared her personal experiences with depression and anxiety, which she attributes to the pressure to meet high expectations, “I mean, I think that expectation that they, and myself, have had naturally makes you an anxious person.”

The diagnosis process was often met with a mixture of relief and grief. Relief stemmed from the validation that lifelong difficulties with focus and emotional regulation were not due to laziness. Conversely, many experienced grief over the years spent misunderstanding themselves. As Ashley reflected, “I was diagnosed with OCD before I was diagnosed with bipolar. So, when I was diagnosed bipolar, that was when I felt like the world was crashing down on me. Like I felt like the people around me had failed me.”

Participants frequently adopted masking strategies to survive academically and socially without a diagnosis. This included over-preparation of tasks and maintaining an image of competence. Julie reflected, “I was always very on top of things in elementary school. I remember I was very obsessed with how organized my folders were. Like with color coordination, my mom would get home from work, and I would already have my folder laid out.” For some, this led to burnout and anxiety.

Participants highlighted a pattern of inconsistent academic performance, excelling in subjects of interest while barely passing others. This variability was often misinterpreted as

laziness or lack of motivation. Ashley explained, “I never felt challenged in English class, but I always felt challenged in every other class, specifically math. It was because I loved English and was good at it.” Julie had a similar experience. She mentioned that she struggled in memorization-based classes but thrived in a hands-on environment. As a result, participants often internalized a sense of failure for not being able to perform consistently across all subjects, bringing on feelings of imposter syndrome.

The intersection of neurodivergence and giftedness reveals a complex and often misunderstood aspect of former gifted children's experiences. Participants' reflections highlight how traits associated with ADHD, OCD, and other forms of neurodivergence were usually frequently masked or dismissed due to their high achievements. This dual exceptionality (being both gifted and neurodivergent) compounded feelings of isolation, imposter syndrome, and the pressure to appear competent. Amid these challenges, many participants emphasized the transformative impact of finding a supportive community of like-minded peers who understood them. This sense of belonging alleviated feelings of isolation and fostered acceptance and self-compassion. Table 12 highlights the complexity of being both gifted and neurodivergent, emphasizing how these traits interact to create unique educational and personal challenges.

**Table 24**

Summary of Theme Three: Neurodivergence and Giftedness

<b>Description of Theme</b>	<b>Sample Codes</b>	<b>Participants Who Relate</b>	<b>Researchers Summary</b>
This theme explores the intersection between giftedness and neurodivergence, particularly how traits such as ADHD, OCD,	ADHD Bipolar OCD	Brianna Laura Taylor Ashley Holly Brooke	The overlap of neurodivergence and giftedness often results in complex experiences where

<p>or Bipolar conditions are experienced alongside exceptional intellectual abilities. Gifted individuals with neurodivergent traits may face unique challenges in academic and social settings, where their intellectual abilities may mask or complicate the identification and support for other needs.</p>	<p>Masking</p> <p>Underachievement</p> <p>Misunderstanding of Needs</p> <p>Unable to Regulate Emotions</p>	<p>Lacey</p>	<p>individuals struggle to merge their intellectual abilities with their neurological differences. Gifted individuals with ADHD or other neurodivergent traits may face difficulties in traditional educational systems that don't accommodate their unique ways of thinking and processing. This can lead to feelings of confusion, frustration, or underachievement, as their abilities are not fully supported or understood. Many participants reflect on the challenge of navigating both worlds, feeling isolated or misunderstood by those around them.</p>
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#### **Theme Four: Strong Sense of Community and Support**

For most participants, gifted programs were described as a 'lifeline' during their time in school. Brooke, a 30-year-old General Manager who joined the gifted program in third grade, recalled her relief upon entering the program: “Honestly, it was relieving, to be honest with you.

It is such a relief. I get to go and do work that's interesting or more engaging than what we were doing in the classroom."

Many participants shared that having friends in the program played a pivotal role in shaping their experiences of community and belonging. Unlike the isolation mentioned by gifted children in the regular classrooms, those who shared the gifted experience with friends described a profound sense of relief and mutual understanding. Lacey reflected on the moment she discovered she was being placed in the gifted program: "I just remember being crushed and crying because I thought there was something wrong with me. Why am I going to a different class? Once I knew that my best friend was in it too, I was OK." Learning that her best friend was also in the gifted program gave Lacey a sense of relief. She was an only child, so this made her feel as if she finally had a community of people who understood her. Julie was also in the gifted program with her best friends and said it enhanced her time.

Having a friend in the gifted program enhanced the participants' sense of belonging. It transformed academic challenges into opportunities for healthy competition. Participants recalled study sessions, shared projects, and a unique motivation to excel. Trey shared how the close-knit environment of his gifted classes allowed him to feel a sense of community and enrichment. Trey mentioned, "This is kind of my thing that I get to challenge myself, and I get to challenge my friend, and he gets to challenge me." Rather than creating rivalry, these friendships promoted a sense of teamwork and resilience.

A strong sense of community and belonging emerged as a vital element in the experiences of former gifted children. Participants described how connecting with like-minded people allowed them to validate their experiences. This sense of belonging alleviated loneliness and fostered self-acceptance and a healthier relationship with their abilities. Beyond the

emotional support of the community, participants' reflections also mentioned how those connections played a role in shaping their self-efficacy and beliefs to set and achieve goals. This sense of self-efficacy influenced how they approached challenges, balanced their ambitions, and redefined success on their terms. The table below highlights how a strong community of support can provide a sense of belonging and enhance the gifted experience, balancing out the pressures associated with being gifted.

**Table 25**

Summary of Theme Four: Strong Sense of Community and Support

Description of Theme	Sample Codes	Participants Who Relate	Researchers Summary
<p>This theme focuses on the positive aspects of the gifted experience, specifically the sense of belonging and connection that gifted children often find within their gifted programs or communities. The social and emotional support they receive from peers, teachers, and mentors can create a nurturing environment that fosters growth, self-confidence, and mutual understanding. A strong sense of community can counterbalance the pressures of perfectionism and high expectations.</p>	<p>Belonging Peer Support Mentorship Social Friendships within Gifted Community Gifted Teacher</p>	<p>Paula Maria Brianna Julie John Trey Ashley Brooke Lacey</p>	<p>The sense of community within gifted programs often provides a crucial support network for gifted children, allowing them to connect with others who share similar experiences and challenges. Many participants highlight how this environment helped them thrive academically and socially, offering a space where they felt understood and valued. As adults, the memory of these supportive communities often remains a key factor in their positive reflection on their gifted experiences.</p>

### **Theme Five: Self-Efficacy and Achievement**

The experiences of former gifted children in their early academic years played a huge role in developing their self-efficacy. For many participants, the gifted program confirmed their intellectual abilities, which helped foster a belief that they could achieve anything they set their minds on. Leeanna, a participant who thrived in the gifted program, reflected, "Being gifted pushed me to do more. I do not know if I would have gone on to think that I could get my master's and do the PA program if I had not done gifted." These early successes led to invincibility and a belief that their giftedness would carry them into adulthood.

As the participants transitioned from childhood to adulthood, their beliefs about their abilities shifted. In most reflections, the self-efficacy they knew so well was tested by the harsh realities of adulthood. Some participants continued to experience high levels of achievement, like Paula, a Veterinarian, and a Board-Certified Animal Chiropractor; others found that their initial confidence was not enough to guarantee success in more competitive and less academic environments. Cassie, a 23-year-old Physical Therapist Assistant, mentioned, "I struggled with having to study for the first time. I did not have to do that in our small town, middle school, high school, so I had to teach myself how to study." This realization was a turning point for many former gifted children as they adjusted their expectations and developed a more nuanced understanding of self-efficacy. Brooke stated, "When I got older and got to college, I still carried that label, and I recognized that there were other, like intelligent people around me."

The relationship between self-efficacy and achievement in former gifted children is empowering and complicated. Early experiences in gifted programs often solidified a strong confidence in their intellectual abilities, leading to high academic and personal achievement. However, this sense of invincibility was sometimes disrupted by adult life challenges. Table # illustrates the

critical role that self-efficacy plays in the achievement process for gifted individuals, highlighting both its positive and negative effects.

**Table 26**

Summary of Theme Five: Self-Efficacy and Achievement

Description of Theme	Sample Codes	Participants Who Relate	Researchers Summary
<p>This theme explores the relationship between self-efficacy (belief in one's abilities) and achievement among gifted individuals. Gifted children often have a strong sense of competence and capability, which drives their desire to achieve. However, this can sometimes lead to challenges when their expectations for success are set too high, and they struggle with the fear of failure. The theme examines how self-belief can be a driving force for success or a source of stress when misaligned with realistic outcomes.</p>	<p>Confidence Overachievement Goal Setting Fear of Failure Self-Doubt Motivation Perfectionism</p>	<p>All Participants</p>	<p>Self-efficacy is a central driver in the achievement of gifted individuals, often leading to a strong work ethic and a desire for excellence. However, when their belief in their capabilities is coupled with perfectionism, it can create a double-edged sword: while they are capable of high achievements, the pressure to perform without failure can lead to anxiety and burnout. Many participants discussed how their self-efficacy, while a source of motivation, also resulted in a fear of failure and the constant need to exceed expectations, leading to both significant accomplishments and personal struggles.</p>

## **Theme Six: Creativity and Divergent Thinking**

Many participants recalled their early experiences in the gifted program as crucial moments that helped spark or reinforce their creative thinking abilities. Gifted programs provided opportunities for creative exploration in various forms (i.e., art, writing, science, and problem-solving). Taylor, a Culinary School graduate, shared, "I will say that one of the things that made me want to be a chef, and I remember this like cut and dry. I was in the 4th grade, and I was in the gifted program. We were learning about different countries worldwide, and we had to bring a dish from a different country. The class and I got to be creative and expand and cook something different." This environment of creative freedom helped former gifted children develop a sense of confidence in their creative abilities.

Divergent thinking played a significant role in how former gifted children approached challenges in their academic and personal lives. Gifted programs often emphasized open-ended problems, where multiple solutions were possible, allowing students to develop flexibility in their thinking. John, a 34-year-old manager, mentioned that our extra work in gifted classes better prepared me to study and do more critical thinking throughout college and professionally. I would not have picked up or refined skills in the regular classes." For John and others like him, the ability to think divergently has remained a valuable asset in their careers.

Creativity and divergent thinking were central to the experiences of former gifted children, both in their academic years and as they navigated adulthood. Many participants described how their ability to think outside the box became essential, allowing them to adapt and thrive in diverse environments. As they continued to move into adulthood, new challenges arose that extended well past their intellectual capabilities. Transitioning to adulthood often requires navigating social expectations, career decisions, and reevaluating personal goals. For some, this period was

a struggle. They were forced to reconcile their self-concept as gifted individuals with the realities of adult life. Table 15 highlights the significance of creativity and divergent thinking in the gifted experience, showing both the empowerment it can bring and the struggles it can cause in more structured environments.

**Table 27**

Summary of Theme Six: Creativity and Divergent Thinking

Description of Theme	Sample Codes	Participants Who Relate	Researchers Summary
<p>This theme explores the role of creativity and divergent thinking in the lives of gifted individuals. Gifted children often demonstrate advanced problem-solving abilities, originality, and the capacity to think outside conventional boundaries. While creativity can be a source of pride and intellectual excitement, it can also create a sense of difference, especially when it conflicts with traditional educational or societal expectations.</p>	<p>Innovative Thinking            Outside-of-the-Box            Problem-Solving            Curiosity            Brain Games</p>	<p>All Participants</p>	<p>Creativity and divergent thinking are fundamental aspects of the gifted experience, often fostering an ability to view the world in unique ways and approach problems from fresh perspectives. However, when traditional educational systems fail to recognize or nurture these qualities, gifted individuals may feel misunderstood. Many participants reflected on how their creativity enabled them to excel in some areas while making it challenging to fit within the structured norms of school or society.</p>

## **Theme Seven: Transition to Adulthood**

For many former gifted children, the transition to adulthood was accompanied by tension between early expectations of success and the realities of adult life. Participants recalled being labeled as "the smart one," creating intense internal pressure to achieve at a high level continuously. Maria, a 32-year-old Stay-at-Home Mom, voiced her frustration: "It is like the expectations, even outside of school, the expectations have continued, even though life paths have changed." This expectation gap led some participants to experience feelings of imposter syndrome or a sense of failure when their paths did not align with the ambitious trajectories envisioned for them. John mentioned always being told, "You're smart; you're going on the straight college path."

A surprising theme that emerged was the desire to align career paths with personal passions and values. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with conventional careers that felt mundane and opted for something else. Trey explained, "I have always gravitated towards not doing the same thing daily. I think that would be awful, and I think just doing something mundane to where it was a neck down position where you do not have to think and process and build and grow, I think any career like that would stink." Brianna had similar thoughts on this topic. She started in journalism, but due to the constant criticism, she decided to take her talents elsewhere. She said, "I applied the things I learned with my journalism degree and applied them to graphic design. I have an edge over other graphic designers because I can combine the written word with the more visual stuff. So, I am just being able to re-strategize and reposition myself. I mean, that is something that was ingrained early on, like being able to highlight your strengths." For these individuals, the transition to adulthood was not just about finding a job but about

finding meaningful work that resonated with their values and allowed them to leverage their strengths fully.

Resilience and adaptability emerged as key factors in successfully navigating adulthood. While early experiences of giftedness often involved environments tailored to their strengths, adulthood demanded much more. Many participants spoke on the importance of developing a “growth” mindset. Leeanna, who soared through undergrad and struggled in PA school, said, “You cannot just rely on being smart. You also have to have a work ethic for studying. That was something that I was not necessarily used to having to do.” Jamie reflected, “When I went to college, I thought I would know much more than I did. I feel like I was always really smart compared to everyone else. And then, when I got to college, I realized that I was just normal.”

The transition to adulthood for former gifted children is a multifaceted process that involves reconciling early expectations with the complexities of adulthood. While their skills and confidence developed in these programs provided a strong foundation, adapting to these new challenges required reevaluation of self. The ability to balance intellectual pursuits with emotional and social growth proved to be vital in achieving long-term fulfillment. The table below captures the struggles and adjustments faced by former gifted kids as they move into adulthood, emphasizing the importance of redefining self-worth and finding new sources of validation and purpose.

Table 28

## Summary of Theme Seven: Transition to Adulthood

Description of Theme	Sample Codes	Participants Who Relate	Researchers Summary
<p>This theme focuses on the challenges and experiences former gifted children face as they transition into adulthood. The shift from a structured school environment to a more ambiguous adult world can be difficult, especially for those who are highly reliant on external validation, achievement, and intellectual abilities. Many gifted individuals struggle to redefine their identity and purpose outside of the educational or gifted context and may experience a sense of disillusionment or confusion about their role in the world.</p>	<p>Identity Crisis</p> <p>Self-Discovery</p> <p>Career Challenges</p> <p>Wake-Up Call</p> <p>Adulthood Expectations</p> <p>Imposter Syndrome</p> <p>Post-School Transition</p> <p>What is Success?</p>	<p>All Participants</p>	<p>The transition to adulthood presents significant challenges for former gifted children, especially as they navigate the shift from being exceptional students to being "just" adults in a competitive and often uncertain world. Many participants express feelings of being unprepared for the lack of clear structure and guidance in adulthood, leading to struggles with self-identity, career choices, and managing relationships. The intense focus on achievement and intellectual validation in their youth can leave a void when these factors no longer define their success or value. This theme highlights the complexities and ambiguities gifted individuals often face in adulthood as they seek meaning and fulfillment beyond academic or intellectual pursuits.</p>

## Unexpected Findings

While this study set out to explore the long-term outcomes of former gifted students, an unexpected yet recurring theme emerged: the profound and lingering impact of unsupportive teachers outside of gifted settings. This was not the case with all participants, but an overwhelming majority described their experiences in traditional classrooms where their abilities were overlooked, misunderstood, and often criticized. These encounters had lasting effects on their academic confidence and emotional well-being. This unexpected finding shocked me. Although I am a former gifted student myself, this particular experience was not one I personally encountered. Realizing that helped me stay open and curious as I listened to participants' stories, especially when their experiences were different from mine. It also helped me avoid projecting my own assumptions onto the data and made it easier to recognize and respect the unique perspectives they shared.

This phenomenon aligns with existing literature on the challenges gifted students face when placed in environments that fail to acknowledge their needs. Studies have long shown that gifted children, when not provided with adequate support, often experience feelings of isolation, frustration, and disengagement (Reis & Renzulli, 2010). These emotional and academic struggles, as reported in the study, are a direct consequence of teachers who misunderstand or undervalue the needs of gifted students. The recurring theme of gifted students being isolated, often physically separated from their peers, mirrors findings in the field of gifted education, where such practices have been shown to negatively impact social and emotional development (Neihart, 2007).

For some participants, these discouraging interactions resulted in disengagement from subjects they once enjoyed. They described feeling discouraged from taking academic risks,

fearing further criticism or embarrassment. One participant described feeling isolated when their teacher separated them, other gifted students, from the rest of the class: "I will say I did feel isolated at points. For example, I had a classmate who was also gifted. On our gifted day, the teacher would give us all the worksheets for the whole day and stick us in the back of the class to complete them independently. If you are sticking me back here and I am doing it alone, why should I pay attention to you if I can do it alone?" According to the literature, such isolation can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and hinder opportunities for collaboration and peer relationships, both of which are critical for emotional well-being (Coleman, 2000). The participant's frustration with being separated and left to work alone is a clear manifestation of how unsupportive teaching practices can diminish a gifted student's engagement and enthusiasm. Several participants shared that unsupportive teachers wildly contributed to feelings of self-doubt when their intellectual curiosity or unconventional thinking was misinterpreted as defiance or arrogance. One participant recalled feeling anxious about how their teacher felt towards them: "Anytime I would answer a question or ask a question, she would always just give me this mean face. That is the first time I remember feeling anxious about how someone felt."

In some cases, participants encountered direct hostility toward their gifted identity. One participant described a teacher's resentment toward gifted programs: "As I got older — I had a teacher who was very upset about the gifted program in general. I could tell there was some discrimination against us gifted because she said, 'All children are gifted.' The participant recalled feeling dismissed and undervalued, as though their unique needs were denied. This participant's account of a teacher's obvious despise for the gifted program reflects broader societal resistance to the notion of "elitism" in education, a theme frequently explored in educational research (VanTassel-Baska, 2005). The teacher's comments that "all children are

gifted” echo the sentiment that the needs of gifted students are often trivialized or misunderstood, as though giftedness is an inherent trait shared by all.

Another participant expressed frustration with some educators' broader resistance toward gifted students: "Probably the biggest challenge, and I am not sure if it will ever be overcome, is just the educators who do not see value in the program." This frustration was compounded by the confusing hostility some participants faced from teachers despite their academic success. One participant reflected on this disconnect: "It never made sense to me. Why were the teachers so mad about it? I am making an A in your class, and like why are you mad at me?" The emotional toll of these negative teacher interactions was a consistent theme in the study, with many participants describing how these experiences affected their academic trajectory and self-esteem

These unexpected findings reveal that unsupportive and discriminatory teacher interactions can significantly alter former gifted students' academic trajectory and emotional well-being. Feelings of isolation, frustration, and disengagement were common themes, particularly when teachers demonstrated resentment or prejudice toward gifted students. These unexpected findings highlight the emotional toll such experiences can take. The experiences shared by participants shed light on the need for better teacher training in recognizing and nurturing gifted traits in all classroom environments, not just specialized programs. These insights, alongside the study's primary themes, offer a deeper understanding of the multifaceted experiences of former gifted students. The following section will summarize the key findings and their significance.

## Summary

The findings from Chapter 4 reveal a complex and nuanced picture of what it means to grow up as a gifted child and carry that identity into adulthood. Across participant narratives, seven key themes emerged: Pressure to Excel, The Gifted Label and Identity Formation, Neurodivergence and Giftedness, Strong Sense of Community and Support, Self-Efficacy and Achievement, Creativity and Divergent Thinking, and the Transition to Adulthood.

Many participants described the pressure to always perform at a high level as both motivating and burdensome, shaping how they saw themselves and what they believed was expected of them. The gifted label often became a core part of their identity early on, making it difficult to separate their worth from their performance. Several also reflected on experiences that pointed to neurodivergence that went unrecognized or unsupported because their giftedness masked deeper needs. A strong theme across interviews was the vital part the gifted program played in developing a sense of community and belonging. As they aged, participants' sense of self-efficacy varied, with some feeling empowered by their early capabilities, while others struggled with self-doubt when their paths didn't match the "exceptional" trajectory expected of them. Creativity and divergent thinking were often sources of joy and self-expression, though not always nurtured in traditional academic settings. Finally, the transition into adulthood brought a period of reevaluation, where many began to redefine what success and giftedness meant to them beyond grades or career titles. This redefinition often included a focus on emotional health, autonomy, and meaningful relationships.

The next chapter will look at how these findings relate to existing literature, drawing connections between the experiences of former gifted children and theoretical frameworks on

giftedness. It will also recommend practical solutions for educators and mental health professionals working with this population.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This chapter serves as a summary of research conducted on the experiences and outcomes of former gifted children. The findings from the interviews and focus group analysis are discussed in this chapter and interpreted in light of the theoretical framework and literature reviewed in earlier chapters. This research aimed to explore how giftedness influences the lives of individuals as they transition from childhood to adulthood and how this might manifest in their personal, academic, and professional experiences.

In the previous chapters, a detailed review of the giftedness literature highlighted gifted children's advantages and challenges, emphasizing social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes. Studies suggest that giftedness can lead to heightened expectations, unique social struggles, and diverse educational trajectories. However, the experiences of former gifted children navigating these challenges have received limited qualitative attention, which this study wanted to address.

The findings from this study revealed nuanced experiences of former gifted children, many of whom report complex relationships with their giftedness that continue to affect their adult lives. This chapter discusses these findings, exploring their implications for both theoretical understanding and practical applications. The chapter also acknowledges the study's limitations, suggests opportunities for future research, and concludes with a reflection on the contributions this research makes to the field of gifted education.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This study explored how former gifted children recognize and reflect on their lived experiences in relation to personal development, identity formation, and the challenges they have faced during and after their gifted education. Additionally, it examined how they perceive the

influence of their giftedness on their career paths and overall life satisfaction in adulthood. The findings reveal several key themes that highlight both the advantages and difficulties associated with having been identified as gifted in childhood.

A total of 15 former gifted children participated in this study. During both the interview process and focus group, seven themes developed. Those themes are as follows:

- Theme 1: The Pressure to be Exceptional
- Theme 2: The Gifted Label and Identity Formation
- Theme 3: Neurodivergence and Giftedness
- Theme 4: Strong Sense of Community & Support
- Theme 5: Self-Efficiency and Achievement
- Theme 6: Creativity and Divergent Thinking
- Theme 7: Transition to Adulthood

The themes collectively illustrate how the gifted label shaped the participant's early experiences and influenced their adult identities and life choices. While some participants described positive outcomes, others faced ongoing struggles with imposter syndrome, perfectionism, and self-worth. In the following sections, each theme as well as its alignment with the CASEL framework will be discussed separately.

### **Thematic Analysis Aligned with the CASEL Framework**

The experiences of former gifted children can be complex, with unique strengths and significant challenges. To better understand these experiences, the seven key themes identified in this study are organized using the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework. This framework emphasizes the development of five core competencies

that promote emotional intelligence, social engagement, and academic achievement. These competencies are:

1. Self-awareness
2. Self-management
3. Social awareness
4. Relationship skills
5. Responsible decision-making

By aligning these themes with CASEL's framework, this analysis highlights the interconnected nature of identity, achievement, and well-being in the lives of former gifted children. The following chart outlines each theme and corresponding competency to represent how the seven key themes align with the CASEL framework. This visual tool highlights the connections between participants' experiences and the social-emotional skills that influenced their development.

**Table 29**

Alignment of Key Themes with CASEL Competencies

CASEL Competency	Key Theme
Self-Awareness	The Pressure to be Exceptional
	The Gifted Label and Identity Formation
Self-Management	Neurodivergence and Giftedness
	Creativity and Divergent Thinking
Social Awareness	Strong Sense of Community and Support

Relationship Skills	Transition to Adulthood
Responsible Decision-Making	Self-Efficacy and Achievement

This table demonstrates how the emotional and social dimensions of the participant's experiences align with established competencies, offering a framework for interpreting their growth, challenges, and resilience. Each theme will be explored in detail in the following sections.

### **Self-Awareness: The Pressure to be Exceptional and The Gifted Label and Identity Formation**

Self-awareness is a foundational competency in the CASEL framework, encompassing understanding one's emotions, thoughts, and values and how these influence behaviors (CASEL, 2020). For former gifted children, self-awareness often plays a pivotal role in identity formation, self-perception, and overall mental well-being. Two key themes from this study, The Pressure to be Exceptional and The Gifted Label and Identity Formation, closely align with this competency.

Many former gifted children reported feeling an overwhelming need to excel in various areas of life, often internalizing high expectations from parents, teachers, or even themselves. Research suggests that gifted students frequently experience a "burden of high expectations," where their abilities become the defining characteristic of their identity (Mendaglio & Peterson, 2007). This pressure can significantly shape self-perception, reinforcing the belief that their worth is tied to achievement (Speirs Neumeister, 2004). While some participants described this pressure as motivating, others shared feelings of anxiety, perfectionism, and burnout (Schuler, 2000). For some, the gifted label intensified this pressure, as they felt obligated to consistently meet or even exceed exceptional performance associated with being identified as gifted. This often resulted in heightened self-criticism when they faced challenges or underperformed. Over

time, this pattern influenced how they viewed themselves, sometimes altering their sense of self-worth. Participants who struggled with subjects that did not align with their strengths, such as math, often felt as though they had failed to live up to the gifted label. This aligns with prior research on gifted underachievement, which says that gifted individuals who struggle in certain areas may experience a profound sense of disappointment, leading to disengagement or avoidance behaviors (Siegle & McCoach, 2005).

The gifted label played a significant role in shaping participants' identities throughout childhood and adolescence. Some internalized this label as a core part of their identity, which led them to pursue intellectually demanding career fields. However, for others, the label came with feelings of imposter syndrome or self-doubt, particularly when they faced difficulties in adulthood. Research on the imposter syndrome phenomenon in gifted individuals suggests that some former gifted children struggle with feelings of fraudulence, fearing that their past successes were due to luck rather than ability (Huecker et.al, 2023).

For participants diagnosed with ADHD or other neurodivergent conditions later in life, this discovery often prompted a reevaluation of their gifted identity. Participants described moments of identity conflict, where they grappled with reconciling their perceived intelligence with areas where they struggled. For example, some individuals reported excelling in creative pursuits yet feeling inadequate in traditional academic settings. Others reflected on how being identified as gifted fostered feelings of isolation, as they believed their peers could not relate to their experiences or expectations. This aligns with studies on twice-exceptionality (2e), which highlight the unique challenges faced by gifted individuals with disabilities, such as difficulties in executive functioning despite high cognitive abilities (Baum et al., 2017).

While self-awareness allows former gifted children to recognize the impact of their thoughts, emotions, and identity on their behavior, the ability to regulate these emotions and manage challenges effectively is equally critical. In the CASEL framework, self-management refers to the capacity to regulate emotions, manage stress, set and achieve goals, and exercise self-discipline in the face of difficulties (CASEL, 2020). The following section explores how former gifted children navigate self-management, examining themes such as perfectionism and procrastination, emotional regulation, and goal-setting struggles.

### **Self-Management: Neurodivergence & Giftedness and Creativity & Divergent Thinking**

Self-management, as defined by the CASEL framework, involves regulating emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations. It includes impulse control, stress management, self-discipline, goal-setting, and organizational strategies. For former gifted students, this competency intersects with two themes from the study: Neurodivergence and Giftedness and Creativity and Divergent Thinking. This connection emphasizes how gifted individuals often develop unique coping mechanisms to manage their intense emotions and high expectations. Additionally, their ability to think divergently can influence how they approach self-regulation and problem-solving in daily life.

For participants who identified as both gifted and neurodivergent, self-management emerged as a critical area of challenge. Many described struggling with executive functioning skills such as time management, organization, and emotional regulation. Despite being recognized as highly intelligent, these individuals often felt frustrated by their difficulty maintaining focus, meeting deadlines, or sustaining long-term projects (Brown et al., 2009). This tension led to cycles of self-criticism and frustration, especially for those who felt like their giftedness should compensate for their struggles. Some described feeling scatterbrained or

overwhelmed by their ideas, while others shared how their impulsivity or emotional intensity complicated academic and social experiences. Research suggests that gifted individuals with ADHD often experience difficulty regulating emotions, leading to heightened reactivity, frustration intolerance, and a tendency to hyperfocus on specific interests while neglecting other obligations (Amran & Majid, 2019).

Creativity and divergent thinking are key strengths for many gifted individuals, often serving as powerful tools for problem-solving, self-expression, and innovation (Runco, 2004). In this study, participants often described their creativity as a meaningful part of their identity. It was something that brought them joy, helped them cope with challenges, and shaped their personal growth. While finding productive ways to channel this creativity wasn't always easy, it ultimately played a crucial role in their adaptability and well-being. Many participants said their creativity helped them approach problems from fresh, unconventional angles, allowing them to excel in areas like writing, art, entrepreneurship, or science. This ability to generate unique ideas often gave them an edge in academic settings, group projects, or leadership roles. For some, their imaginative thinking allowed them to see obstacles as opportunities, turning setbacks into moments of growth and learning.

While self-management focuses on regulating internal experiences and behaviors, social awareness involves understanding and empathizing with others' emotions, perspectives, and social dynamics. As individuals with a heightened sense of self-awareness and intense emotions, former gifted children often face unique challenges in navigating relationships with peers, mentors, and family members. In this next section, we explore how social awareness plays a crucial role in fostering positive social interactions and relationships for gifted individuals.

### **Social Awareness: Strong Sense of Community and Support**

Social awareness, as defined by the CASEL framework, involves the ability to understand the perspectives of others, demonstrate empathy, and recognize social norms and cultural dynamics (CASEL, 2020). For former gifted children, social awareness was deeply connected to their experiences of belonging, identity, and interpersonal relationships. The theme Strong Sense of Community and Support aligns closely with this competency, highlighting how connection with others shaped participants' emotional well-being and personal growth.

Participants consistently described the importance of finding communities where they felt understood, valued, and connected. Many recalled that being part of the gifted program provided a sense of belonging that was otherwise difficult. These spaces offered relief from feeling "different" or isolated, allowing participants to form meaningful friendships with peers who shared their interests, curiosity, or intensity (Neihart, 2007). However, participants also reflected on moments when they struggled with social awareness, particularly in their early years. Some recalled feeling out of sync with their peers because of their intense focus on specific interests, heightened emotional sensitivity, or tendency to engage in conversations that felt too advanced for their age group. Gifted children often experience developmental asynchrony, where their cognitive abilities may outpace their emotional or social maturity, making it harder to relate to their same-aged peers (Silverman, 1993). Over time, participants developed stronger social awareness by learning to recognize social cues, adapt their communication styles, and build empathy for those with different perspectives.

As former gifted children develop social awareness, they also begin to cultivate relationship skills, another key competency in the CASEL framework. While social awareness focuses on understanding and empathizing with others, relationship skills emphasize the practical

application of these insights in forming, maintaining, and navigating interpersonal relationships. In the next section, we will explore how former gifted children develop relationship skills across various stages of life.

### **Relationship Skills: Transition to Adulthood**

As defined by the CASEL framework, relationship skills involve establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups (CASEL, 2020). This competency includes communication, teamwork, conflict resolution, and seeking or offering support when needed. For former gifted children, relationship skills were often shaped by their experiences of feeling "different" from peers, navigating intense emotions, and learning to build meaningful connections. The theme of Transition to Adulthood aligns closely with this competency.

For many participants, the transition to adulthood marked a pivotal period in developing relationship skills. As they moved away from structured educational settings and entered the workforce, college, or independent living, they often re-examined how they formed and maintained connections. Research suggests that gifted individuals may experience social difficulties during life transitions due to shifts in their support systems and the need to adapt to new social norms (Robinson, Shore, & Enersen, 2007). Some participants described feeling unprepared for the social demands of adulthood. Having spent much of their childhood immersed in academic pursuits or niche interests, they sometimes struggled to navigate workplace dynamics, build casual friendships, or engage in small talk. This aligns with studies showing that gifted individuals often develop deep, intense friendships but may find more superficial social interactions challenging (Gross, 2003). For those who thrived in gifted programs, the absence of that structured social support in adulthood was particularly challenging. Gifted education

programs often provide built-in communities of like-minded peers, where deep intellectual conversations and shared interests are the norm (Rinn & Bishop, 2015). In contrast, adulthood requires individuals to navigate broader and more diverse social environments, where adaptability and emotional intelligence become essential for success.

As participants entered adulthood, they discovered that collaboration, active listening, and effective communication were key factors in forming successful personal and professional relationships. While some naturally excelled in these areas, others found that their intellectual intensity, high expectations, or perfectionist tendencies sometimes created barriers in interpersonal interactions (Neihart et al., 2016). Gifted individuals who had been used to leading discussions or working independently in academic settings sometimes found it challenging to adjust to team-oriented workplaces where collaboration and compromise were valued over individual achievement.

As former gifted children navigate adulthood, their relationship skills continue to evolve. They develop a deeper understanding of how their choices impact themselves and others. This naturally leads to the competency of responsible decision-making, the final core area of the CASEL framework. In the next section, we will explore how former gifted students approach responsible decision-making, including their strategies for overcoming perfectionism and self-doubt, and how they learn to make choices that align with their long-term goals and well-being.

### **Responsible Decision-Making: Self-Efficacy and Achievement**

As defined by the CASEL framework, responsible decision-making involves making constructive and ethical choices about personal behavior and social interactions (CASEL, 2020). This competency includes skills such as evaluating consequences, considering the well-being of

oneself and others, and reflecting on past experiences to inform future actions. For former gifted children, responsible decision-making was often influenced by their drive for achievement, their experiences with perfectionism, and their evolving sense of self-efficacy. The theme of Self-Efficacy and Achievement closely aligns with this competency.

Self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific tasks or situations, played a crucial role in participants' decision-making processes (Bandura, 1997). Many former gifted children described developing a strong sense of self-efficacy in childhood, often reinforced by early academic success or recognition of their talents. This confidence empowered them to take on challenging projects, pursue ambitious goals, and embrace leadership roles. Others noted that early experiences of competence led them to feel capable of making independent choices, particularly in academic and creative pursuits (Pajares, 2002). However, participants also shared that their sense of self-efficacy was sometimes fragile, especially when they encountered failure or struggled in areas outside their comfort zone. This aligns with research showing that gifted individuals who experience early success may struggle with setbacks later in life, as they have fewer experiences with overcoming challenges (Dweck, 2006). For some, early academic success created unrealistic expectations that they would always excel. When faced with setbacks, particularly in adulthood, they reported feeling discouraged or questioning their abilities.

Many participants described learning to balance their high expectations with more realistic, flexible approaches to decision-making. Research suggests that developing resilience in the face of setbacks is key to maintaining healthy self-efficacy and making responsible choices (Duckworth et al., 2007). Some individuals reported that reframing failure as a learning experience helped them approach decisions with greater confidence and adaptability (Dweck,

2006). These findings emphasize the importance of fostering self-efficacy while also encouraging adaptability, especially for gifted individuals navigating major life transitions.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the experiences of former gifted children, shedding light on the social-emotional complexities that shaped their development. Seven key themes emerged: The Pressure to be Exceptional, The Gifted Label and Identity Formation, Neurodivergence and Giftedness, A Strong Sense of Community and Support, Self-Efficacy and Achievement, Creativity and Divergent Thinking, and The Transition to Adulthood. These themes reflect the complex interplay between participants' cognitive strengths, emotional development, and social environments. These themes highlight how gifted individuals often grapple with heightened expectations, self-perception struggles, and the need for meaningful connections. They also reveal the lasting impact of early gifted experiences on adult identity and well-being. The following sections dive deeper into each theme, comprehensively understanding the participants' journeys.

#### **Discussion of Theme 1: Pressure to be Exceptional**

The pressure participants experienced to sustain high performance is consistent with research highlighting the psychological toll of giftedness (Neihart, 2002). Many participants reported feeling defined by their early success, which led to internalized pressure to meet unrealistic standards. This aligns with studies suggesting that early labeling as "gifted" can create a fixed mindset, wherein individuals perceive intelligence and ability as static traits rather than qualities that develop over time (Dweck, 2006). Consequently, setbacks or failures may be

perceived as personal shortages rather than opportunities for growth, exacerbating anxiety and self-doubt (Gross, 2004).

Interestingly, this pressure was not solely external; several participants described feeling self-imposed expectations that persisted into adulthood, even in the absence of parental or societal reinforcement. Research indicates that gifted individuals often develop a strong internal locus of control, leading them to attribute success or lack thereof to personal effort rather than external factors (Siegle & McCoach, 2005). While this can foster resilience, it may also contribute to heightened self-criticism and stress. This finding suggests that early identification as "gifted" may create an enduring mental framework in which individuals evaluate their worth based on achievement.

A study by Pyryt (2004) highlights that this pressure to maintain exceptional performance can sometimes result in underachievement or emotional exhaustion. This paradox, where high-potential individuals struggle to meet their own or others' expectations, has been well-documented in research on the "gifted underachiever" phenomenon (Reis & McCoach, 2000). Emotional exhaustion, in particular, has been linked to burnout in high-achieving populations, with some studies indicating that gifted individuals may be more prone to perfectionism-driven stress and anxiety disorders (Schuler, 2000).

These findings align with research indicating that gifted children often struggle with heightened sensitivity to criticism (Post, 2022) and unrealistic self-imposed standards. The intensity of this pressure varies across life stages; for some participants, this pressure intensified in adulthood, particularly in high-performance careers or competitive academic settings. Others described learning to release the burden of perfectionism through mindfulness practices, therapy, or meaningful life experiences that reframed failure as a natural part of growth. This shift aligns

with research on self-compassion and adaptive coping strategies, which suggests that reframing failure as a learning experience can significantly reduce perfectionism-related distress (Neff, 2011). Ultimately, these findings highlight the complex impact of early gifted identification, reinforcing the need for psychological support that fosters balanced self-perception and adaptive coping mechanisms in high-achieving individuals.

### **Discussion of Theme 2: The Gifted Label and Identity Formation**

The gifted label played a complex role in participants' sense of identity. For some, being labeled gifted felt empowering as it became a key part of their identity and shaped how they understood their strengths and potential. They often felt proud of their abilities and saw their giftedness as something that set them apart positively. Research indicates that gifted students frequently develop a sense of identity closely tied to their intellectual abilities, which can foster confidence and motivation (Rinn & Bishop, 2015). This alignment between self-concept and ability can be beneficial, particularly when accompanied by supportive environments that encourage exploration and self-expression (Coleman & Cross, 2014).

However, not everyone felt this way. Others described feeling weighed down by the label, as though it came with rigid expectations they constantly tried to meet. For these participants, being "the gifted kid" sometimes felt like a box they could not step out of. Studies have shown that the gifted label can create pressure to maintain exceptional performance, sometimes leading to stress, anxiety, and fear of failure (Speirs Neumeister, 2004). This tension reflects a form of identity dissonance, where individuals struggle to reconcile their past self-perception as "gifted" with their current experiences. Some participants described feeling frustrated or even embarrassed when they did not meet the high standards they believed came with the label. At times, they would struggle, whether in academics, careers, or personal challenges, and that

sometimes left them questioning whether they were truly “gifted” at all. These feelings of doubt could be complicated for those who once excelled but later felt they were falling short of expectations.

Research by Cross & Cross (2015) highlights that this kind of identity confusion is common among gifted individuals, particularly when their abilities are emphasized more than their emotional well-being. Adolescents may face challenges when they feel pressured to live up to their "gifted" identity while navigating personal growth, social relationships, and emotional struggles. The psychological weight of maintaining an image of intelligence and success can sometimes hinder personal development, as individuals may avoid challenges that could risk their self-perception of giftedness (Freeman, 2013).

For some participants, learning to separate their self-worth from achievement and recognizing that being gifted did not mean they had to be perfect was an important step in developing a healthier sense of identity. Research supports the idea that reframing intelligence as a dynamic trait, rather than a fixed label, can help gifted individuals develop greater resilience and emotional well-being (Dweck, 2006; Neff, 2011). Ultimately, these findings emphasize the need for a more nuanced approach to gifted education and identity development; one that prioritizes both intellectual and emotional well-being.

### **Discussion of Theme 3: Neurodivergence and Giftedness**

The overlap of giftedness and neurodivergence emerged as a significant theme, with many participants sharing experiences of feeling misunderstood or misdiagnosed in their earlier years. Participants diagnosed with ADHD or other neurodivergent conditions later in life reflected on how the gifted label sometimes obscured their struggles, reinforcing feelings of

inadequacy. While being identified as gifted often brought praise for their intelligence or creativity, it also had a downside; their struggles were frequently dismissed or misinterpreted. Because they seemed to perform well in certain areas, teachers, parents, and participants often overlooked signs of underlying challenges. This left some participants feeling frustrated, confused, or inadequate as they wrestled with difficulties they could not fully explain. For many, the gifted label masked struggles with focus, organization, or emotional regulation. While their strong problem-solving skills or creative thinking often helped them succeed in school or other pursuits, those struggles frequently made it harder to stay on top of tasks, manage deadlines, or maintain emotional balance. As a result, participants sometimes felt like they were constantly underperforming compared to their potential, reinforcing feelings of self-doubt or failure.

This pattern reflects everyday experiences among twice-exceptional (2e) individuals, those who are both gifted and have coexisting disabilities. Studies have shown that twice-exceptional (2e) individuals, those who are gifted and have coexisting disabilities, are often misunderstood, leading to delayed diagnosis and frustration with unmet potential (Baum et al., 2017). This can lead to delayed diagnoses, unmet needs, and frustration with their potential. For participants, discovering their neurodivergence later in life was often a turning point. It helped them make sense of their past struggles and gave them new strategies to manage their challenges. More importantly, it allowed them to reframe their experiences — recognizing that their difficulties were not signs of laziness or failure but rather the result of complex neurological differences that had been overlooked for too long.

#### **Discussion of Theme 4: Strong Sense of Community and Support**

Participants consistently emphasized the positive impact of finding spaces where they felt understood and accepted. For many, connecting with people who "got them" greatly impacted

their well-being. Whether bonding with like-minded peers or simply having a friend who shared their sense of humor, these connections helped them feel less alone. Instead of feeling like the odd one out, they felt seen and valued. This experience aligns with research by Rimm (2008), which highlights that strong peer connections are vital for gifted students, reducing feelings of isolation and fostering positive identity development.

When gifted individuals find spaces where their ideas, quirks, and passions are accepted, it often strengthens their identity. These positive social experiences give them a safe space to express themselves, take risks, and build the confidence they need to thrive. According to Gross (2006), gifted children who struggle to find intellectual peers often experience social isolation, whereas those who connect with others who share their interests develop greater confidence and resilience. Finding their "people" was a turning point for many participants when they realized they did not have to hide parts of themselves to belong. Realizing they did not have to suppress aspects of themselves to fit in was liberating. Research on gifted adolescents indicates that social acceptance within intellectually compatible groups fosters not only self-esteem but also intrinsic motivation and emotional well-being (Mendaglio, 2012). These findings highlight the importance of creating environments where gifted individuals feel free to embrace their authentic selves.

In addition to peer relationships, several participants highlighted the impact of supportive teachers and family members in creating those safe spaces. Having someone who recognized their potential, encouraged their strengths, and guided them during challenging moments played a key role in their personal growth. Research by Siegle and McCoach (2005) indicates that supportive teachers can significantly impact gifted students' self-perception and motivation by providing intellectual stimulation while fostering emotional resilience. These trusted individuals

often helped participants navigate social pressures, manage self-doubt, and embrace their unique abilities. For some, this support was the foundation that allowed them to form stronger friendships and feel more confident in social settings. The findings highlight the profound impact of social connections on the emotional and intellectual development of gifted individuals. Whether through peers, teachers, or family, having spaces where they feel understood and valued not only alleviates loneliness but also enhances self-confidence and personal growth.

### **Discussion of Theme 5: Self-Efficacy and Achievement**

Participants who developed a strong sense of self-efficacy, believing in their ability to influence outcomes through effort and perseverance, were more likely to achieve their goals despite facing challenges. These individuals described learning to advocate for themselves, seek alternative learning strategies, and embrace their unique thinking styles as strengths. This aligns with Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory, which emphasizes the role of belief systems in driving persistence, resilience, and achievement. Bandura (1997) further argued that self-efficacy is a critical determinant of how individuals respond to obstacles, as those with high self-efficacy view challenges as opportunities to develop their skills rather than insurmountable barriers.

Building this mindset was difficult for many participants, but it made a huge difference. Those who cultivated a growth mindset felt empowered to take calculated risks, adapt to change, and pursue meaningful goals (Dweck, 2006). Instead of viewing setbacks as failures, they often saw them as opportunities to learn and improve, which helped them stay motivated even when things got tough. Several participants also pointed out that developing self-efficacy did not happen overnight; they built it gradually through experience. Small wins, like mastering a challenging subject, overcoming social anxiety, or successfully navigating a tricky situation, gave them the confidence to take on more significant challenges. This pattern aligns with the

work of Schunk and Pajares (2002), who found that repeated experiences of success, even in small increments, enhance self-efficacy and encourage further effort.

Supportive relationships also played a key role; encouragement from friends, mentors, or family members often helped participants recognize their strengths and believe in their ability to succeed. Research by Siegle and McCoach (2005) suggests that gifted students who receive validation and support from trusted adults are more likely to develop academic self-efficacy, which positively influences motivation and performance. Over time, these positive experiences reinforced the idea that perseverance and creative problem-solving could lead to real progress.

### **Discussion of Theme 6: Creativity and Divergent Thinking**

Creativity was a major strength and an important way for participants to cope with life's challenges. Many participants mentioned how they were great at coming up with out-of-the-box ideas, finding unique solutions, and thinking in ways that did not always follow the usual rules. This aligns with research indicating that gifted and neurodivergent individuals often excel in divergent thinking, which involves generating multiple ideas or solutions in response to open-ended problems (White & Shah, 2011). Divergent thinking allows individuals to approach challenges from multiple perspectives, fostering innovation and adaptability in both academic and personal settings (Runco & Acar, 2012).

Many participants shared how their creative pursuits, like writing, art, and design, became essential outlets for them. These activities helped them process their emotions, figure out who they are, and build confidence. Research by Yüreğilli Göksu et al. (2024) underscores that creativity enhances cognitive development and is a powerful tool for emotional regulation among

gifted individuals. Creative activities help individuals externalize complex emotions, reducing stress and fostering self-awareness (Jean-Berluche, 2024),

Divergent thinking, the ability to generate multiple ideas (Lubart, 2016), played a significant role. Participants often found that their knack for seeing things from different angles helped them navigate difficult situations. For example, some described how this skill allowed them to brainstorm creative solutions during social conflicts, find new ways to manage their schedules, or adapt to unexpected changes. This aligns with research by Runco (2014), which emphasizes that divergent thinking is closely tied to problem-solving skills, particularly in situations that require flexibility and innovation. For many participants, this ability to think differently helped them cope with day-to-day stressors and empowered them to embrace their unique perspectives and turn challenges into opportunities for growth and self-expression.

These findings emphasize the importance of fostering creativity as both a cognitive and emotional resource for gifted and neurodivergent individuals. Whether through artistic expression, innovative problem-solving, or imaginative thinking, creativity provides a valuable framework for coping with challenges, strengthening self-identity, and building resilience.

### **Discussion of Theme 7: Transition to Adulthood**

The transition to adulthood was a pivotal period for many participants. While some embraced the newfound independence, others described feeling unprepared for its social and practical demands. Tasks like managing schedules, meeting deadlines, and making everyday decisions suddenly felt overwhelming. For some, these struggles had been present all along but were easier to manage in the structured environment of school, where clear expectations and external support systems were in place. Once they entered adulthood, whether through higher

education, starting a job, or moving out independently, those hidden challenges became harder to ignore.

Many participants reflected on how their giftedness had previously masked these difficulties. In school, their strong memory, quick thinking, or ability to cram before a test often compensated for disorganization or poor time management. Many reported that they could succeed academically by cramming before a test, relying on last-minute bursts of productivity, or depending on external structures to keep them on track. However, as adult responsibilities piled up, these strategies no longer worked. Without the school structure to fall back on, some participants felt stuck, overwhelmed, or frustrated by their inability to meet their high expectations.

This struggle aligns with research by Robinson and Noble (1991), which highlights that gifted individuals may face unique challenges when adapting to new environments. Many gifted individuals develop a strong academic identity, but this does not always translate into practical life skills. Their heightened sensitivity, perfectionism, or reliance on academic strengths sometimes leaves them lacking the practical skills to manage everyday life. Research further suggests that twice-exceptional individuals (gifted individuals with ADHD, autism, or other neurodivergent traits) may struggle disproportionately with executive functioning challenges (Reis, Baum, & Burke, 2014). This combination of high expectations and unexpected struggles often led to feelings of self-doubt.

For many participants, the sudden loss of external structure and academic validation in adulthood created a profound sense of uncertainty. In school, success was clearly defined by grades, awards, or teacher feedback, but in adulthood, the absence of such metrics left some feeling directionless or unmotivated. Research by Perry (2008) suggests that gifted individuals

often struggle with the transition from external validation (e.g., academic success) to internal motivation, particularly if their self-worth has been tied to achievement. This can lead to "gifted burnout," where individuals experience emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and avoidance of challenging tasks due to fear of failure or unmet expectations (Yang & Cho, 2024).

However, many also described how developing new strategies, such as seeking support, learning to prioritize tasks, or embracing flexibility. Eventually, this helped them build the skills they needed to thrive. This struggle ultimately became a valuable learning experience for some, helping them develop resilience and a stronger sense of independence. These findings align with research by Duckworth, Gendler, and Gross (2016), which emphasizes that self-regulation, grit, and flexible thinking are key predictors of long-term success among gifted individuals.

In conclusion, this study highlights former gifted children's complex and often challenging experiences, showing that their journey involves much more than intelligence or high grades. The themes explored—identity, pressure, and social connections—show how being gifted can shape a person's thoughts, feelings, and relationships in lasting ways. While many gifted individuals develop strengths like creativity, resilience, and independence, they may also face self-doubt, burnout, or feeling different from their peers. Recognizing these experiences is important for parents, teachers, and mental health professionals who want to support gifted individuals in a way that nurtures both their abilities and emotional well-being. By creating environments where gifted individuals feel understood, accepted, and encouraged to explore their interests, we can help them build fulfilling and balanced lives. The following section explores the practical and educational implications of these findings, offering strategies to help gifted individuals thrive not just in school, but throughout their lives.

## **Implications**

The implications shared in this section come directly from the participants themselves. At the end of each interview, they were asked what advice they would give to parents, teachers, and others who work with gifted individuals. Their insights are rooted in personal experience and reflect what they believe would have helped them most growing up—and what could help others now. The following categories reflect the themes that emerged from their responses: educational implications, implications for parents and caregivers, implications for mental health professionals, implications for adulthood success, and policy implications. These ideas are meant to offer real-world guidance from those who've lived it firsthand.

### **Educational Implications**

Educators can play a critical role in fostering the success of gifted children. Research on differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001) emphasizes the need to tailor education to individual student strengths and motivations. The following strategies can support both academic and social-emotional well-being:

- **Embrace Strength-Based Learning Approaches:** Gifted children often excel when encouraged to explore subjects that align with their passions and interests. Several participants shared how the most rewarding experiences in their education were those that allowed them to dive deeply into topics they loved. One participant explained, “When I was allowed to pick a project that interested me, I would spend hours on it without realizing time was passing. That’s when I really felt engaged.” This aligns with Renzulli’s (2016) Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness, which highlights the importance

of task commitment and creativity alongside high ability. Educators can provide opportunities for more student-driven projects and open-ended learning tasks.

- **Address Executive Function Challenges:** Difficulties with time management, organization, and task initiation can undermine achievement for gifted students who may also be neurodivergent. Many participants shared how their challenges with executive functioning, despite their high intellectual abilities, led to struggles with completing tasks or managing deadlines. One participant noted, “I’d start projects with a lot of enthusiasm, but then I’d get overwhelmed by how much I had to do, and I’d end up procrastinating or forgetting things.” Research on twice-exceptional (2e) students (Baum, Schader, & Owen, 2017) emphasizes the importance of explicit instruction in executive functioning strategies, such as visual planners and checklists, to support these learners effectively.
- **Redefine Achievement and Success:** Gifted students often face pressure to achieve traditionally (e.g., grades, awards, projects). Many participants reflected on how this pressure negatively impacted their experience, leading to feelings of stress or inadequacy. One participant shared, “I always felt like I had to get the perfect grade or I wasn’t good enough, and when I didn’t, it really crushed me.” Dweck’s (2006) growth mindset theory suggests that valuing effort, resilience, and creativity over fixed notions of ability can help students develop a healthier perspective on success. Educators could actively promote a broader understanding of success that promotes and values personal growth, creativity, and well-being alongside academic performance.

### **Implications for Parents and Caregivers**

Parents and caregivers are essential in helping gifted children develop confidence, resilience, and independence. Research on social-emotional development in gifted children

(Cross & Cross, 2011) highlights the importance of a supportive home environment that validates their unique experiences. Strategies for families include:

- **Encourage Open Conversations About Identity:** Gifted individuals may struggle with isolation or self-doubts described in the theory of asynchronous development (Silverman, 1997), where intellectual abilities outpace emotional or social maturity. Several participants expressed how difficult it was to feel “advanced” in some areas while still struggling with emotions or social situations typical of their age. One participant shared, “I could read at a college level, but I still cried when I got overwhelmed. People didn’t understand that both could be true.” Families can foster a positive sense of identity by encouraging open discussions about their child's strengths and challenges.
- **Support Self-Advocacy Skills:** As children transition to adulthood, teaching them to advocate for their own needs is crucial. Several participants reflected on how much easier their path might have been if they had been explicitly taught how to speak up for themselves. One participant shared, “I didn’t even know I was allowed to ask for help. I just thought I had to figure it all out on my own.” Research on twice-exceptional (2e) learners (Baum, Schader, & Owen, 2017) emphasizes the need for proactive communication skills. Role-playing scenarios, such as asking for accommodations in school, explaining their learning preferences, or managing social challenges, can help build these skills.
- **Continue Enrichment at Home:** Many reflected that their most meaningful learning experiences often happened at home, where they had the freedom to explore their interests without the pressure of grades or performance. They encouraged parents and caregivers to provide access to books, creative tools, puzzles, and open-ended activities

that spark curiosity. Several participants emphasized that enrichment can be as simple as letting kids ask big questions, dive deep into a topic they love, or spend time making things. This aligns with Renzulli's (2016) model of gifted education, which highlights the value of interest-based learning and creative productivity beyond traditional academic settings.

### **Implications for Mental Health Professionals**

Therapists, counselors, and coaches can provide valuable support for gifted children by addressing their unique emotional and cognitive needs. Research on the social-emotional development of gifted individuals (Neihart et al., 2002) highlights the importance of tailored interventions that recognize both their strengths and vulnerabilities. This can look like:

- **Incorporate Trauma-Informed Practices:** Many gifted and neurodivergent individuals have experienced academic trauma, social rejection, or internalized failure. Several participants described how their educational experiences left them with lasting feelings of inadequacy. One participant shared, "I was always told I was smart, but I couldn't keep up with everything. It made me feel like I wasn't good enough, even though I was trying my hardest." Research on academic trauma (Roick & Ringeisen, 2017) suggests that negative educational experiences can lead to anxiety, avoidance, and decreased self-efficacy. Mental health professionals should adopt approaches that emphasize validation, self-compassion, and resilience-building.
- **Target Perfectionism and Imposter Syndrome:** Gifted individuals, particularly those with ADHD or anxiety, are prone to perfectionism and self-doubt (Mofield & Peters, 2018). Dabrowski's (1964) Theory of Positive Disintegration suggests that heightened sensitivity and self-criticism can lead to personal growth but also increase vulnerability to

imposter syndrome. Therapists can help clients challenge unrealistic expectations by promoting cognitive-behavioral strategies (e.g., reframing negative thoughts and setting realistic goals).

### **Implications for Adulthood Success**

Given the challenges gifted children face in traditional career paths, strategies that help promote success in the workplace are essential. Those strategies include:

- **Promote Flexible Career Paths:** Many gifted individuals thrive in careers that allow autonomy, creativity, and non-linear thinking. Participants in this study frequently shared how they felt most fulfilled in roles where they could pursue multiple interests and work independently. One participant reflected, “I never felt like I fit in a traditional career path. But when I started my own business, everything clicked. I could be creative, follow my own ideas, and not be confined by a set structure.” This aligns with theories of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the concept of multipotentiality, where gifted individuals often excel in diverse fields (Fredrickson, 1979). Encouraging careers in technology, design, writing, or entrepreneurship may provide environments that better align with their strengths.
- **Address Burnout and Perfectionism in the Workplace:** Dabrowski’s (1964) Theory of Positive Disintegration highlights how intense self-reflection can lead to both growth and distress. Many participants described how their heightened sensitivity and tendency toward deep self-examination often led to periods of overwhelm. One participant shared, “I’d get so caught up in my thoughts, analyzing every little mistake, that I’d become paralyzed by it. It was like I couldn’t turn it off.” Employers can support gifted and

neurodivergent employees by encouraging flexible work structures, clear communication, and mental health accommodations to prevent overwhelm and burnout

### **Policy Implications**

Broader systemic changes are necessary to improve support for gifted individuals at the institutional level. Research on equity in gifted education (Peters et al., 2020) highlights the need for comprehensive policies that address both academic and social-emotional development. The following strategies can help create more inclusive and supportive systems.

- **Integrate SEL Programs in Gifted Education:** Incorporating SEL curricula in gifted programs aligns with Goleman's (1995) theory of emotional intelligence, which emphasizes the role of self-awareness and interpersonal skills in long-term success. Several participants reflected on how their emotional needs were often overlooked in gifted programs, particularly in areas such as emotional regulation and managing perfectionism. One participant shared, "I was so focused on being perfect that I forgot how to just be okay with not getting everything right. It took me years to realize that wasn't normal." Providing opportunities for self-reflection and coping strategies can help students develop emotional regulation, relationship-building skills, and strategies for managing perfectionism.
- **Expand Support 2e Students:** Twice-exceptional students, those who are both gifted and have a disability, are often overlooked due to their asynchronous development or compensatory strategies (Baum, Schader, & Owen, 2017). Many participants shared their experiences of being misunderstood or misdiagnosed during their school years. One participant recalled, "Teachers saw I was capable, so they didn't understand why I was struggling with certain things. I ended up hiding my difficulties, which just made

everything worse.” Schools could adopt more transparent policies and professional development that equip educators with the tools to identify and support 2e learners who are often overlooked or misunderstood.

The findings of this study emphasize the complex relationship between giftedness, neurodivergence, and social-emotional well-being. By aligning support systems with the CASEL framework, stakeholders can create environments that foster self-awareness, resilience, and meaningful connections. Tailored strategies in education, family dynamics, mental health practices, and workplace settings are crucial for ensuring that gifted and neurodivergent individuals are empowered to thrive. However, while these implications offer valuable insights, it is equally important to recognize the limitations of this study. Factors such as sample size, participant demographics, and the scope of inquiry may have influenced the findings. The following section outlines these limitations and offers considerations for future research.

### **Limitations**

While this study provides meaningful insights into the experiences of former gifted children who are also neurodivergent, several limitations should be acknowledged to provide context for the findings and guide future research. First, this study's sample size was small, meaning the findings may not apply to a broader population. At the same time, qualitative research focuses more on exploring experiences in depth rather than covering a wide range of people; having a larger group of participants could have provided a more varied look at experiences across different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. It is also possible that the people who chose to participate were those especially willing to reflect on their past, which resulted in a sample with specific shared perspectives or narratives about their giftedness and neurodivergence. Future research could strengthen these findings by including a more diverse

group of participants or combining qualitative insights with quantitative methods to fully understand the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Since this study focused on participants looking back on their childhood and teenage years, their memories may not be entirely accurate. People's recollections can be influenced by their current feelings, perspectives, or life experiences, which affect how they remember things from the past. While one of the strengths of qualitative research is that it taps into participants' personal experiences, future studies might benefit from methods that track experiences over time or gather data at different points in participants' lives (Nikolopoulou, 2023). This approach could reduce the impact of memory distortions and provide a clearer picture of their experiences.

Additionally, this study mainly looked at the connection between giftedness and neurodivergence, but it did not go very deep into other important identity factors like race, socioeconomic background, or culture. These aspects can significantly impact how people experience giftedness, neurodivergence, and a sense of belonging. Future research would benefit from an intersectional approach to better understand how these overlapping identities shape the experiences of gifted and neurodivergent individuals, especially those from marginalized groups.

Finally, as with qualitative research, the researcher's ideas or expectations may have shaped how they interpreted the data. Although steps like member checking were taken to promote objectivity, the subjective nature of qualitative research can still pose some challenges. An additional limitation of this study was the absence of an expert reviewer to validate the coding process. While steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness, such as maintaining a detailed audit trail and grounding codes in participants' own language, the involvement of an additional researcher or expert in qualitative analysis could have strengthened the reliability and credibility of the thematic interpretations. Future studies might consider using mixed-methods approaches

combining qualitative insights with quantitative data. This could provide a more well-rounded and reliable understanding of these experiences.

Despite these limitations, the study offers important insights into the nuanced experiences of gifted and neurodivergent individuals. By addressing these limitations in future research, scholars can deepen our understanding of this population's strengths, struggles, and developmental pathways. The following section outlines key recommendations for future research to build on these findings.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the findings of this study, several areas for future research are recommended to expand our understanding of the long-term experiences of gifted individuals:

1. **Exploration of Diverse Gifted Experiences:** Future research should explore the experiences of gifted individuals from underrepresented backgrounds, including culturally diverse populations, individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and those with disabilities. These perspectives are crucial for understanding how systemic factors, such as access to resources and cultural expectations, shape the gifted experience.
2. **Longitudinal Studies on Social-Emotional Development:** While this study captured participants' reflections in adulthood, longitudinal research tracking gifted individuals through childhood would provide deeper insights into how social-emotional competencies evolve. Such studies could identify protective factors that support resilience, well-being, and positive identity development.
3. **Intersection of Giftedness and Neurodivergence:** Given the significant number of participants who identified as neurodivergent, future research should further investigate

the experiences of twice-exceptional (2e) individuals. Studies focusing on tailored strategies for managing executive functioning challenges, emotional regulation, and identity development could inform more effective support systems.

4. **Giftedness and Parenting Experiences:** Given that some participants reflected on how their experiences influenced their parenting approaches, future research could examine how former gifted children parent gifted or neurodivergent children. Exploring the interplay of identity, expectations, and emotional support in these family dynamics may provide valuable insights for supporting future generations.
5. **Impact of Unsupportive Teachers in General Education Classrooms:** Although not universal among all participants, a significant number reported experiences in traditional classrooms where their giftedness was overlooked, misunderstood, or met with resistance. Given the consistency and emotional weight of these reflections, future research could examine the long-term psychological and academic outcomes of gifted students who encounter unsupportive or dismissive educators outside of specialized gifted programs.
6. **More Teacher Training and Professional Development:** This could involve looking at the effectiveness of current teacher education programs in fostering inclusive practices that support a diverse range of gifted learners, especially those with intersecting identities or twice-exceptionalities.

By expanding research in these areas, educators, mental health professionals, and families can better understand the nuanced experiences of gifted individuals and develop strategies that promote academic achievement and lifelong well-being.

## Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of former gifted children, revealing key themes that highlight the complexities of their social-emotional development and identity formation. Through examining participants' reflections, it became clear that giftedness is not solely defined by academic achievement but is deeply intertwined with emotional well-being, interpersonal relationships, and self-perception. The seven themes identified — The Pressure to be Exceptional, The Gifted Label and Identity Formation, Neurodivergence and Giftedness, A Strong Sense of Community and Support, Self-Efficacy and Achievement, Creativity and Divergent Thinking, and The Transition to Adulthood — highlight the complex nature of the gifted experience. While participants often excelled in intellectual pursuits, many faced heightened anxiety, perfectionism, and social challenges. However, those who developed strong self-awareness, effective coping strategies, and supportive relationships were better equipped to navigate these challenges successfully.

By aligning these themes with the CASEL framework, this study emphasizes the importance of fostering social-emotional competencies alongside intellectual development in gifted individuals. Encouraging self-reflection, emotional regulation, and meaningful connections can give gifted individuals the tools to thrive beyond the classroom. Ultimately, these findings highlight the need for educators, parents, and mental health professionals to adopt holistic approaches that nurture both gifted individuals' cognitive strengths and emotional well-being. By understanding the long-term impact of giftedness and supporting the development of essential life skills, we can better empower gifted individuals to achieve personal fulfillment, resilience, and success throughout their lives.

**APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A

### UNPACKING THE EXPERIENCES OF FORMER GIFTED CHILDREN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON IDENTITY, ACHIEVEMENT, AND WELL-BEING

#### Introduction:

Welcome and thank you for participating in this interview. My name is Nikki Bishop, and I am a researcher conducting a qualitative study as part of my dissertation titled: Unpacking the Experiences of Former Gifted Children: A Qualitative Study on Identity, Achievement, And Well-Being

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences and to help inform educational practices and support systems for gifted individuals.

Your participation in this interview is vital as it will provide rich insights and perspectives that will contribute to a deeper understanding of former gifted children. Your experiences and viewpoints are essential to this research, and I appreciate your willingness to share them.

Before we begin, I would like to assure you that all information shared during this interview will be kept confidential. Your identity will be protected, and any personal details shared will be anonymized in the final dissertation. If you are comfortable with it, I will be recording this interview to ensure accuracy in data analysis. However, please let me know if you prefer not to be recorded.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time or decline to answer any question that you are not comfortable with. Your decision will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the study in any way. Do you have any questions before we proceed?

During this interview, I will be asking you a series of questions related to former gifted children. These questions are designed to elicit detailed responses that will help me explore the nuances of your experiences and viewpoints. Feel free to elaborate on your answers and provide examples to illustrate your points.

Are you ready to continue?

#### **Background information:**

- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- When did you graduate high school?
- Did you attend college? What did you major in?

- Are you currently employed? Where?

**Main questions:**

1. Can you tell me about your experiences as a gifted child – whether that be in grade school or post-schooling?
2. How do you feel your giftedness has influenced your academic and personal development?
3. What are some challenges you faced as a gifted child?
  - a. How did you navigate those challenges?
    - i. Then
    - ii. Now
4. In what ways did being gifted affect your relationships with your family, teachers, and peers?
5. Can you share any memorable moments that shaped your understanding of your giftedness? When did it click?
6. Have there been any misconceptions or stereotypes about gifted children that you have encountered?
  - a. If yes, how did you handle them?
  - b. If no, why do you think that you have not encountered anything like this?
7. How do you feel your giftedness has influenced your career choices and achievements?
8. What advice would give to parents, teachers, or other individuals working with gifted children based on your experience?

**Closing questions:**

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as a gifted child?
- Do you have any suggestions or recommendations for addressing issues related to former gifted children?

**Wrap-up:**

Thank you. There is a chance that I may need to contact you for some clarifying information or perhaps to ask additional questions, or for your input as to the findings I discover

## Appendix B

### UNPACKING THE EXPERIENCES OF FORMER GIFTED CHILDREN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON IDENTITY, ACHIEVEMENT, AND WELL-BEING

#### Introduction:

Welcome and thank you for participating in this focus group. My name is Nikki Bishop, and I am a researcher conducting a qualitative study as part of my dissertation titled: Unpacking the Experiences of Former Gifted Children: A Qualitative Study on Identity, Achievement, And Well-Being. The purpose of this study is to examine how the early identification of your giftedness has shaped your identity, relationships, career paths, and overall well-being as adult.

I want to hear your thoughts on how being identified as gifted affected you emotionally, socially, academically, and in your adult life. This is an open space for you to share your experiences, and there are no right or wrong answers.”

Your participation in this focus group is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time or decline to answer any question that you are not comfortable with. Your decision will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the study in any way. Do you have any questions before we proceed?

Are you ready to continue?

#### Ground Rules

1. Confidentiality: Everything in this room is confidential. No one outside of the group will know what is discussed.
2. Respect: Please be respectful of others’ viewpoints. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your opinions and perspectives.
3. Voluntary Participation: You are free to withdraw from the discussion at any time without any consequences.
4. One Speaker at a Time: I ask that you speak one at a time.

#### **Icebreaker**

Let’s start by introducing ourselves. Please share your name and a brief memory of your childhood related to school or learning that stands out to you. This can be either positive or negative.

#### **Questions:**

1. What do you remember about being labeled as a gifted child?

- Probing: How did you feel when you were identified as gifted? Was it something that you embraced or felt pressured by?”
2. How did being gifted influence your relationships with peers during childhood?
    - Probing: Were there any challenges in connecting with other children? Did you feel different from your classmates?
  3. How did your academic experiences as a gifted child shape your self-perception and expectations?
    - Did you ever feel that your abilities led to different expectations from teachers, family, or friends? Did this affect your confidence or self-esteem?
  4. How did your giftedness affect your transition from childhood to adolescence? Did you face any specific challenges during this period?
    - Did your giftedness become more or less relevant to your identity as you grew older? Were there changes in how others saw you?
  5. Looking back, how do you feel about the label of being gifted now as an adult?
    - Do you still identify with being gifted, or has that label shifted in importance for you?
  6. What impact do you think being a gifted child has had on your adult life, both personally and professionally?
    - Do you see any long-term benefits or drawbacks of your giftedness? How has it shaped your career or relationships as an adult?

**Closing questions:**

- Do you feel that society’s view of giftedness has changed since you were a child? If so, how?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as a gifted child that we haven’t discussed yet?

**Wrap-up:**

Thank you all for sharing your valuable experiences and insights today. Your perspectives are incredibly important for helping us understand the long-term impacts of being a gifted child. As a reminder, everything discussed in this session is confidential, and you can contact me if you have any further thoughts or questions after today

## Appendix C

### RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Study Title: Unpacking the Experiences of Former Gifted Children: A Qualitative Study on Identity, Achievement, And Well-Being

Protocol Number: IRB-FY2025-155

Approval Date: 01-21-2025

Principal Investigator: Teranee “Nikki” Bishop

Institution: Middle Tennessee State University

#### Study Description and Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the experiences of former gifted children. Specifically, the study focuses on how identity, achievement, and well-being are shaped by giftedness and how these factors may evolve. The findings of this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of giftedness and its long-term impacts on individuals.

#### Target Population:

- Individuals who were identified as gifted in childhood (before age 12)
- Participated in gifted education for at least one year in the state of Tennessee
- Current age is less than 35, but greater than 21
- Willing to share their stories and engage in an interview

#### Risks & Benefits:

While there are no physical risks associated with participation, discussing personal experiences may lead to emotional discomfort for some participants. You are free to skip any questions that make you uncomfortable and can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

While there may be no direct benefits to you, your participation could help increase your understanding of the long-term outcomes of being a gifted child, potentially leading to better educational and psychological support for gifted children in the future. The findings may also offer insights into how giftedness affects personal development, self-esteem, and life satisfaction.

Additional Information:

If you choose to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview where you can share your personal experiences and insights. In addition to the interview, there is an optional focus group session where you can discuss your experiences with other former gifted children.

Your participation will provide valuable insights into how being gifted as a child may shape your life as an adult.

Principal Investigator: Teranee 'Nikki' Bishop

Contact Information: [tnm5d@mtmail.mtsu.edu](mailto:tnm5d@mtmail.mtsu.edu)

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jim Rost

Contact Information: [jim.rost@mtsu.edu](mailto:jim.rost@mtsu.edu)

For additional information about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Office of Compliance at 615-494-8918 or via email at [irb\\_information@mtsu.edu](mailto:irb_information@mtsu.edu). (<http://www.mtsu.edu/irb>)

## Appendix D

Subject: Scheduling Your Dissertation Interview and Optional Focus Group

Dear [Participant's Name],

I hope this message finds you well! As part of my dissertation research, I would like to invite you to participate in a one-on-one interview. Your insights are incredibly valuable, and I'm excited to have the opportunity to speak with you.

Please find below the details for scheduling:

1. **One-on-One Interview:**

Please let me know your availability, and we will schedule a time that works best for you. If you are located in Wayne County or North Alabama, we can arrange to meet in person. Otherwise, we can conduct the interview virtually.

2. **Optional Focus Group:**

In addition to the interview, there will be an optional focus group session. If you're interested in participating, kindly indicate your availability for the group session, which will be scheduled after the individual interviews. Like the one-on-one interviews, if you are local, the focus group will be held in person, and virtual options will be available for participants outside of Wayne County and North Alabama.

To make scheduling as easy as possible, please reply with a few dates and times that work for you, and I will follow up to confirm the details.

Thank you for your time and participation. Your contributions are greatly appreciated, and I look forward to speaking with you!

Best regards,  
Nikki Bishop  
Doctoral Candidate

[teraneebishop@gmail.com](mailto:teraneebishop@gmail.com) ; [tnm5d@mtmail.mtsu.edu](mailto:tnm5d@mtmail.mtsu.edu) ; 731-412-6177

Unpacking the Experiences of Former Gifted Children: A Qualitative Study on Identity, Achievement, And Well-Being

## Appendix E

Thank you for participating in this study on the long-term impacts of being identified as a gifted child. The goal of this research is to better understand how childhood giftedness affects adulthood in areas such as emotional well-being, social relationships, career success, and life satisfaction. Your responses will help us gain important insights into the challenges and benefits faced by former gifted children.

If you have any further questions about the study or its findings, feel free to contact Teranee Bishop at [tnm5d@mtmail.mtsu.edu](mailto:tnm5d@mtmail.mtsu.edu). We also encourage you to reach out for a summary of the study's results once the research is complete.

For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Office of Compliance at 615-494-8918 or via email at [irb\\_information@mtsu.edu](mailto:irb_information@mtsu.edu). (<http://www.mtsu.edu/irb>).

Thank you once again for your valuable contribution to this important study.

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